Illiberalism and the
democratic paradox: The
infernal dialectic of
neoliberal emancipation

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Abstract
The main trust of this article unfolds around the impasse of democratic politics today, marked by the fading belief in the presumably superior architecture of liberal democratic institutions to nurture emancipation on the one hand, and the seemingly inexorable rise of a variety of populist political movements on the other. The first part of the article focuses on the lure of autocratic populism. The second part considers how transforming neoliberal governance arrangements pioneered post-truth autocratic politics/policies in articulation with the imposition of market rule and, in doing so, cleared the way for contemporary illiberal populisms. The third part considers the institutional configuration through which the democratic has been fundamentally transformed over the past few decades in the direction of a post-democratic constellation. The article concludes by arguing for the need to re-script emancipation as a process of political subjectivation unfolding trough a political act.

Keywords
Democratisation, emancipation, illiberalism, Lacan, politicisation, populism

Well, my dear Adeimantus, what is the nature of tyranny? It’s obvious, I suppose, that it arises out of democracy.

– Plato (The Republic, 1974, p.382)
The dialectic of democracy: Emancipation redefined

The main trust of this article unfolds around the impasse or deadlock of democratic politics today, marked by what Appadurai calls the democratic fatigue syndrome (Appadurai, 2017), and the fading belief of many in the presumably superior architecture of liberal democratic institutions to nurture emancipation on the one hand, and the seemingly inexorable rise of a variety of populist, illiberal, nativist, autocratic and/or xenophobic political parties and movements that seem to exercise an indelible lure for many people on the other. This erosion of democratic life, institutionalised in what I shall refer to later as post-democratisation, unfolds through an infernal dialectic whereby the very drive for emancipation, understood as the desire to become private and autonomous subjects unhinged from the rights and obligations of life in common, free of oppression and able to choose one’s identity, unleashes the very mechanisms that undermine the democratic from within (see also Blu¨hdorn, 2020 as well as Blu¨hdorn in this special issue). Herein resides the present deadlock of democratic politics: the neoliberal insistence on and promise of individual freedom and emancipation as autonomy parallels and nurtures a growing sense of unease, anxiety, neurosis, failure and an uncanny feeling of powerlessness that feeds a disdain for democracy itself and a desire for immunisation from being-in-common. This nourishes the lure of autocratic and illiberal regimes as people desperately try to regain an apparently impossible enjoyment (McGowan, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This paradoxical deadlock operates within a particular unfolding of the dialectics of emancipation within a broadly neoliberal order (see also L¨utjen as well as Butzlaff in this special issue).

I argue in the article that the abstract notion of emancipation, understood as freedom from oppression and equality of expression, that is emancipation as the freedom to do what one has to do and the realisation of the subject’s inner-most drive in a context of axiomatically proclaimed principled equality, has been re-articulated over the past few decades in the formation of a neoliberal subject and the associated metonymic re-quilting of emancipation understood as equality in the face of disembodied market forces, the immunological securitisation of private life and freedom as the choice to consume and to be a manager or entrepreneur of the self (Dean, 2009; Esposito, 2011). This operates within a consensualising post-democratic governance arrangement (see Swyngedouw, 2018). While enlightenment notions of emancipation first unfolded under the mantra of autonomy and freedom from oppression or domination, and became enacted through emancipatory collective social and political struggle against oppressors, and later – principally under the impetus of the Frankfurt School – became scripted as a process of transgressing the repression and alienation of modern capitalist societies, the symbolisation and practices of emancipation under neoliberalisation revolve around the superego demand to enjoy, to maximise the fulfilment of private desire (Bailes, 2020; Dean, 2009; McGowan, 2016; Žižek, 1999). Enjoyment became a central political factor. The enlightenment notion of emancipation involved forms of both social and political struggle against a variety of forms of oppression (religious, class, sexual and others) to achieve sovereignty of the individual under conditions of generalised equality and sustained by a common social bond. While the former remains the prime driver, the culture of neoliberalisation inaugurated a move of the process of emancipation from a collective
process operating under the aegis of equality to a private and individualised affair (see also Butzlaff in this special issue). Emancipation became an individual mission, this time scripted not so much as liberation from oppression or transcending alienation, but as an injunction to Enjoy (Žižek, 2007). In other words, enjoyment became the prime measure of emancipation and failure to enjoy the sole responsibility of the individual.

I mobilise the notion of ‘enjoyment as a political factor’ (Hook, 2017; Stavrakakis, 1999) in the Lacanian sense (as *jouissance*). For Jacques Lacan, subjects are driven by a (presumably lost) object (real or imagined) that arouses desire but that remains forever unattainable. Enjoyment requires a lost or absent object that can never become present and exists only insofar as it is lost because objects that are just there lose their desiring fantasy (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008). Loss creates the excess excitation that leads to enjoyment, which is why the subject must suffer its enjoyment rather than finding pleasure in it. The relationship between enjoyment and loss, a loss that produces excitement and gives the subject something for which to strive, represents the key to the politics of enjoyment (Hook, 2017). In order to preserve their possibility for enjoyment, subjects will cling to loss and to the suffering that it entails. As Jodi Dean (2006, p. 4) explains:

> Enjoyment (*jouissance*) refers to an excessive pleasure and pain, to that something extra that twists pleasure into a fascinating, even unbearable intensity. . . . It is a special kind of agony, an agony that makes us feel more alive, more fully present, more in tune with what makes life worth living, and dying for, than anything else. Enjoyment, then, is this extra, this excess beyond the given, measurable, rational, and useful.

For example, one might desire a promotion and invest considerable effort in achieving it and fantasise how this will finally produce pleasurable satisfaction, but when eventually achieved, this ‘thing’ (the promotion) loses its initial lustre; and one seeks ‘enjoyment’ around yet another ‘thing’ in an endless repetitive, intensely painful, often anxiety-ridden, occasionally depressing, but always excessive, manner, yet one never gets there. This continuous repetitive process is precisely what defines ‘enjoyment’; it is about ‘getting off’ on the repetitive failure, rather than in achieving ‘it’. It is here that the culture of neoliberalism finds its core libidinal attachment in the sense that it continuously promises to deliver individual ‘enjoyment’, yet has to perpetually invent the new, thereby frustrating the desire for fulfilment in the existing, but nonetheless promising it yet again in the next ‘thing’. While enjoyment is fantastically circulating around an object-cause of desire (what Lacan names as ‘object a’), this ‘thing’ never really satisfies fully (for further details of the Lacanian analysis of enjoyment as a political factor, see Dean, 2009; Hook, 2017; McGowan, 2004, 2013; Pohl & Swyngedouw, 2021a; Stravarakakis, 2007; Žižek, 2007). As Jodi Dean continues, enjoyment (‘*jouissance*’) denotes an overwhelming, even agonizing, affective intensity. It designates something we desire but can never fully get, and something we want to avoid but can never fully shake. It’s that ‘something extra’ for the sake of which we do what might otherwise seem irrational, counterproductive, or even wrong. (Dean, 2009, p. 50).
Slavoj Žižek and others (Dean, 2009; McGowan, 2016; Verhaeghe, 2014) discern in the particular promises of freedom as enjoyment the cultural inscription of neoliberalisation whereby the injunction to enjoy is accompanied by the fantasy that free markets, individualisation, deliverance from community obligations and attachment to the private sphere can deliver this, and its realisation is the responsibility of the individual. However, the desire for enjoyment is itself set in motion through a primordial lack or absence, one that is constitutive and, therefore, can never be satisfied fully.

As Lacan insisted, the realisation of desire is indeed bound to fail and gets caught in a compulsive repetition of always failing attempts to fulfil desire (Lacan, 1998). Many are, therefore, caught in the anxiety and growing neuroses that accompany the insistent, since inevitable, failure of fulfilling this ‘commanded enjoyment’ (McGowan, 2004; Verhaeghe, 2014, 2018), a process that continuously undermines and renders ever more distant the promises of an autonomous private life, yet sparking an ever more desperate quest for even greater autonomy and privacy, the fantasy structure that nurtures the promise of fulfilling one’s desire (Neumann, 2017).

It is this anxiety that sustains the call for increasing autocratic politics as the means to guarantee the fulfilment of the desire and the promise of enjoyment nurtured by private life. As Todd McGowan insists, ‘[i]t is precisely the attempt to cling to one’s private world and avoid the public that nourishes the totalitarian impulse that wipes out all privacy’ (McGowan, 2016, p. 66). In other words, the drive for emancipation expressed as enjoyment and its immanent and constitutive failure nourishes the lure of illiberalism and the desire for more autocratic political regimes. The latter promises to remove the obstacles for enjoyment (which is imagined as residing in the Other who stands in the way) to safeguard the autonomy and sovereignty of the individual in the face of all manner of risks and threats that challenge the drive for enjoyment.

The dialectic of emancipation under neoliberalisation unfolds, therefore, as the tension and contradiction between the injunction to individual enjoyment and the attraction of illiberal political arrangements that promise to safeguard and nurture its impossible realisation while immunising the subject from a common bond (see also Blu¨hdorn in this special issue). In what follows, I shall explore in greater detail the uncanny relationship between the neoliberal injunction to enjoy and the drive for privacy and autonomy, which both have become the signifiers of emancipation under neoliberalism, on the one hand, and the autocratic impulses that are generated through the transformation of the democratic political form itself on the other. I shall proceed in three parts.

The first part grapples with the lure of autocratic populism and how it deepens the very deadlock of the current situation. This deadlock has to be understood as the gap between the promise of private enjoyment on the one hand and its constitutive failure on the other. In other words, neoliberalisation nourishes the desire for enjoyment while disavowing its impossibility. I mobilise here a psychoanalytically inflected interpretation of Roberto Esposito’s argumentation that neoliberalisation deepens the call for a prophylactic immunological biopolitics to safeguard the desire for private autonomy and individual freedom. The affirmative immunological biopolitics that Esposito seeks threatens to turn into an auto-immunological thanatopolitics as the dialectic of emancipation tilts towards excluding those who are considered to be stumbling blocks to achieve real enjoyment. The second part considers how transforming neoliberal
governance arrangements pioneered post-truth autocratic politics/policies in articulation with the imposition of market rule and, in doing so, cleared the way for the present-day nativist and illiberal populisms. The key argument here is how the tension between increasingly autocratic intervention to sustain the neoliberal fantasy of market rule and the growing discontent with its inability to deliver the promised enjoyment was channelled through forms of illiberal populism. The third part considers the institutional configuration through which the democratic has been fundamentally transformed over the past few decades in the direction of what observers call a post-democratic constellation. The point here is to demonstrate how contemporary post-democratising politics erode from within the principles of the democratic political which is predicated upon the axiomatic assumption of equality of each and all qua speaking beings. It is precisely this assumption upon which the process of emancipation as freedom from oppression and freedom to express is fundamentally predicated. The article concludes by arguing for the need to traverse the fantasy that sustains the very deadlock of the current situation, a process that requires re-scripting emancipation as a process of political subjectivation unfolding through a political act, and contingently founded on the axiomatic presumption of equality of each and all. Such forms of excessive and transgressing acting re-quilt enjoyment through a process of subjectivation. Or in other words, I shall foreground the emancipatory political act as one that stages equality in the face of a ‘wrong’ as the process through which freedom from oppression and of expression can be liberated from the fantasmatic promise of neoliberal enjoyment.

The autocratic lure and the injunction to enjoy: An immunobiopolitical fantasy

The lure of autocratic regimes is indeed undeniable as political parties that advocate such regime changes attract a growing crowd of voters. The momentous transformations wrought by the infernal process of uneven and deepening neoliberalisation is now paralleled by an alarming rise of autocratic illiberalism (Zakaria, 1997). The success of autocratic populist parties is customarily interpreted as an external and irrational intrusion of the misguided masses foolishly embracing post-truth discourses and ideologies that threaten to destabilise the unquestionable and assumedly self-evidently superior foundations of liberal democracy. However, rather than considering it as an alien body that infects and undermines the healthy body politic, I consider the present surge of illiberal autocracies as a symptom of the deadlock produced by the contradictions and antagonisms that constitute present-day instituted post-democracy in its articulation with a deepening, albeit geographically highly variegated and uneven, process of neoliberalisation, a process galvanised by the reorientation of emancipation as outlined above.

Claude Lefort has of course explored in detail the internal forces that erode democracy from within. He has been concerned with what he names ‘the democratic invention’ and with the uncanny relationship between democracy and totalitarianism. He argues that ‘the revolutionary and unprecedented feature of democracy’ is that it is contingently founded on an ‘empty place’ of power – there is a void at the centre of the democratic (Lefort, 1988, p. 17). This ‘emptiness’ does not only refer to the condition, in contrast to other political regimes, in which the place of power is not transcendentally given and
instituted (by God or in the person of the king/emperor), but is fundamentally undecided. Democracy is predicated upon the absence of a foundational claim by anyone or anything given in the social order that assigns the place of power: ‘no dimensions of social space exist until they have been given a form’ (Lefort, 1988, p. 11). In other words, anyone can claim the place of power in democracy (see Flynn, 2005). Through this, Lefort shows how democracy is about the institutionalisation of conflict, the axiomatic presumption of equality, the recognition that the social is inherently split, ruptured, unfounded: there is no authority (no big Other or Master that forbids, permits or regulates) that designates the site of power, there is nothing in the social but the recognition of its own absent ground. There is no originary, organic and pre-existing form of ‘the people’. Democracy is ‘founded upon the legitimacy of a debate as to what is legitimate and what is illegitimate – a debate which is necessarily without any guarantor and without any end’ (Lefort, 1988, p. 39). This radical undecidability, combined with conflicts and antagonisms that cut through the social, marks the democratic invention, but also carries within it the kernel of totalitarianism.

For Lefort, totalitarianism is a political system that invokes the People as One and undivided, a fully legible and transparent society in which everyone takes their place overseen by a benevolent leader (Lefort, 1986). The autocratic leader is posited as the incarnation of the People and sustained by a fantasy of organic whole or totality, reinstating a symbolic order that tells us what we want and how to desire. This move is, of course, predicated on covering up, repressing, the ‘absent ground’ of the social and concealing the antagonisms that cut through the social body. It disavows ‘the scandal of democracy’ that simultaneously invokes the People as ultimate authority while insisting that ‘the People’ do not exist, that there is no ultimate ground upon which to base authority (Rancière, 2014).

As the constitutive divisions and conflicts that cut through the social cannot be erased, preserving the notion of ‘The People’ requires invoking an external element that can be posited as the object-cause that undermines or destabilises the (illusionary) one-ness or unity of the People. An imaginary and fantastic displacement takes place whereby a part of ‘the community’ becomes scripted as constitutive outsider that is the object-cause of disruption, conflict and the pervasive presence of a divided society. The fantastic screen promises that the presumably lost unity of ‘the People’ can be reinstated through the erasure of the destabilising intruder. The outsider becomes identified with the stumbling block for enjoyment; he/she ‘steals’ our enjoyment and prevents the operation of ‘The People’ as One. That is precisely why totalitarianism necessarily relies on a fantasy screen that assigns the role of the malignant intruder who destabilises the imaginary of a fully closed and harmonious (but inoperative) social order (Žižek, 2006a). Of course, anything or anyone can take the symbolic place of intruder: Jews for the Nazi’s, Muslims or refugees for xenophobic populists, greenhouse gases for climate activists, the European Union for UK Brexiteers and so on. That is why there is always a totalitarian temptation within the very frame of the democratic invention, one that requires continuous vigilance and reassertion of the ‘empty place of power’ as the Real upon which democracy is contingently constituted (see Swyngedouw, 2018).
Both the lure of the neoliberal appeal and its subsequent transformation into more authoritarian directions are the twin outcomes of the very mechanisms through which neoliberalisation became instituted. What needs to be accounted for, therefore, is precisely why so many people from across the social and class spectrum and who were often enthralled by neoliberalisation’s ideological promise of and support for autonomy, freedom, individuality and privacy so easily and freely succumb to the populist–autocratic temptation. The cases of Poland and Hungary, originally embarking on the ‘shock doctrine’ of neoliberalisation in the 1990s, but embracing the lure of illiberalism two decades later, are exemplary in this regard. Indeed, as Hannah Arendt insisted, ‘[n]othing proved easier to destroy than the privacy and the private morality of people who thought of nothing but safeguarding their private lives’ (Arendt, 1973, p. 36). The early promises and supporting imaginaries of neoliberalisation provided for an apparently immunological prophylactic against the threat of an irredeemably interventionist nanny-state, bureaucratic biopolitical control, economic straightjacketing and communal obligations. In the process, the erosion of the public sphere paralleled this desire for autonomy sustained by an injunction to enjoy. Gradually, the earlier societies of religious or sexual prohibition and class, gender or racialised repression transformed into societies of enjoyment, reaching its apogee in the neoliberal promises of consumer autonomy, self-management and private self-realisation (McGowan, 2004). The realisation of private desire nonetheless required increasingly forceful political interventions to be sustained and nurtured. Put simply, the popular investment in the libidinal drive of the neoliberalising project harbours as much an autocratic kernel as the antinomies of neoliberalism as a political-institutional project. Both are co-constituent architects of the inexorable drive to illiberal regimes. Roberto Esposito’s analysis of biopolitical governmentality, enhanced by Todd McGowan’s and Frédéric Neyrat’s Lacanian psychoanalytical interpretation, may begin to shed some light on this condition (Esposito, 2008, 2011; McGowan, 2016; Neyrat, 2010). As Todd McGowan (2016, p. 66) explains:

In this sense, totalitarianism is not the reverse side of liberalism’s insistence on sustaining the private world at all costs, but instead the ultimate end point of this insistence. The more one seeks to safeguard privacy and clear the path for capitalist relations of production, the more one also leaves space for the rise of totalitarianism.

Roberto Esposito is precisely concerned with this breakdown of the public, of the political ‘community’, within the present configuration, and the consequent transformations of the polity around the articulation between privatism on the one hand and autocratic forms of governance on the other. Esposito builds on Michel Foucault’s analysis of biopolitical governmentality as the fundamental form of modern liberal state governance by showing how this biopolitical frame that Foucault associated with the consolidation of the liberal state is today increasingly sutured by an immunological drive, a mission and commitment to seal off objects and bodies of governance (the population) from possibly harmful intruders or destabilising outsiders that threaten the bio-social integrity, the cocooned privacy, the realisation of desire and the socio-economic cohesion of the population (Esposito, 2011). As he puts it:
The more humans, as well as ideas, languages and technologies, communicate and are bound up with one another, the more necessary preventative immunisation as counterweight becomes until it is the coagulating point of contemporary life. (Esposito, 2008, p. 60)

In an interesting twist on Marx and Engels’s account of globalisation in the first pages of the Communist Manifesto, Esposito insists that it is precisely the process of cosmopolitan neoliberalisation that intensifies the desire for a deepening immunological prophylactic to shield the private body from its violent insertion in a public sphere with its rights, obligations and incalculable risks (Campbell, 2006). It is what Slavoj Žižek names as the making of ‘the cupola of the privileged’ (2020, p. 78). The rise of surveillance and forms of control as immunological dispositives in effect further heightens our commitment and libidinal attachment to privacy and to the promises of neoliberal subjectivation.

‘Immunological’ has to be understood here as the suspension of the obligation of mutual communal gift-giving, a form of asylum that suspends one’s duty to participate in the rights and obligations of being-in-the-common, of the community. Similar to Lefort’s and other post-foundational notions of the People (see Pohl & Swyngedouw, 2021a), for Roberto Esposito community does not refer to a set of individual properties that are shared by members of the community (like values, language, religion, etc.):

> [O]n the contrary, community is without particular properties; it is defined by sharing what one has in common, not about sharing individual properties . . . to belong entirely to the originary communitas means to give up one’s most precious substance, namely, one’s individual identity, in a process of gradual opening from self to the other. (Esposito, 2013, p. 84)

Community is formed by the communal, by that which is not my own, but what belongs to all. This is an insubstantial notion of community, with neither essence nor properties, but resides purely in the being-in-common, and the mutual gift giving that goes with it, and denotes what is not private:

> If communitas is what binds its members in a commitment of giving from one to the other, immunitas, by contrast, is what unburdens from this burden, what exonerates from this responsibility. In the same way that community refers to something general and open, immunity – or immunization – refers to the privileged particularity of a situation that is defined by being an exception to a common condition . . . Although immunity is necessary to the preservation of our life, when driven beyond a certain threshold it forces life into a sort of cage where not only our freedom gets lost but also the very meaning of our existence. (Esposito, 2013, pp. 84–85)

Excessive immunisation deepens the erosion of the public sphere. The injunction to enjoy individual freedom and obey the call for exercising unrestrained choice is precisely the founding gesture of such a deepening immunological biopolitics, that is, the accelerating ring-fencing of the fragmented body from its insertion in the obligations and violence that bonds common life (Brossat, 2003). Unrestricted enjoyment is predicated precisely on loosening these community bonds. And it is the immunitary biopolitical
governance apparatuses, that is, a set of imposed practices, rules, institutions and technomanagerial dispositives, that are increasingly solidifying and work to create a fantasmatic sense of protection and sequestration, one that allegedly permits to secure our private well-being. Immuno-politics are clearly at work, for example, in Western practices around immigration, public health, the economy, the environment and international terrorism, from tighter immigration laws and continuous surveillance and big-data profiling to the actual construction of steel and concrete walls and barriers and the proliferation of all sorts of camps and other militarised or policed enclosures.

As McGowan (2016, p. 67) insists:

But widespread surveillance does not have the effect of eliminating our investment in privacy and our private worlds. Instead, surveillance – and knowledge about that surveillance – has the effect of heightening our commitment to privacy. When surveillance threatens the private world, we respond by identifying entirely as private beings, which is precisely the response the surveillance aims to trigger. The ideological function of surveillance is not the elimination of privacy but the creation of subjects who see themselves only in terms of privacy.

Similar examples can be identified in the strict cordonning off when infestations of all kind threaten to penetrate the immuno-engineered eco-topian bubbles of the elite’s local life. For example, many of the sustainability and eco-managerial practices that populate ecological interventions, smart technologies and governance practices are precisely aimed at re-enforcing the immunological prowess of the immune system of the body politic against threatening outsiders (from CO2 and waste to bacteria, refugees, viruses, ozone, pollution and the like) so that life as we know it can continue. The radically uneven distribution, in both socio-economic and geographical terms, of the COVID19 pandemic and the states’ response to it are, in fact, a case in point. The public management of the recent COVID19 pandemic, at least in most countries, was precisely aimed at sequestering and isolating the ‘external’ intruder in order to preserve the integrity of the private sphere. While a series of more or less invasive surveillance and control policies were imposed in order to safeguard the health of the population and the integrity of the socio-medical fabric, a growing number of people experienced the imposition of extraordinary measures in the name of protection as an inadmissible straightjacketing of individual choice and activity and an attack on their desire for enjoyment. Moreover, the social triaging of exposure and risk demonstrated the inequality inscribed in the state’s immunological biopolitical control.

Immuno-biopolitics deepens biopolitical governance and attachment to private life in an era of uncertainty and recognised perpetual risk (Neyrat, 2008). As Pierre-Oliver Garcia (2015, p. 321) put it:

An immunitary power takes control of the risks, dangers and fragilities of individuals to make them live in a peaceful manner while obscuring any form of dissensus.

Alain Brossat maintains that this process inaugurates what he names as immunitary democracy (Brossat, 2003; Esposito, 2012). An immunitary democracy is precisely what
illiberal democracies promise, namely tight security and global protection so that private life can go on unencumbered. Emancipation as the pursuit of private enjoyment is indeed nurtured and deepened through these promises of protection and immunisation. Illiberal regimes, duly democratically elected, invest their success with an immunitary promise to provide a privileged cupola that excludes undesirable intruders, whether immigrants, viruses, pollution or preying financiers. In doing so, they simultaneously insist on the common bond vested in the desire for privacy and insulation and destroy the community as public sphere.

Imunitary democracy is a social configuration operating as an immunity system that guarantees not being touched, of being immunised. It is a fantasy of a total protection and securitisation of life, without exposure to risk. For Brossat, this is a dangerous fantasy as the logic of immunity entails nothing else than the destruction of community, of being-in-common with the Other-quà-other. Necessarily, this logic creates the continuous production of the exposed or the exiled (the non-immunised) as the flipside of the immunised body and leads to depoliticisation: the immunised becoming mere spectators of the suffering of others from the cocoon of their sanctuary spaces. As Maria Kaika argues, such immunological sanctity space offers only the affective politics of either hate or compassion for the threatening intruder as flipsides of the same coin, while sustaining their expulsion into the peripheral zones of refugee camps, migration enclaves and imposed exclusion where life remains bare (Kaika, 2017).

It is here that the articulation between the sociocultural promises of neoliberalisation as securing private life, individual choice and personal identity maintains its indelible lure while being threatened existentially by both the socio-spatial transformations and triaging wrought exactly by the de- and re-territorialising dynamics of an apparently disembodied process of a spatially widening and geo-socially deepening capitalism on the one hand and the always failing attempt to realise desire fully, to attain ‘enjoyment’, on the other. Immunitary democracy promises to untangle this Manichean tension, but in doing so, deepens it further through the post-democratic institutional configuration that forecloses the recognition of the radical antagonisms that are at the core of the democratic process itself (see below).

Indeed, as Frédéric Neyrat (2008, 2010) insists, the immunitary dispositive does not Really function as the exposure to risks affects all, albeit not to the same extent. In relation to refugees, migration, (bio-)security and economic-financial collapse, immuno-biopolitical management often succeeds in displacing risks and fear of collapse and disintegration onto a terrain of a crisis to be governed, a situation to adapt to or to become resilient against. While ‘risks’ (economic, refugee, environmental, disease or geopolitical/security crises) are subject to immuno-biopolitical gestures that promise the safeguarding of life (for the included, thereby (re-)producing and expanding the exposed and exiled) in the face of potentially lethal threats by means of deepening immunological management, screening and techno-shielding, these apparatuses secure at best a palliative for temporary relief, but never go far enough as the deadlock deepens.

Indeed, this immuno-biopolitical dispositive of crisis management is rapidly disintegrating in the face of the Really existing combined and uneven socio-ecological and socio-economic catastrophe. The standard apparatuses of neoliberalising governance that sustain and nurture the immuno-biopolitical desire become increasingly ineffective.
In spite of the mobilisation of all manner of state-led techno-managerial apparatuses that were supposed to provide a safety-wall behind which the private life of the immunised can continue, the Real of the combined and uneven socio-ecological and socio-economic disintegration still gallops forward, piercing the canopy of immune life on the one hand and increasing anxiety, depression and a sense of failure to achieve the neoliberal command to enjoyment and success on the other.

The insistent intrusion of the Real of socio-ecological and socio-economic antagonisms and contradictions undermines terminally this immunological fantasy script, exposes its unstable core, uncovers the gap between the Symbolic presentation of the promise of an immunised and emancipated private life and the Real of rapidly degrading conditions in many parts of the world and undermines its supporting discursive matrix. This infernal dialectic, Frédéric Neyrat argues, is predicated upon redoubling the fantasy of absolute immunisation. It is precisely at a time when the Real of the excessive acting of an externalised threat cannot any longer be contained and ignored that a widening and intensification of the immunological biopolitical drive is called for while redoubling the fantasmatic desire for absolute immunisation (Neyrat, 2014). Indeed, as Esposito (2012, 2013) maintains, neoliberalisation risks pushing the immunological drive to an auto-immunological thanatopolitics that threatens to undermine both subject and community, a process that has been highlighted too by both Giorgio Agamben (2005) and Jacques Derrida (2005). It is in this conundrum that the autocratic lure might turn into the reality of illiberal and nativist nationalisms.

**Neoliberalising governance as post-truth autocracy**

The rise of illiberal regimes, I suggest, is the flipside of neoliberalisation, born out of the dialectics of democracy and the transformation of the emancipatory impulse as explored above, whereby enjoyment is both promised and impossible. Both the signifiers ‘Post-Truth’ and ‘Populism’ are closely associated with the rise of illiberal politics. The two are indeed interrelated. Post-Truth Politics (PTP) popularly refers to a condition whereby emotion, affect and personal feelings trump fact, reasoning and the search for truth in political debate and practice and is generally associated with the rising prominence and success of illiberal and populist movements and their particular penchant for ‘spinning’ information and distorting facts. PTP as a catchword is particularly favoured by liberal elites to express their disdain for the presumed idiocy of the underprivileged who fall prey to the calls by assorted, heterogeneous and often mutually hostile populists like the Donald Trumps, Nigel Farages, Marine Le Pens, Beppe Grillos, Jair Bolsonaros, Viktor Orbáns, Rodrigo Dutertes or Recep Erdogans of this world.

However, as Slavoj Žižek has argued, glimpsing the truth of the situation requires a ‘parallax view’, an anamorphic gaze that looks in from a partial outside that is nonetheless an integral part of the constellation we are in (Žižek, 2006b). Autocratic politics, I contend, are indeed not the privilege of blinkered nativist and xenophobic populist right wingers, but are first and foremost the symbolically disavowed or foreclosed truth of the realities of the political and economic neoliberal project itself, and of the cultural politics that circle around the protection of private life and the identitarian pursuit of individual enjoyment, discernible within the patterning of the uneven and heterogeneous
trajectories of neoliberalisation over the past two decades. PTP and their mobilisation by populist and often autocratic governance regimes, in sum, are not the sole prerogative of populism; it is the cosmopolitan neoliberal elite that first experimented with it in various places and subsequently elevated it to a general political and ideological strategy (see Swyngedouw, 2019).

The condescending contempt of the liberal elite of the post-truth antics of populist discourses indeed disavows that post-truth inflected ‘facts’ and ‘arguments’ underpinned part of the success of the neoliberal fantasy ruthlessly pursued at all geographical scales ever since Pinochet, Reagan and Thatcher set both tone and content to their class mission to change the political-economic configuration of their country and indeed the wider world; a project further solidified by the ‘spinned’ Third Way politics of Tony Blair (remember Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction), François Hollande or Bill Clinton. It is precisely the discursive framing and policy substance of neoliberalisation as a class project that nurtured forms of reasoning and legitimising policies whereby truth and fact mattered less than the affective pull of the message.

A growing number of people have now pierced through the phantasmagorical veil of neoliberal promises that, while nurturing individualism, private life and consumer freedom, would also equate with more jobs, higher income and greater equality of opportunity (Crouch, 2009; Kaika, 2017). Both hard data and experience have demonstrated that neoliberalisation intensifies uncertainty, accentuates social polarisation, nurtures anxiety and depression and produces exclusion (Piketty, 2014; Verhaeghe, 2014), while the hegemony of what Immanuel Kant called private reasoning colonises the public sphere (Kant & Wood, 1996). Nonetheless, individualism and the particular neoliberal take on freedom as individual choice and the pursuit of the realisation of desire continues to exercise an irresistible and repetitive pull as many people continue to invest their desire in becoming welfare investors as a means to optimise the enjoyment of their immunised private sphere (Crouch, 2009).

Indeed, the neoliberalising project pioneered ‘illiberal democracy’ from its very inception. Autocratic state policies have been instrumental in forging the tumultuous transformations that go under the generic name of neoliberalisation. Both the ‘roll-back’ and ‘roll-out’ phases of a geographically variegated neoliberalisation (Peck, 2010) demonstrated the central and directing role of a top-down and interventionist state at all scales in the institutionalisation of market rule and the nurturing of a culture of individualism and (consumer) choice. However, the fantasy of a ‘free’ market populated by private individuals untrammelled by the heavy hand of the state to pursue their enjoyment was finally and terminally shattered after the financial crisis of 2008 saw an unapologetic resurgence of state economic and financial intervention and imposed austerity in a desperate attempt to bring the neoliberal train back on track. On 7 February 2009, Newsweek’s cover headline titled ‘We Are All Socialists Now’. Indeed, Newsweek is correct; a communism of capital, as Paulo Virno calls it (Virno, 2004): the elites of the world corralled the state to serve their collective interests, while maintaining that such measures are in the interest of all. After many national states in Europe had bailed out their ailing banks and turned private non-performing debt into public liabilities, the European Union and its core member states ruthlessly imposed a single set of rules on countries whose debt had risen significantly precisely because of the bail-out,
irrespective of possible alternatives or democratic consent. In sum, the lure of autocratic governance is not the precinct of the nativist right. It has been pioneered and perfected by the very architects of neoliberalisation. At the same time, the neoliberal fantasy collapsed, but continued as what Jamie Peck called a ‘zombie-neoliberalism’ (Peck, 2009; see also Crouch, 2011), a ghostly presence pursued by increasingly interventionist and autocratic rule (Peck, 2010; Springer, 2018).

As people saw the promise of private welfare gains go up in smoke, many began to opt resolutely for the anti-austerity, anti-financial capital and pro social security policies that almost all the populist parties defend in a desperate move to preserve the cocooned privacy and immuno-biopolitical enclaves of their lives. And it is precisely this deadlock that needs urgent attention, that is, the drive towards autocratic governance arrangements that inheres in the liberal-democratic project on the one hand and the rise of illiberal regimes on the other (Büscher-Ulbrich, 2018). They are not two distinct processes but flipsides of the same autocratic coin. The key point indeed is to recognise that autocratic processes are not disturbing the proper functioning of the democratic from without but are the disavowed obscene underbelly of instituted democracy itself that explodes when the promises of a private, free and emancipated life are thwarted by the very mechanisms that are supposed to deliver them.

In sum, the rise of illiberal governance, I argue, manifests itself as a deadlock that disavows, represses or forecloses the contradictions and antagonisms that cut through the contested and contentious processes of neoliberalisation and its particular lure of private freedom and emancipation. In the next section, I shall explore the mechanisms through which the democratic public sphere eroded as new institutional regimes of techno-managerial autocratic governance became gradually more deeply entrenched in the governing dispositives.

**Post-politicisation and the making of autocratic post-democracy**

**Post-politicisation**

In recent years, political scientists have lamented the decline of the public sphere and the ‘retreat of the political’ (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1997). While the formal envelope of democracy survives, ‘its substance is becoming ever more attenuated’ (Marquand, 2004, p. 4). Many observers theorised this transformation as an integral part of a process of post-politicisation, whereby politics is increasingly replaced by hard and soft technologies of administration, management and policing of environmental, social, economic or other domains within an undisputable socio-economic order (Žižek, 2002, p. 303). This post-political frame reduces politics to the sphere of governing and polic(y)ing through allegedly participatory deliberative procedures of governance (see Swyngedouw, 2018), within a given distribution of places and functions, one that excludes those who are deemed ‘irresponsible’, ‘irrational’ or ‘ideological’. It is a policymaking set that prescribes what is possible or acceptable and driven by a desire for consent. The stakeholders (that is those with recognised and legitimate speech) are known in advance and dissent is reduced to debate over the choreographies of instituted modalities of
governing, the technologies of expert administration and management, and the dispositives of ‘good governance’ within spaces appropriate for their enactment, like parliaments, council chambers, community centres, public-private governance arrangements and so on.

This process takes the scandalous proposition of Marx that the state is the executive branch of the capitalist class as literally true: identifying politics with the management of capitalism and its contradictions is no longer a hidden secret behind the appearance of formal democracy; it has become the openly declared basis for democratic legitimacy. Maximising emancipation understood as securing the enjoyment of the people can only be achieved by declaring the inability or incapacity of the People (as a political name) to arrange or manage themselves the conditions of this maximisation. The power of post-democracy as the instituted form of post-politicisation resides, in other words, ‘in the declaration of the people’s impotence to act politically’ (Rancière, 1998, p. 113). Moreover, any denunciation or any struggle against this tactic of depoliticisation is viewed as going against historical necessity. As Alain Badiou (2012, pp. 7–8) argues,

since it is commonly held that Marxism consists in assigning a determining role to the economy and the social contradictions that derive from it, who isn’t Marxist today? The foremost ‘Marxists’ are our masters, who tremble and gather by night as soon as the stock market wobbles or the growth rate dips.

Indeed, the recent imposition of extraordinary austerity regimes, for example, by the allied national, European and global elites on the weakest segments of the Spanish, Greek, Irish or Portuguese populations precisely signals the overwhelming, naturalised and apparently inescapably effect of ‘economic’ forces in whose name and integrity an outright class war is fought. Even if the bullwhip of the IMF or the European Central Bank is not mobilised, governments systematically pursue a singular and single-minded policy irrespective of the political composition of their majorities. Consider how, for example, the British, Dutch or Danish governments, and many others, doggedly pursued austerity policies in the name of saving civilisation as we know it, even if both evidence shows and leading economic observers, like Paul Krugman or Joseph Stiglitz, demonstrate the social and economic ravages their radical class politics inflict. But this is a class war fought by experts, consultants, ‘economists’ and assorted other elite bureaucrats and policymakers in a form of ‘cognitive capitalism’ (Moulier-Boutang, 2012) and ‘capitalist realism’ (Fisher, 2009), in close consultation with business elites, and presumably socially disembodied ‘financial markets’. Of course, this dogma was quickly assigned to the dustbin of history when the COVID-19 emergency hit and ‘the economy’ in danger of grinding to a halt.

The voices of those who disagree are deemed inarticulate, wrong, nonsensical and/or ideological. They are registered as ‘noise’, devoid of proper political ‘voice’. This split between ‘noise’ and ‘voice’ is not just a question of mutual incomprehension that can be managed through a Habermasian open communicative procedure, but rather an expression of a misunderstanding or disagreement that is ‘constitutive’; it is a process of rendering some voices incomprehensible and nonsensical, reducing those who disagree to the political margins and leaving them politically mute and inexistent (Rancière, 1998).
Post-politicisation is caught in this tension: the disappearance of the political as the space for the enunciation of dissensus and the suturing of social space by a consensualising post-politicising order harbours autocratic gestures, precisely by foreclosing, disavowing or repressing the political (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). Post-democratic consensus politics, in a very precise sense, is the key condition of the contemporary configuration of public administration and governance (Rancière, 2003, pp. 4–6).

**Post-democracy**

The notion of ‘Post-Democracy’ has been associated with the consolidation of consensus politics and is marked by the emergence and deepening of post-democratic institutional configurations (Crouch, 2004; Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1996; Swyngedouw, 2011). This arrangement assumes that ‘all parties are known in a world in which everything is on show, in which parties are counted with none left over and in which everything can be solved by objectifying problems’ (Rancière, 1998, p. 102). There is no excess left over and above that what is instituted. Post-democratisation, in short, is the institutional embedding of post-politicising processes.

The irreducible gap between politics as the instituted order of and for the people on the one hand and, on the other, the political as the terrain of dissensual dispute and excessive acting as the name of enjoyment, articulated and performed by those who do not count, who are surplus to the count of the situation, is foreclosed. Although the formal architecture of democracy is still intact, there is a proliferating arsenal of new processes that bypass, evacuate or articulate with these formal institutions. It is the imposition of a Platonic view whereby everyone is supposed to know their place and role within the distribution of the sensible, within the social order and acts accordingly. While there may be recognised conflicts of interest, identitarian concerns and differences of opinion, there is widespread agreement over the conditions of the existing, the problems that need attention and what needs to be done. The emergence and characteristics of this process of post-democratisation combines a series of interrelated dynamics and processes that forms a diffuse set of practices that take different forms in different places, but share a range of uncanny similarities (for details, see Swyngedouw, 2018).

**Traversing the deadlock: Recapturing emancipation as political subjectivation**

The democratic requires reclaiming from the process of the contested and never fully complete dynamics of post-democratisation as the generic name for the new authoritarianisms. I am not referring here to democracy as a set of political institutions (parliaments, governments and the like), institutional principles (like pluralist negotiation) and its associated political procedures (like free elections at regular intervals), but rather to the founding gesture of democracy. The democratic political expresses the contingent and axiomatic presumption of equality of each and every one qua speaking – and hence political – beings, and in doing so, both asserts the empty place of power and negates the possibility of a closed and coherent community (with common properties and values) or
society. Indeed, as Esposito argues, community is both impossible and necessary, and this dialectic is foreclosed in the present arrangement. The presumption of equality that marks ‘the democratic invention’ stands in strict opposition to any given, and sociologically verifiable unequal, order, including any instituted ‘democratic’ order. The democratic political, therefore, exposes the inegalitarian processes that rupture any socio-spatial order and asserts the impossibility of ‘The People’ or The Community’. Or in other words, the People (like community) are not based around a pre-existing and pre-given set of shared properties, but has to be called into being, as the being-in-common around what one shares (but not has) and not around the identification of common properties.

Put differently, the injunction to enjoy that quilts emancipatory discourses today and the recurrent failures of realising this promise has to be transgressed by transcending the umbilical cord that knots emancipation to this unfulfillable promise of neoliberalisation. This requires re-quilting emancipation from being vested in the neoliberal promise of private enjoyment that is impossible to fulfil as it is rooted in a constitutive ‘lack’, to an act of political subjectivation around the signifier of ‘equality’. The latter is not an individual property but a shared ‘lack’.

In other words, the autocratic lure identified above is nothing else than a symptom of the repetitive failure to enjoy, caused by an Other who is imagined to stand in the way of ultimate, yet impossible, enjoyment. The recognition that the failure is constitutive to the subject (and not external) opens potentially a terrain for recapturing both the democratic political and egalitarian emancipation. Traversing the fantasy implies reframing ‘enjoyment’ away from fulfilling private desire and uninhibited autonomy to circling around the axiomatic democratic presumption of ‘equality’ and its constitutive absence or lack. Indeed, as Todd McGowan insists, ‘democracy has always been a signifier replete with enjoyment, an indication of excess that no social structure can adequately contain’ (McGowan, 2013, p. 191). Yannis Stavrakakis (2007, pp. 278–279) equally associates the democratic with enjoyment:

Far from being antithetical to jouissance, democratic subjectivity is capable of inspiring high passions . . . They mobilise a jouissance beyond accumulation, domination and fantasy, an enjoyment of the not-all or not-whole.

This article insisted on how the lure of autocratic post-democracy relied on the impossibility of enjoyment while the culture of neoliberalisation enjoins us to enjoy. It is this impasse that fuels part of the erosion of the democratic. Recapturing the transgressive enjoyment that resides in the ‘scandal of democracy’, an enjoyment not promised by an external authority, but in the desire for enjoyment arising from the subject, opens up a terrain that associates emancipation not so much with ‘the good’, but with ‘enjoyment’. For Jacques Rancière, democracy has always been associated with the terrain of excess. As he put it in Hatred of Democracy, ‘[a]s a social and political form of life, democracy is the reign of excess. This excess signifies the ruin of democratic government and must therefore be repressed by it’ (Rancière, 2014, p. 38). Post-democratisation as consensus politics contains precisely the repression of enjoyment that resides in excess. As McGowan (2013, p. 191) continues,
Democracy is excessive because it strips away all legitimacy justifying social authority. It signifies the absence of legitimate social authority... In democracy, the people govern, but democracy entails the paradoxical recognition that the people as an entity does not exist. Democracy is thus an acceptance of a certain necessary illegitimacy and the enjoyment that accompanies it.

This enjoyment of excess and transgression also implies the partiality of enjoyment. While neoliberal commanded enjoyment nurtures a fantasy of complete enjoyment (McGowan, 2004, p. 196), democratic excess as enjoyment is always partial, circulating around an absence or lack: ‘partial enjoyment involves enjoying one’s lack – what one does not have, not what one does have’ (McGowan, 2004, p. 195; see also Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 278ff). Many recent political uprisings, from the Arab Spring to the Spanish Indignados, Occupy!, and the Hong Kong Umbrella movements, revelled in the enjoyment of acting in excess of the given situation and circulating around a generic sense of equality and ‘democratization’ (for further details, see Swyngedouw, 2018).

This ‘excessive acting’ is indeed the terrain upon which Jacques Rancière also situates emancipation. For Rancière, emancipation is an act of verification of the axiomatic principle of equality, one that is always in part undermined by any given instituted order (Swyngedouw, 2018). The latter implies not only checking the reality of the principle of equality in any given order, but more literally the demonstration and making of equality, that is, the process through which the empty signifier of equality acquires symbolisation and social substantiation (i.e. becomes the shared desire of being-in-common experienced as ‘lack’). Emancipatory acts, therefore, imply processes of disidentification, subjectivation and transgression (Zižek, 1999, 2006b). Emancipation unfolds through acts of subjects who refuse to occupy and enact their allocated place within the given and instituted order (what Rancière names ‘the police’), and in their acting demonstrate the inequality inscribed in the given order on the one hand and actively perform equality on the other (Swyngedouw, 2011). Emancipatory acts articulated around equality are indeed excessive to the instituted and always partially inegalitarian order. Take, for example, the iconic moment (for the U.S. Civil Rights Movement), when Rosa Parks – a trained activist – sat down on a white-designated seat on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama on 1 December 1955. In doing, she both demonstrated the ‘wrong’ inscribed in the existing configuration and performatively demonstrated ‘equality’ (see May, 2008, 2010). Such acts inaugurate the moment when one refuses to be an object of immunological biopolitical governance within the given distribution of functions and places, and practices new ways of being-in-common, of producing community. Through this, one becomes a political subject claiming and performing equality. This constitutes, of course, also a moment of disidentification with the consensually established order and the part one plays in its enactment, thereby rupturing the unequal configuration of the given and open up a space and time for transgression and egalitarian transformation (see also Butzlaff in this special issue). It is an opening up to the Other-as-such in a shared space of excessive enjoyment that transcends the coordinates of the given. At such moment, the realisation of the non-existence of the commands and presumed desire of the Other compels engaging with the process of subjectivation and accepting that the primordial loss of
enjoyment can only be partially recovered through articulating desire with the process of egalitarian transformation.

This process of subjectivation opens up a ‘dissensus’ between the existing order of things and the principle of equality (Biesta, 2012; Woodford, 2016). This, in turn, may open up a procedure for the making of a new ‘distribution of the sensible’, a new common sense, predicated not on the process of taken up dominated or repressed subject positions but the making of new subjectivities (Rancière, 1998). Subjectivation breaks the libidinal attachment to the injunction of the symbolic order enjoining us to enjoy and embarks on the risky, failure-prone and always partially unsatisfactory trajectory of re-quilting the social bond around the presumption of equality, marked by a constituent lack or absence.

In other words, the presumption of equality (not as a given but as a future to be made and verified) is the very premise upon which emancipatory acts are constituted. A democratising, and hence emancipatory, political sequence arises when, in the name of equality, those who are not equally included in the existing socio-political order, stage their ‘right to equality’, a performative acting that inaugurates politics, renders visible what is invisible, hearable what is only registered as unarticulated noise, and exposes the ‘wrongs’ in the present order. Moreover, the presumption of equality is predicated upon asserting difference, differentiation, agonism and disagreement, while refusing to inscribe one particular antagonism as the One that prevents the realisation of the presumption of equality. An emancipatory practice is not just one that includes the excluded, or asserts the identity of the dominated – both just reproduce the logic of inequality – but involves the transgression and, hence the transformation, of the existing, opening up a possible trajectory for the positive realisation of equality (as a historically geographically contingent and, therefore, always contestable inscription, one that demands continuous verification and re-imagining) in the face of inegalitarian practices sutured by the spectral operation of the class relation and strives for the universalisation of this egalitarian injunction from the basis of always historically and geographically situated and locally specific inequalities. These struggles are invariably located in concrete places and unfold around particularities, but aspire to universalisation and spatialisation (Swyngedouw, 2014). They are predicated on political subjectivation, the becoming of a political subject through grounded emancipatory struggles. This is why Rancière equates emancipation with ‘politics’, the moment when the principle of equality meets the inegalitarian inscriptions of the given order. Re-scripting politics as emancipation and enjoyment as lack might indeed permit transgressing the present deadlock whereby consensual post-democracy parallels the rise of illiberal and autocratic regimes.

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Note

1. I mobilise here the Lacanian terminology of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary (see Pohl & Swyngedouw, 2021b). The social bond and the terrain of everyday social, cultural and political life is, according to Lacan, structured as a Borromean knot of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Politics operates in and through the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The Symbolic stands for the assemblage of institutions, laws, rules, regulations and actors that constitute politics as a fully closed configuration. It quilts a chain of signifiers, such as democracy, state, cohesion, nation, choice, freedom and so on into a discourse that sustains the order and assigns everyone and everything a certain place within the social edifice. In other words, the symbolic order in which we dwell and through which we understand our (and everyone else’s) place in society is the basic starting point for instituting a ‘world’. It constitutes the Law (or the big Other) that prescribes, prohibits, entices, lures, punishes or rewards. Politics (as an instituted symbolic order) invokes and constructs a community, a whole, a One, that becomes (re-)presented in the interplay between political forces, programs, parties and the like. Of course, this is a symbolic representation of something that is neither unified nor coherent, but utterly contingent. The Imaginary, in the present political context, can be identified with the widely held view that pluralist liberal democracy as the idealised political form and capitalism as the preferred form of organising production and reproduction are the only workable, realistic, inclusive and quasi-naturalised social order beyond questioning – one without excess, remainder or gap. There is no alternative imaginary possible. The Imaginary is the terrain of ideology, of providing a sense of coherence or wholeness. It is constituted through seductive and alluring images, often providing an illusionary sense of unity and transparency, ‘promising fullness, integration, and harmony’ (Stavrakakis, 2009, p. 160). It is what makes the Symbolic sensible; it offers a way through which things and relations are seen and understood as common sense and self-evident (structured around signifiers like nation, whiteness, solidarity, the invisible hand of the market that produces the common good and so on). The Imaginary invariably covers up or conceals the gap, the void, the abyss between the Real and the Symbolic. Fantasy becomes the mechanism through which the gap that marks their inconsistency is contained. It operates through the promise of enjoyment (jouissance) for the subject by providing meaning, context, purpose and a sense for desire. So, fantasy not only tells us what to desire but, more importantly, how to desire and how to achieve it. In today’s neoliberal consumer culture, for example, the imperative ‘Enjoy!’ (Jouis!) – go shopping, pursue pleasure, exercise consumer choice and be who you want to be – has become a key driving force of the superego (Lacan, 1998, p. 3). For Lacan, the world of the symbolic order, like the subject, is always lacking. It is an unstable, shifting and necessarily incomplete register, which is why Lacan ends up stating ‘that there is no such thing as a world’. Reality does not exist as a whole, because there is always something ‘revolting’ against it. There is always excess, a remainder, which cannot be symbolised or represented; a hard kernel that sticks to the world like a fishbone in the throat and exerts an unalienable scratch. This is what Lacan calls the Real, a complex, shifting spectral presence that ‘resists symbolisation absolutely’ (Lacan, 1991, p. 66). Like an eel, the Real slips through the net of words each time one believes to have a firm grip.
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