

Beyond limits: a psychoanalytical study of the neoliberal imaginary

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Some years ago Hayek said: We need a liberalism that is a living thought. (...) It is up to us to create liberal utopias, to think in a liberal mode, rather than presenting liberalism as a technical alternative for government. Liberalism must be a general style of thought, analysis, and imagination.

Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*

*A Fearghus,
A ma famille et aux amis,
Sans qui rien de tout cela n'aurait été possible*

Abstract

This thesis intervenes in the debates on the persistence of neoliberalism by examining the psychic and fantasmatic undercurrents of its ideas. To do so, it argues that neoliberalism is not solely an economic theory, but that it also functions as a cultural imaginary. The imaginary is understood here as a frame around which fantasies can be articulated together and given consistence, providing a structuring – but ultimately unsustainable – image of the self and of the social.

To develop this idea, the thesis reconceptualises the concept of the ‘imaginary’ via the psychoanalytical work of Jacques Lacan, constructing a political theory of the imaginary that can be used to analyse neoliberal discursive productions. It then applies this conceptual framework to three different corpuses of texts that display and rework neoliberal ideas. These are, firstly, canonical texts of neoliberal economic theory by Friedrich Hayek, Gary Becker, Milton Friedman, Frank Knight and Joseph Schumpeter; secondly, narratives by two contemporary iconic entrepreneurs, Elon Musk and Peter Thiel; thirdly, best-selling memoirs on childhood in poverty by two social critics, Darren McGarvey and J.D. Vance. The thesis thus brings together economic history, psychoanalytical theory and cultural studies.

Treating neoliberalism as an imaginary means excavating its metaphysical preconceptions to better denaturalise it. It means analysing how neoliberal representations hail us as subjects by mobilising fantasies of identity formation, of life and death, and of moving beyond limits. The neoliberal imaginary specifically delineates what we, inhabitants of the neoliberal present, should aspire to be and desire. Finally, treating neoliberalism as an imaginary entails attentiveness to its internal dissonances. This approach reveals something profoundly alienating in neoliberal promises, showing how they function as disciplinary apparatuses that differentiate between useful and non-useful lives, leading to the potential sacrifice of the latter and the consecration of all to the ordealic mechanisms of uncertainty.

Key words: neoliberalism; imaginary; psychoanalysis; Lacan; Hayek; entrepreneur; addiction

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Carla Ibled, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

30th November 2020

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Introduction

The last fifteen years have seen the multiplication of global crises, all accompanied by hopeful proclamations about the end of neoliberalism. As Alex Doherty (2020) recently argued, the current Covid-19 pandemic is no exception to the rule. Enforced social distancing, lockdowns, quarantines and the closing of borders have effectively disrupted global exchanges and labour markets, while the magnitude of the economic crisis that comes in their wake has forced even the governments most committed to non-interventionism to step in to support their economies – thus suspending what are seen as the basic rules of free market ideology. Yet, as Doherty reminds us, the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2016 Brexit vote followed few months later by Donald Trump’s election were all perceived by contemporary commentators to signal an end to the neoliberal era – an end that today seems long overdue.

In other words, we keep being surprised by what Colin Crouch evocatively calls “the strange non-death of neoliberalism” (Crouch 2011). Such persistence is of course partly due to the fact that neoliberalism benefits from the full backing of institutional and state powers won over to its cause, and specifically from their monopoly over the means of legitimate violence (Harvey 2005; Klein 2008). The emergence of rival social projects – from the socialist experiments in 1973 Chile and 2015 Greece to today’s environmentalist ZADs (*zone à défendre*) in France – tend to be swiftly contained or smothered through military, institutional and financial means. Yet, state violence cannot explain everything. To understand the endurance of neoliberalism, one also needs to take into consideration the realm of ideas and, particularly, the long, patient and insidious campaigns to root neoliberal ideas into institutions (Blyth 2002; Peck 2010; MacLean 2017) and into the intellectual spheres (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Burgin 2013). On the level of ideas, neoliberalism keeps disconcerting us thanks to its ability to adapt to and recombine with the critiques formulated against it (Boltanski and Chiapello 2011).

More profoundly, one needs to understand, to follow Foucault, how neoliberalism acts as a rationality that shapes people in their very minds, subjectivities and bodies (Foucault 2004; Dardot and Laval 2010; Brown 2015). Neoliberal rationality produces certain ways of thinking and behaving. It imbues our sense of self, but also the way we perceive our environment and put it into words and images. The worldviews promoted by neoliberalism seek to merge with our very conception of reality. It presents itself as the only realistic politico-economic system – Margaret Thatcher’s infamous TINA (‘there is no alternative’) as captured by Mark Fisher’s

concept of 'capitalist realism' (2009). Far from the optimistic proclamations about neoliberalism's ending, what a number of post-2008 analyses (like Fisher's) dread is that the neoliberal ways of thinking and being have come to occupy the horizon given to our collective and individual imaginations. Like the roots of a gigantic tree, they smother the articulation of alternative imaginaries, by occupying all the available mental space. Such a fear is evocatively summarised by Frederic Jameson's famous claim that it is "easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson 2003, 76).

Such reflections on the pervasiveness of neoliberal rationality have led some scholars, like Bob Jessop (2013), Wendy Brown (2015), or Pierre Dardot (2020), to describe neoliberalism as having an 'imaginary'. The concept is generally used by these scholars to designate a "semiotic ensemble" (Jessop 2013, 236) comprised of networks of values and ideas. It is also often used to discuss hegemonic struggles between rival imaginaries. For instance, Brown described how the neoliberal imaginary slowly corrodes the democratic imaginary by destroying what she takes to be its very foundations, namely humanism, public life and popular sovereignty (Brown 2015; see also Cornelissen 2018). Conversely, Dardot (2020) discusses the construction of an alternative imaginary, the "imaginary of the common[s] (*l'imaginaire du commun*)", which he hopes can function differently from the neoliberal imaginary.

This doctoral project takes these reflections on neoliberalism and imaginaries as the starting point of its investigation into neoliberal rationality and discourses. Like Pierre Dardot, my initial interest in the imaginary derives from my encounter with the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, an economist, political theorist and psychoanalyst, whose magnum opus *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975) is a standard reference in France when it comes to theorising imaginaries. Although my work has since significantly departed from Castoriadis's, I was inspired by his ambition to take a step aside from functionalist considerations on social organisations, to better analyse the imaginary dimension of these organisations. According to Castoriadis, "man [sic] is an unconsciously philosophical animal" (1975, 222), who asks existential questions about the world that surrounds him. He is also "a poetical animal, who provides answers to these questions in the imaginary" (1975, 222). What Castoriadis invites us to do is to always approach social productions as something slightly weird and strange, as works of the imagination. This is precisely what I intend to do when analysing neoliberal discourses to break the aura of 'realism' that surrounds them.

In addition, the aim of the thesis is to develop Foucault's work by addressing an aspect that, I argue in Chapter 1, is not sufficiently taken into account in the Foucauldian scholarship. Foucault concentrates on how neoliberal rationality shapes subjectivities through the discourses it spreads. Conversely, using psychoanalytical theories, and specifically the work of Jacques Lacan, I want to explore what makes these representations stick and why they hail us as subjects, which entails understanding how there might be something alluring – but also something dissonant – in these representations. Such an investigation means asking questions about identity formation, desire and enjoyment, both at the collective and individual levels. I suggest that it can be done by re-mobilising the concept of the 'imaginary' in a psychoanalytically informed way, by taking into account Lacan's reflections on this concept so as to address the libidinal kernel at work in neoliberal representations and discourses – a kernel that anchors attachment to them.

1. Research questions

My re-mobilisation of the concept of the "neoliberal imaginary" is organised around three specific sets of questions. First and foremost, when using the concept of the imaginary, I am interested in how the cultural productions I analyse – no matter whether they are economic treatises or biographical/autobiographical narratives – function as what David Howarth, Jason Glynos and Steven Griggs call "fantasmatic objects" (Howarth, Glynos, and Griggs 2016, 102). How do they appeal to and mobilise certain fantasies about what it is to be a successful individual in a social environment, about what one should aspire to be, and desire? How is it possible to say, with Valerie Walkerdine, that neoliberalism offers "exciting perspectives to the self" (Walkerdine 2020, 383)? Such questions particularly entail examining processes of imaginary identity formation and subjectification, as well as exploring how they are pervaded with drives and libidinality. For instance, I am interested in how the popular narratives I analyse in Part III function as mobilising fictions that contribute, through the fantasies they conjure up, to the spread of identity models and counter-models also promoted in neoliberal theory.

Secondly, I am interested in roughly mapping the utopian world elaborated in neoliberal theoretical texts. How is this utopian market order organised and around which kind of structures? What does it claim to do, and which are its promises? Why should we find them attractive? What is this order supposed to protect us from? More importantly, what are its metaphysical underpinnings? These questions particularly invite us to consider that, behind the veneer of abstract rationality that characterises neoliberal thought, lies a number of specific –

and, at times, rather peculiar - considerations about being, about humanity, knowledge, identity and time. Such a work also entails understanding how these visions operate in relation to the worldviews promoted in other imaginaries – and specifically in the imaginary of planning, in opposition to which the neoliberal imaginary defines itself.

Lastly, through the spectrum of psychoanalytical theory, I want to address the alienating dimension of imaginaries in general, and of the neoliberal imaginary in particular. To draw on Castoriadis' work, how can the logics that organise an imaginary become autonomised and force their imperatives on social agents? To be specific, I am interested in how the world imagined by the neoliberal scholars puts into place a number of disciplinary mechanisms that are meant to breed a certain ethos - what Hayek calls a "commercial spirit" (Hayek 2013, 413) – but are also meant to enable the differentiation between useful and non-useful market agents. My work thus aims at identifying certain of these mechanisms (namely mimetic desire, the ordeal, stigmatisation and sacrifice) and at examining the effects they are meant to have, from a social engineering perspective. Yet, to go a step further with Lacan, I am also interested in how the identities promoted within neoliberal discursive productions are ultimately impossible to sustain. This impossibility is double. On the one hand, I show how imaginary identity representations are alienating in the sense that they cannot be exhaustive and all-encompassing – they always leave something out that comes back to haunt and disrupt the representations thus constituted. What I show here is that the neoliberal promises of cohesion and fulfilment are ultimately bound to fail. On the other hand, as will become clear in the two final chapters, because they are articulated around the unleashing of the forces of desire and enjoyment, neoliberal promises are also peculiarly tied to the death drive, making their realisation an anguishing encounter with one's potential dissolution.

2. The stakes

Asking these questions does three things. Firstly, my immanent critique aims to denaturalise the representations constantly hammered into us, inhabitants of the neoliberal present, by approaching them as the strange objects they are. When deconstructing these representations to highlight their fantasmatic and libidinal dimension, I hope to loosen their grip, to untie the knots that hamper our imagining of alternatives to neoliberalism. Destabilising hegemonic imaginary representations is thus a way to delineate another possible relationship with neoliberalism as a repository of fantasies – a relationship not characterised by over-investment (Glynos 2014, 10).

Secondly, my deconstructive psychoanalytical reading identifies contradictions within the imaginary representations promoted in neoliberal discourses; like, to mention just a few, the tensions between neoliberalism's simultaneous celebrations of freedom and of submission, of the power of the individual and of its limitations by the market infrastructure; of creation and of destruction. The aim here is to point to, so as to open further and ultimately make unendurable, internal breaches in a discourse that fantasises itself as fully coherent. Conversely, psychoanalytical deconstruction is also about examining how neoliberal discourses feed on these contradictions, as they are both what make the discourses malleable but also paradoxically desirable.

Thirdly, psychoanalytical theories invite us to consider the connections between enjoyment and the death drive (Lacan 1986). My deconstructive psychoanalytical reading of neoliberal discourses thus aims to highlight how the neoliberal dream of becoming a life principle through the triggering of desire and its call for enjoyment is intertwined with an intrinsic violence and self-destructiveness. Throughout the thesis I argue that the social engineering neoliberal discourses promote (with mechanisms like sacrifice or the ordeal) are included in an economy of pain and also come to justify the active disinvestment of populations who, in Melinda Cooper's words, are seen as not "worth the cost of [their] own reproduction" (Cooper 2008, 61). In other words, this doctoral work on the neoliberal imaginary can help to throw light on the imaginary mechanisms that support and make possible the policy of 'letting die', or what Achille Mbembe (2006) evocatively calls a "necropolitics" of discredited lives, which we are witnessing on a global scale today (Feher 2020) – as for instance in the case of the American opioid crisis I analyse in Chapter 7.

3. Contribution to knowledge

The thesis reconceptualises the concept of the 'imaginary' via the psychoanalytical work of Jacques Lacan. It builds a political theory of the imaginary that can be used to analyse neoliberal discursive productions to highlight their fantasmatic dimension.

In addition, the thesis brings together corpuses of texts that have not previously been studied together to offer a kaleidoscopic view of the neoliberal imaginary. As an interdisciplinary project, it stands at the crossroad between economic theory and history, psychoanalysis, psychosocial studies and cultural studies.

As such, an important original contribution of the thesis is to apply Lacan's psychoanalytical theories to a corpus of canonical texts of neoliberal economic theory, composed of a selection of texts by Friedrich Hayek, Gary Becker, Milton Friedman and Joseph Schumpeter, alongside an occasional engagement with Frank Knight and Richard Posner. This deconstructive and interpretative reading focuses on fantasies, aiming to show how these texts taken together provide the sketches of a utopian world – the market order (or 'catallaxy') – and of the imaginary agents who populate it. My analysis determines how this utopian world comes with a programme and with appealing promises (which explain why it is libidinally invested in), but also how there is something disturbing in these promises, an inherent moralism and cruelty. When analysing these texts not as economic treatises but as cultural objects, I give particular attention to the images, metonyms and metaphors their authors use, to the emotions they attempt to convey, to the stories, myths and legends that pervade the texts, as well as to the values and beliefs they appeal to and which delineate a philosophy of life distinctive of neoliberalism. One of my main sources of inspiration here is the critical and deconstructive reading of cultural artefacts given by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (2007 [1957]), which I revisit through Lacan's work.

A last contribution of the thesis is to offer a comparative analysis of neoliberal theory and biographical and autobiographical narratives taken from popular culture. My goal is here to examine how the theoretical ideas sketched in neoliberal theory from the 1940s onwards bleed into today's popular culture. Particularly I am interested in how the figures of success and failure found in neoliberal theory are reinterpreted in the attractive models and repulsive counter-models widely advertised in today's Western culture. Still using psychoanalytical theories and its concept of the imaginary as my interpretative framework, I focus on the discursive construction of the iconic entrepreneur as exemplified by the figures of Elon Musk and Peter Thiel, as well as on the discursive construction of the impoverished addict in the narratives of two relatively well-known social critics, J.D. Vance and Darren McGarvey.

Throughout the thesis, my aim is to take seriously neoliberalism as a utopian project by analysing it according to its own terms to better point at its internal shortcomings and limits. Because I will provide an immanent critique of the utopian social project advertised in neoliberal cultural productions, I focus primarily not on the critics of neoliberalism, but on its advocates. I want to understand how they narrate themselves, how they understand the world that surrounds them and attempt to recreate an ideal society based on their core convictions, so as to explore the full implications of this reformist project.

4. The argument

Before presenting the structure of the thesis, I want to end this introduction by summarising its central argument. This thesis argues that in order to understand the persistence of contemporary discourses of neoliberalism it is necessary to take into account their affective dimensions, psychic powers and embodied effects. I investigate how neoliberalism functions not just as an economic doctrine, but also as a theory of life that mobilises individual and collective fantasies of self-realisation and control, as well as of physical and spiritual transcendence. I claim that treating neoliberalism as an imaginary – that is, a frame that gives consistence to these networks of fantasies so as to provide a stable, but ultimately unsustainable, image of the social and the self – foregrounds the intrinsic libidinality of neoliberal discourse.

Treating neoliberalism as an imaginary enables us to grasp how the psychic strength of neoliberal discourses relates to the alluring promises they make, both at the individual and collective levels. Promises of fulfilment and willpower, promises of enjoyment, promises of freedom from moralistic norms and constraints; all of these can be spontaneously accommodated within the structures of the imaginary market order, as long as these structures are unimpeded (by economic planning, the welfare state and so on). As I demonstrate throughout the thesis, the neoliberal project aims at the reconstruction of the social around a giant libidinal apparatus, the ‘catallaxy’. With its invitation to reach beyond physical and mental boundaries, neoliberalism fantasises itself – to draw on Friedrich Hayek’s words – as the “party of life”, the party that can ward off the threat of stasis and degeneration.

Treating neoliberalism as an imaginary also shows that these promises come with a price. I demonstrate that, as a condition of reaching the plenitude they advertise, these discourses demand assiduous participation and emotional investment in the structures and disciplinary apparatuses they have put in place. Along with Jessica Whyte (2017), I argue that they demand faith in the workings of the market order, and submission to the superhuman, “unintelligible” forces that organise it. They require acceptance of collective disempowerment and of the logic of creative destruction, and the individual and collective sacrifices that come with it.

Lastly, I argue that despite neoliberalism’s claim to be non-judgemental and to accommodate all life-choices, the logic of effective physical and emotional investment is used within it to justify the existence and the acceptance of a hierarchy between the successful and those who fail, and, eventually, between the worthy and the unworthy. I want to show that the imaginary constructions deployed in neoliberal discourses intend not just to naturalise this social

hierarchy, but also to make it *desirable*. In addition, I claim that it opens the way to a distinction between lives that are worth investing in and lives that are disposable – as for instance suggested in Hayek’s concept of the “calculus of lives” (Hayek 1988, 132); that is, those lives that may be sacrificed so as to preserve the more useful ones. The ‘party of life’ can swiftly turn into the party of death.

5. The structure

To address the different aspects of my argument, the thesis is divided into three main parts. The **first part** comprises three methodological chapters that aim at setting up the scene for my case-studies. **Chapter 1** is a literature review that situates my psychoanalytical approach within the existing literature on neoliberalism. **Chapter 2** presents my conceptual framework, organised around the Lacanian concept of the ‘imaginary’. **Chapter 3** explores how the imaginary can be used as a methodological tool to provide a deconstructive psychoanalytical reading of neoliberal discourses; it also introduces the corpuses I analyse in Parts II and III.

The **second part** of the thesis is dedicated to a psychoanalytical reading of canonical texts of neoliberal economic theory. **Chapter 4** examines the functioning of the catallaxy, a utopian and ‘marvellous’ infrastructure which, the authors of these texts believe, can coordinate human interactions in a non-arbitrary way. **Chapter 5** pursues this work on the catallaxy by analysing the features of the imaginary actors that populate it and whose behaviours can be curved so as to breed certain ethos – specifically by acting on their desires and submitting them to uncertainty. The chapter concludes by examining how these breeding mechanisms contribute to the formation of a hierarchical dichotomy between the most useful and efficient individuals, and those who fail or do not strive enough.

The **third part** of the thesis explores further this dichotomy by assessing how it is taken over, invested in and transformed in contemporary popular culture, outside the immediate sphere of neoliberal economic literature. **Chapter 6** focuses on the figure of the iconic Silicon Valley entrepreneur, through the narratives that surround Peter Thiel and Elon Musk. I discuss how both men give a human face to the ideal subject celebrated in neoliberal theory, but also how their narratives are punctuated by ruptures, which suggest that the archetypical identity they attempt to embody is impossible to sustain, even for themselves. **Chapter 7** explores the discursive construction of the abject figure of the addict in the narratives of two social critics writing about poverty, J.D. Vance and Darren McGarvey, to discuss how it functions as a cathartic

and disciplinary mechanism and how it delineates an ethic of self-responsibility, distinctive of neoliberalism.

In the **afterword**, I summarise the conclusions I have reached and offer a reflection on the implications of my findings for our neoliberal present.

PART I

CONCEPTUALISING THE NEOLIBERAL IMAGINARY

Chapter 1. Investigating the ‘strange non-death’ of neoliberalism

Introduction

Many scholars and commentators have attempted to explain the resilience of the neoliberal project. As stated in the introduction, this thesis is a contribution to this debate. I particularly contend that a psychoanalytical approach is crucial to understanding neoliberalism’s adaptability.

Chapter 1 situates my approach within the existing (and abundant) literature on neoliberalism. This literature is various, but we can distinguish three main trends schematically: an institutionalist politico-economic approach to neoliberalism; an account of histories of neoliberal thought; and a cultural analysis that is strongly influenced by poststructuralism.

¹ My presentation of these three traditions makes no claim to be exhaustive and will necessarily be too succinct to do justice to the complexity and nuances of the academic works listed in each category. It also needs to be stressed that these categories are not necessarily homogeneous. They sometimes complement each other and are consequently not “mutually exclusive” (Cornelissen 2018, 20). They do not stand in isolation and the boundaries between them should not be exaggerated, as many works tend to transcend these boundaries. Some studies might thus appear in several categories. For instance, I have placed William Davies’s work in the poststructuralist tradition, though it is also indebted to a politico-economic approach. Similarly, Jamie Peck’s and Melinda Cooper’s analyses fit into both ‘politico-economic’ and ‘historical’ categories. By comparing and contrasting these traditions schematically, though, we can gain an insight into the variety of academic perspectives brought to bear on neoliberalism, and the multifarious explanations given for its resilience.

¹ My categorisation is inspired by and indebted to a number of literature reviews published in recent years. See particularly Springer 2012; W. Davies 2014b; Birch 2015; Cornelissen 2018.

Such an exploration also shows that whether they conceive of neoliberalism as a set of policies, a set of ideas or as a rationality, all three trends describe it as an external pressure that comes to fully and thoroughly shape people's behaviour either by force or by less coercive means. Less has been written on how individuals come to invest in neoliberal structures internally and emotionally. The last section of the chapter thus advocates the further development of a psychoanalytical approach to neoliberalism.

1. Neoliberalism as a class project

The first group of studies constitutes an institutionalist approach to neoliberalism that is broadly (and sometimes explicitly) inspired by Marxist and neo-Marxist analyses of capitalism, as well as by Karl Polanyi's 1944 *Great Transformation* (2001). This group includes pre-2008-crisis works like David Harvey's *Brief history of neoliberalism* (2005), Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy's *Capital resurgent* (2004), Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2008), Mark Blyth's *Great Transformations* (2002) and Andrew Gamble's writings on the 'two faces of neoliberalism' (2006), as well as post-2008-crisis studies like Wolfgang Streeck's *Buying Time* (2017), Loïc Wacquant's *Punishing the Poor* (2009), Colin Crouch's *The Strange Non-death of Neoliberalism* (2011), and Ian Bruff's work on 'authoritarian neoliberalism' (2014) – to which I add the investigations of geographers Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck 2010).

What unites these works is their understanding of neoliberalism not merely as an economic programme but, tellingly, as a *political* project aiming to restore the power of "economic elites" by re-establishing the "conditions for capital accumulation" (Harvey 2005, 19; Duménil and Lévy 2004). It is a 'restoration' in the sense that it is designed to counter the relative loss of influence of the capitalist classes following the abandonment of strict *laissez-faire* policies after the economic crisis of the 1930s and the Second World War, which led to increased market regulations and the establishment of the welfare state. Both Harvey and Blyth draw on Polanyi's theory of the 'double-movement' (the ebb and flow of the struggle between the forces of labour and capital) to show that these progressive mid-twentieth-century measures were the result of the "forces of labour demand[ing] protection to the state against the dislocating effects of the disembedded market" (Blyth 2002, 4; see also Harvey 2005, 11). Consequently, according to Blyth, neoliberalism constitutes a counterattack or a "revolt" (2002, 149) to disembed the market again from society's control, "to roll back the institutions of social protection and replace them with more market-conforming institutional order" (2002, 4). Such a "restructuring of capitalism" is meant to reassert the domination of capital over labour (Gamble 2006, 26), at the

expense of the subordinated social groups and lower classes, which are increasingly marginalized and excluded (Bruff 2014, 116; Wacquant 2009, 310).

Crucially, these studies can be described as ‘institutionalist’ in that they see the creation of a ‘neoliberal state’ as central to the restructuring of capital in the interests of the elites (Harvey 2005, 64). The state plays an important role in the perpetuation of the new (neoliberal) social order (Duménil and Lévy 2004) as it is incorporated and used to spread the neoliberal policies designed to recreate “the best conditions for markets to flourish” by “removing as many restrictions on competition as possible and empowering market agents by reducing the burden of taxation” (Gamble 2006, 27). The institutionalist works investigate a process of “creative destruction” (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 349; Harvey 2005, 3) by which previous (Keynesian) regulatory and institutional infrastructures are partially dissolved and replaced by new market-oriented institutions, norms and rules – what Peck also identifies as a restructuring strategy of “rollbacks” and “rollout” (Peck 2010, 22). As Ian Bruff demonstrates, these neoliberal reforms target states’ constitutional and legal apparatuses (2014, 116). Despite being “nominally democratic institutions”, governments and parliaments organise their “self-disempowerment” by engineering new constitutional and legal rules that constrain their actions (2014, 116), especially when these actions have “societal goals” (2014, 122). The “rolling back of the state” announced by Margaret Thatcher is thus limited to its disengagement from engineering redistributive and protective social policies that mitigate the dislocating outcomes of market trends. All institutions are mobilised to ensure market orthodoxy, strict budgetary discipline and non-inflationary policies (e.g. monetarist policies, reduction of social expenditures, privatisation of public assets, rise of interest rates).² Bruff cites the example of how the 2008 crisis was followed by the multiplication in Europe of “debt-brake” constitutional amendments that mandated balanced budgets and limit deficits, and thus discouraged welfare measures (2014, 123-4). Making these rules constitutional renders them legally binding for future governmental actions, thus insulating (or immunising) them further from democratic pressure (Bruff 2014, 122; Streeck 2017, 4).

Popular resistance to neoliberal reforms must be broken, if need be, by resorting to the state’s monopoly over the means of legitimate violence (Gamble 2006, 27; Harvey 2005, 2) – thus

² Knafo et al. have argued that the institutionalist (as well as the poststructuralist) approaches tend to assume that, with neoliberalism, the state, and public administration in general, are increasingly made to act as a firm, internalising managerial techniques to allegedly translate market principles “into tools of public administration” (2019, 3). For Knafo et al., this vision fails to recognise that managerialism and neoliberal theory have different origins, explaining in turn why states’ managerial practices may sometimes go against neoliberal theory.

creating a further rift between democracy and capitalism (Streeck 2017, 5). In other words, the advent of neoliberalism is accompanied by a redeployment of the state's coercive power, symbolised for Loïc Wacquant by the development of an "expansive, intrusive, proactive penal apparatus" to handle "the social turbulence generated by deregulation and to impres[s] the discipline of precarious labour" (Wacquant 2009, 307–8). Neoliberalism is thus constitutively "authoritarian" (Bruff 2014) - a trend that came strikingly to the fore with the advent of the 2008 crisis. Generally, Naomi Klein (2008) has documented how political and economic crises, and the shocks and distress they leave in their wake, have been instrumentalised to coercively impose and expand further neoliberal infrastructures and norms.

Yet, these thinkers also recognise that coercion might not be strong enough to impose a lasting consensus. Their works contain recurrent references to the building of a new dominant "common sense", and thus (not always explicitly) to the work of Antonio Gramsci on hegemony (Bruff 2014, 117; Gamble 2006, 24–25; Harvey 2005, 5; Peck 2010). They understand neoliberalism as an 'ideology' (although, as I explain later, their definitions of this concept may differ), focusing on its message (as found in neoliberal theory) and on the institutions that spread it (giving special attention to the role of think-tanks, universities, newspapers and businesses that promote neoliberal ideas (Blyth 2002, 152–201; Wacquant 2009, 306–7)). For instance, Mark Blyth's ideational analysis invites scholars to take seriously the role of ideas in the shaping of interests (and thus of consent) among vast sections of the population, in the questioning of old institutions and their replacement by new ones, and in the perpetuation of the latter (Blyth 2002, 15). He is particularly interested in the role played by economic ideas (elaborated by economists, spread by businesses and business-friendly think-tanks, and institutionalised by politicians) in the large-scale legitimisation of the global 'disembedding' of the economy (2002, 151).

Interestingly, when investigating the neoliberal hegemonic 'construction of consent' and the neutralising of resistance, Harvey claims that "for any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent to the social world we inhabit" (2005, 5). This seductive message is constituted, according to Harvey, by the neoliberal exaltation of individual freedom and human rights and dignity - for instance when the advocates of neoliberalism claim that the market is the cornerstone protecting individual liberties from the totalitarian intervention of the state and other collectivist forms of social organisation like trade unions (2005, 7). Neoliberal discourses have thus managed to take up the themes that Harvey sees as

historically associated with left-wing emancipatory movements, and specifically with the global social and cultural unrest of 1968 (2005, 41). It has thereby detached these values from the groups that traditionally defended them.

This process of incorporation of critique is analysed further by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme* (2011 [1999]). In their influential study, Boltanski and Chiapello examine how late capitalism guarantees the active engagement of workers and managerial staff by spreading seductive discourses strong enough to convince them that they have a personal and collective interest in participating in the capitalist order (2011, 41). The 'spirit of capitalism' (that is, the "ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism" (2011, 41)) draws its force from its moral neutrality and its plasticity, which enable it to adapt to and match its critics' moral and emancipatory demands (2011, 72). By this means, neoliberal rhetoric has succeeded in securing a very broad basis of support and consent, even among movements defending individual liberties and minority rights (Harvey 2005, 41). However, Boltanski and Chiapello's stance on neoliberalism's moral neutrality has been increasingly contradicted by the clear links between neoliberalism (at least in its American version) and neoconservatism (Brown 2006; Cooper 2017).³ Drawing on Stuart Hall's analysis of Thatcherism's "authoritarian populism" (Hall 2017), Bruff discusses how neoliberalism has turned itself into common sense by playing on popular anxieties to deploy a "specific political narrative that moralize[s] the holding of debt" (2014, 123) – thus shaming and excluding further welfare recipients. Harvey and Bruff both emphasise the paradoxical ethical dimension at the heart of the neoliberal ideology: a radically individualistic ethic that opposes all form of collective social justice (Harvey 2005, 41), while advocating a "greater reliance on family values" (Bruff 2014, 117).⁴

There are however disagreements among institutionalist scholars on how to interpret neoliberal hegemony, especially when it comes to the status of neoliberal theory - although they (with the notable exception of Bruff (Bruff and Starnes 2019)) emphasise the many contradictions between neoliberal theory and its actual implementation (Crouch 2011, viii; Harvey 2005, 19). To start with, Bruff argues that, since the 2008 crisis, neoliberal economic elites have become less interested in maintaining their hegemony through consent and are therefore more willing

³ Dardot and Laval similarly suggest that Boltanski and Chiapello uncritically accept the seductive power of the 'new spirit' rhetoric, forgetting that it is accompanied by an outstandingly effective disciplinary apparatus (Dardot and Laval 2010, 411). On the other hand, although Harvey acknowledges neoliberalism's ethical dimension, he does not recognise the intrinsic connections between neoliberalism and neoconservatism and has instead a mistaken tendency to oppose them (2005, 82 – see comments by Wacquant (2009, 311)).

⁴ Both ethical injunctions are compatible with Thatcher's infamous declaration that "there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families." (Harvey 2005, 23).

to rely on their coercive power and their “explicit exclusion and marginalization of subordinate social groups” (Bruff 2014, 116). Generally, Bruff finds no contradiction between the theory and its implementation and, on the contrary, considers that the post-2008 period constitutes a more faithful application of the neoliberal theoretical programme (Bruff and Starnes 2019, 253). On the other hand, Harvey insists on theory/practice discrepancies concerning the role of the state and individual freedom (that is, a theoretical distrust of the state, the advocacy of laissez-faire policies and the sanctity of individual freedom is contradicted by the deployment of strong authoritarian states in supposedly neoliberal polities) (Harvey 2005, 21). According to Harvey, these incongruities are evidence of the incidental character of neoliberal theory to neoliberalism as such. For example, Crouch (2011) demonstrates that the theoretical dedication to free markets (which presupposes anti-monopolistic regulations guaranteed by a neutral state) invariably translates into policies that ensure the infiltration of the market by quasi-monopolistic giant corporations and their lobby groups. This means that, for Harvey, neoliberal theory was never intended to be scrupulously implemented in a pure form. It is rather fundamentally a sham⁵ crafted to legitimate and guarantee the core of the neoliberal project, namely a programme of wealth redistribution in favour of the economic elite at the cost of the inexorable deepening of social inequalities (Harvey 2005, 16). For Boltanski and Chiapello, this view conforms with the economistic-Marxist understanding of ‘ideology’ as “a moralising discourse that aims to conceal material interest” (2011, 33).⁶

The geographers Jamie Peck, Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore also place the discrepancies between theory and practice at the centre of their approach, with the notion of “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore 2002). However, they do not consider that these dissonances reveal a large-scale programme of deception; they are, on the contrary, seen as constitutive of neoliberalism and the main source of its strength. Peck particularly insists on the fact that neoliberalism has “only ever existed in ‘impure’ forms, indeed *can* only exist in messy hybrids” (Peck 2010, 7). Going a step further, as I discuss in the second part of the chapter, he argues that it is the utopian and unrealisable dimension of neoliberal theory – “the pristine clarity of its ideological apparition, the free market, coupled with the endless frustrations borne of the inevitable failure to arrive at this elusive destination” - which gives the neoliberal project “a significant degree of forward momentum” (2010, 7). While the theory provides the practice

⁵ Harvey specifically draws on Polanyi’s comments on the fictitious character of “labour, land and money” to assert that capitalism needs fictions to function (Harvey 2005, 166–67).

⁶ Boltanski and Chiapello oppose this Marxist definition and define ideology as “a set of shared beliefs, inscribed in institutions, engaged in actions, and thereby anchored in the real” (2011, 33).

with a source of legitimacy, the hybridity of practices of neoliberalism means that the neoliberal project is adaptable to all terrains.

Disagreements around the status of neoliberal theory have larger implications. Particularly, with the notable exception of the studies conducted by geographers, institutionalist works have a tendency to describe neoliberalism in the singular, as a set of unified doctrines, a kind of “*economic pensée unique*” (Plehwe 2009, 1), consciously elaborated in circles of power and imposed on the base. By extension, these accounts often treat neoliberalism as a timeless doctrine, although many elements point toward the fact that it should be treated historically. This is particularly striking in Harvey’s work, which has also been criticised for its economistic reading of neoliberalism (Wacquant 2009, 311). As Philip Mirowski points out, “for [Harvey], ideas are far less significant than the brute function of serving the interest of finance capital and globalized elites in the distribution of wealth upward” (Mirowski 2013, 42). If theory is to be exclusively understood as a mere rhetorical ‘system’ of justification, the diversity of the different trends of neoliberal thought around the world necessarily becomes only mildly significant when compared to the structural goal underlying them, namely the unchallengeable domination of one social class over all others. In this reading of neoliberalism, all neoliberal currents merge together.

Institutionalist accounts of neoliberalism are essential as they allow us to discern the intrinsic violence at the heart of the neoliberalization of the world economy, as well as how this process is structurally driven by the deepening of economic and social inequalities. Nonetheless, their impassioned depictions of neoliberalism’s rise to power might paradoxically eclipse more thorough and subtle historical and geographical perspectives on the rooting of the neoliberal world and values.

2. Neoliberalism as a ‘thought collective’

A second trend in the literature on neoliberalism has sought to answer the limitations of institutionalist analyses, and specifically of its economistic-Marxist branch, by placing neoliberal theory and its history at the centre of the debate. Beyond its role in the institutional redistribution of power and wealth, neoliberalism has been interpreted by some scholars as a radical project that seeks to profoundly reform society as a whole on a long-term basis. In this vision, the utopian ideas developed by the neoliberal theorists are neither instrumental nor secondary but, on the contrary, sketch the outline of an ideal world to come.

I would first like to draw attention to a series of recent publications, at the junction between institutionalist and historical traditions, which investigate the intricate relationship and recent history of the neoliberal and conservative movements in the United-States. Worthy of particular mention is Nancy MacLean's *Democracy in Chains* (2017), which explores the connections between James M. Buchanan's Virginia School of Public Choice and the Koch brothers, two billionaires with a strong influence on American politics – emphasising the classist and racist underpinnings of both the theory and the policies promoted by the Virginia School. Another contribution that has been influential for my work is Melinda Cooper's *Family Values* (2017), exploring the history of the American poor laws and the discourse on the family in the second part of the twentieth century to stress the active collaboration of the free-market theorists of the Chicago School with social conservatives. She demonstrates that this harmony between the champions of individualism and the defenders of the family can be explained by the central role played by the family in neoliberal theory, where it is conceived as the buffer absorbing the dislocating effects of the free-market – thus shifting protective responsibilities from the state to the household.

Secondly, a new geo-historical approach to neoliberalism has emerged since the 2008 financial crisis. It is represented by Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe's *Road to Mont-Pèlerin* (2009), Angus Burgin's *Great Persuasion* (2013), Jamie Peck's *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (2010), Daniel Stedman Jones' *Masters of the Universe* (2012) and, more recently, Quinn Slobodian's *Globalists* (2018a). These works break away markedly from the political-economy tradition by focusing their analysis on the genesis and genealogy of neoliberal thought in the 20th century. Their enquiry interestingly presents the main architects of neoliberal theory – especially the tutelary figures of Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman – less as the unscrupulous agents of big capital than as utopians sharing the unshakable faith in “the primacy of ideas” and in “the power of philosophical abstraction to instigate long-term political change” (Burgin 2013, 217; see also Mirowski 2009, 432). Furthermore, according to these historical interpretations, the neoliberal theorists did not simply strive for the restoration of social elites or the return of classical *laissez-faire*. Instead they fiercely opposed what they explicitly identified as the ‘status quo’ of their time (‘collectivism’) to revolutionise society. For example, Hayek and Friedman refused to be called ‘conservative’; the latter argued that the term only applied to New Dealers, who wanted to ‘keep things as they were’ and opposed radical social change (Burgin 2013, 175).

The historical studies of neoliberalism have emphasised its eclectic character. Neoliberalism should be seen as pluralistic, historically and geographically polymorphous both in theory and practice (Peck 2010, 30–31). Different intellectual branches coexist, like for instance the Freiburg School, the Austrian School or the Chicago School. They all display their own particular logic and features, but also “cross-fertilize” each other (Plehwe 2009, 12). Moreover, the historical studies highlight the evolving and fluctuating trends of neoliberal theory. Far from being the monolithic doctrine described in the economistic-Marxist analyses, neoliberalism is here characterised by its fluidity, its continual re-articulations and mutations. For instance, Burgin demonstrates that the scholars of the early Chicago School, like Frank Knight and Jacob Viner, were concerned about the moral hazard that a market-centred society could potentially represent, whereas Chicago later became a stronghold of free-market fundamentalism under the influence of Henry Simons and Aaron Director (Burgin 2013, 33; see also Van Horn 2015; Gane 2019). Interestingly, Peck specifically interprets the prefix ‘neo’ as denoting “the repeated (necessity for) renewal and reinvention of a project that could never be fixed as a stable formula” (Peck 2010, 20). He identifies neoliberalism as an “unstable signifier” (2010, 31): an unrealizable “utopian vision of a free society and a free economy” that constitutes a horizon always aimed at and never attained, thus lending impetus to its implementations in hybrid and impure forms (2010, 7). Brenner and Theodore’s concept of “actually existing neoliberalism” (2002) must similarly be understood as a way of demonstrating that there is not one unique form of neoliberalism, but a plurality of instantiations in time and space of a fluid and heterogeneous set of utopian ideas.

The historical approaches to neoliberalism thus encourage us to be aware of the potential disagreements between branches. For instance, Burgin shows that Knight and Viner were ill-at-ease with the fanatical extremism of the views of LSE free-marketers like Hayek. Paradoxically such views seem today far more accommodating than Friedman’s aggressive plea for the uncompromising application of an idealised version of nineteenth century free market principles (Burgin 2013, 176). The plurality of the neoliberal movement contributes, according to Mirowski and Plehwe (2009), to the difficulty in giving neoliberalism a precise definition. Interestingly, they demonstrate that neoliberal theorists themselves struggled to find a consensus strong enough to coordinate their action. Until 1947, they were dispersed and divided despite some abortive attempts to organise a directory for free-market advocacy, like the 1938 *Colloque Walter Lippmann* in Paris where the term “neoliberalism” was used for the first time as a rallying

cry on the suggestion of Louis Rougier and Walter Lippmann (Dardot and Laval 2010, 165; Plehwe 2009, 13).⁷

The creation of the Mont-Pèlerin Society (henceforth MPS) in 1947 on Hayek's initiative offered a platform where the different neoliberal schools could be brought together to craft a common identity. It was conceived as a closed group, whose like-minded participants were carefully selected (Mirowski 2009, 430). As such, the MPS's meetings were considered by the various defenders of the free market as privileged moments, shielded from the torments of an external environment that they thought implacably hostile to their ideas and won over to Keynesianism. The meetings helped to formulate a reasonably coherent 'set of epistemic commitments' on which the different trends could all agree (Mirowski 2009, 417). What had previously been considered as irreconcilable positions were rearticulated and turned into productive tension to create a more or less unified doctrine around a number of key common points. For instance, all participants shared a profound faith in the ability of market mechanisms to solve the most intractable social problems. Although they did not agree on how much regulation should restrain market forces, they all called for a reorganisation of society along market principles (Burgin 2013, 213). They generally agreed that the market was not natural, but, on the contrary, needed to be created and nurtured via 'enlightened' policy interventions (Mirowski 2009, 435). This represented an important point of departure from the strict '*laissez-faire*' approach advocated in classical liberalism.

One also needs to understand the MPS as a novel intellectual structure and knowledge apparatus, which was crucial in allowing the neoliberal intellectuals to successfully turn their theoretical ideas into effective political praxis. It functioned as a laboratory of ideas where an alternative social world could be imagined. It was also a platform where participants were encouraged to reconceptualise their theoretical ideas in political terms in order to strengthen them (Burgin 2013, 165). The meetings were trans-disciplinary, with members principally coming from academia, the media, politics and business. This 'multisector' interaction, that

⁷ Dardot and Laval suggest that the expression 'neoliberalism' had already been used prior to the colloquium, particularly by Gaëtan Pirou (2010, 160). Andrew Gamble, in contrast, claims that the name was coined by Alexander Rüstow (2006, 21). It is also important to note that most neoliberal scholars maintain an ambiguous relationship with the appellation. Whereas Milton Friedman still uses it in 1951 (Friedman as quoted in Peck 2010, 2–3), the name progressively disappears in the following years as the movement consolidates itself institutionally (Mirowski 2013, 38). Dardot and Laval point Hayek's later wish to rhetorically tune down the discontinuities between 'neoliberalism' and classical liberalism (2010, 242–3; see also Mirowski 2013, 39–40). Interestingly, Slobodian's research suggests that there is a revival in the use of the term in neoliberal circles: he mentions leading neoliberal journal *Ordo*'s clarifications regarding the addition of the "syllable 'neo'" (quoted in Slobodian 2018a, 6).

Mirowski also refers to as a “thought collective”, was a real asset since it reinforced the MPS’s “capacity to incubate, critique and promulgate ideas” (Mirowski 2013, 43). Participants ambioned to reconfigure the entire fabric of society; they wanted, no less, to “alter the tenor and meaning of political life” (Mirowski 2009, 431). This entailed to radically change people’s representations, to capture the imagination of future generations, which in turn required a long-term strategy of interventions (Plehwe 2009, 15). Neoliberal ideas had to be spread, and political power conquered.

According to Plehwe, the MPS functioned like a complex and “efficient knowledge machinery” (2009, 6), which used differentiated strategies to seduce specialised audiences and the wider public. On the one hand, the MPS targeted a specialised audience composed of decision-makers and knowledge-diffusers. To win these actors to its cause, it relied on a network of supporters already present in strategic spheres: academic departments dominated by neoliberals (like the LSE, University of Chicago Economics, George Mason University, Geneva’s *Institut Universitaire des Hautes Etudes*), foundations promoting neoliberal doctrines (like the Volker fund), and general-purpose conservative “think-tanks” (like the Institute of Economic Affairs, the American Enterprise Institute), which were in charge of repackaging neoliberal theories into practical policy documents (Mitchell 2009, 387).

On the other hand, the vulgarisation of MPS ideas for a wider public was entrusted to the care of those whom Hayek called the “second-hand dealers of ideas”, that is, public intellectuals, journalists, school teachers, media commentators, film makers (Mitchell 2009, 386), and to popular and rhetorically aggressive activists and politicians, in charge of ideological campaigning in the public sphere. They were supported by individuals with a background in PR, business and marketing who helped to make the diffusion of their message more efficient (Mitchell 2009, 387–388). This double-discourse, a combination of “elite scholarship with popular writing and intermittent sophistication with populist simplification” (Plehwe 2009, 6), is very clearly active in Friedman’s work, with a clear-cut division between his academic writing (intended for his students and peers) and his populist and propagandist work like his 1980 *Free to Choose* TV series (Burgin 2013, 187; see also Brandes 2020).

Mirowski argues that the success of the MPS can be explained by the fact it made no fetishistic distinction between theory and practice, since both were mobilised to shape public discourse and policy (2009, 427). This gave its proponents an “ability to transform its economic ideas and slogans into demonstration projects” (Mitchell 2009, 388) and thus to test and prove the rightness of neoliberal ideas by using the world as a laboratory. Similarly, Jamie Peck (here

combining institutionalist and geographical insights) argues that it is neoliberalism's triangulation "between its ideological, ideational, and institutional currents, between philosophy, politics and practice" that guarantees its resilience (2010, 6–8) and thus enables it to adapt to any historical context and geographical terrain, through a process of trial and error.⁸ Through this account of the MPS's crusade, the historical and constructivist approaches⁹ to neoliberalism thus focus attention on the power of ideas to effect social change.

However, these historical accounts are not exempt from difficulties. Particularly, despite their apparent differences, they fundamentally share with the economic-Marxist approach an underlying (and slightly conspiratorial) understanding of neoliberalism as an intentionally-propagated ideology – that is, a seductive discourse overlying the material interests of a social elite – which is particularly striking in Mirowski's insistence on neoliberalism's 'double truths doctrine' (Mirowski 2013, 68).¹⁰ Both interpretations thus apprehend the social and intellectual shifts introduced by neoliberalism as the result of well-thought-out discursive strategies propounded by exceptional individuals. This suggests that there is such a thing as a set of persons or organisations with the power to craft the content of neoliberalism, and through it to determine the features of today's world. It further suggests these individuals are exterior to and independent of this neoliberal ideology, the concrete mechanisms of which they can freely generate and manipulate. Considering neoliberalism as an ideology in this sense also implies that the institutional and historical approaches centre, sometimes almost exclusively, on neoliberalism's political campaigning and institutional conquests – with consequently a tendency to suggest that there is nothing as efficient as a good PR campaign to instil radically new principles in the social world.

It is nonetheless interesting to consider that, like the institutionalist scholars, the thinkers of the geo-historical approach refer to neoliberalism's hegemonic dimension; that is, to its conversion into 'common sense'. Mirowski specifically questions how "'everyday' neoliberalism has sunk so deeply into the cultural unconscious" that even such a cataclysmic event as the 2008 financial crisis cannot displace it (2013, 89). Mirowski thus invites the reader to recognize "the subconscious prompts that lurk in each of our lives, the attitudes that have grown to be the

⁸ Such an "uneven socio-spatial development" (Peck 2010, 20) accounts for the seeming discrepancy between the violent imposition of neoliberalism in the Global South (for instance, as described by Naomi Klein (2008)) and its seemingly more peaceful and surreptitious rooting in Western societies.

⁹ See Mark Blyth's ideational analyses mentioned in Part 1.

¹⁰ This expression is used to illustrate how neoliberal scholars deem it "necessary to maintain an exoteric version of [their] doctrines to the masses (...) but simultaneously hold fast to an esoteric doctrine for a small closed elite" (Mirowski 2013, 68).

unremarkable furniture of waking life” and that determine our “acquiescence” to the neoliberal world view (2013, 106), “neoliberal attitudes, imaginaries and practices” (2013, 92).

As will be argued in the final part of the chapter, this ‘subconscious’ dimension (the subject of this thesis) is only alluded to and not analysed systematically. Generally, the infiltration of common sense and people’s conversion to the neoliberal mindset is mostly attributed to the workings of the neoliberal ideology and the rhetorical system of justifications it establishes – when it is not imposed by sheer force through the psychological manipulations of a ‘shock doctrine’ (Klein 2008). People are either mesmerised by rhetorical geniuses like Friedman, misguided by a deceitful ideology, or traumatised into accepting the neoliberal state of affairs. But neither the pen nor the sword is sufficient to explain the deep rooting of neoliberal ideas. We have to understand how neoliberalism shapes (or produces) people both mentally and physically, acting on their behaviour and their psychic processes. Viewed from this perspective, relationships of domination and power may prove to be more complex; proponents of neoliberalism might themselves be embedded in their own programme. To explain the pervasiveness of neoliberalism and the difficulty of thinking outside its mindset, we thus have to go beyond the ideational level to examine the minute mechanisms that root it deeply in human subjectivity.

3. Neoliberalism as a political rationality

Thinking the articulation of epistemological changes and their deeper implications on subjectivities is at the centre of a third approach to neoliberalism - an analysis that is inherently plural and which will be referred to here as the poststructuralist approaches. This trend has developed as the result of the publication in 2004 of *La Naissance de la Biopolitique (The Birth of Biopolitics)*, Michel Foucault’s 1978-1979 lectures on neoliberalism, which have influenced a whole range of academic works like Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval’s *La Nouvelle Raison du Monde (The New Ways of the World)* (2010), William Davies’ *Limits of Neoliberalism* (2014a) and Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos* (2015). These approaches share many affinities with the historical approach previously described. They are characterised by a similar belief in the power of ideas - and knowledge in general - to structure the world, and also proceed to minutely study the historical evolution and the geographical particularities of the different neoliberal schools. However, as argued below, they are far more circumspect concerning the role of neoliberal thinkers in the implementation of what we know today as neoliberalism.

The poststructuralist approaches refocus their analysis on the neoliberal project itself in order to fully grasp its utopian dimension and its consequences. Foucault highlights the distinctiveness of each of the neoliberal traditions (mainly focusing on ordoliberalism, French neoliberalism and the Chicago School), but also depicts the common rationality that animates them. In his analysis of the late Chicago School, he makes a point of differentiating it from a simple policy programme focused on economics, from a technical and administrative alternative to previous types of governments, like socialism. For Foucault, neoliberalism is first and foremost a way of thinking, a “utopian source (*foyer*) continuously reactivated” which is used both as a key or method to decipher the world and as an instrument to act upon it (Foucault 2004a, 225). This neoliberal rationality is marked by the extension of the scope of market logic to new domains of human existence previously untouched by economics. As Ben Fine argues in ‘The Triumph of Economics’ (1998), with the spread of neoliberal thinking, economics increasingly becomes the yardstick of everything. Far from being limited to the economic and monetary sphere (as in classical liberalism), economic reasoning (especially in its market dimension) comes to be generally viewed “as a principle of intelligibility” that is used to decipher social relationships and individual behaviours (Foucault 2004a, 249). Whereas ordoliberalism focused on the remaking of institutional infrastructures around the idea of the market (2004a, 137), neoliberalism as imagined by the Chicago School represents a clear radicalization of this aspiration, with the “absolute” and “unlimited” generalization of the form of the market across the entire social body (2004a, 248–9). All social phenomena, especially non-market phenomena, are thereby translated into economic terms. Family life, for example, is understood within this framework as the ‘domestic sector’, that is, a contract-based productive unit with its particular transaction costs (2004a, 250–1), while neoliberal economists develop a theory of the psychology of price explaining consumer behaviour and determining their consumer welfare (W. Davies 2014a, 86).

This quantitative reinvention of society is a means of snatching the most topical social issues out of the sphere of political debate (Brown 2015) - debates that often equate in the neoliberal mindset with endless metaphysical disagreements on the nature of things. According to William Davies, neoliberalism (especially in its US implementation) is an agnostic movement that values efficiency over terms as debatable as universality (2014a, 107). It consequently advocates, for the sake of scientific objectivity and clarity, “[t]he replacement of political ‘metaphysics’ (language of freedom, rights, conscious intentions, justice, agency) by political ‘physics’ (language of effects, price, unconscious intentions, efficiency and consumer welfare)” (2014a, 103). For example, whereas punishment historically had a cathartic dimension by being used to symbolically purge the social order of its evils, it is redefined by neoliberalism (following

Benthamian utilitarianism) not in moral terms but in terms of the costs and negative externalities of law enforcement (Foucault 2004a, 260). However, as Foucault demonstrates, this economic deciphering grid is also applied to reformulate social problems in quantitative terms (2004a, 258), thereby making them amenable to a market evaluation and resolution. The particular way neoliberalism reads the world is the first step that introduces the possibility of agency for those problems. Market reformulation is therefore followed by a translation into concrete policy measures – with the state often organising and supervising operations. Unlike the *laissez-faire* advocated by their liberal predecessors, the different neoliberal trends thus include the state in their revolutionary project (although Foucault proves that the question of the optimal degree of government intervention remains central (2004a, 258)). As Dardot and Laval demonstrate, despite its apparent subjection to the constraints of the neoliberal order (the imperative of austerity and competitiveness), the state contributes significantly to the active creation of that order (2013, 154). Moreover, by leading the way in the translation of most social problems into quantitative terms, the state makes itself the potential object of neoliberal scrutiny and constant auditing. Governments’ policy responses and interventions are continually measured, tested and monitored (Foucault 2004a, 252). In this market critique of the state (which contrasts strongly with the traditional political and juridical critique (2004a, 252)), competitiveness is further instituted as the quasi-divine test for valid action (W. Davies 2014a, 113).

Foucault’s concept of governmentality has also been highly influential for these approaches to neoliberalism. For Foucault, governmentality refers to an art of governing populations by physically and psychologically managing them, by inculcating certain chosen norms and behaviours in them, in order to induce and direct certain conducts and practices (Foucault 2004a, 192). The study of governmentality thus consists in an analysis of what Foucault calls the “microphysics of powers”; that is, the subtle, omnipresent and discreet network of disciplinary apparatuses, discourses and methods that meticulously shape the individual according to a particular conception of the subject (Foucault 1975). This network, which intervenes both at micro- and macro-levels - working equally on human bodies and on the distribution of human activities – aims to produce both an obedient and a useful subject. It preconceives the individual both as an acting subject and a subjected object. Importantly, in order to do so, it needs an extensive knowledge of the target populations, and therefore relies on a strong power/knowledge complex. According to Foucault and Dardot & Laval, neoliberalism possesses such an art of governing (while socialism, for Foucault, does not). They understand neoliberalism as a rationality that seeks to establish a global normative framework embodied in institutions,

in order to fulfil its ambition of reorganising society along market lines and the logic of competition (Dardot and Laval 2013, 6). This necessitates creating new economic and political conditions, but especially transforming subjectivities, ways of living and social relations in order to make them comply with neoliberalism's revolutionary goals (2013, 149). In a market-centred society, inducing competitive behaviours is the most effective way of regulating the social at every moment (Foucault 2008, 145). For Foucault and Dardot & Laval, the workings of neoliberalism thus run far deeper than in the Marxist vision: it is not just a question of implementing policies that will reinforce capital accumulation but more profoundly (as I analyse further in Chapters 4 and 5) a question of producing a new enterprise ethos throughout society via disciplinary regimes and techniques of power that englobe all dimensions of human existence (Dardot and Laval 2013, 7). In order to realise this project, neoliberal rationality implements a redefinition of most social phenomena into quantitative and economic terms. It thus seeks to control the internal logic of human behaviour in order to subtly bend it in a chosen direction (Foucault 2004a, 229). Such a meticulous redefinition of existential norms is clearly at work in the increased use of the notion of 'human capital'. As Foucault argues, subjects are increasingly encouraged to rationally invest in the future (for instance, in their education, their health), thereby displaying an embodied economic reasoning (2004a, 238).¹¹ By doing so, they are led to strategically engage in neoliberalism's worldview. The progressive generalisation of the 'human-capital mindset' therefore results in an effective, though indirect, large-scale "strategic programming of individuals' behaviour" (2004a, 238), with the aim to "compel individuals to govern themselves under the pressure of competition, in accordance with the principles of maximizing calculation and a logic of capital valorisation" (Dardot and Laval 2013, 150).

Several conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. First, there is a shift in the way human-ness is conceived (or, as I will argue, *imagined*). We pass from the classical conception of *homo oeconomicus* as the man of exchange, consumption and interest, to the neoliberal vision of *homo oeconomicus* as the man of competition and self-entrepreneurship (Foucault 2004a, 274) – again shifting, with the advent of finance capitalism, increasingly toward a conception of *homo oeconomicus* as the investor of himself (or the portfolio holder) (Feher 2017)¹² and its corollary, the indebted man (Lazzarato 2012). Second, as will be developed in greater detail in the

¹¹ The same can be said for states – national competitiveness increasingly depending on countries' investment in human capital.

¹² I agree, however, with Wendy Brown who says that the shift is not as "thoroughgoing and complete" as Feher suggests, and that "human capital on the entrepreneurial model" may cohabit with "human capital on the investment model" (2015, 231, n.36).

following chapters, once man is reconfigured as a self-entrepreneur or self-investor, he also becomes responsible for his investments and his life-trajectory in general (Brown 2015, 84). Despite this steadfast move towards the responsabilisation of the individual, as opposed to collective social responsibility, states are also increasingly encouraged to intervene to adjust non-conforming, that is, anti-market, behaviours - for instance by modifying behaviours through nudges or by treating depression (W. Davies 2015). Individuals are thus simultaneously shaped and edged in a direction by the microphysics of power, while nurturing the impression that they have both the power and the responsibility to shape their own life and their self.

Lastly, the Foucauldian concept of governmentality is especially original because it is conceived as a 'strategy without a strategist' (Foucault 2004b) and thereby transcends the limitations I identified in the approaches based on an understanding of neoliberalism as ideology. Foucault and his followers are generally far more circumspect concerning the actual influence of neoliberal actors, be they organisations like the MPS, or individuals like Hayek and Friedman. As Dardot and Laval point out, the term 'strategy', to which Foucault often refers when discussing neoliberalism, does not mean that "the objective of generalized competition between enterprises, economies and states was itself developed on the basis of a well-thought-out project, as if it was the subject of a choice just as rational and controlled as the means put at the disposal of the initial objectives" (Dardot and Laval 2013, 149). They take up the example developed by Foucault of the moralisation of the working class by the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century. They maintain that the bourgeoisie, 'as a pre-constituted subject' did not recognise that the objective it was implementing was the result of an already developed ideology. The bourgeoisie was actually 'produced' as the agent of this crusade by the very strategic objective of moralising the working class (2013, 149). The social world is thus conceived as pervaded by symbolic systems and discourses that authoritatively impose certain social norms (and generally everything it contains, from the subject and truth itself, to language, knowledge and social relations) which continue to be diffused by all political and social relations (Foucault 1994, 523). Consequently, Foucault strongly criticizes what he sees as the Marxist analyses of ideology for seeing the "relationship of subject with truth" as distorted by living conditions or by the ideological discourses diffused by external social or political relations, since this would presuppose a "subject of knowledge" having a privileged and objective access to a truth 'out there' (1994, 522). If these '*dispositifs*' and symbolic systems are constitutive elements of social life, there cannot be any externality to them. The poststructuralist approach to neoliberalism thus defends a general understanding of social change as happening without any purposive action of an investigator, "will of a strategist or the intentionality of a subject",

but as the result of a certain “logic of practices” that itself employs techniques of power – the multiplication of these techniques giving the overall direction of the changes in question (Dardot and Laval 2013, 149).

This does not mean that the Foucauldian analysis dismisses the power of ideas to trigger social change. Generally, paradigmatic social change derives from the association of a political or intellectual project and a larger historical dynamic (like technological revolutions). For Dardot and Laval, neoliberalism as we know it today is the product of the confluence of certain historical trends (such as the crisis of capitalism) and an ideological struggle *de circonstances* against Keynesianism and the welfare state. But the neoliberal theory that arose mainly came to *sustain* “the action of various governments and made a major contribution to legitimating the new norm when the latter finally emerged” (Dardot and Laval 2013, 150). Moreover, this intellectual action was doubled by a conflict at the level of subjectivities. It is the combination of these various tendencies that resulted in “the establishment of a general rationality, a kind of new regime of self-evident truth imposing themselves on rulers of all persuasions as the sole framework for understanding human conduct” (2013, 150). To displace neoliberalism, it is therefore not enough to merely create new economic policies to amend its negative effects. Displacing neoliberal representations would necessitate a complete revision of something as broad and deep-rooted as a market society (W. Davies 2016a).

4. Introducing a psychoanalytical approach to neoliberalism

4.1 Beyond poststructuralism

The poststructuralist focus on governmentality offers a convincing explanation of neoliberalism’s pervasiveness by proposing a framework with which to analyse neoliberalism as a rationality that symbolically shapes subjectivities through strategies of power, disciplinary apparatuses and discourses. I situate my intervention broadly within the poststructuralist framework, but with one reservation. As it currently stands (and although Foucault’s later work on the ‘hermeneutics of the self’ might constitute a deviation) the poststructuralist understanding of subjectification generally remains on the level of external symbolic structures. As Judith Butler argues, Foucault has a tendency to overlook “the interiority of the body, leaving that interiority as a malleable surface for the unilateral effects of disciplinary power” (1997, 86–87). People tend to be seen in this vision as passively shaped by their external environment. Furthermore, according to Lynne Layton, what Foucauldian theory is missing, in order to fully account for “how neoliberalism is psychically lived”, is “a notion of unconscious process” that

highlights “the particular normative defences, transferences and counter-transferences promoted by neoliberalism” (2014, 165).

Much, thus, remains to be said about what gives the neoliberal rationality its hegemonic grip. Why and how do human subjectivities internalise (or actively ‘decode’, as Stuart Hall (1973) might argue) the *dispositifs* of power and discourses described by Foucault and his followers? What makes us, as individuals, responsive and sensitive to the market ethos promoted by neoliberalism and implemented through its continual nudges?

Although Foucault’s work has undoubtedly thrown light on the microphysics of power that meticulously shape subjectivities, this approach needs to be complemented by a study of how subjectivities adopt these existential norms as their own. In other words, describing these mechanisms of power is not enough to understand why they “stick” (Ahmed 2004, 11). If the neoliberal ethos is today largely hegemonic, it is because it must somehow strongly appeal to us and exert some fascination over us – a fascination that cannot merely be the result of the attractive neoliberal rhetoric described by Boltanski and Chiapello.¹³ Hence the call for the elaboration of a “psychosocial theory of the subject” by scholars like Imogen Tyler (2013).

4.2 The psychological question

Following this call I argue that, in order to explain the persistent hegemony of neoliberalism, we must also examine its deeper roots in the human unconscious, and remodel our focus on symbolic structures to include the affective dimension of politics, as well as the libidinal and ‘fantasmatic’ energies at the heart of human representations that anchor attachments to them and make them difficult to displace (Stavrakakis 2007, 20). The longevity and hegemonic success of neoliberalism could also be interpreted in terms of its efficient manipulation of human enjoyment and pleasure.

This entails re-directing current investigations of neoliberalism towards a psychoanalytical framework. As conscientious readers of Freud and Lacan may already have noticed when reading my literature review, most of the recent scholarly accounts of neoliberalism’s ascendancy that I have presented seem to have some interest in psychology in general, and in the psychological questions posed by neoliberalism in particular. Psychoanalytical theory never seems very far away, although it is rarely referred to directly – probably due to its supposed impenetrability. This is striking when considering Mirowski’s mentions of the “cultural

¹³ See note 3.

unconscious” (2013, 89) or of “neoliberal consciousness” (2013, 91); or Wendy Brown’s analyses of *homo oeconomicus*’ “imaginary primary drives” (2015, 85), capitalism’s “life drives” (2015, 76), as well as her reference to Freud’s concepts of the ‘pleasure principle’ and the ‘superego’ when analysing ‘the economy principle’ and interest (2015, 98).

As William Davies argues, there has also been a “psychological turn” within neoliberal theory and neoclassical economics themselves; a turn epitomised by the recent attempt to understand the “irrational psychic forces” that may question “market-based techniques and rationalities” in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis (W. Davies 2014a, 164). Conversely, in a line of descent from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: L’anti-Œdipe* (1972; see also Lazzarato 2012, 95), there has been a larger debate on the participation of psychology and psychoanalysis in the disciplinary processes of neoliberal subjectification. For instance, Valerie Walkerdine (drawing on Nikolas Rose’s work on “advanced liberalism” in *Governing the Soul* (1999)) has described psychoanalysis as a “practice” or a “mode of governance” in neoliberalism (2020, 380), as providing neoliberalism with “the discourse that props up the fiction of the individual, autonomous subject of choice” (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008, 229).¹⁴ Similarly, Dardot and Laval discuss how psychology has been largely used in management to introduce a new type of work subjectivity based on the governing of the self (2010, 425).¹⁵

4.3 Existing literature on psychoanalysis and neoliberalism

A number of academic works use psychoanalysis specifically to study neoliberalism and late capitalism. The following section presents them briefly, while the final section introduces my own approach to the question.

4.3.1 Academic works on neoliberalism using psychoanalysis as a tool

The post-2008 period has been an opportunity for the publication of a number of studies on neoliberalism that use some psychoanalytical concepts as part of a larger investigative framework (Walkerdine 2020, 380). These studies have focused on various objects of inquiry, from which I single out two particular topics: an interest in subjectification and in affects. Taken

¹⁴ Interestingly, Ringrose and Walkerdine concurrently assert that psychology can also be used as “a restorative practice”, helping in “successful modes of adaptation” (2008, 229-230).

¹⁵ It is also worth mentioning the work of Lynne Layton (a psychoanalyst herself) on the “unconscious collusion” of psychoanalysts with the cultural norms promoted by neoliberalism (2014, 173), particularly when refusing to understand the societal conditions of their patients’ psychic pain.

together, they testify of an increasing interest in the role of the psyche in the perpetuation of neoliberal mental and material structures.

Firstly, an important set of works on subjectification has recently been published, in an attempt to join together poststructuralist and psychoanalytical theories. Characteristically, they often use one specific psychoanalytical concept as a tool in a larger sociological argument. For instance, Dardot and Laval (2010) seek to bridge the gap between psychoanalysis and poststructuralism by combining Foucault's theories with Lacan's (despite the famous anti-psychiatric stance of the former). As I discuss in further length in the next chapter, they differentiate the 'imaginary' from the 'disciplinary' dimensions of neoliberal discourses – a nuance that has been particularly important for the development of my argument. They also provide a review of French psychoanalytical publications on the pathologies of late capitalism – something I will develop at greater length at the end of this section. We should also include Christina Scharff's work on the 'psychic life of neoliberalism', in which she analyses a series of interviews with female early-career musicians in order to highlight the "contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity" (2015, 2). However, despite drawing on discursive psychology and emphasising the psychic dimension of her approach, Scharff explicitly relinquishes the use of psychoanalysis to emphasise her poststructuralist perspective – which to my mind diminishes the novelty and the scope of her approach.

For my purpose here, the recent body of publications on indebtedness is also promising. Lazzarato's work on *The Making of the Indebted Man* (2012) introduced a broader reflection on how the financial crisis resulted in the intensification of mechanisms of 'proletarianisation' that use debt as a mode of governance through the production of certain types of subjectivities. These subjectivities foster personal guilt (2012, 29) and precariousness (2012, 94) to encourage ways of life compatible with debt repayment (2012, 31). Lazzarato thus denounces Foucault's "political naiveté" (2012, 108). He particularly criticises Foucault's concepts of 'human capital' and the 'entrepreneur of the self' (2012, 91) as formulated in "terms of emancipation (pleasure, self-fulfilment, recognition, experimentation with different forms of life, mobility, etc.)" (2012, 93). On the contrary, the "work on the self" that characterises the post-2008 authoritarian turn means, for Lazzarato, "taking upon oneself the costs and risks that business and the State externalize onto society" (2012, 93). Although Lazzarato's essay does not explicitly use psychoanalytical categories, it has inspired further works that do. For example, William Davies, Johnna Montgomerie and Sara Wallin's co-authored report 'Financial Melancholia: Mental Health and Indebtedness' (2015) uses the Freudian concept of 'melancholia' to outline how debt

as an economic condition is the cause of an array of depressive symptoms and specifically how it plays “a powerful role in locking people into a depressive sense of regret and self-reproach” (2015, 31). Another important example is Andrea Mura’s article on ‘Lacan and Debt’ (2015), which uses Lacan’s reference to the ‘capitalist discourse’ to reconcile Foucault and Lazzarato. Mura demonstrates that the post-2008 authoritarian turn with its trail of austerity measures does not constitute a radical break from the previous period of capitalism, marked by credit exuberance and the promotion of freedom and prosperity. On the contrary, “debt and failure fully realise (...) that very mode of government that Foucault delineated in his analysis of liberalism” (2015, 166). More specifically, in Mura’s reading of the ‘capitalist discourse’ (a discourse I will return to at the end of the present section), Lacan suggests that the infinite circular motion of consumption that the discourse promotes works as a “consuming machine” that “capitalise[s] upon its own failure, producing and consuming it too” (2015, 166). Debt and failure thus stand in “structural contiguity with the logics of credit and success that informed the liberal articulation of the phantasm of freedom” (2015, 166). Subjectification consequently needs to be understood as the intermingling of the two sets of logics, as “the subject is suspended in the uncodable terrain of a contradictory circularity between success and failure, satisfaction and emptiness, limitless credit and limitless debt” (2015, 170) – an idea central to the development of my argument in Chapters 6 and 7.

Another tradition focuses on the shaping of subjectivities through the repulsive influence of the abject. Particularly worth of mention are Imogen Tyler’s (2013), as well as Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine’s (2008) reworkings of Kristeva’s psychoanalytical concept of the abject and its association with the Foucauldian theory of governmentality. Tyler is notably interested in the way ‘abjection’, and by extension “stigmatization”, must be read as a “form of governance” (2013, 212) and the “psychic anxiety” it causes as a “mode of self-governance” (2013, 11). Similarly, Ringrose and Walkerdine, in their study of British television programmes, analyse how the abject is used in neoliberal discourses for the production of modes of self-regulation and self-responsibility as its depiction “incites manic desire for changing the self” (2008, 235), which open it to the “internalization of the right sorts of expert knowledge to sustain an endlessly adaptive and reinventing self” (2008, 227).

Secondly, the advent of the post-truth era inaugurated by the election of Donald Trump to the US-presidency, and the Brexit vote, instilled a renewed interest in the political impact of feelings and emotions – with, for instance, William Davies’ *Nervous States* (2018b), which uses among other philosophical references Le Bon’s *Psychology of Crowds*, as well as Freud’s *Beyond the*

Pleasure Principle (2013) to discuss how emotions like resentment or the feeling of powerlessness can be triggered to mobilise people for political purposes and to make them act against what seems to be their rational interest. In parallel,¹⁶ a current of the school of affect theory has been inspired by the work of Lauren Berlant on *Cruel Optimism* (2011), which uses psychoanalytical categories to explain and explore the “affective structure” of people’s “optimistic attachment” (2011, 2) to the promise (or in Berlant’s words the “fantasy”) of the “good life”, which is disseminated in neoliberal representations. This optimism is seen as inherently “cruel” as the promised life of self-realisation and fulfilment is inaccessible to the large majority of people. Nonetheless, despite our reiterated failure to attain the ‘good life’, we persist in painfully striving to achieve it – because of its fantasmatic lure, because of our desire for its “normative promise” (2011, 170).

4.3.2 The Essex School and ideology critique

Another example of the use of psychoanalysis to explore neoliberalism can be found in the work of the post-Marxist scholars of the Essex School of Discourse Analysis - specifically in the works of Jason Glynos (2014; 2012), David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis (2007), along with the work of Jodi Dean (2008). As I explain below, what makes this approach interesting for my project is the fact that it is explicitly inspired by Jacques Lacan’s writings.

The Essex School of Discourse Analysis derives from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s neo-Gramscian work on hegemony (2001), which itself broadly reuses Lacanian categories (categories that I will explore in greater details in Chapter 2). Laclau, particularly, draws on Lacan’s work on the incompleteness of meaning and social (symbolic) representations to describe society as an “impossible object”, which lacks the means of an “adequate or direct representation” (Laclau 1996b, 40). Society is an ‘empty signifier’ which means that, despite the constitutive absence of anything tangible like ‘society’ or the ‘people’, there is still a functional need for them (Laclau 1996a, 53). Consequently, the social terrain will be characterised by fights between different social groups to convincingly incarnate ‘society’ (as a ‘pragmatic universality’ (Laclau 1996a, 55)), often as a result of alliances and compromises with a variety of other social forces, and by creating artificial antagonisms between individuals included in ‘society’/the ‘people’, and others ejected from it. Each of these incarnations come with a programme and serve specific interests. This is what Laclau and Mouffe (2001) call the ‘hegemonic operation’,

¹⁶ As an example, Walkerdine explains Brexit’s ‘Vote Leave’ in relation to an “affective history” of collective and community practices that takes into account social and material conditions in order not to pathologize the working-class (Walkerdine 2019, 10).

thus reusing Gramsci's work on the production of consent. By definition, any claim to incarnate society or the people is inadequate; it is thus contested by competing groups and fundamentally unstable.

While Glynos, Howarth and Stavrakakis broadly agree with Laclau and Mouffe's framework (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000; Howarth, Glynos, and Griggs 2016; Stavrakakis et al. 2017), their works are marked by a turn to affects and emotions (Glynos 2012, 2404; see also Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008). Drawing here on Sara Ahmed's *Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004), they want to understand what makes ideological norms and representations "stick". Importantly for my project, Glynos applies this reflection to neoliberalism and enquires into the reasons "why justifications offered in support of neoliberal policies might find traction as much in political elite circles as with the wider public" (Glynos 2014, 5). Following Slavoj Žižek's reinterpretation of Lacan's work as a tool for ideology critique (1989), the Essex School scholars argue that ideological norms and representations (and therefore, by extension, neoliberal norms and representations) are gripping because of their fantasmatic substance (Stavrakakis 2007, 18; Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008; Howarth 2018). As I explain in further details in Chapters 2 and 3, the fantasmatic dimension of ideological representations is rooted in the fact they are designed to hide the primordial lack at the centre of the social order and of subjectivity (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008, 261). To use a Laclauian vocabulary, ideological discourses 'suture' (although, again, inadequately) this distressing gap (Laclau 1990, 61). In doing so, they offer a support to reality and hide the constitutional but traumatic contingency of social institutions and relations (Žižek 1989; Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008, 262). Because they *cover* this lack, which Žižek associates with the order of the 'real' in Lacan (see Chapter 2), ideological discourses, norms and representations are suffused with libidinal energies.¹⁷ To reformulate, these discourses offer an illusory impression of fullness and completion on both collective and individual levels, and they become, as such, the object of "fantasmatic overinvestments" (Glynos, Burity, and de Oliveira 2019, 148). As Glynos explains in the case of neoliberalism, the focus on competition and targets mobilises fantasies at the individual, collective and organizational levels, as reflected in policies and in cultural productions (2019, 154). In another series of articles, Glynos associates the success of neoliberal ideology to its triggering of "fantasies of independence", which, he argues, supports "the operation of market logics and its transactional assumptions" (Glynos 2014, 8-9; 2012).

¹⁷ As I explain in Chapter 2, the radically negative order of the real is charged with libidinal energies

This Essex School's body of work has been essential in my enquiry, especially when it comes to understanding how neoliberalism plays with libidinal investments. Similarly, their reformulation of antagonism in terms of splitting – that is, the tendency of subjectivities to externalise the blame for ideological discourses' failure to provide fullness and contentment on a hated 'Other' (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008, 262) – has echoed my interest in processes of abjections (see Chapter 7). Yet, I identified a few limitations, which have led me to reformulate some of the Essex School theories around the concept of the 'imaginary'.

My first reservation is conceptual. While I do agree with most of the Essex School's theories, I do not think they are sufficient to explain libidinal attachments to symbolic structures, because they have a tendency to ignore the category of the 'imaginary' to instead solely focus on the two other orders of the Lacanian triad, the 'real' and the 'symbolic'. This is especially problematic, I argue, because they frame the debate in term of "identification processes" (see for instance Stavrakakis 2007, 18; Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 21), which in Lacan's work belongs to the order of the imaginary (see Chapter 2).¹⁸ In contrast, I consider that the three orders are always at work together. One needs to precisely consider how symbolic structures, like for instance discourses on competition, come to be intertwined (or, to use a Lacanian vocabulary, knotted) with the structuration of the ego and the viscosity that accompanies it. For instance, in the case of neoliberal discursive productions, I will show in the thesis that, while they aim to reconstruct what I call a 'pure' symbolic order, they do so by mobilising mechanisms associated with the order of the imaginary, like mimesis.

The Essex School's focus on the symbolic has, I argue, further consequences. As implied in my presentation, analyses of the functioning of ideologies are not limited to neoliberalism but can be indiscriminately applied to any kind of ideological discourses, with the risk of potentially conflating them. Characteristically, Glynos's inspection of the neoliberal "fantasy of independence" is mirrored by his unease with what he calls the (welfarist) fantasy of the "Caring Other" (Glynos 2012, 2409; 2014, 9). By focusing on the (symbolic) "logic" of fantasies (that is, on how fantasies relate to the structure of desire), Glynos has a tendency to miss their (imaginary) content – which is mentioned but slightly overlooked. As I discuss in Chapter 2, I consider with Cornelius Castoriadis (1975) that it is important to take a step aside from analyses

¹⁸ In contrast, in 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus' (2001), Louis Althusser (who signalled his indebtedness to Freud and Lacan) does integrate the imaginary dimension of ideology when emphasising its specularly (or its 'mirror-structure'). Individuals are simultaneously interpellated (or hailed) as 'subjects' (and as such are ascribed an identity) and required to subject to the Subject (the symbolic Big Other – from whose image they are derived). Althusser implies that specularly plays a central part in the internalisation of ideological discourses.

of social organisations that exclusively focus on their functionality (as done, for instance, in the structuralist tradition) to include a reflection on the creative forms - the imaginary texture – that these organisations take. Yes, all ideological discourses (and the category seems rather extensive) share a common function: to suture the gap at the heart of social representations and organisations. Yet, they do so in different ways and with more or less success. This thesis is an enquiry into the specific way neoliberal discourses imagine and reshape the Western social order and the people who inhabit it. It provides an attentive description of the neoliberal worldview and worldmaking.

In addition, as a result of their work on ‘splitting’ and antagonism, the scholars of the Essex School have a tendency to see discourses in antagonistic - and often bipolar - terms, which is apparent in Glynos’s opposition of the neoliberal fantasies of independence and the fantasies of dependence on the ‘Caring Other’. While this antagonistic bipolarity is undeniably at work in the neoliberal discourses I study – like for instance in the neoliberal thinkers’ stark opposition to planning, which comes to determine what neoliberalism *is* (see Chapter 4) – I claim that it is important to remain open and make hearable continuities with other imaginaries, like the liberal imaginary or the imaginary associated with the ‘American Dream’ (see Chapter 6).

Lastly, my impression is that the Essex School analyses on neoliberalism tend to associate it – at times, reductively - with one or two corresponding fantasies, like the ‘fantasy of independence’. These analyses focusing on the symbolic encourage us to see discourses as fully coherent and as forming a unity. As I explain in Chapter 2, by using the concept of the imaginary – and drawing on Graham Dawson’s (1994) work on cultural imaginaries – I want to slightly displace this impression of coherence to instead reintroduce a certain messiness and fluidity, illustrated by the cohabitation of images, ideals and discourses that might sometimes contradict each other.

4.3.3 Psychoanalytical works on late capitalism

Finally, the last three decades have witnessed the publication of a number of psychoanalytical works on the new psychopathologies of the contemporary subject and on repercussions of capitalist infrastructures on the human psyche – with, to name just a few, Charles Melman’s *L’homme sans gravité* (2005), Todd McGowan’s *The End of Dissatisfaction* (2004) and *Capitalism and Desire* (2016), Renata Salecl’s *The Tyranny of Choice* (2011), Lynne Layton’s “Some psychic effects of neoliberalism: Narcissism, disavowal, perversion” (2014) or Samo Tomšič’s *The Capitalist Unconscious* (2015).

As already implied in my analysis of Mura’s article, most of these works are influenced by Lacan’s sibylline comments (first presented at a lecture in Milan in 1972 but never properly formalised) on the ‘capitalist discourse’, envisaged as a complement to the theory of the four discourses¹⁹ that he elaborated as a response to the social unrest of May ‘68 (Lacan 1991). The ‘capitalist discourse’ constitutes one of Lacan’s most explicit and fecund contributions to the analysis of late capitalism.²⁰ Briefly, the ‘capitalist discourse’ in Lacan’s work stands out for its structural difference from the four other discourses – which all symbolise different ways to articulate the “social bond in a subjective framework organised around symbolic castration” (Mura 2015, 160). As Stijn Vanheule demonstrates, the four discourses are characterised by four elements (\$, symbolising the (castrated) subject marked by the cut of the symbolic; S_1 , representing the master signifier; S_2 , representing the means of knowledge that derive from this master signifier; and a , symbolising the *objet a* (one’s own object of desire that always remains, according to Lacan, out of reach (something I will discuss in further detail in Chapter 2))) which rotate, depending on the discourse, between four different loci (Vanheule 2016). These loci are themselves connected by arrows, which symbolise the relations between all positions. The four initial discourses follow the structure presented in Figure 1.

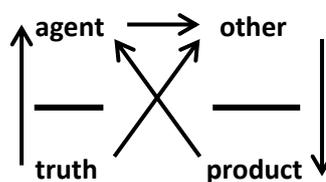


FIGURE 1: The overall structure of the four discourses and the relation between all positions (based on Vanheule 2016, 2)

As illustrated in Figure 1, according to Lacan, all discourses have two levels. The upper level, the explicit aspect of the discourse, relies on the lower level, the hidden or repressed aspect of the discourse. When an agent addresses another person (thus engaging in a social bond), her speech rests on a hidden truth that fuels its content, while also influencing the interlocutor. Her words have an effect, a hidden product, but also always somewhat fail to make their point (since perfect communication is impossible for Lacan) (Vanheule 2016, 2).²¹ For this very reason, there

¹⁹ The four discourses are: the discourses of the master, of the university, of the hysterical and of the analyst.

²⁰ As Samo Tomšič (2015) has demonstrated, Lacan had a long-term engagement with Marxist theory. For instance, his concept of *plus-de-jouir* is built on the model of Marx’s ‘surplus value’.

²¹ For Lacan, something is always lost when trying to express something into words. Language always involves some semblance and deception.

is no connection between the hidden product and the truth that initially motivated the speech, although the product subsequently further fuels the discourse of the agent. In Lacan, this marks “the impossibility to achieve totalisation” (Mura 2015, 162): that is, to attain one’s object of desire, but also to be a fully stable and completed subject (something I will return to in Chapter 2).

Importantly, in the ‘capitalist discourse’ (Figure 2), the relationship between the four positions (agent, other, truth and product) drastically changes.

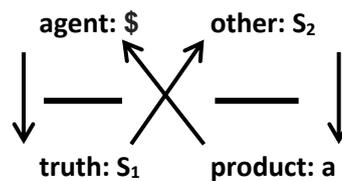


FIGURE 2: The capitalist discourse
(based on Vanheule 2016, 7)

The divided and discontented subject is here placed as agent (as in the discourse of the hysteric) but instead of being fuelled by a repressed truth, the agent seems to refuse her structural determination, and, on the contrary, seems to actively look for a master signifier that answers for her discontent. This suggests to the agent that an objective solution can be found to remedy her dissatisfaction, through the acquisition of an object that will function as a master signifier. Consequently, for Vanheule, “[w]ithin the capitalist logic, the lack at the heart of subjectivity is not seen as a structural consequence of using signifiers, but as an accidental frustration that can be remedied within the market of supply and demand” (Vanheule 2016, 7). It has also been interpreted as a refusal or foreclosure of castration (Mura 2015, 162; Tomšič 2015, 226). As the absence of a direct relation between the agent and the other in Figure 2 demonstrates, the capitalist discourse is fundamentally anti-social, and narcissistic. But more importantly, Figure 2 shows that the quest to remedy discontent will result in the determination of a corresponding knowledge apparatus, which will itself produce the *objet a*. In other words, the active attempt by the agent to fill her existential emptiness (caused by castration) by the acquisition of an object that symbolises lost plenitude cannot fail to be dissatisfactory and produce a hidden “component of nonsensical libidinous corporality” (Vanheule 2016, 9) that only makes the division of the subject more striking and unbearable, leading to an eternal reproduction of the same structure. Lacan insists on the fact that this process works particularly well, as if on

“wheels” (Lacan 1972, 48), but also results in the exhaustion of the subject.²² In other words, even if the consumer knows rationally that consumption does not make him happy, he will feel “attracted by something sublime, which he hopes to get hold of via the market”, without realising that “what makes him dream of the sublime is a lost cause (a) that cannot be recuperated by means of discourse” (Vanheule 2016, 9). Far from remedying the fundamental impossibility of reaching the object of desire, the ‘capitalist discourse’ thus forecloses this very impossibility and fuels “an insatiable demand for *jouissance*” (Tomšič 2015, 226).

Interpretations of this central text have emphasised how the ‘capitalist discourse’ reveals important shifts in the production of the capitalist subjectivity (Tomšič 2015, 3). First, the disavowal of castration that lies at its heart has motivated the publication of a literature on the erosion of the symbolic order (that is, all the discourses, structures and rules that organise society and human relations, and which are associated in Lacan with the order of the paternal Law or the paternal function). As the castration caused by the entrance in the symbolic order is seen as fundamental to the structuration of the unconscious through the figure of desire (see Chapter 2), scholars have described the formation of new types of subjectivity, like Melman’s ‘man without gravity’ (2005) or Massimo Recalcati’s ‘man without unconscious’ (see Mura 2015, 161). Furthermore, the disavowal of castration in the capitalist discourse (which marks it as a perverse injunction) has been associated with the promotion and diffusion of forms of narcissistic (Layton 2014; Recalcati in Mura 2015) and perverse states (Layton 2014; Melman 2005; Tomšič 2015) in public and private life. Layton particularly discusses how neoliberal society can be considered as perverse because it demands a “disavowal of vulnerability and dependence” (2014, 168). It thereby promotes withdrawal from commitments to public life, the fetishization of figures of power and a clamorous grandiosity, as well as expansive behaviours that swing between self-deprecation and the violent devaluation of vulnerable others (on whom the rejected part of the self is projected), thus displaying some of the clinical symptoms of narcissism (2014, 166). On the other hand, the capitalist discourse has been interpreted as structurally perverse because it requires the subject to act as a masochist; that is, to enjoy “being a commodity among others” (used for one’s labour) or to embrace one’s suffering (Tomšič 2015, 229). Lastly, the injunction to enjoy placed at the centre of the capitalist discourse, along with

²² Lacan here plays on the quasi-homophony in French between “*consommer*” and “*consumer*” (both translated by ‘to consume’ in English) to imply that capitalism’s mechanical logic of consumption works so smoothly (“*comme sur des roulettes*” (like on wheels)) that it can only result in the wearing out of the subject. Lacan here seems to suggest that he agrees with Marx in saying that capitalism is inherently doomed to crisis (in his words, “doomed to puncture”).

its deceptive claim to provide access to the object of desire, have been associated with the development of a range of psychopathologies, such as depression (Fisher 2009), anxiety (Mura 2015), anorexia (Recalcati in Mura 2015) and addiction.

4.4 Limitations of the current literature

All the works I have presented concerning the intersection of psychoanalytical theory and neoliberalism/late capitalism have been immensely influential in the framing of my approach. I have nonetheless identified some limitations that I wish to take into account.

On the one hand, the current literature on neoliberalism *per se* has a tendency to use psychoanalysis parsimoniously, as a thought-provoking heuristic device. This means that these works' engagement with psychoanalysis, however invaluable, are often limited to a few concepts – like 'abjection' in Tyler, and Ringrose & Walkerdine. I wish therefore to integrate and root these works within a larger psychoanalytical reflective framework, in order to lend more theoretical density to the central concepts they use by more systematically exploring their psychoanalytical underpinnings.

On the other hand, the psychoanalytical works I have identified – along with Lacan's 'capitalist discourse' - are inclined to miss what constitutes the very specificity of neoliberalism because they have a tendency to merge it into a broader account of late capitalism. Even when they explicitly name neoliberalism, as for instance in Layton and Mura, they tend to give no precise and tangible detailed examples of what constitutes the neoliberal discourse and how it operates in concrete terms, no minute anatomy of the alluring imaginary apparatus it displays to attract subjects into its snares (something Berlant is better at conveying, although she focuses on cultural productions in the neoliberal era and less on neoliberalism (and its theory) *per se*).

When they seek to specifically explore neoliberal discourse, like for example the Essex School of discourse analysis, they tend to focus on one particular aspect at the expense of others: for instance, on consumption (McGowan 2016; Žižek 1989), on production (Glynos 2012; Tomšič 2015) or on the new psychopathologies associated with the rise of neoliberalism (Layton 2014; Melman 2005). This consequently results in the scattering of the different psychoanalytical contributions to the study of neoliberalism. Lastly, I am uncomfortable with the reactionary and conservative undertone of some of the psychoanalytical contributions, particularly Charles Melman's, who laments the disappearance of the paternal Law (and the rise of the "*matriarcat*" in mono-parental families (2005, 102)) in an - at times - brutal and scornful pathologization of

contemporary ways of life. I contend that such a position necessarily overlooks and misses what makes the neoliberal message potentially attractive.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the different scholarly traditions in the study of neoliberalism in order to better situate my own approach. Such an exploration has enabled me to identify certain limitations in the current scholarship on neoliberalism – limitations that this thesis seeks to address. I have specifically stressed that, while they rightly investigate the material, ideational and rhetorical dimensions of neoliberalism, the institutionalist and historical approaches tend to neglect its function as an embodied rationality that shapes people's behaviour and psychic processes.

As I have claimed, my approach tends to be closer to the poststructuralist standpoint on neoliberalism, as it focuses on subjective practices. However, I agree with Berlant (2011, 182) and Layton (2014, 165) when they state that the Foucauldian approach writes the unconscious out of its analysis and thereby cannot sufficiently explain people's deep attachment to neoliberal representations.

I have therefore reasserted with other scholars the necessity of introducing a psychoanalytical approach to the study of neoliberalism. Such an undertaking does already exist but either in fragmentary and scattered ways or in a way that does not sufficiently recognise the specificity of neoliberalism. The contribution of this thesis is thus to bring the 'neoliberal' and 'psychoanalytical' strands of enquiry together in order to provide a psychoanalytical reading of neoliberal discourse. As I explain in greater detail in Chapter 3, I do so via a psychoanalytical interpretation of neoliberal representations that focuses on a combination of canonical texts of neoliberal economic theory, and of contemporary cultural productions that I consider strongly influenced by the values the theoretical texts convey.

In order to bring psychoanalysis and the poststructuralist discursive analyses of neoliberalism together in a more cohesive manner, I use a concept from the literature on neoliberalism, cultural studies, and more importantly, psychoanalytical theory, where it plays a crucial but often overlooked role: the concept of the 'imaginary'. Showing how neoliberal rationality functions as an imaginary enables me to explore what makes neoliberal discourses so specific, as well as to explain the psychic pervasiveness of its imaginary repertoire. The following chapter thus presents my conceptual framework built around this concept and discusses how it can be used specifically to analyse neoliberal discourse.

Chapter 2. Towards a political concept of the ‘imaginary’

Introduction

One of the central arguments of the thesis is that what makes neoliberal representations ‘stick’ (to draw on Sara Ahmed’s (2004) expression) and makes them hail us as subjects is that neoliberal rationality functions as an ‘imaginary’. Chapter 2 thus introduces this concept by presenting its main characteristics and ways of functioning, to construct a theoretical framework based on the notion of the imaginary.

As discussed in the thesis’ introduction, there has been a resurgence in the use of the concept of the ‘imaginary’ in the post-2008 literature on neoliberalism and late capitalism. One can mention, for instance, Imogen Tyler’s *Revolting Subjects* (2013), Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos* (2015), or Quinn Slobodian’s *Globalists* (2018a). Similarly, Mark Fisher’s concept of ‘capitalist realism’ was coined to encapsulate “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2009, 2 – Fisher’s emphasis). One can also note recent influential sociological studies, like Jens Beckert’s *Imagined Futures* (2016), which explores the ‘fictional expectations’ that drive modern capitalist economies. Lastly, it is worth mentioning a renewed interest in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis on imaginaries, with a number of publications drawing on the concept of ‘radical imaginaries’ to discuss how radical alternatives to neoliberalism and finance capitalism could be invented (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014; Komporozos-Athanasiou and Bottici 2017; Dardot 2020).¹

What I find particularly fruitful in these different perspectives is how, in order to explain neoliberalism’s resilience after the 2008 shock, they have moved beyond rational discourses to consider the fluid realm of invention and imagination. Neoliberalism’s persistence is explained

¹ One should also mention the multiplication of invitations to create new ‘economic science-fictions’ as promising alternatives to the worldview promoted by neoliberalism. See the collection of essays edited by William Davies in *Economic Science Fiction* (2018), and particularly: Chang, 2018; W. Davies, 2018a.

by its ability to pre-empt (or foreclose) the future, to colonise people's capacity to conceive alternatives to it. However, these approaches have a tendency to take the concept of the 'imaginary' for granted – which means they miss, as I argue below, some of what makes imaginary representations so compelling.

In this chapter, I draw on these strands of enquiry to develop a theory of the 'imaginary' that can be applied to the study of neoliberalism. My reconceptualization of the 'imaginary' draws on three traditions, each highlighting an important characteristic of this concept. The first part of the chapter focuses on the works of Charles Taylor (2007) and Cornelius Castoriadis (1975) to examine how imaginaries function as distinct collective semiotic repertoires, which frame individuals' experience and perception of the world that surrounds them. Crucially, the pervasiveness of these representations is explained by the fact they are conveyed by evocative "images, stories and legends" (Taylor 2007, 23) rather than cohesive functionalist discourses. The second part draws on the psychoanalytical work of Jacques Lacan to discuss further the potency of imaginary representations. Through Lacan, I analyse how the imaginary is related to processes of identity formation at the individual level. As such, the subject libidinally invests in imaginary representations, making them hard to displace. The last part of the chapter explores further the relations between individual and collective imaginaries, but also between imaginary and discourse (and, through them, the relations between psychoanalysis and cultural studies) by examining the notion of "cultural imaginaries", as developed by Graham Dawson (1994). I come to define the imaginary as a magma of significations and representations that solidifies into a structuring – but ultimately untenable – image of the self and the social, in an effort to suture the constitutive gap at the heart of ego and social representations and thus ward off the anxiety that derives from it.

The chapter thus aims to displace the focus often placed on the notion of (symbolic) discourse in the existing studies on neoliberalism – and specifically in the studies inspired by the works of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan. Instead, I use the concept of the 'imaginary', which enables us to be receptive to the role played by the texture (or the consistency) of these discourses. Paying attention to the evocative and fluid imaginative dimension of discourses, rather than to their discursive coherence, provides crucial insights into the way they function as reservoirs of affects and fantasies, dreams and aspirations, which ground attachment to the representations they promote.

1. The struggle of imaginaries

1.1 The imaginary as a semiotic ensemble

When considering the recent literature that specifically refers to a ‘neoliberal imaginary’, it is clear that the authors understand the ‘imaginary’ as a cohesive ensemble of conceptions and beliefs. Wendy Brown, for instance, analyses how the “neoliberal imaginary” has become ubiquitous and corroded the “political imaginary” that coheres around public life, humanism and popular sovereignty (Brown 2015, 41–45). Quinn Slobodian refers to the tensions between a “free-trade imaginary” and a “protectionist imaginary” (Slobodian 2018, 202), or to the “Geneva school imaginary” (2018, 12). Bob Jessop speaks of different “economic imaginaries” and enquires into whether the 2008 crisis has disrupted the “hegemonic neoliberal economic imaginaries” and brought up to date “those that had been consigned to oblivion in recent decades” (Jessop 2013, 234). Yet, the notion is rarely conceptualised, and is often employed as an evocative, but interchangeable, synonym for other concepts like ‘rationality’ or ‘ideology’.

As an exception, Jessop does explicitly refer to Charles Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2007) and defines the ‘imaginary’ as “a semiotic ensemble (without tightly defined boundaries) that frames individual subjects’ lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or guides collective calculation about that world” (Jessop 2013, 236). According to Taylor, this semiotic ensemble, which inspires social norms, is not the result of explicit theories or doctrines clearly verbalised and structured, but is conveyed through “images, stories and legends” (Taylor 2007, 23). It is like a common ‘repertory’ with an “unlimited and indefinite nature”, a set of common implicit rituals shared by the people living in the same society (2007, 25–26). These “images, stories and legends” are articulated around a set of ideals, which themselves refer to “a moral and metaphysical order, in the context of which the norms and ideals make sense” (2007, 24–25). Such ideals are often seen as unattainable because of their “unstructured and inarticulate” dimension (2007, 25), but they are nonetheless referred to as a possibility to aim at, in order to ensure that what seems at first a set of chaotic social practices keeps a higher meaning.

This semiotic understanding of the imaginary is, I argue, already extremely productive and insightful when applied to the ‘neoliberal imaginary’ (and unfortunately largely underexploited in the current literature – including in Jessop’s chapter). It encourages the reader to be more observant of the ‘images, legends and stories’ that are present in neoliberal discourses; that is, to interrogate their origins and deeper meanings, as well as their form. In other words, it encourages us to be attentive to the implicit “moral and metaphysical order” which neoliberal

ideas rely on – something I will address in Chapter 4. However, Taylor’s analysis of the imaginary of ‘Western Modernity’ completely elides the emergence of neoliberalism. There is therefore a need to determine what might constitute these ‘images, stories and legends’ for a theory like neoliberalism, which rejects any reference to a transcendent order and which “presents itself as a shield protecting us from the perils posed by belief itself” (Fisher 2009, 5).

1.2 The imaginary as a creative power

This is something that the writings of Cornelius Castoriadis, a Marxist political theorist, OECD economist and psychoanalyst, can shed light upon. His work is particularly interesting because it offers an early analysis and critique of what can be identified as the ‘neoliberal imaginary’.² Castoriadis’s ambition is to demonstrate that modernity’s commitment to rationality “pushed to its limit” (which enables it to despise “the bizarre customs, inventions and imaginary representations of preceding societies”) is itself purely formal and without content; that is, it is “imaginary” (Castoriadis 1975, 235).³ His work sets out to debunk some of the main neoliberal assumptions (and particularly the myth of *homo œconomicus* (1999c, 94), the ‘rational’ capitalist markets (1999d, 202), monetarism (1999d, 204) and enterprise (1999d, 207)),⁴ in order to ultimately prove that the creations of neoliberalism respond to the same magical logic as preceding forms of human organisations.

Castoriadis’s argument is that social organisations (that is, a society’s institutions, including its myths) have both a functional dimension (in general to do with the coordination of production, reproduction, education and so on) and an imaginary one (Castoriadis 1975, 174).⁵ In other

² In his 1975 *Imaginary Institution of Society*, Castoriadis refers to the “imaginary in the modern world”, which he designates as a product of capitalism (Castoriadis 1975, 235). In his subsequent work, he often refers to the modern ‘capitalist imaginary’ (Castoriadis 1999d), before explicitly calling it ‘neoliberalism’ in the last years of his life (Castoriadis 2005b, 31; 1999c).

³ In this chapter and in the rest of the thesis, the translations of Castoriadis’s and Lacan’s works are my own.

⁴ Castoriadis has an understanding of neoliberalism that might appear somewhat old-fashioned today, as he often seems to merge (or confuse) neoliberalism with neoclassical economics - a widespread tendency which is adamantly criticised by Dardot and Laval (2010). It must be said in his defence that he died in 1997 before the 2004 publication of Foucault’s *Naissance de la Biopolitique*. Although he appreciates neoliberalism’s attempt to economise all domains of social life (a critique of rationality that is close to the analyses of the Frankfurt School (see particularly Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002)), Castoriadis nonetheless misses some important features of neoliberalism, like its implicit moralism or its reconfiguration of *homo œconomicus* around the model of the entrepreneur. My analysis is thus indebted to the ultimate ambition of Castoriadis’s approach, but it will take a radically different route.

⁵ This distinction between the imaginary and the functional (that is, symbolic) dimensions of institutions must be understood in relation to Castoriadis’s dialogue with thinkers often associated with structuralism – particularly with Lacan and Levi-Strauss and their discussions of myths. For an excellent discussion of myth in the work of these two thinkers see Leader (2003).

words, although every society obviously fulfils the same core social functions, they all perform them in different ways, and these creative variations are what Castoriadis wishes to capture with his concept of the 'imaginary'. According to him, the imaginary dimension always has precedence over the functional one due to the fact that it exactly mirrors the workings of the 'imagination' at the level of the individual psyche (Castoriadis 1999a, 306). The psychic 'imagination' (understood as the '*mise en image*' of the surrounding world) is itself a primary human ability that takes precedence over biological functions (1999a, 296) and which conditions the formation of all thoughts. Human beings are driven by a constant flux of images. They are led by affects, desires and fantasies that make them act in ways that sometimes work against their self-preservation (Castoriadis 1999b, 117; 1999a, 295).⁶ Similarly, at the collective level, the social imaginary bends or distorts the purely functional elements of the social order according to its own logic, while cementing them together (Castoriadis 1975, 216).

From this perspective, as for Taylor, the Castoriadian imaginary functions as a key for reading the social world, as an organising scheme imposed on it that reinforces certain of its elements and excludes others, and thanks to which society can affectively and mentally grasp and represent its surrounding environment (Castoriadis 1975, 215). It can be interpreted as an orientating principle that will ordain what will be held in the social sphere as legitimate and what will make sense within it both at the collective and individual level (1975, 219). All human beings are consequently included in a culture or 'imaginary order' that "determines what [they] see as normal" (1975, 244). The imaginary, as an anonymous creative impetus, governs the formation of a symbolic structure common to the agents living in its boundaries and determines what will be seen as real and not real within it. The articulations it imposes on the social world have a quasi-corporeal reality, shaping the individuals who live within its confines in both body and mind. The imaginary is thus bound for Castoriadis to the very identity of society – in the same way as nationalism is for Benedict Anderson (2006) an "imagined community". The imaginary is what helps society to define its relationship and articulation with the world, its problems, "its needs and desires" (Castoriadis 1975, 221). It also helps it to creatively bring (fantasised) answers to some existential questions that pass down generations, like the question of origins

⁶ Because of the primacy of imagination and the libidinal power of representations, human beings are, according to Castoriadis, markedly dysfunctional animals. Castoriadis's theories on the primordialism of the imaginary has been heavily criticised by Lacan (see particularly Lacan 2014, 32–33; as well as Stavrakakis 2007, 52–53).

– questions that cannot be genuinely settled through perception and the use of reason (1975, 222) and which often hide what is perceived as an original lack of cohesion in reality.⁷

In Castoriadis's view (and in accordance with Brown, Jessop and Slobodian), several imaginaries can be at work in the social world at the same time. The modern period is, for example, according to him, characterised by the tension between the 'capitalist imaginary' and the 'democratic imaginary' – the former slowly destroying the latter (Castoriadis 1999b). This reflection on the 'hegemony' of certain imaginaries (although Castoriadis does not use this expression nor explicitly refer to the work of Antonio Gramsci) is what strongly distinguishes Castoriadis from a liberal thinker like Taylor. The Castoridian imaginary, as a force of creation, remains fundamentally ambivalent due to its inherent connection with alienation. Because the imaginary often takes precedence over considerations of functionality, sometimes the imaginary institutions can become a-functional as they start undermining the workings of society's vital functions (Castoriadis 1975, 173). This especially happens when the imaginary becomes autonomous from society's creative agency; that is, when societies seem to forget that they created these institutions and that they can therefore amend them to follow their functional needs; they become "overwhelmed by the logic of their own economic institutions" (1975, 185).⁸ For Castoriadis, this is precisely the case with modern society, which has become overwhelmed by the logic of the 'capitalist imaginary'.⁹ As an early environmentalist thinker, Castoriadis criticises Western modernity's commitments to its rational mastery over nature, to the unlimited expansion of production, consumption and 'techno-science', which all are fundamentally unsustainable and self-destructive as they wrongly presupposes unlimited natural resources (Castoriadis 1999d, 211–12). This lack of autonomy from the capitalist imaginary (or this 'heteronomy') results in a general sense of powerlessness when facing the blind and impersonal injunctions of globalisation (Castoriadis 2005b, 350).

Castoriadis's solution is to rely further on the imaginary. To avoid sliding into heteronomy, societies should seek to keep a certain leeway with their imaginary creations, mainly by keeping alive the creative impetus of what Castoriadis calls the 'radical imaginary' and by constantly

⁷ Castoriadis quotes Marx's analysis of Feuerbach's *Theses* and refers to Feuerbach's claim that the externalization in the divine is the result of a perceived lack of cohesion in the profane (1975, 199 n.27). In this passage, one can see again the influence of both Levi-Strauss's and Lacan's understanding of myths.

⁸ Castoriadis here reinterprets Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1957), as well as Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach' (1992a). Both describe how a human imaginary invention (religion and human essence respectively (and, in Marx's later work, capitalism (1992b))) comes to dominate mankind, as a realisation of human rationality that is paradoxically estranged from human beings.

⁹ For an application of Castoriadis's theoretical framework to finance capitalism see Ibled (2018).

displacing and questioning the crystallization and rigidity of the 'instituted imaginary' (Castoriadis 2005a; 1999b, 118). Such a distrust of fixity can be attributed to Freud's influence on Castoriadis' work - specifically Freud's differentiation between death drives (characterised by stillness) and life drives (creating constant tension) (Freud 2003, 83). Yet, what I suggest throughout the thesis is that Castoriadis misses the fact that the neoliberal imaginary is animated by the same rejection of fixity. Just like Castoriadis's radical imaginaries, the narratives I will deconstruct, and which I find characteristic of the neoliberal worldview, do celebrate the creative power of the imagination. Just like him, they understand their *raison d'être* as a relentless fight against the stifling grip of the status quo – although they might not aim at generating the same meaningful autonomy as Castoriadis.

In other words, I suggest that Castoriadis's invitation to fight the alienating power of some instituted imaginaries by resorting to more and freer imagining might somewhat miss the point. It underestimates how much the attractiveness of the promises displayed through the neoliberal imaginary relies on its claim to open the doors to an indeterminate future that can be shaped by the power of individual imaginations. Castoriadis's generally positive understanding of the imaginary, furthermore, does not entirely make sense of the ascendancy that the imaginary sometimes has over individuals and communities - a sway that may lead to them sacrificing their lives, as emphasised by Anderson (2006) in the case of nationalism. Explaining the powerful grip of collectively imagined symbolic representations also means exploring the darker side of the imaginary, its alienating and mesmerizing potentialities.

2. Lacan and the imaginary foundations of human psyche

Lacan's work provides precisely such insights into the alienating dimension of the imaginary. It is thus worth presenting his theories in some length, as I will refer back to his analyses throughout the remaining chapters – particularly when examining the concepts of desire, enjoyment and uncertainty in neoliberal thought.

It is important to note that the study of the imaginary is usually considered to correspond to a first phase in Lacan's teaching, where he sketches the contours of his theory of the mirror stage described below, although this segmentation is refuted by Lacan himself (Stavrakakis 1999, 6). Moreover, throughout his seminar series, the imaginary exclusively remains a category that centres on the individual subject. In other words, unlike his post-1968 theory of discourses (sketched in Chapter 1) and unlike its Castoridian equivalent, Lacan's theory of the imaginary

does not, strictly speaking, take into account the collective level. The third part of the chapter extends this theory of the individual imaginary to account for a collective 'neoliberal imaginary'.

2.1 The Borromean structure of the subject

Lacan's psychoanalytical work is organised around "three essential registers of human reality" (Lacan 1953) – namely, the triad constituted by the real, the symbolic and the imaginary – the intertwinement of which founds our sense of reality and stability (Leader 2011, 45). For Lacan, the symbolic refers to language and laws, and generally to all the discourses, structures and rules that organise society and human relations. The symbolic order thus lies outside the individual's direct control. The real, which is conceived by Lacan as a radically negative order, evokes the libidinal life of the body (Leader 2011, 45); that is, all elements of existence that cannot be formulated or conceptualised. Lastly, the imaginary corresponds to everything that belongs to the order of the image and self-representation.

In order to avoid the pitfall of discussing which register has the ascendancy over the two others, I ground my analysis in Lacan's later work and, precisely, in his theory of the knots.¹⁰ Lacan compares the triadic structure Real-Symbolic-Imaginary - which, according to him, forms the subject - with the Borromean rings, a mathematical structure formed by the intertwinement of three rings, each interlaced with the two others (Lacan 2005, 50). These circles cannot be detached (even when deformed) from one another and none is on top (or under) the other two. By referring to this figure, Lacan suggests that the three registers cannot be isolated from one another, and points toward their equal importance. The three registers always co-exist. To conceptualise the imaginary from a Lacanian perspective consequently also means taking into account the real and symbolic registers. My analysis of the neoliberal imaginary in the following chapters will thus highlight its intertwinements with the symbolic and the real orders; that is, respectively, with the legal and institutional frameworks neoliberalism puts into place, and uncertainty and creation.

¹⁰ The theory of the knots first appears in 1973 in *Encore* (1975, 107–123), merely three years after the theory of discourses developed in *L'envers de la psychanalyse* (1991), which is almost exclusively dedicated to the exploration of the symbolic. This symbolic peak in Lacan's work led him to invent 'mathèmes', algebraic formulations that he uses to symbolise the central concepts of psychoanalysis.

2.2 The imaginary mirror of Narcissus

Coming back to the Latin root of the concept, Lacan understands the imaginary as the image we have of our own body and by extension “that basic and enduring dimension of experience that is oriented by images, perceived or fantasized” (Boothby 1991, 22). This interpretation – which may, at first sight, seem restricted - is based on Lacan’s studying of ethological experiments about how animals’ drives and reproductive behaviours are generally orientated and triggered by the perceived image of their partners, and not so much by their actual presence (Lacan 1993, 93). Lacan extends these findings to the human subject and particularly to the psychological development of the infant. As this section suggests, Lacan’s description of the infant’s subjectification profoundly affects his understanding of the imaginary function. It is therefore useful to analyse it in some depth, before discussing in Part 3 how it can be extended to account for the main characteristics of the neoliberal imaginary at the collective level.

According to Lacan, the infant comes to the world prematurely. It cannot look after its most basic needs and is thus left in a situation of fundamental helplessness in an environment of which it only has an unstructured and chaotic perception – an environment which in addition seems to act on the impotent child through various stimuli. The infant’s feeling of vulnerability is reinforced by the experience of a certain disconnection and discordance at the level of its body - what Lacan calls the “*corps morcelé*” (the body in pieces) (Lacan 1978, 72); an experience which endures as a haunting trace throughout life (1978, 66). In other words, the infant has no mastery or genuine awareness and grasp of the unity of its own body, which is in the grip of a chaos of uncoordinated and uncontrolled excitations (Boothby 1991, 28).

This disquieting situation meets an end in what Lacan baptised the ‘mirror stage’ (Lacan 2004, 42; 1993, 93; 1978, 66), a primordial mythical stage from which the psyche of the future individual is formed and structured, and a process at the centre of which lies the imaginary. It refers to the moment when the infant will start identifying with its own image in the mirror or with other children. This primordial identification with the image the infant is presented with - the ‘specular image’ or ‘*imago*’ - offers it an imaginary “promise of wholeness and completeness” (Leader 2011, 46). It allows the infant to gain a first grasp of its bodily integrity, which in turn gives it a first impression of self-mastery and control over its own movements (Boothby 1991, 27). Acting as a focal point, the *imago* of the mirror phase is thus a “proto fantasy” that allows the infant to mobilise and channel for the first time, thanks to this imaginary unity, the chaos of libidinal energies that characterises its previous state (Boothby 1991, 28).

The infant gains here a first sense of self-consciousness from which it can start constructing its psychic personality - what Lacan refers to as "*le moi*", or the 'ego'. The 'ego' is thus for Lacan an entirely "imaginary function" (Lacan 1978, 50).

Although the identification with the imago provides a first point of stability that drives the infant out of the chaotic realm of ungoverned sensations and energies that characterised its early life, Lacan conceives the imaginary as a potentially negative force, tied to the Freudian death drive. The ego is associated in Lacan's texts with the figure of death (1978, 245) because of the equivocal characteristics of the imaginary. Particularly, the first structuration of the individual psyche around the 'ego' is also simultaneously his first experience of alienation (Boothby 1991, 21). More precisely, the channelling of energies that takes place in the mirror phase does prevent the individual from relapsing into the realm of chaos that could destroy the integrity of the persona he constructed, but it also involves a selection of certain drives at the cost of the exclusion and the inhibition of some others (Boothby 1991, 56). This filtering of energies, which is undeniably a first impoverishment, means that the ego constructed through the mirror phase cannot equate with the "organism as a whole" (1991, 56). The imaginary is thus "essentially twofold", being divided "between an anarchy of impulses that remain outside the ego and a partial investment in an imaginary unity" (1991, 58). There is always something left out in the construction of the ego, which makes the latter "intrinsically frustrating" (1991, 58). For Lacan, the subject is thus a lack, a "primitive gaping openness" (Lacan 1978, 245); meaning that we never know exactly who we are.

Importantly, since "the kernel of our being does not coincide with the ego" (Lacan 1978, 59), it cannot faithfully reflect the natural order, even if it is rooted within it. The imaginary register thus also involves a distortion of what is being reflected. The sense of power and mastery the imago offers is fundamentally an illusion, if not a delusion (1978, 72). The infant sees itself as more capable than it actually is, which highlights an essential discrepancy between its actual experience (an unfinished body) and the false unity offered by the image with which it identifies (1978, 66). It does not recognise the imago for what it is: an *image* of itself, a fantasy only offering a mirage of wholeness. This dualism is to be added to the twofold structure of the imaginary described by Boothby and in which "[f]antasies of omnipotence and utter helplessness, mastery and victimization" continually meet (Boothby 1991, 26). Despite the tension at the heart of the imaginary identification, the individual remains fascinated and mesmerised (Lacan 1978, 67) by the immovable reflection of what is at the same time him and

not him, like Narcissus and his mirror. This image of the unified body is thus cherished, invested with strong libidinal affects (Lacan 2004, 50–51).

Lastly, the alienating potential of the imaginary is related to the fact that, with the specular image, the infant finds its first sense of unity outside itself, and becomes “an other to himself” (Lacan 1978, 138). The constitution of the ego is thus “simultaneously the constitution of an alter ego” (Leader 2011, 46). Within what Lacan qualifies as the “*mirage du semblable*” (the mirage of the fellow creature), we are losing ourselves in the other, who becomes an all-powerful master from whom our unity depends. This reflection in the other is, paradoxically, a source of aggressiveness and is even potentially lethal, mostly due to the jealousy (Lacan 1978, 67) caused by the discrepancy mentioned above between the self-image and actual experience (Leader 2011, 47). The imaginary is thus also a space of auto-destruction, a “struggle to the death” (Lacan 2006, 360), if it is not mediated by another register; the symbolic (Lacan 1978, 72–73).

2.3 The symbolic as a mediating figure

Unlike the imaginary which is tied to the individual’s personal “discovery of experience” (Lacan 1978, 50), the symbolic refers to structures, boundaries and rules that pre-exist the individual, and organise human relations, as well as the individual’s reality. It thus plays a central role in the stages of the individual’s subjectification – a centrality explored again in Chapter 4 in my analysis of the neoliberal thinkers’ ambition to artificially create a ‘pure’ symbolic order.

Before its very birth, the infant is already integrated into a larger network of discourses over which it has no control – e.g. discourses of the family, of the nation, of the Law (Lacan 1978, 112). The symbolic realm is therefore autonomous from human experience (1978, 51). The mediation of the symbolic (which intervenes in Lacan through the symbolic figure of the Father, the Law being referred to as the “desire of the father” (Lacan 2004, 126)) tempers the imaginary identification by giving us as infants “a place that is not defined by our reflection or the image of our counterparts” (Leader 2011, 48). The symbolic register is generally the realm through which meaning is ascribed to things (Lacan 1978, 56), thus giving a relative stability to our discursive construction of reality.

The symbolic order will have the same validating and exclusionary tendencies on bodily impulses as the imaginary. It thus further contributes to the impoverishment of the individual’s reality and to her ego decentring from her entire being (Lacan 1978, 63). The complementary

exclusionary function of the symbolic and the imaginary registers highlights further their fundamental intertwining. On one hand, as Lacan argues, “the intimate break” (“*la cassure intime*”) within the specular image is what gives to the symbolic exclusion (the castration) its psychic strength, its “support and material” (Lacan 2004, 19–20). On the other hand, as a representation, the imaginary necessarily borrows elements from the world of symbols. However, the main difference is that the symbolic exclusionary function is external to the individual (an externality which explains why Lacan often refers to the symbolic as the ‘Other’).¹¹ Thanks to this system of differentiations and validation/exclusion, reality becomes meaningful to the subject since it is transformed “into a system of signs, whose value depends on the other parts of the system, rather than on bodily equation” (Leader 2011, 51). It therefore helps to break the grip of the infant’s narcissistic fascination with its own reflection and its inner conviction that the world is organised around its own person, by introducing a “distance from the supposed immediacy of experience” (2011, 51). The symbolic allows thereby the infant to enter a shared social space.

Nonetheless, this entrance into the symbolic order is represented for Lacan (as well as for Castoriadis) by the figure of castration or prohibition, since, in order to attain it, the infant must sacrifice something (McGowan 2004, 15). Whereas for Castoriadis that something has to do with the autonomy of the infant – namely the relinquishing of its illusory position of omnipotent (but non-viable) monad (Castoriadis 1999a, 298–305) - it is connected for Lacan with ‘*jouissance*’, understood as a mix of pleasure, jubilant enjoyment and pain. Lacan conceives of *jouissance* as a bodily energy related to the real which, as shall be seen, threatens to destabilise the subject’s identity. Reinterpreting Freud’s theories on the ‘pleasure principle’ (Lacan 1978, 85; 1978, 102),¹² Lacan argues that these menacing tendencies are restrained, repressed and obstructed by the imaginary and symbolic constructions the subject puts into place to keep them at bay, estranging thereby an important part of his personality. This castrating renunciation leaves the individual with a fundamental sense of dissatisfaction, which drives him - as shall be later argued - in a long search to retrieve this lost *jouissance* through the quest for the ‘*objet a*’; that is, “the object that holds out the promise of the ultimate *jouissance* for the subject” (McGowan 2004, 77). Importantly, for Lacan the sacrifice of *jouissance* is one of the very bases of the social bond (along with the paradoxically comforting mediation of rules and laws). Since all individuals have

¹¹ The ‘Other’ is here to be differentiated from the ‘other’ as the fellow creature (that is, the specular image of the ego) (Lacan 1981; 1978, 276).

¹² The Freudian ‘pleasure principle’ is the principle that keeps the level of excitation within the human psyche at the lowest possible level – excessive excitation being unpleasurable (Freud 2003, 47). See Chapter 4 for a detailed analysis.

to renounce *jouissance* to enter the social realm, they all have in common a shared dissatisfaction, which establishes a “pact of mutuality” and opens, by the same token, the possibility of coexistence (McGowan 2004, 22).

Symbolic castration thus profoundly marks individuals (be they men or women) when entering the world of signifiers (Lacan 2004, 37; 2004, 52) – what Lacan also calls the ‘place of the Other’ (2004, 42). It is what truly constitutes them as subjects. For Lacan, symbolic castration is thus something ultimately positive (2004, 58) as it is fundamentally needed for the individual to access the world of shared meaning. The absence of symbolic castration in childhood often clinically results in an inability for psychotic patients to allocate meaning to their surrounding world; an inability compensated by a greater appeal to the imaginary function in order to repair a reality that has no cohesion and re-establish contact with it (Lacan 1981; Leader 2011, 70). It is thus interesting to consider that Lacan’s famous comments on the ‘capitalist discourse’, which I presented in Chapter 1, precisely centre on how this discourse encourages the individual subject to deny castration (Lacan, 1972; see also Vanheule, 2016) in an operation that “*imposes the perverse position on the subject*” (Tomšič 2015, 150).¹³

As such, despite its alienating tendencies (Ruti 2012), the symbolic register is a disruptive force that challenges and deconstructs the mesmerising fixity of the representations created by the imaginary (and particularly those attached to the ego as an illusionary unity) (Boothby 1991, 128). The mediation of the symbolic order that lies outside the individual breaks the spell of imaginary identifications, reintroduces a certain polysemy within our representations and opens them to an “unending slippage of significations” (1991, 128) and to the potential creation of new representations (1991, 112–113). The symbolic opens breaches in imaginary representations through which some aspects of the real can emerge “as a surprise” (1991, 135).

2.4 Outside the imaginary, the return of the real

This irruption of the real as a disrupting and potentially liberating force highlights its singular status in the Lacanian system. As I will argue in the following chapters, the same ambiguity can

¹³ As explained in Chapter 1, Lacan uses a series of diagrams to symbolise the (internally broken) relationship between truth, agent, labour/other, and product within the four sets of discourses he analyses (Lacan 2005; 1991; Tomšič 2015, 199–229; Vanheule 2016). The capitalist’s discourse, as the fifth discourse, is in radical contrast with the other discourses because, unlike them, it “makes the subject appear as an autonomous agent and the initiator of an infinite circulation from which there is not breakout” (Tomšič 2015, 220). The castration of the subject is hence radically disavowed (as in the category of perversion) or, in the worst cases, foreclosed (forcing then the subject in the position of psychosis). As Tomšič argues, there is here a fundamental ambiguity in Lacan’s perspective (2015, 153).

be found in the neoliberal literature surrounding the concept of ‘uncertainty’ and ‘creation’, which can both be compared to Lacan’s ‘real’.

As seen above, the notion of alienation is at the centre of Lacan’s understanding of the imaginary – the mirror phase, when the imaginary comes to the fore, being simultaneously for the infant a moment of structuration and formulation of its psyche, and the moment of a primordial oblivion of a whole aspect of its sensory information. The imago, this image of the infant’s own unity that motivated the construction of its own personality (the ego), can capture only a limited “portion of the forces animating the living body” and thus represents a “fraction of the organism’s panoply of vital energy” (Boothby 1991, 57–58), leaving out a radically unimagined and unimaginable remainder that constitutes a “lack”. The lack at the heart of the ego construction is mirrored by a similar lack at the centre of the symbolic order that Lacan refers to as the “lack in the Other”. This is particularly striking for Lacan in the inability of discourses (and by extension of any social organisation) to faithfully and exhaustively represent the world (Stavrakakis 2007, 73). Both imaginary and symbolic constructions thus never quite fit and are prone to internal collapse under the blows of this unspeakable remainder of vital energies. This ensemble of unimagined vital forces of the body that haunts reality is what Lacan designates as the ‘real’. For Lacan, both imaginary and real registers stand in direct opposition – the real being “alienated by the imaginary structuration of the ego” (Boothby 1991, 105). Yet, they are still connected, mostly because the mental constructions of the subject always depend on the body and its release of energy (1991, 62).

As with the imaginary, the Lacanian real is thus an ambiguous force. It is undeniably “a force of death” that threatens to disintegrate the integrity of the ego and the fictional stable identity that the subject patiently elaborated to escape the primordial sensory chaos of his early infancy (Boothby 1991, 67). The ineffable fear that the irruption of the real causes – a fear that has no conscious or determined object – is the source of an irrepressible feeling of anxiety (1991, 149). However, it is paradoxically also the source of *jouissance* as it destabilises imaginary and symbolic constructions in their protective but estranging attempts to keep *jouissance* at bay as the source of a traumatic (yet fascinating) body energy that threatens the subject’s identity. There is therefore a tension between the explosive release of body energies and the subject’s mental structures, or between “the immediacy of physical sensation” and the unity of “the field of the clear consciousness” (Lacan 1978, 66). Unconsciously, the subject cannot help feeling a certain form of *jouissance* at the collapse of his own mental structures under the blow of the real, since it is also experienced as a paradoxical release from bondage, a liberation from frozen

and alienating imaginary constructions (Boothby 1991, 70). This explains why for interpreters of Lacan like Richard Boothby or Mari Ruti, the return of the Real is also paradoxically a source of life that animates the subject and prevents him falling into a debilitating torpor. For Ruti, the emergence of the real even founds the very singularity of the subject; that is, “what is aberrant and socially anomalous about the subject” by opposition to the reasonable and common “façade of subjectivity and personality” (Ruti 2012, 21). The real is thus a “rebellious force” that leads the subject beyond hegemonic sociability (2012, 32), a “transcendent” moment when “the real erupts within the symbolic, exposing the fantastic underpinnings of the latter’s claim to consistency, and revealing (in an epiphanic manner) that there is something ‘beyond’ social normativity” (2012, 26). The irruption of the real can however only be a transitory moment. It will necessarily be followed by a moment of rearticulation, of construction of new representations and identities along imaginary and symbolic lines.

As I argue in Chapters 5 and 6, the psychic strength of the neoliberal representations can be explained by neoliberalism’s ability to keep open this irruption of the real by integrating it to its imaginary and symbolic structures through the figure of uncertainty and disruptive creativity. As two destructive and creative principles, they both guarantee neoliberalism’s constant renewal, through the stimulation of desire.

2.5 Desire as the real of the lack

From this perspective, it is interesting to note that the ambiguity that surrounds the real in Lacan is nowhere more patent than in his treatment of the concept of desire. Desire originates in the “lack of being” (Lacan 1978, 261) caused by the primordial channelling of energies through the imago in the mirror phase and through symbolic castration. This lack, which Lacan also designates as the *objet a*, is charged with libidinal drives and constitutes the “last irreducible reserve of libido” (Lacan 2004, 127), “an ineffable reservoir of desire” (Boothby 1991, 57). Desire thus finds its source in these ungraspable remainders of vital energies and is animated by the sheer force of negativity and emptiness that is characteristic of the real register. However, by the same token, the fantasies of completion that accompany the lacking ‘*objet a*’ mean that this object also channels these real energies and “orients and polarises desire” (Lacan 2004, 57). It leads the individual in a tantalising quest to find “what lacks as object of [his] desire” (2004, 33) to fill this existential gap.

In the mirror phase when the specular image gives the infant the illusion of being the other, this object of desire is identified with the other’s object of desire, leading to a situation of radical

incompatibility between 'ego' and the 'other' as they desire the same thing (Lacan 1978, 67). The castrating intervention of the symbolic function breaks, to some extent, this conflictual identification. However, symbolic castration also means that we experience satisfaction in a mediated way, through symbols that never give us an immediate object. The symbolic "slippage of significations" mentioned before thus marks a long series of constant displacements in the choice of objects of satisfaction, which is part of the experience of desire. In each instance, the individual searches to appropriate what he identifies as the object of desire of the Other (Lacan 2004, 33); that is, usually, of the figures of authority he encounters. This object is still the Mother in the early stages of subjectification, but it increasingly becomes objects found in the symbolic system as we grow up and seek to align with a depersonified Other (e.g. with the Law). Lacan strongly insists on the fact that the individual has no way to access or support his desire other than when "coupling it, knotting it" with his necessary dependency (as a subject) to the Other (2004, 33) – something I will go back to in Chapter 5 in my interpretation of the neoliberal instrumentalization of 'mimetic desire'. In other words, one's own desire is supported by a fantasy, the image of the desire of the Other: that is, what one imagines the Other to lack, as well as the desire and temptation for the lack that is represented by the Other itself (2004, 35).

However, within this fantasmatic image of the desire of the Other, one cannot recognise the '*objet a*', one's own object of desire. The *objet a* is too intimate for the individual to see (Lacan 2004, 52), or even reach. The space it is inscribed in, its home, is the empty space (- φ) opened by the symbolic castration at the closest place to the individual's being.¹⁴ This space is for Lacan still deeply embedded at the level of "the proper body, of the primary narcissism, of what one calls auto-eroticism, an autistic *jouissance*" (2004, 57), meaning it is crossed by body energies that belong to the real. Because of this deep connection to the real, the *objet a* is a 'presence' (a 'Thing' (1986)) that cannot be expressed or translated into words or images (2004, 57), even less into one particular object. Concretely, this means that the individual is led to pursue different objects, thinking they are what she truly desires, without ever finding a complete and lasting satisfaction. The individual is thus driven indefinitely toward new objects to be invested and subsequently rejected. Crucially, as Lacan suggests in his analysis of the capitalist discourse, capitalism is all-'consuming' and gripping because of the very way it triggers our thirst for the *objet a* - this 'obscure object of desire' (to take up Buñuel's 1977 film title) - by constantly inciting consumers to pass from one commodity to the next (Lacan 1972, 48).¹⁵ This logic can be

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that this space has an equivalent in the symbolic realm of the Other (Lacan 2004, 52).

¹⁵ See Chapter 1, note 20.

extended to neoliberalism as representing the latest stage of capitalism and Chapter 4 will explore its specific ways of doing so.

Importantly, Lacan also emphasises the fact that desire is what “supports man in his existence *qua* man” (Lacan 2004, 52) and drives him forward, away from apathy and indolence. Far from diagnosing the absence at the heart of human individuality as a dangerous lack to be filled in for good, Lacan on the contrary claims that the lack is a genuine support for the individual’s psyche – going as far as to argue that anxiety is caused by the lack of lack (2004, 66); that is by the absence of a gap, of a mediation, between oneself and the real *jouissance*. Desire and lack thus have a structuring and essential function (2004, 70) and I will argue in the following chapters that what makes us emotionally and libidinally invest neoliberal representations is the fact that neoliberalism has turned its structures into mechanisms to constantly activate desire and stimulate lack. Desire and lack both drive human beings throughout their life by supporting their libido (2004, 122) and must be, as such, preserved. For Lacan, the distressing experience of lack and the disappointing pursuit of desire are ultimately what allow the individual to be conscious of her being, even if this being is built on a fundamental absence (Lacan 1978, 262). Particularly, although it originates from the real, desire canalises the latter, thanks to fantasies, by directing libidinal drives toward an object, however unstable the attachment for this object might be. As such, as the next section highlights, it both reactivates the spectre of real *jouissance*, while keeping us from its most destructive tendencies.

2.6 The imaginary *jouissance*

How does desire interact with imaginary processes? First, desire has a channelling power which plays a crucial role because, however strong the temptation for real (and liberating) *jouissance* might be, this latter always includes a possibility of total collapsing of mental structures. As I explore below, the encounter with real *jouissance* is often a traumatic confrontation which the subject may not survive intact. Faced with this incommensurable risk, the subject might seek for other ways to reach a semblance of *jouissance*, often by appealing to the imaginary register. As Todd McGowan argues, in Lacan’s work, the imaginary, as the realm of images, can also allow the subject “to visualise the enjoyment it lacks” (2004, 18). The imaginary register can thereby subvert the prohibition of *jouissance* that results from the castrating entrance into the (symbolic) social order by keeping alive the image of the enjoyment that is refused to us. The subject thus has a tendency to retreat in this world of images in order to make up for his lost *jouissance*.

The *objet a* plays here again a crucial role. It represents “the promise of [the] filling [of this lack], the promise of a miraculous encounter with castrated *jouissance*” (Stavrakakis 2007, 75). The fantasy scenario that the *objet a* offers is therefore an ‘imaginarisation’ (2007, 75.) through which the subject can imagine the recovery of his lost wholeness, and thereby avoid recognising the effect of castration. Retreating into the imaginary is thus a way to “obscure both the lack in the subject and the lack in the Big Other” (McGowan 2004, 66), a way to maintain the mirage that the *objet a* is a determined object that can be reached and possessed, and thus “obviate this perpetual dissatisfaction of desire” (2004, 68). It is precisely what advertising is doing nowadays: by suggesting that a particular commodity is the very object of our desire, it implies that the *objet a* can be substantiated. Thanks to the retreat in the imaginary, the subject can harbour illusions of his own completion and find a paradoxical comfort and joy in them (2004, 70). However, this process remains illusory: the imaginary being the realm of images, we are bound to only enjoy the image of the object of desire, not the object itself (Lacan 2004, 53).

This has important consequences for our fundamental experience of the world. First, the imaginary has undeniably a subversive potential. By supplying an illusory enjoyment and by thus keeping alive a faded image of real enjoyment (McGowan 2004, 18), the imaginary offers an “imaginary transcendence”, an “illusion of a beyond”, which sustains the spectral figure of the real within the symbolic constructions and thereby allows “subjects to recognise the prevailing social order itself as limited, as *not* the only possible social terrain” (2004, 77). As suggested in the following chapters, one of the reasons for neoliberalism’s attractiveness might be its ability to sustain an image of the real, and thus by extension of *jouissance*, through its framing of uncertainty and disruptive creativity. By stimulating them and building its symbolic structures around their image, the neoliberal imaginary keeps continually alive the image of a possible beyond within those structures. All practices and institutions must consequently be adaptable to the irruption of the new and in constant mutation.

Nonetheless, because we are here dealing with the image of *jouissance* rather than *jouissance* itself, our enjoyment remains within the boundaries of the symbolic order we live in – and it is worth recalling that the neoliberal world, despite its revolutionary pretensions, ultimately remains a conservative order (Brown 2006; Cooper 2017). We do not genuinely embrace the leap into the unknown that real enjoyment would represent. As McGowan argues, “imaginary enjoyment (...) allows the subject to remain securely rooted in its symbolic identity; it respects symbolic barriers, even as it offers the subject the illusion of transgressing them” (McGowan 2004, 71). The imaginary thus performs a paradoxical subversion; a subversion that never fully

realises itself, that questions the social order without genuinely threatening it and which might even contribute in maintaining it. The neoliberal imaginary does not escape this tendency. As Chapter 4 illustrates, whereas neoliberalism claims to liberate individuals from tradition, and precisely from the stifling metaphysical order of prohibition, it ineluctably ends up submitting them to and re-establishing the less-visible sway of another authoritarian and castrating order, that of the market.

More generally, one of the main characteristics of the image is that, unlike the symbolic register, the image is unmediated – which suggests a fundamental lack of distance between the subject and the perceived image. In perception, the image is directly and immediately grasped. It is only then subsequently processed and conceptualised through the mediation of the symbolic function (McGowan 2004, 20). This immediacy of the image does not allow the subject any critical distance with what he perceives, this exclusive and uncompromising relationship with the object being itself a source of enjoyment (2004, 20). When this imaginary mode of relating to the world coincides with the fragility of the imaginary construction of the ego - which leads the subject in a continual attempt to reconstitute a semblance of wholeness by trying to find who she truly is – it results in the formation of violent identifications with the object, of a narcissistic fascination. Living in a neoliberal world submitted to the iron rule of uncertainty, we come to invest with the full strength of our libidinal affects the images and fantasies of self-mastery and objectivity that the neoliberal imaginary disseminates.

3. Building a political theory of the imaginary

As I explained above, Lacan's theory of the imaginary, unlike Castoriadis's, exclusively focuses on the individual level - the collective level being tackled in the 'symbolic realm'. I have nonetheless highlighted a few points of convergence between the neoliberal (collective) imaginary and the imaginary of the subject in Lacan. Now I want to take a step back to determine how exactly Lacan's subject-centred understanding of the imaginary can be extended to the collective level. The existence of such a collective force (or a "common soul") is something that Lacan seemed himself doubtful about, as he argued that "the collective and the individual are strictly the same thing" (Lacan 1978, 43). He was, for example, sceptical about Carl Jung's notion of 'collective unconscious'. Lacan argued instead that there is just a sum of 'particular unconscious-es', each participating to the elaboration of the language it speaks (Lacan 2005, 123). However, how are symbolic systems and structures themselves created, since it is clear that they do (sometimes radically) change and mutate? Is this process similar to the process of

the imaginary construction of the ego? Furthermore, how do we explain that the subjects' libidinal attachments also come to invest symbolic structures – as it is for example the case with nationalism when the 'nation' comes to merge with its subjects' identity?

3.1 The imaginary symbolic and the symbolic imaginary

To answer these questions, one has to go beyond Lacan's project by bringing it into dialogue with other sources. Understanding the intertwinement of the symbolic and imaginary orders entails outlining a psychosocial approach that brings together the two strands of enquiry discussed in the chapter.

On the one hand, I explored above the 'social imaginaries' as found in the work of Charles Taylor and Cornelius Castoriadis. The social imaginaries designate the networks of "images, stories and legends" (Taylor) that pervade and nourish the symbolic structures of a particular society, thus functioning both as an organising principle for its institutions, as well as a key of reading that determines how its members grasp and make sense of their environment (with the risk of this imaginary becoming sometimes all-encompassing and alienating). As such, it can also be compared with the symbolic register in Lacan as this latter designates the large network of discourses (e.g. the family, the nation) in which the individual is integrated. From this perspective, it is interesting that Lacan highlights the "relationship of contiguity of myths [as found in ethnographic exploration] with the infantile mythical creation" (Lacan 1994, 255) when analysing Freud's depiction of Little Hans' exuberant story-telling. Although Lacan is here, once again, primarily interested in the individual (as he studies the passage of the infant's unmediated imaginary world to the world of symbolic social relations), he nonetheless reinterprets his friend Claude Lévi-Strauss' theories on myths. Myths come to express the relationship of human beings with the "themes of life and death, of existence and non-existence, specially of birth; that is, of the apparition of what does not yet exist" or the human relation with "a secret force, malevolent or benevolent, but essentially characterised by its sacred [aura] (*par ce qu'elle a de sacré*)" (1994, 254) – a vision very close to Castoriadis' understanding of the imaginary (Castoriadis 1975, 222).¹⁶ The themes associated with the sacred resist any attempt at symbolisation; they are by definition associated with what has been designated as the Lacanian real (Leader 2003, 36). Yet, myths represent a collective attempt to tackle these anxiety-inducing mysteries of life

¹⁶ Darian Leader focuses on Lévi-Strauss' (and, by extension, Lacan's) innovative perspective on myths. Whereas traditional views (including Castoriadis's) understand myths as an *answer* to the mystery of the origins (which gives it meaning), Lévi-Strauss conceptualises them as an attempt to *formulate* the in-formulable (the "initial situation of impossibility") through sets of logical relations (Leader 2003, 39).

and death, to close the gap these mysteries have opened in the representations of the world that surrounds us. The difficulty consists in that Lacan (with Lévi-Strauss) considers the mythical operation to be purely symbolic (Lacan 1994, 255), mostly because it is formulated through language as a signifier and expressed in relational terms. Despite Lacan's focus on the signifier, I want to investigate the specific role of images within these symbolic representations; all the more so since Lacan himself acknowledges that the "mythical structuration" (here of Hans, but I argue that we can extend it to social myths because of their "contiguity") is made of "imaginary elements" that are symbolically permuted (Lacan 1994, 284; see also Leader 2003, 41). So what do these images specifically tell us?

On the other hand, I discussed how Lacan's work on the imaginary invites us to understand the imaginary as directing the narcissistic construction of the ego and as guaranteeing its corporeal consistency. I explored how this anchoring of the ego into the fantasised and fascinating image (or 'imago') of a coherent body is fundamentally reductive and unstable – and thus somewhat illusory – as it cannot grasp the entirety of the individual's "psychological reality". Lacan's work thus emphasises the role of the image and points toward an imaginary order that is not entirely congruent with the individual's empirical reality. However, Lacan's work on the intertwinement of the three registers suggests that the imago of the mirror is also already contained in the snares of the symbolic (as an example, the symbolic figure of the parents validates the image in the mirror ('This is you') (Lacan 2004, 42)). There is therefore a need to understand how the imagos with which the subject identifies are also contained in a collective symbolic repertoire.

Determining how the two visions cross-fertilise each other thus requires, on one hand, considering the role of images within symbolic constructions and, on the other hand, considering how collective symbolic constructions intervene in the identification of the subject with her imago.

3.2 Cultural imaginaries

The concept of 'cultural imaginaries' developed by the cultural historian Graham Dawson (1994) provides a bridge between these two dimensions. Dawson uses psychoanalytical theories (specifically Melanie Klein's work) to build a reflection on the role of images/'imagos' in the psychic formation of the individual but also in the formation of collective cultural repertoires. Dawson defines cultural imaginaries as:

vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time and articulate its psychic and social dimensions. (...) Cultural imaginaries furnish public forms which both organise knowledge of the social world and give shape to phantasies within the apparently 'internal' domain of psychic life. (Dawson 1994, 48)

Dawson here describes a twofold process in which individuals both use the images they find in the social and cultural world to structure their identity (what Dawson refers to as the process of 'composure'), but also simultaneously project their expectation, repressions, fantasies and desires into the cultural representations available to them. These are "in turn re-introjected into the internal world" (1994, 47). As such, the cultural imaginaries are deeply invested with libidinal affects as they provide imaginary elements, "a narrative phantasy that can be lived with, psychically and socially" (1994, 43) – however unstable that identity might be.

Interestingly, Dawson suggests that the cultural imagos elaborated compose the individuals' psychic personalities but that they also bring the "social worl[d] into life" (1994, 51). As he argues, "psychic and social are abstracted levels of a single process, articulated by cultural imaginaries that become the repositories, through projection and introjection, of historically and culturally specific forms of anxiety, defence and reparation" (1994, 51). There is, therefore, a sense that the psychic and the social mirror each other when it comes to processes of identification.

By extension, and keeping in mind that according to Lacan the lack at the heart of ego constructions is mirrored by a lack at the centre of the imaginary order,¹⁷ I want to argue that a similar process of imaginary composure takes place at society's collective level. Just as the imaginary provides the infant with a first point of stability that allows it to leave the chaotic realm of ungoverned sensations to construct its psychic personality around the 'ego', the social imaginary provides society with a structuring image of the community of its members (an idea also found in Anderson's *Imagined communities* (2006)). It is thus the collective fantasy that attempts to constitute society and hides its constitutive absence (see also Laclau 1996). Rather than a spontaneous and primordial force of creation, I understand the imaginary as an effort to suture the constitutive gap at the heart of our representation of reality and thus to obviate the existential anxiety caused by the return of the ineffable real, which threatens to disintegrate the integrity of the fictional stable identity which has been so laboriously assembled.

¹⁷ This idea has been taken over by Ernesto Laclau when describing society as an "impossible object" (Laclau 1996, 40).

Although this image of the community the imaginary offers us is by definition always deceptive and inadequate, it is not superfluous since it is what brings individuals together. It has, however, a dark potentiality. Being fundamentally unmediated, the image of the community is consequently at the origin of a narcissistic fascination and a self-destructive enjoyment for this reflection of fullness of what is, at the same time, us and not us. It motivates outbursts of violence - as it is often the case with nationalism - or melancholic and morbid rituals when the community suffers traumatic blows. Being created to hide the gap at the heart of society's representation, as well as of the individual's ego, communities and subjects fully identify with the mesmerising images they are presented with and invest these existential lifelines with libidinal affects, explaining why imaginary symbolic structures are so hard to displace.

3.3 Conceptualising the imaginary

As an analytical tool, my concept of 'imaginary' thus share similarities – and is compatible - with other notions more commonly used in political theory, such as the concepts of 'hegemony', 'rationality', 'ideology', 'discourse', as well as 'fantasy' and 'affect'. Nonetheless, the 'imaginary' shifts the emphasis of my analyses by enabling me to explore the role of images, identity and composure.

As an orientating principle, the imaginary may be reminiscent of the concept of 'hegemony' as developed by Antonio Gramsci to designate a broad project aiming at the strategic production, crafting and organisation of consent by non-coercive means, mainly by acting on and investing the cultural sphere, common sense and language (Barrett 2012, 238; Gramsci 2000; see also Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Because of its dynamic indeterminacy, it can also be compared to the Foucauldian notion of 'rationality' described in Chapter 1 as a regime of self-evident truths. Characterised as strategies, flux of creation or methods, all three concepts are apprehended by their authors as nebulas, the importance and efficacy of which lies in their plasticity and the energy they draw from it, rather than in their determinate content. Although hegemony, rationalities or the imaginary are conceived as systems that allocate sense in the social sphere, these allocations are never fixed but are, on the contrary, constantly rearticulated. As dynamic systems of interpretation, they are, for their authors, particularly difficult to exhaustively delineate and effectively address, which makes them seem unchallengeable.

Nevertheless, the imaginary, as well as Foucault's concepts of rationality and discourse, are supposed to comprise the production of ideological discourses and disciplinary apparatuses. They are the larger context that makes them effective (Dardot and Laval 2010, 277). Moreover,

ideology and hegemony tend to be understood in the Marxist traditions (including in the Gramscian branches) as instruments that enable the shaping of mental productions in order to secure the material domination of a class – be it the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, a gender or a race. Such a view thus implies that ideology is often conceived in terms of false-consciousness; that is, an oppressive form of consciousness that misleads people by concealing their exploitation and that needs to be unmasked (as it is, for instance, still the case in the early work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe according to David Howarth (2018, 134)). The Marxist and early post-Marxist understandings of ideology consequently revive the possibility that, through critical theory and emancipatory measures, there could be a non-ideological (reconciled) mode of relation to the social world. This is something that both the imaginary and rationality oppose. Both concepts regard alienating power relations as intrinsic and constitutive of the social world. From this perspective, the imaginary and rationality are far more all-encompassing than the classical understanding of ideology as no genuine externality from them is ever possible.

It is however worth mentioning another post-Marxist reconceptualisation of ideology and hegemony along Lacanian lines, as found in the work of Slavoj Žižek, as well as in the later writings of Laclau and of the Essex School of discourse analysis (see Chapter 1). Žižek particularly reworks the concept of ideology by drawing upon the Lacanian notion of ‘fantasy’ (Žižek 1989). As Howarth argues, fantasy is here understood as “a ‘support of reality’ whose function is to cover over the traumatic intrusion of ‘the Real’” (2018, 134). In other words, these fantasmatic narratives suture the lack at the centre of the social order and provide a semblance of fulfilment to its inhabitants. As (in a typical Lacanian fashion) Žižek considers that alienation cannot be superseded, fantasy becomes itself constitutive of the way we relate to the social world, while ideology is redefined as the practice that contributes in hiding the fundamental contingency of the social and in naturalising existing social relations (Howarth 2018, 136).

Such an understanding of fantasy needs to be differentiated from my understanding of the imaginary. Castoriadis indicates that ‘imaginaries’ are “vaster” than ‘fantasies’ (1975, 216). The former must be conceived as containing the latter. On one hand, fantasies must be understood in the singular. Each type of fantasy designates a specific fantasmatic scenario that frames people’s libidinal investment of an idea or an object. For instance, Jason Glynos (2014) understands neoliberalism as being organised around a fantasy of independence, whereas the cultural studies scholar Lauren Berlant (2011) focuses on the ‘fantasy of the good life’. In contrast, the imaginary is a principle that ordains a large set of social fantasies and determines their content by giving them a quasi-corporeal consistence. The imaginary is the frame within

which different collective and individual fantasies can be fluidly articulated. Furthermore, fantasies are usually considered in their symbolic dimension. Like the myths I described above, they need to be considered as expressing a set of relations. In contrast and while still integrating this relational dimension, the 'imaginary' also points toward the imaginal consistency of these relations and the way this frail layer tries to contain the surge of the real.

This leads me to briefly discuss the notions of 'emotion' and 'affect' as found in cultural studies, and particularly in the work of Sara Ahmed (2004) and Lauren Berlant (2011). As put by Ahmed, 'emotions', and by extension 'affects' attach us to social norms and explain why they 'stick' (2004, 11). Along with Glynos who compares them to a "quantum of libidinal energy" (2012, 2405), I argue that affects should be associated with Lacan's real. Reinterpreted in such a way, the 'imaginary' becomes the process that is supposed (although it necessarily ultimately fails) to give a concrete shape (or an image) to these evanescent affects. The imaginary representations are thus animated by the libidinal strength of what they precisely attempt to channel.

Lastly, the concept of the imaginary must be differentiated from the one of 'discourse'. As I understand it, the imaginary must be seen as a complement to the notion of discourse. Specifically, I want to be attentive to the imaginary dimension of discourse. Consequently, as Dawson similarly argues, I am less interested in the "discursive coherence, regularity and unity" that usually characterise discourses than in the "fluid imaginative connection between patterns of linked associations (...), which traverse a terrain by innumerable overlapping byways" (Dawson 1994, 50), as these directly appeal to and stimulate the emotions, composure and libidinal investments of the agents the discourses target. To illustrate this, Dawson contrasts his approach focusing on 'cultural imaginaries', with Edward Said's analyses (2003) of Orientalism as a discourse. While the former in its analysis of the imagining of the heroic colonial soldier in adventure stories is open to a "complexly structured and contradictory formation" and to messy "intertextual relations" between different "discursive archives" (like Orientalism, Britishness and Europeanness), the latter results in a "static analysis that collapses everything into one mode of object relation" (that is, the opposition of the West and the East) (Dawson 1994, 50). In a similar way, the tradition of discourse analysis represented by the Essex School has a tendency to exclusively consider discourses through the lens of agonism and hegemonic struggle, at the risk of missing some evocative motifs and fluid associations that do not neatly enter this framework but, I argue, play a central part in the (Western) subjects' affective libidinal investment in the discourses presented to them. My intuition is that focusing more on the imaginal texture of discourses, and therefore less on their relational dimension (as often done

in both Foucauldian and Lacanian scholarships) will provide crucial insights into the way the symbolic structures that discourses produce are adopted. It will bring to the fore how they do so by relying on and stimulating a complex series of fantasmatic identifications and rejections.

My intervention is thus meant to displace the poststructuralist focus on neoliberal rationality while preserving its core, especially when it comes to its disciplinary dimension. As Lauren Berlant nicely puts it, it must be conceived as a shift of emphasis and not as a ‘theoretical negation’ (2011, 8). As such, and to pre-empt the critique Dardot and Laval directed at Boltanski and Chiapello (2010, 411; see also note 3 in Chapter 1), I do not belittle the reach of neoliberal rationality’s disciplinary power. Thanks to Lacan’s theory of the Borromean knots, I consider that the disciplinary (castrating) dimension of the symbolic order is always presupposed. What I am interested in is how these disciplinary apparatuses, as well as the discourses on which they rely, are knotted with networks of images and narratives that play around individuals’ imaginary processes and their needs for self-identification.

3.4 Studying the neoliberal imaginary

It now remains to be determined how the psychosocial concept of the imaginary can be applied to the study of neoliberalism. Throughout the following chapters, I develop three lines of enquiries to analyse the neoliberal imaginary.

First, to draw on Castoriadis’s, as well as Anderson’s (2006) theories on the imaginary (not to forget Lévi-Strauss’s and Lacan’s works on myth), imaginaries need to be considered as a horizon that determines the attempts to collectively formulate the in-formulable mysteries of birth, death and immortality – thus warding off the intrinsic anxiety that accompanies these enigmas. In the next chapters, I argue that neoliberalism does indeed also mobilise socialised individuals by arousing their disquiet about suffering, death, loss and immortality, in the same way as it ardently demands their personal sacrifice. With the help of Lacan’s psychoanalytical theories, I demonstrate that, by doing so, neoliberalism also stimulates certain libidinal affects, as well as processes central to the formation and settling of the self. I contend that, rather than solely a theory of calculation (as it is often presented in the poststructuralist account), neoliberalism needs to be understood as a metaphysical theory of what constitutes life and death. As developed further in Chapters 4 and 5, this entails being open to neoliberalism’s ‘fictional expectation’ about the future (Beckert 2016; W. Davies 2018a, 22–23), as well as questioning its alleged moral neutrality and anti-metaphysical stance, to take seriously its religious or spiritual dimension. From this perspective, it is worthwhile to keep in mind Max Weber’s work on *The*

Protestant Ethic (2001). As I explore in the rest of the thesis, neoliberalism similarly ends up reproducing a social hierarchy of the elected and the doomed; a hierarchy organised around the ability to make the right choice and to withstand the crushing weight of uncertainty to embrace continual creativity. However, as Boltanski and Chiapello remark, the engagement in early capitalism that Weber describes in his analysis of ascetic Protestantism finds its justification in an ideological system, the religious doctrine, that is external to capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2011, 42). By contrast, neoliberalism finds its justification within itself, and spreads its own ethics.

Secondly, as Dawson argues, imaginaries produce both “‘positive’ imagos”, models that individuals are encouraged to internalise and identify with when composing their ego, as well as “unwanted ‘negative’ imagos”, which are “rejected and expelled” (Dawson 1994, 47). By following the production of these attractive heroes and repulsive others, one can delineate “articulated zones and defensive borders across the imaginative geographies of cultural as well as psychic life” (1994, 51). One can, in other words, highlight the fragile limits that mark an imaginary world. The present thesis thus investigates which persona are produced as heroes and villains in the neoliberal imaginary. As I explain further in my methodological chapter, the hero is unsurprisingly represented by the figure of the heroic entrepreneur, while the role of the abject villain is ascribed to the losers of the economic game, the alleged non-striving and thus underserving poor, as well as those who radically divert the rules of game – such as the addict. I explore the specific qualities and attributes performatively given to these figures in Chapters 6 and 7.

Thirdly, the imagos produced by the imaginary mainly operate on the psychic level. People are encouraged to compose themselves according to the model of their heroes, but this does not mean that these identifications neatly coincide with their material and empirical experience. This understanding points toward a discrepancy in contemporary Western societies between the narratives and imagos spread in neoliberal discourses, which promote at the *imaginary level* the power of the imagination and the will, and the often-bleak *material reality* that most people experience. The imaginary can here be understood as a seductive but deeply illusory fantasmatic message that comes to disguise ruthless relations of dispossession. Dardot and Laval, as well as Jodi Dean (2008), allude to this dimension when arguing that the hegemonic strength of neoliberal rationality comes from the ways it manages to negotiate the relation between the imaginary and the disciplinary dimensions of its action. On the disciplinary level, neoliberalism does deploy a minute and intricate apparatus of surveillance, monitoring and control to shape

the type of individual it requires to function (Dardot and Laval 2010, 455). It does so by re-actualising and reusing traditional institutions of symbolic disciplinary power like the family (Cooper 2017) or the university. In other words, individuals are not less physically constrained than they were in the past; they are not let loose, free from authority, and abandoned to their unconstrained self-destructive *jouissance* as sometimes implied by Charles Melman (2005). Nonetheless, the fact that neoliberal discourses on human capital promote self-responsibility as a form of self-realisation and self-control means that the effective constraints met by the individual on her *jouissance* are presented as originating from the individual herself, as the fruit of a personal choice (Dardot and Laval 2010, 452). The individual can remain full master of her own destiny, encountering no limits to her wildest dreams and desires, but only at the imaginary level (2010, 453).¹⁸

The following chapters develop this intuition at further length, emphasising how the imaginary level complements and libidinally reinforces neoliberal rationality's symbolic operations. This enables me to answer the critique Lazzarato addresses to Foucault when he claims that Foucault's concept of 'human capital' is "misleading" (Lazzarato 2012, 91) as it misses the "proletarianization (...) of the middle class and the class of workers" (2012, 93). What I want to highlight is that both are not incompatible. The former can persist as an imaginary invitation to continually by-pass the limits of one's ability, at least in our fantasies, while being effectively constrained by the latter form of subjectification at the empirical or material level.

Conclusion

This chapter has developed a psychosocial theory of the imaginary that can be applied to study neoliberalism. To do so, I have drawn on three different traditions – political theory, psychoanalytical theory and cultural studies.

My reconceptualization of the 'imaginary' is primarily indebted to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical understanding of the imaginary as the order of the image and self-representation. I argued that, for Lacan, the imaginary is intrinsically connected to the individual's identity formation. It designates the process by which chaotic libidinal energies are channelled so as to provide the lacking subject with a relatively stable and consistent identity.

¹⁸ This ambivalence is also explored by Lauren Berlant with her concept of 'cruel optimism', which is meant to express the "attrition" of the fantasy of the good life; that is, the tension between the (required) fantasmatic commitment to the good life and the realisation that such a life is today materially impossible (2011, 11).

As holding a promise of completeness and self-mastery, imaginary representations are cherished and invested with libidinal affects. Nonetheless, the illusory and unmediated dimension of this promise means the imaginary is potentially alienating and hard to displace. Drawing on Todd McGowan's interpretation of Lacan, I also argued that the imaginary had a subversive potential as it keeps alive the possibility of unhindered *jouissance*, and through it of the "illusion of a beyond" (McGowan 2004, 77). Yet, Lacan's analysis of the imaginary exclusively centres on the individual level. When discussing collective representations, like for instance in his analysis of myths, Lacan tends to use instead the order of the symbolic, which he associates with language, laws, institutions and discourses. Inspired by his friendship with the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Lacan understands myths in purely relational and functionalist terms.

My aim has been to displace the focus on the relationality and functionality of discourse to better account for their imaginary dimension by examining their texture and consistency, by paying attention to the creative forms they take. I have been thereby inspired by the works of the Cornelius Castoriadis and Charles Taylor. My intuition is that the form these discourses take, through the "images, stories and legends" (Taylor 2007, 23) they display, is central to the way discourses are adopted. Their evocative and fluid dimension plays a core part in the mesmerising power of imaginaries, understood as a semiotic ensemble. The two political theorists have provided my reconceptualization of the imaginary with two further insights. On the one hand, Charles Taylor invites us to pay attention to the implicit metaphysical presuppositions on which imaginaries rely. On the other hand, Castoriadis develops a reflection on the autonomisation of imaginary orders – a reflection which has been instrumental to my analysis of the Hayekian market order (see Chapter 4).

To further conceptualise the connection and interplay between individual and collective imaginaries, I have used the work of the cultural theorist and historian Graham Dawson on "cultural imaginaries" – a work that also heavily draws on psychoanalytical theory. Dawson's work has been extremely helpful to think about the way cultural imaginaries - and the collective repertoires of images, motifs and narratives associated with them - are used by individual subjects as supports to fashion their personal identity. While, as subjects inhabiting a particular social and cultural world, we introject the positive models available to us within it, we also project our emotions and fantasies on these cultural and imaginative representations. Through these cultural models, we give shape to our internal fantasies. Collective imaginary

representations thus become the repository of stimulating dreams and fantasies, which further explain our attachment to them.

This three-stage analysis has led me to propose a broad definition of the concept of the 'imaginary' used in the rest of this thesis to read neoliberal discursive productions. I have particularly defined the imaginary as an organising scheme providing a structuring – but ultimately untenable – image of the self and of the social, in an inevitably unsuccessful attempt to ward off and channel the dislocating tendencies of the real. At such, it is infused with libidinality.

As I explore in the following chapters, reading neoliberal discourses from such an imaginary perspective gives the means to answer some of the questions left opened by the other approaches to neoliberalism. Specifically, paying attention to the imaginative texture and creative form of the neoliberal norms and injunctions enables us to be more sensitive to their affective and psychic undercurrents that anchor attachment to them.

In the following chapter, I examine how neoliberalism can concretely and practically be described as an imaginary by developing an approach that takes the imaginary as a methodological tool with which to analyse neoliberal discursive productions.

Chapter 3. The imaginary as a methodological tool

Introduction

In this chapter, I show how a psychoanalytical understanding of the ‘imaginary’ can be used as a method to explore neoliberal discourses. As such, the chapter brings together the theoretical framework I presented in Chapter 2 with my case studies.

Determining practically how the ‘neoliberal imaginary’ can be studied is not an easy task. When the concept appears in the scholarship on neoliberalism, it tends to be used generically. It is often used as a shorthand for the discursive and material commitment to the meticulous nurturing of the free market and to the reorganisation of all society along market lines. What I argue in my four analysis chapters is that, while this dimension is undoubtedly present, there is a need to be sensitive to the fantasmatic undercurrents that run underneath the explicit and conscious economic logic of neoliberal discourse. It is these fantasmatic undercurrents, articulated around a consistent whole, which constitute neoliberalism as an imaginary. But how can one pin down this consistent whole, considering that social imaginaries are, as Castoriadis recognised himself, in constant rearticulation and mutation? Castoriadis’s suggestion was to study them obliquely (Castoriadis 1975, 216) – that is, as I argue in this chapter, to highlight their limits, what they promote and what they viscerally reject. When describing them, he also focused on their discursive productions – thereby setting an example I will emulate in the rest of the thesis.¹

I want to analyse how neoliberalism narrates and imagines itself and, by so doing, reveals its libidinal attachments. I want, moreover, to investigate how these narrations, along with their fantasmatic background, resonate in the wider social sphere. Specifically, I want to grasp the fantasmatic dimension of the imaginary identities neoliberal discourses invite us to inhabit and navigate. This means that I focus in the following chapters on what the neoliberal doctrine and its (more or less conscious) advocates claim to do, on the ‘world image’ they promote, together

¹ At the same time, I am analytically following the footsteps of Foucault’s *Birth of Biopolitics* as I explore (among others) similar textual materials as he used in his lectures at the Collège de France.

with the stream of tropes about personal accomplishment and omnipotence that pervades them.

The chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, I reflect on how psychoanalysis can be mobilised to read neoliberal discourses. The second part presents the corpuses of texts I analyse in the four final chapters. It introduces an original interdisciplinary approach to the study of neoliberalism, which brings together cultural studies, economic theory and history, psychosocial studies and psychoanalytical theory.

1. A psychoanalytical interpretation of neoliberal discourse

1.1 Discourse analysis

Considering that, according to Foucault (1975), discourses are one of the fundamental means through which the microphysics of power exercises itself, I seek throughout the thesis to bring to the fore the imaginary dimension of neoliberal discourse. In other words, I want to highlight the imaginary representations that constitute it as a consistent body of thought and that give it its grip by mobilising certain fantasies. I analyse three case-studies that exemplify neoliberal discourse to demonstrate that what makes the neoliberal social imaginary so pervasive is that, while reconfiguring the social, it also provides a structuring image of the self.

My approach to discourse analysis exclusively focuses on the analysis of semiotic data. It is freely inspired by the Essex School tradition (Stavrakakis et al. 2017), and specifically by the branch of the Essex School that directly uses Lacanian psychoanalysis as represented in the work of David Howarth and Jason Glynos at the Essex Centre for Ideology and Discourse Analysis, as well as in Yannis Stavrakakis's writings.² These scholars use Lacan's concepts to explore, in Howarth's words, "the precise role of 'non-discursive' factors like passion, affects, and enjoyment in the critical explanation of social phenomena" (Howarth 2018, 137); or to concentrate on what "escapes discursive capture, or rather what lies at the limits of discourse and meaning" (Glynos

² It is also worth mentioning other strands of discourse analysis, and particularly critical discourse analysis (CDA) (see Fairclough and Fairclough 2018; Wodak and Meyer 2009), as well as quantitative linguistic analysis (Moretti and Pestre 2015). Unlike my approach, which, as I discuss in more detail later in the chapter, is comparatively looser and more associative, CDA and quantitative linguistic analysis tend to strictly concentrate (as the name of the latter indicates) on the linguistic and grammatical analysis of the texts under scrutiny. For instance, Pestre and Moretti analyse the frequency of words used in the World Bank's Annual Reports to illustrate changes in its policy orientation.

2012, 2399–2400) so as to focus on “the fantasmatic logics, that account for the way particular practices and regimes ‘grip’ subjects” (Howarth, Glynos, and Griggs 2016, 100).

In other words, the central insight I take from the Essex School is that discourses are “not just meaning” (Glynos 2012, 2408). They must be considered as an attempt to formulate with mere words (or in Glynos’ words “symbolise”) something larger: our emotions, affects, desires, enjoyment and passion – or what Glynos refers to as a “quantum of libidinal energy” in an explicit appeal to Lacan’s work (2012, 2405). As I explained in Chapter 2, formulation through discourse is necessarily restrictive and cannot do fully justice to the complexity of our affects and desires (the Lacanian real). Discourses are haunted by what remains at their limit while being internal to them; they are invested with the frustrated inner energy of the inexpressible – which explains why these discourses ‘stick’.³ They are a fantasmatic production. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek’s understanding of fantasy, Glynos, Howarth and Stavrakakis argue that, by giving shape to the unshapable, discourses as “collective social fantasies” concurrently hide us from the “trauma” of the real (Howarth 2018, 134); that is, from the fact that all social constructions (including language) are fundamentally contingent and built on a lack, on a fundamental impossibility. They contribute to naturalising inherited social structures, occluding their structural and inescapable arbitrariness. As a consequence, they are always involved in ideological operations - ideology being inherent to all social organisations, according to Žižek (1989).

Glynos, Howarth and Stavrakakis’s discourse analysis thus seeks to identify “a narrative as a specifically *fantasmatic* narrative”; that is, it highlights “the affective investment made in one or more of its elements” (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008, 263). For example, Glynos explores in a series of articles the fantasmatic narratives that support the operations of market logics and brings to the fore how they are sustained by what he calls “fantasies of independence” (Glynos 2014; 2012).⁴ As I explained in Chapter 2, this constitutes a difference between my approach and the work of the Essex School. The Essex School’s discourse analysis tends to identify and focus on specific types of fantasy, like the ‘fantasies of independence’. In contrast, my approach does also attempt to pinpoint these fantasies but only so as to discuss how they are integrated,

³ Glynos, Howarth and Stavrakakis here all acknowledge their indebtedness to the work of Sara Ahmed (2004) on emotions and affects.

⁴ According to Glynos, these neoliberal fantasies enter in tension with “fantasies of dependence” which are characteristic of investments in the “pastoral and paternal” tradition of the Welfare State (Glynos 2014, 9). Although coming from the field of cultural studies and affect theory, Lauren Berlant similarly focuses in *Cruel Optimism* on one kind of fantasies, namely the fantasy of “the good life” (2011, 11).

in Castoriadis's words, into an "invisible cement" (1975, 216) that forms a consistent whole; that is, an imaginary. The imaginary brings together a collection of fantasmatic investments that gives a doctrine (here the neoliberal doctrine) a consistent body and its libidinal strength. Furthermore, I suggested in Chapter 1 that the Essex School's analyses have a tendency to insist on the symbolic dimension of discourses, often at the expense of a study of the imaginary processes that run underneath them – something I will go back to later in the chapter.

1.2 Psychoanalytic literary criticism

It remains to be determined how a consistent imaginary can be identified within neoliberal discursive productions. I do this in the textual analyses that compose the four following chapters, by treating the texts I chose to study as *works of imagination* – even, or rather *especially*, when these texts are economic treatises. This modus operandi means not being blinded by the immediate and most explicit function of these texts (that is, expounding a 'radical' new economic theory and convincing the reader of its superiority), as well as by their claim to intellectual expertise. Rather, it means paying more attention to the mode of expression, to the analogies, images, emphases and distortion used, as well as the gaps they reveal.

Interestingly, such "literary-theoretical" examinations of the neoliberal canonical texts have been recently advocated by Ian Bruff and Kathryn Starnes, who similarly study the narrative techniques used by Hayek and Friedman to actively shape an image of the free-market that "serve their narrative", while claiming to objectively represent it as it actually exists (Bruff and Starnes 2019, 246). Again, while my work is to be situated in this revisiting of neoliberal economic texts as "literary artefacts" (2019, 246), it explores the neoliberal scholars' rhetorical strategies only to grasp what lies beyond it, the imaginary representations they appeal to.

As Peter Brook nicely puts it, my approach is about "refus[ing] the text's demand to listen to its desire" (Brook 1987, 12). To do so, as I explain further in the next section, I interpret the texts' images and distortions with reference to a range of central psychoanalytical concepts and theories found in the work of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. My method can thus be compared to what is done in the field of psychoanalytic literary criticism (see Brook 1987; Felman 1982; Parkin-Gounelas 2001) and is generally inspired by the way both Lacan and Kristeva discussed their theories in relation to emblematic literary works (James Joyce's for the former (Lacan 2005) and Louis-Ferdinand Céline's for the latter (Kristeva 1980).

A number of remarks must be made about my psychoanalytical interpretive approach to neoliberal texts. First, the literary critics who use psychoanalysis in their work advise against “*applying*” psychoanalysis to literature – as this presupposes the subordination of the latter to the former (Felman 1982, 9 – italics by Felman). On the contrary, Shoshana Felman insists on the fact that psychoanalysis and literature both “*implicate each other*” (1982, 9 – italics by Felman). For instance, psychoanalysis uses literary references to name its central concept - like Freud using Sophocles’ *Œdipus Rex* to name his ‘Œdipus complex’. In the context of my research, Felman’s remarks are complicated by the fact that the texts of my selection do not strictly speaking belong to the field of literature. As I explained above, treating them as ‘works of imagination’ – not to say ‘works of fiction’ – is an artifice I have used to displace their claim to scientific authority and highlight their imaginary dimension. One could assume that *applying* psychoanalytical concepts in an instrumental way is therefore justifiable as the implication of psychoanalysis in neoliberal discourse and vice-versa might be less intimate. Yet, as suggested in Chapter 1, my analysis in the four following chapters (and specifically in Chapter 7) suggests that the relationship between neoliberalism and psychoanalysis is far more ambivalent – which is striking, for instance, in Gary Becker’s recurrent allusions to a “death wish” (Becker 1976b, 10) or a “death instinct” (Becker and Posner 2004, 13), as well as his mention of the “ego and the id” (Becker 1976b, 13) as both recall the Freudian concepts of the ‘death drive’ and of the ‘id, ego and superego’. From this perspective, I think it is fruitful to follow Felman’s suggestion and take psychoanalysis as a “go-between” when studying neoliberal discursive productions. Psychoanalytical theory informs us of certain aspects kept silent in the neoliberal texts, but it might also be affected by neoliberal discourse or integrated into the *imaginarisation* of the neoliberal worldview.

This brings me to a second important point made by literary critics. As Peter Brook argues, the psychoanalytical interpretation of texts is to be understood through the “transferential model”, as “a difficult and productive encounter of the speaker and the listener, the text and the reader” which is the place of “real investments of desire from both sides of the dialogue” (Brook 1987, 12–13). On one hand, this entails that I, as the reader/analyst, must be aware of the partial and speculative character of my interpretation (Parkin-Gounelas 2001, xii). On the other hand, it also means that “narrative discourses are always proffered for a purpose, to create an effect” (Brook 1987, 12) – an ambition to convince the reader that is explicit in the texts of my selections, especially in the economic literature, as it seeks to demonstrate the extent of the threat caused by central planning. Deconstructing this intentionality through a psychoanalytical interpretation built around the imaginary does not simply mean focusing on the texts’ rhetorical dimension (as

done in classical forms of CDA), as this would entail remaining at the surface of the argument. As Brook contends, it is rather about having, as a reader/analyst, a “suspicious hearing”, an “agonistic dialog with the words we are given to work with” – for example by paying attention to the wording of recurrent obsessional ideas (1987, 12) as these are supposed to cover up or suture something which remains silent, such as certain fears of the authors which are also projected on the reader, or other kinds of unconscious investments.

1.3 Analysing the neoliberal texts

What techniques of ‘suspicious hearing’ did I bring to bear on the neoliberal ‘literary artefacts’ I have gathered here? How was it possible to listen for their dissonant notes and thematic variations? In the following section, I expound the procedure I adopted to analyse the texts of my corpus before explaining, in the last part of the chapter, how I constituted this corpus.

It is first important to differentiate my procedure of hermeneutic interpretation from the methods of the Essex School of discourse analysis. As I explained in Chapters 1 and 2, the Essex School’s ideology critique is primarily influenced by the structuralist analyses of myths and discourses developed by Lévi-Strauss and Lacan. These analyses tend to emphasise the symbolic dimension of mythical (and, for the Essex School, ideological) narratives, which means that they ambition to express the complex social interrelations reflected in these discursive practices by means of logical formula and frameworks - as for instance illustrated by Lacan’s use of algebraic formulas (the *mathèmes*) when expounding his theory of the four discourses (see Vanheule 2002; 2016). The Essex School scholars are thus interested in identifying how ‘available empty signifiers’ (like democracy) are ascribed particular meanings when articulated with certain organising (and ideologically-charged) ‘nodal points’ (like, for instance, communism) (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000). They intend to track ‘dislocations’ in these ‘chains of signification’ and to highlight the workings of logics equivalence and difference (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000). When applied to neoliberalism, one could have studied, for instance, how available empty signifiers like ‘freedom’, ‘liberty’, ‘choice’, ‘uncertainty’ and ‘the market’ are rearticulated through the prism of the nodal point ‘(neo)liberalism’. While this work is of course worthwhile and important, I have explained that I am here less interested in the discursive coherence of neoliberal discourses (a coherence that makes them comparable with other ideological discourses) than in their particular imaginative dimension and content – what I designated as their original texture or consistency. As I explained in Chapter 2 when discussing myth-making, I want to emphasise the role of images within symbolic procedures (in which, Lacan says, images are ‘shuffled’), as these images - through the *imagos* - are what give consistency to the imaginary

identities of the mythical play. As Richard Boothby claims, psychoanalysis, on top of being a “science of phantasy”, is also an “archaeology of the image” (Boothby 2001, 134).

How can one access and evaluate this imaginary texture? I argue that such procedure entails reading against the grain or, to reuse Bruff and Starnes’s sentence, making “a familiar way of writing unfamiliar” (2019, 248). To do so in the following chapters, I focus and analyse the evocative or recurrent images and concepts that are insistently at work in the texts I selected. My close deconstructive reading of these texts consists in being attentive to the use of vivid expressions and read them as metaphorical, which entails interrogating them to make them speak. It is about questioning their commonality by refusing to take them for granted and instead ‘estrangle’ them. For instance, my analysis has highlighted the importance of the theme of desire in Hayek’s work. The word ‘desire’ and its derivatives (like ‘to desire’, ‘desired’, ‘desirable’ and ‘desirability’) appear 216 times in the *Constitution of Liberty* (2011b), 211 times in *Law, Legislations and Liberty* (2013) and 70 times in *The Road to Serfdom* (2011c), which marks the concept of ‘desire’ as central in Hayek’s reflection, while also being a core concept in psychoanalytical theory as I discussed in Chapter 2 (something I will go back to). Investigating further Hayek’s use of the term, I was led to more closely interpret some specific passages in his work, which I selected for their suggestive values. As an example, I was intrigued by a passage of the *Constitution of Liberty* in which Hayek enjoins “a progressive society” to recognise “the desires it creates as a *spur* to further efforts” (2011b, 98 – my emphasis). While the word ‘spur’ can be easily overlooked when reduced to its meaning of ‘incentive’, I was interested in following the tradition of psychoanalytical hermeneutic interpretation to making the word resonate with its primary meaning (as found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*): a small spike, as used, for instance, for urging a horse forward. Desire here becomes something that stings, relentlessly and rather harshly, to force the individual forward. It is disquieting and potentially painful, like a small rock stuck in one’s shoe. Yet, it is also celebrated by Hayek as the driver of progress. This sado-masochistic overtone becomes even more explicit two sentences later when Hayek states that “[a progressive society] disregards the *pain* of unfulfilled desire *aroused* by the example of others” (2011b, 98 – my emphases). As I demonstrate in Chapters 4 and 5, pain will be found to be a central motif of Hayek’s market order, as well as of Joseph Schumpeter’s and Gary Becker’s works. Through my interpretative analysis of the themes of sacrifice and the ordeal, I will argue that pain is part of a learning process of adaptation (a “method of breeding” entrepreneurial minds (Hayek 2013, 414)), but also key to the emergence of the new. In the thesis, I will similarly analyse and interpret other insistent metaphors and vivid expressions found in the neoliberal canon. To mention just a few, I will dissect Hayek’s (1945) view of the

market as a “machinery” (but also a “mechanism” and a “system of telecommunication”), but also as a “marvel” (which will lead me to discuss the motif of faith and submission); Hayek’s celebration of liberalism as “the party of life” (2011a) or his concept of the “calculus of lives” (1988); Schumpeter’s designation of ‘creative destruction’ as a “perennial gale” (1954, 84) and his heroic entrepreneur; or Becker’s mention of the “death wish” (1976, 7) and his “rotten kid theorem”.

In addition, the passage by Hayek quoted above explicitly assimilates desire to mimetic desire; desire manifests itself in its disquieting dimension when being confronted with – when visualising - the “example of others”. For a reader of Lacan, this obviously brings to mind the mimetic processes associated with the mirror stage and with identification in general – processes that Lacan tends to associate with the imaginary. This is of course an example of the way neoliberal discourses trigger mimetic and fantasmatic mechanisms of identification (and abjection) – contributing to my argument that they constitute an imaginary. But what I want to emphasise here is a second methodological step in the procedure I adopted when analysing the texts of my corpus. When closely reading these texts, I was also particularly attentive to the resonance between the images and concepts they drew on, and the core concepts of psychoanalytical theory. Interestingly, this exegesis has enabled me to highlight that distinctive psychoanalytical motifs recurrently resurface in the neoliberal texts, such as the crossing of the limit and *jouissance*; the life and death drives; the ordeal and the sacrifice; desire, sublimation and abjection. Hayek’s understanding of ‘desire’ and Becker’s mention of the “death wish” are two striking and obvious examples of these parallels. Similarly, I interpreted Peter Thiel’s self-comparison with the figure of Œdipus, who plays a central part in both Freudian and Lacanian theories. These resonances can also be spread across my corpus. As a telling example, I use Freud’s opposition of life and death drives in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2013) as a tool to interpret the way the authors of my corpus tend to assimilate life to movement and disruption (as tellingly represented by Schumpeter’s ‘creative destruction’) and death to stasis. Freud, Lacan but also Kristeva’s theories have had two main functions in my analysis. On the one hand, considering the length of my corpus, they have provided me with a rationale to select and concentrate on certain insistent motifs and themes, which have strong fantasmatic connotations and significance according to psychoanalytical theory. On the other hand, they have provided me with a vocabulary and conceptual framework with which to interpret these texts to make sense of the neoliberal authors’ celebration of impulses, intuitions and emotions. Lacan’s work has also encouraged me to be attuned to moment of discomposure, particularly in the auto-biographical texts I analyse in the third of the thesis – here offering a point of

commonality with the analyses of the Essex School on dislocation. Because the imaginary, like the symbolic, has a 'covering' function (that is, covering the primordial lack opened by the real), I will also highlight places when the imaginary identities adopted by the authors I study crumble – like for instance with Elon Musk's seeming meltdown during a 2018 interview to the *New York Times* (Gelles et al. 2018)).

Lastly my close reading tracks similarities across three different sets of texts. On top of the similarities I just mentioned above between psychoanalytical theory and the corpus I constituted, I also track repetitions within this corpus, across two different types of texts: economic treatises and autobiographical texts of popular culture. By doing so, I want to illustrate how neoliberal ideas become popularised. These repetitions across the scenes – like the fear of stasis, the celebration of disruption and the urge to uncover 'secrets' in the fabric of the social world – uncover common metaphysical assumptions and a common worldview, common interrogations and anxieties, common dreams and ambitions.

Because my method of reading is fundamentally interpretative and hermeneutic, I do not claim my analysis to be fully objective and exhaustive. While I plainly revendicate the subjective dimension of my interpretation, I also accept that other scholars might have different readings of the same texts. By applying psychoanalysis as a method of reading texts, I follow the steps of other scholars who have used it for literary criticism (Felman 1982; Brook 1987), in cultural studies (Dawson 1994) or sociology (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008). When Dawson applies a Kleinian conceptual framework to analyse the British newspapers' reporting on the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, it is to better investigate the fantasmatic processes of introjection and interjection that animate Orientalism and the depicting of the colonial hero, and their connection with individual identity formation. When applying a Lacanian framework to my reading of the neoliberal canon and a selection of popular autobiographies, my aim is to highlight the psychic undercurrents of neoliberal ideas by uncovering their mobilisation of fantasies associated with identity formation and with life and death.

1.4 A psycho-social study

As I explained in Chapter 1, my reading of the texts has been substantiated by the existing literature on neoliberalism. I concentrate on specific mobilising ideas that these studies have uncovered, namely the notions of uncertainty and risk, entrepreneurship, autonomy and self-responsibility. Yet, my approach differentiates itself from these works by using psychoanalysis to fill a gap I identified in the literature: the lack of attention given to the role of the unconscious

in the anchoring of neoliberal representations. As I claimed, when this dimension has been scrutinised, as in the work of Lauren Berlant, academic enquiries have focused on cultural productions identified as expressing the ‘neoliberal spirit’, but their intrinsic connection with neoliberal economic theory has not been explored in depth.

The originality of my approach is that it addresses the role of unconscious processes within the neoliberal economic theory itself by providing a psychoanalytical critical interpretation of its central texts. It furthermore brings together the study of the neoliberal theoretical texts with their cultural reinterpretation by providing two case-studies in which the theory and its re-appropriation are directly compared. This enables me to explore how the main concepts that pervade the theoretical texts have been taken up and invested in popular culture, ‘lived in’ and incarnated by a characteristic group of individuals, and particularly how these investments bring to the fore points of rupture that mark the imaginary identifications promoted by neoliberal theory as ultimately practically and intellectually untenable.

In addition, unlike existing psychosocial studies on neoliberalism that identify some of the fantasies that pervade it (e.g. the fantasy of the good life for Berlant, the fantasies of independence for Glynos), I investigate how neoliberalism functions as an imaginary; that is, as a horizon in which these different fantasies are inscribed and gain consistence/. As an imaginary, neoliberalism provides people with a stable image and understanding of what constitutes a successful or failing individual, as well as social life (and immortality) and social death (and oblivion). By doing so, it concurrently denies and makes abject what cannot be framed in this picture; a libidinally-charged and haunting remainder. Considering neoliberalism as an imaginary enables me to join together these two dimensions, and to discuss their psychosocial effects – their appeal to *jouissance* and their triggering of existential angst.

This original combination explains why my analysis differs from the other scholarly works on neoliberalism’s impact on subjectivities. Branching off from the focus on credit and indebtedness (as found particularly in the work of Michel Feher (2017) and Maurizio Lazzarato (2012)), it concentrates on the motifs of uncertainty, creativity and sacrifice. It argues that the remodelling of subjectivities around indebtedness is compatible and concomitant with the spread of other narratives about self-control and the power of imagination. The next section discusses in further detail how my corpuses have been constituted.

2. The texts

In order to build a sample of texts representative of neoliberal thought, or to engage in what Lauren Berlant calls ‘the engaged construction of an archive’ (2011, 11), I have drawn from both neoliberal economic literature and the world of popular culture, selecting some best-selling autobiographies and memoirs.

2.1 The ‘construction of an archive’

Several questions may arise from this decision. To start with, why two different corpuses? My resolution to work around two seemingly radically different types of source-texts can be justified by my ambition to provide what Imogen Tyler calls “a rich and textured account” (2013, 211) of the neoliberal imaginary. Such an approach enables me to highlight how certain imaginary figures and tropes, constructed in the neoliberal economic literature, bleed into the cultural sphere, where they are taken over, reinterpreted and transformed (see particularly my analysis of the entrepreneur and sacrifice in Chapter 6, and addiction and abjection in Chapter 7). It allows me to compare the treatment of these themes in the two corpuses and thus to track “their resonances across the scenes” (Berlant 2011, 12). It is from this perspective necessary to clarify that I sometimes analyse different types of sources within the same case-study, as in Chapter 6, where I alternate between best-selling biographies, interviews, and popular management guides (with an autobiographical dimension) so as to bring together the pieces of a constellation in which the imaginary figure of the star-entrepreneur crystallises. They are pieces of a spectacle in which the iconic entrepreneur offers a meticulously crafted self-image to his audience (and arguably to himself) as a model to emulate. I thereby follow the steps of Imogen Tyler in her tracking of the public construction and iteration of abject figures “across different sites – popular culture, news media, policy documents, political rhetoric, academic discourses – and within a range of social spaces including the communicative practices of everyday life” (2013, 10).

Working across many scenes is a reminder that the simple iterations of economic theories in the official neoliberal texts are not enough for the neoliberal ideas to root themselves in people’s subjectivities. Because they are less explicitly polemic and ideological, and less explicitly ‘neoliberal’, cultural productions can be a more efficient medium for the neoliberal ideas about what constitutes a successful life to ‘get inside’ and to “transfor[m] and reshap[e] our relationship to ourselves and others” (Rosalind Gill in Tyler 2013, 11). It is thus important to

grasp the qualitative difference of the two types of texts I chose to analyse. As I explain further in the next sections of the chapter, the neoliberal economic texts are valuable for their ideological dimension – they offer an important insight into the thoughts, fears and expectations of the architects of neoliberalism from which to extract a recurring set of themes. The popular autobiographical texts, on the other hand, have what could be called a more ‘emotional’ quality; they are here to give flesh to the neoliberal ideals, to endow them with the heart-warming density of real-life experience through their depictions of lives worth living (and of those unworthy of life), of the passions for innovation for which all must be sacrificed.

Finally, why small corpuses? I chose to focus on a small sample of texts in order to be able to closely interpret their narratives and metaphorical articulations. I wanted to study in granular details the images that the neoliberal scholars, but also charismatic and popular individuals who have been bestowed a role-model in popular media, rely on to construct their identity and make sense of their environment. My selection of particular texts (especially when dealing with cultural production) is motivated, as I explain below in greater detail, by the fact I consider them representative of what is advocated in neoliberal discourse. With Lauren Berlant, I implicitly consider that “singular” experiences can be “circulated as evidence of something shared” – what Berlant also calls “the becoming general of singular things” (Berlant 2011, 12); that is, their power to represent and illustrate larger phenomena and experiences. The last two subparts of the chapter describe the specific constitution of each of the corpuses.

2.2 The canonical texts of neoliberal thought

Chapters 4 and 5 examine a corpus of neoliberal scholarly texts, specifically the works of Friedrich Hayek, Joseph Schumpeter and Gary Becker, as well as – more occasionally - Frank Knight, Milton Friedman, and Richard Posner. I chose to research a sample of neoliberal intellectual productions as these canonical texts of neoliberal theory give access to the neoliberal imaginary world as primarily conceived by its main architects, and particularly to their dreamed reconfiguration of the social (Chapter 4) and of the self (Chapter 5).

2.2.1 What is a canon?

My analysis focuses on a number of texts, which form parts of what I call a ‘neoliberal canon’.⁵ In literary studies, the ‘canon’ is used as a reference to the ‘biblical canon’, which the *Oxford*

⁵ I borrow this idea of a ‘neoliberal canon’ from Bruff and Starnes’s 2019 article.

English Dictionary defines as “a collection or list of sacred books accepted as genuine”. Such a definition highlights the sacred aura and the authoritative character of the texts deemed canonical (Fowler 1979, 98), as well as the reverential attitude they invite the reader to adopt towards them. They demand a suspension of critical judgement and disbelief, and particularly a willingness to unquestionably accept their normative assumptions. Furthermore, setting a canon is an act of setting “fixed limits to our understanding of literature” (Fowler 1979, 98). It excludes certain texts, which it implicitly judges of a lesser quality, less authoritative or even not ‘genuine’ – that is, false. These limits can be institutionalised, as in the “official canon”, but Fowler also talks about “personal canon[s]” of a more informal nature (1979, 98). By extension, the reasons why certain texts belong to the canon tend to be also implicit. As Charles Altieri argues, “[o]ur practical ideas about the nature and workings of a canon rarely derive from explicit theoretical principles” (Altieri 1983, 41). What is crucial for my research is that the “[w]orks we canonize tend to project ideals” – they are “an institutional form for exposing people to a range of idealized attitudes” (1983, 42). In other words, they shape people’s representations and are thus central medium to spread specific imaginaries.

The concept of the canon fits well with the analysis of neoliberal literature. A number of scholarly texts have gained an unusual visibility within neoliberal circles. Along with some emblematic fictional works, such as Ayn Rand’s novels (see Duggan 2019), they come to form an informal neoliberal canon. This is particularly striking when considering the legacy of two of Hayek’s books: *The Road to Serfdom* ([1944] 2011c) and *The Constitution of Liberty* ([1960] 2011b). The former became a “surprise best-seller” from the moment of its publication (Van Horn and Mirowski 2009, 140), to the extent that, as Angus Burgin recounts, the demand for it in England, in the immediate aftermath of the war, “was outpacing the limited rations of paper allotted to its printer” (Burgin 2013, 87). Following the publication of the US edition with the University of Chicago Press and its abridgement in the *Reader’s Digest*, Hayek went on a triumphal American tour where he was treated like a celebrity (2013, 87). Crucially, as Van Horn and Mirowski depicted, the tour led to negotiations with the Volker Fund to create an “*American Road to Serfdom*” to further extend the reach of Hayek’s ideas in the US - the original text being written for a British audience (2009, 141). Hayek subsequently obtained financial support from the Volker Fund for the formation of a team of academics at the University of Chicago to complete the project. The *American Road to Serfdom* team was led by Aaron Director (and included Milton Friedman) and brought together the economic department, the Law School and the Business School. It is considered to have cast the first stone of what is known today as the ‘Chicago School’ (Van Horn and Mirowski 2009, 154). Although Director actually failed to write

the commissioned book, Van Horn and Mirowski argue that the spirit of *The Road to Serfdom* later materialised in another emblematic best-selling publication of the Chicago School, Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* ([1962] 2002) (Van Horn and Mirowski 2009, 166).

Written during his tenure at the Chicago School, *The Constitution of Liberty* was considered by Hayek as his "magnum opus" (Burgin 2013, 153). He was therefore taken aback by the disappointing sales right after the 1960 publication, and by the *Reader's Digest* refusal to condense it – as it had done so successfully for *The Road* (2013, 153). Nonetheless, the postface of the book, 'Why I am not a conservative', has later gained a surprising fame among the public advocates of neoliberalism. It can be found on the websites of prominent neoliberal think-tanks, like the Cato Institute and the Foundation for Economic Education ('F. A. Hayek' n.d.; Hayek 2016). Margaret Thatcher also admired this book in particular. She famously interrupted a heated policy discussion "by flamboyantly slamming [it] on the table while declaring 'This is what we believe'" (Peck 2010, xv). She moreover publicly declared her admiration for Hayek in 1981 at the House of Commons, recommending the reading of *The Constitution of Liberty and Law, Legislation and Liberty* ([1973] 2013) to the MPs (Dardot and Laval 2010, 269).

These emblematic texts thus played an important role in the constitution and the crystallisation of the neoliberal imaginary. They either provided an impetus for the academic institutionalisation of the doctrine and for its large-scale popularisation, but they also constituted the intellectual basis on which its self-declared advocates could found their credo. As such, as I examine in Chapters 4 and 5, they projected an idealised and normative vision of the social world and of individual subjectivity. This vision opposed previous institutionalised understandings of the social (Chapter 4) and made plans for its reconfiguration – thus conforming to Laclau and Mouffe's theories on antagonism (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). The texts also provided a powerful image of what the neoliberal theorists *wanted* social relations, but also the individuals forming them, to look like. One thus needs to emphasise their performative dimension: by formulating their theories, the economists make their world (Bruff and Starnes 2019). Yet, it is important to keep in mind that the theoretical world thus imagined might not exactly correspond to the world as it has been actually implemented – hence the comparison I make in Chapters 6 and 7 between the neoliberal theories as initially imagined and the way they re-emerge in popular culture.

By interpreting these texts with a psychoanalytical framework, I am intending to denaturalise them, to deconstruct their aura of economic expertise - which derives from the fact they present

themselves as a pure method of calculation, to recall that they are first and foremost a cultural ‘imaginary’ production that emerges at a certain point in time and place. My reading thus focuses on the libidinal dimension of these texts, on how the steady images they offer are meant to contain a muted but irrepressible anxiety. It is from this perspective different from the political-economic, historical and poststructuralist approaches I introduced in Chapter 1.

2.2.2 Selecting thinkers for the corpus

I have circumscribed my analysis to a small number of theorists and decided to focus my enquiry on what Foucault called “American liberalism” (Foucault 2004a, 224). A passage of the *Birth of Biopolitics* has had a lasting influence on me and motivated the selection of the thinkers of my corpus. It is thus worth quoting at full length. Foucault writes:

American liberalism is not—as it is in France at present, or as it was in Germany immediately after the war—just an economic and political choice formed and formulated by those who govern and within the governmental milieu. Liberalism in America is a whole way of being and thinking. (...) I think this is why American liberalism currently appears not just, or not so much as a political alternative, but let’s say as a sort of many-sided, ambiguous, global claim with a foothold in both the right and the left. It is also a sort of utopian focus which is always being revived. It is also a method of thought, a grid of economic and sociological analysis. (Foucault 2008, 218)

Then speaking of Hayek (“who is not an American exactly” but comes to incarnate this claim), Foucault adds:

Some years ago Hayek said: We need a liberalism that is a living thought. Liberalism has always left it to the socialists to produce utopias, and socialism owes much of its vigor and historical dynamism to this utopian or utopia-creating activity. Well, liberalism also needs utopia. It is up to us to create liberal utopias, to think in a liberal mode, rather than presenting liberalism as a technical alternative for government. Liberalism must be a general style of thought, analysis, and imagination. (Foucault 2008, 218–19)

This “American” approach to neoliberalism has therefore a particular interest for me because of the utopian dimension that Foucault so brilliantly mentions, because it represents “a whole way of being and thinking”, a “living thought” and not just a political and economic “alternative’. It has therefore a remarkable imaginary quality and texture. Primarily focusing on Hayek’s work has enabled me to understand neoliberalism as a philosophy of life (and, by extension, of death). As part of his ambition to reinvent liberalism, Hayek also offers the advantage of being a central figure in both the construction of the neoliberal doctrine as a transnational network – with his

pivotal role in the creation of the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS) – and in the local establishment of the Chicago School (Van Horn and Mirowski 2009, 159).

Considering Hayek's involvement in the creation of the Chicago School, I also complete my examination of his writing with a reading of other thinkers associated with this institution – particularly Frank Knight, a thinker of the early Chicago School (prior to Hayek's intervention),⁶ Gary Becker, as well as Richard Posner and Milton Friedman. It is necessary here to make an important caveat. Despite Hayek's central role in the establishment of the Chicago School, he paradoxically ended up having little influence in the development of the theoretical programme specific to the post-war Chicago School once he actually joined the University of Chicago in 1950 (Van Horn 2015, 91). The later Chicago School dismissed their predecessors (including Knight but also by extension Hayek) for being primarily interested in philosophy, history, anthropology and theology (Van Horn and Mirowski 2009, 145). Instead, they advocated an empirical and mathematical understanding of economics based on neoclassical equilibrium theory – an understanding that finds its best illustration in the series of equations that punctuate (and, for me, tend to obscure) Becker's books and articles. As Walker and Cooper argue, the MPS was "internally split between the followers of the radical neoclassicism of the Chicago School (Gary Becker, George Stigler, Milton Friedman) and the advocates of the more romantic, subjectivist 'Austrian' school of economic philosophy, most famously associated with Friedrich Hayek" (Walker and Cooper 2011, 148; see also Gane 2013; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009).

While this split undeniably comes to the fore in the exploration of the corpus I assembled, I nonetheless decided to read the thinkers of the philosophical "Austro-American" tradition⁷ and the empirical American tradition together because of their common ambition to revolutionise society in its entirety so as, to quote Thatcher, to "change the soul" (Dardot and Laval 2010, 412). The latter tradition particularly illustrates itself by its urge to push the furthest the logic of the extension of market rationality to all domains of social life, as exemplified in Becker's

⁶ Van Horn and Mirowski argue that Knight, who worked in Chicago's Department of Economics from 1927, cannot be considered (as he often is) as a founder of the 'Chicago School' as we understand it today; that is, the result of a tight-knit partnership between the Department of Economics, the School of Law and the Business School. This only emerged through Hayek's intervention in 1946 (Van Horn and Mirowski 2009, 158). Knight was nonetheless an important member of the MPS and in epistolary correspondence with Hayek. Interestingly, Burgin argues that Knight was uneasy about Hayek's (as well as Lionel Robbin's and Mises's) market dogmatism (Burgin 2013, 33). He described it in a letter as "a picture of *laissez-faire* bordering on the conception of a world-wide anarchist utopia" (Knight in Burgin 2013, 33).

⁷ Dardot and Laval use the adjective 'Austro-American' to designate the Austrian economists who migrated to the United-States, Mises and Hayek being the two most famous of them, as well as American thinkers who related themselves to the Austrian School, like Israël Kirzner (Dardot and Laval 2010, 220).

concept of human capital (Foucault 2004a, 245). With the later Chicago School, economic properties come to be embodied: they become part of an ethos, are integrated into the individual's central features – like competitiveness, which becomes a “psychological attribute” (W. Davies 2014a, 171).⁸ Conversely, I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5 how neoliberal theory is pervaded by anxieties related to the question of life and death; its more economic texts, I demonstrate, are no exception.

The thinkers of the Chicago School also pursued Hayek's effort to root the neoliberal doctrine in the popular imaginary thanks to a smooth ‘knowledge machinery’ (Plehwe 2009; Burgin 2013). Until their death, they kept a presence in American public sphere and culture, where they acquired, to some extent, the status of public intellectuals (Mata and Medema, 2013). This is particularly striking when one thinks of Milton Friedman's *Free to Choose* TV adventures already mentioned (see Brandes 2020), his weekly column in *Newsweek* between 1966 and 1984 (as well as his 121 ‘op-eds’ for the *Wall Street Journal* between 1961 and 2006 (Perry 2014)) or the popular ‘Posner-Becker Blog’ (Becker and Posner 2014) (which was also published as a book with a telling title: *Uncommon Sense: Economic Insights, from Marriage to Terrorism* (Becker and Posner 2009)). Their writings thus constitute a bridge between the scholarly world and public life, and, as Chapter 6 and 7 demonstrate further, their imaginary representations do indeed bleed into the identity models promoted (or discarded) in popular culture.

Lastly, I made what is perhaps a controversial decision in adding the work of Joseph Schumpeter to my corpus, while leaving out James Buchanan's Virginia School of Public Choice.⁹ Schumpeter was a contemporary and a compatriot of Mises and Hayek, and shared with them common cultural and intellectual influences from Nietzsche to Carl Menger's marginalism (Robin 2013; Cornelissen 2018). For this reason, he is often considered to belong to the Austrian School (Cornelissen 2018, 183) and he also ended up emigrating to the United-States. Yet, he famously did not take part in the MPS (Burgin 2013, 106), and finished his career at Harvard, “the centre of US economic establishment at the time and notoriously snooty towards Chicago” (W. Davies 2014a, 51). The tension between Hayek and Schumpeter is at times rather explicit as illustrated at the end of Hayek's ‘Use of knowledge in society’ where Hayek targets Schumpeter as an

⁸ See Gary Becker's work on the economics of the family (1991). Ordoliberalism, by contrast, focuses on the construction of optimal legal and institutional frameworks to guarantee market competition.

⁹ The choice not to include Buchanan derives from my decision to primarily focus on Hayek (and through him the Chicago School) rather than Ludwig von Mises. The Virginia School is closer to the libertarian vision of the latter and to his ambition to reduce the role of the state to a minimum. For a study of the links between Mises and Buchanan, see MacLean (2017). MacLean's work is particularly helpful to consider the racist underpinnings of neoliberal thought.

instantiation of the positivist economics he rejects (Hayek 1945, 529–30). Yet, along with William Davies, I consider that Schumpeter has an important influence on the way competition becomes an incorporated ethos or a psychological trait (W. Davies 2014a, 51) – an aspect that will be central to Chapters 5 and 6’s analyses. As Dardot and Laval claim, Schumpeter has had a central influence on post-1970 managerial discourse and on the transformation of the economic man into the manager of himself (Dardot and Laval 2010, 240–41). Similarly, Dieter Plehwe (2020) studied the revival of interest for Schumpeter’s theory of the entrepreneur among the members of the MPS in the 1980s, under the influence of Herbert Giersch, who presided the MPS from 1986 to 1988. I therefore consider Schumpeter to be an integral part of the neoliberal imaginary.

2.3 Biographies and memoirs

Studying the neoliberal economic texts directly provides a privileged access to the ‘neoliberal imaginary’, but I agree with Foucault and his followers when they argue that the influence and intellectual power of the neoliberal scholars (and of the ‘neoliberal thought collective’ in general) should not be overestimated. Ideological struggles are only one part of a multimodal process that has resulted in the settling of neoliberal rationality (Dardot and Laval 2010, 277). They have been accompanied, among others, by a series of disciplinary apparatuses, techniques and discourses – disseminated in all social relations without particular intentionality. To give further content to the ‘neoliberal imaginary’, I thus complement my analysis with two empirical case-studies chosen outside the immediate neoliberal economic literature.

Instead of analysing discursive productions issued by institutions or political powers,¹⁰ I decided to draw on Taylor’s remark that imaginaries are made of “images, stories and legends” (2007, 23) by investigating examples of identity models and counter-models disseminated in the space of popular culture and literature, and ‘storied’. Two methodological remarks must be made about the selection of my empirical case-studies: first about the type of material I chose to analyse and, secondly, about why and how I selected certain typical figures as incarnations of the models and counter-models mentioned above.

¹⁰ I contemplated analysing policy projects on the Universal Basic Income, as well as President Emmanuel Macron’s speeches on entrepreneurship and poverty (Ibled 2019). I chose instead to focus on the cultural sphere as I consider they offer a good example of how the neoliberal tropes and ideals reappear in these discourses. Cultural artefacts might also help to better naturalise and anchor these ideals in people’s subjectivities.

2.3.1 The type of material selected

When it comes to the type of material analysed, I concentrate on a series of self-narrations across different media: autobiographies, memoirs, biographies, interviews and management guides. Once again, I am aware that these examples cannot provide an exhaustive account of the neoliberal imaginary. Nonetheless I consider them exemplary in their very singularity of this imaginary because of the messages they convey.

Specifically, I am interested in how these self-narrations constitute what Christian Salmon has called “mobilising fictions” (Salmon 2007, 103) or “narrative spirals (*engrenages*)” (2007, 17) that can emotionally engage the readers or the spectators in certain identities and behavioural scenarios of what they should be or not. I argue that these ‘mobilising fictions’ are all the more efficient at subjectivising the subject as they rely on the use of ‘life stories’ and self-narrations, which offer a seemingly unmediated access to the author – thus providing the readers with a directly accessible model they can easily identify with. Self-narrations are an important psychological mode of recruitment into the imaginary, especially when they emanate from charismatic people, who are set up as social models in the media. As I explore further in Chapter 7, it is compelling to note that most of the self-narrations I analyse adopt a confessional tone, deprecating their former (non-neoliberal) sinful life to reach salvation and achieve a personality open to the neoliberal injunctions to submit to uncertainty and self-responsibility. The authors present their life as an *individual* triumph over the challenges put on their way by a negative environment (e.g. poverty, the ‘status quo’). The impact of collective solidarities and supporting social structures, like education, are systematically down-tuned; the environment is generally considered as a ‘given’ placed outside political intervention. What Alexander Freund’s (2015) analysis of the popular autobiographical storytelling radio-show *StoryCorps* demonstrates is that this precise narrative structure is reproduced on a larger-day-to-day-scale in the self-narrations of anonymous ‘normal’ individuals. In other words, when people are encouraged to tell their own life-story, they will have a tendency to adopt the same “unifying” narratives that pervade cultural productions and support neoliberal values (2015, 97). They will often recount how they individually overcome “seemingly personal challenges in a world of inexplicable circumstances such as poverty, discrimination and oppression” and will relay some popular neoliberal “self-mantras” like “positive thinking, self-sufficiency, and self-empowerment” (2015, 97). For Freund, storytelling contributes to depoliticise narratives and public discourse: it replaces politics with these mantras, but also with “nostalgia, hero-worship, nationalism, myth-making” (2015, 97) – processes which I associated in Chapter 2 with the operations of the imaginary.

In other words, these processes need to be put into relations with other processes of ego formation, like the ones analysed by Graham Dawson in *Soldier Heroes* (1994), where he examines the imagining and shaping of masculinities as operated through the reading of adventure stories. Interestingly, Dawson argues that:

Narratives of exploration and conquest are instrumental in forming ‘interests’: they organise a particular kind of imaginative investments in the activities of which they speak, according to the recognizable structures and conventions of the adventure tradition. They also organize imaginative investments in the gendered heroes whose deeds they relate and make available, as public representations, which in turn may invite identification. (Dawson 1994, 46)

Dawson thus highlights how mobilising narrative forms (which are themselves located within particular cultural imaginaries) play a central role in the fashioning of the imagos (or imaginary figures) that the social subjects use and libidinally invest to compose their egos (1994, 47–48).¹¹ They particularly contribute to shaping “‘positive’ imagos” that are identified with (the heroes) and, simultaneously “unwanted ‘negative’ imagos [that] are rejected and expelled” (the villains) (1994, 47). Through the narratives that emanate from the cultural imaginaries, the imagos of the heroes and villains are given certain “specific qualities and attributes” (1994, 47). As Tyler argues, they are “fetishistically overdetermined” and are turned into ‘figures’ by being represented “in excessive, distorted and/or caricatured ways” (Tyler 2013, 10)¹² – they are, in other words, libidinally invested.

2.3.2 The selection of figures

As a consequence, when choosing my empirical case-studies, I set myself two targets. First, I decided to concentrate on the self-narrations of those erected as heroes and myths in popular culture - which, I suggest, has been markedly permeable to the values spread by the neoliberal imaginary. As I argue, these ‘model’ storytellings participate in the making of imagos; that is, they directly contribute to the dissemination of unifying narratives that frame the way readers/spectators tell their own self, thus opening it to the neoliberal disciplinary apparatus. Since, as suggested by Dawson, the mobilising dimension of the image of the ‘hero’ is enhanced

¹¹ Dawson argues that the narratives are both ‘cultural forms’ that fashion imagos, but also the ‘imagos’ themselves (1994, 48).

¹² Tyler here describes the figure of the social ‘abject’, but one could argue that the same excess applies to the figuration of the social hero.

by the repulsiveness of the ‘villain’, I also investigated the narrations of those constructed as “unwanted ‘negative’ imagos”, as a correlate to my analysis of the heroes’ narratives.

Secondly, I made sure that the archetypical figures that I was selecting appeared in both the neoliberal economic literature and in popular culture, so as to offer a transition between these two spheres. This enabled me to emphasise how the imaginary conceptions of the self and of what constitutes a successful life theoretically developed in the neoliberal literature are echoed (meaning also reinterpreted and transformed) in public discourse. Chapters 6 and 7 consequently put the neoliberal theoretical texts and popular culture in dialog with one another.

More specifically, I chose to investigate as the incarnation of a ‘positive’ neoliberal imago (or the neoliberal hero) the figure of the iconic entrepreneur as represented by Elon Musk and Peter Thiel, the famous founders of PayPal. As discussed in Chapter 6, the exceptional entrepreneur is a central archetype in the neoliberal economic literature, representing the ultimate figures of success and the model of the person we, as normal inhabitants of the neoliberal imagined world, should aspire to be. Musk and Thiel perfectly fit the profile I determined, as they are omnipresent in popular media where they regularly make the headlines, either thanks to their captivating inventions, or because of their eccentricities and indiscretions. Moreover, Thiel is directly connected to the neoliberal movement, and particularly to its libertarian branch.¹³ He attracted attention with his article ‘The education of a libertarian’ (2009) for the Cato Institute – a prominent neoliberal think-tank. More recently, Thiel has spoken at the 2020 special meeting of the Mont Pèlerin Society in Stanford (Thiel and Robinson 2020; ‘The Mont Pèlerin Society: From the Past to the Future: Ideas and Action for a Free Society’ 2019) – a members-only event that brought together all the ‘leading lights’ of the neoliberal movement. Musk does not have known explicit connections with the neoliberal movement (despite his anti-trade-unionism and his dubious employment policies), but I chose to include his narrative because of his association with Thiel (in PayPal first, and since in SpaceX), as well because he seemed for a long time, and until his star started fading, to incarnate the more acceptable and positive face of futuristic entrepreneurship.

I subsequently set out to identify the entrepreneur’s opposite: those representing what we should absolutely not be. I was particularly interested in how neoliberalism’s advocates narrate those they discursively construct as abject figures and what role these repressive narratives play

¹³ For an account of the connections between the neoliberal movement and the libertarian far-right, see Slobodian (2018b).

in the shaping of their own subjectivity. This proved at first more difficult because of the questionable way the neoliberal economists claim to be morally neutral, and to accommodate through their ideal market society any kind of non-normative lifestyle choices (on the condition the person is ready to pay the price for it). So I ended up focusing on obscure passages in Gary Becker's work on people committing suicide and drug addicts, which seemed to disrupt the smooth functioning of his theory of rational choice.¹⁴ Looking for examples of such figures in the entourage of Musk and Thiel and of the MPS members, I came across J.D. Vance's best-selling memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), recounting his experience of growing up with a mother struggling with addiction.¹⁵ I supplemented this textual analysis with another autobiographical best-seller and prize-winner, Darren McGarvey's *Poverty Safari* (2017), narrating a strikingly similar life-story in the British context. As I demonstrate in Chapter 7, in both cases, the figure of the abject addicted mother is used as a mechanism to reconstruct a pure and absolved self that conforms to neoliberalism's ethical injunctions. Crucially, McGarvey's apparent absence of direct connections with the neoliberal movement and his popularity with the liberal left (as exemplified by his 2018 Orwell Prize (Flood 2018)) powerfully suggests that the crystallisation of the neoliberal-self through the abjection of an intimate-other is not just circumscribed to the imaginary of the MPS' close circles, but pervades popular culture.

2.3.3 Extremes and limits

It is important to clarify that, when focusing on Vance's and McGarvey's narrations, I give a voice to the reformed and successful sons, and not to their marginalised mothers. I am aware that, in so doing, I also leave aside a large amount of people's experience of how neoliberalism interacts with, and is taken as an integral part of, their individual and collective everyday practices (Walkerdine 2019). I do not tell, like Lauren Berlant (2011), how the neoliberal representations are paradoxically affectively invested by those it marginalises, in their cruel, but optimistic, struggle to survive; or, like Imogen Tyler (2013), how this very abjection can be reclaimed as the basis of resistance to its subjectifying apparatus.

Yet, by giving of voice to the privileged sons of neoliberalism, I want to explore how they invest and perform the neoliberal injunctions and inhabit their role of iconic models. I demonstrate

¹⁴ See also Mark Fisher on how the figure of the "debtor-addict" has, according to him, replaced the "worker-prisoner" (2009, 25).

¹⁵ Vance has confessed his admiration for the MPS member Charles Murray (J.D. Vance 2016, 144), who is also close to the Alt-Right (Slobodian 2018b). He has since given public talks with Murray, like in 2016 at the American Enterprise Institute (American Enterprise Institute 2016).

that their incarnation of the neoliberal imago comes at a high psychic price, that under the surface of their successful and creative selves lies a deep and devastating anxiety. In so doing, I aim to denaturalise their emblematic status and pathologize their pathologizing of the 'weak' and unsuccessful (see also Skeggs in Layton 2014, 167).

This leads me to a further remark on the apparent extremity of the characters I focus on. I chose the figures of the extraordinary entrepreneur and of the drug addict because of their liminality. They are not 'typical' examples of the neoliberal imaginary in the sense, once again, that they are not concerned with the 'everyday' or 'normal' actors of the neoliberal imaginary world.¹⁶ On the contrary, it is their very exceptionality which makes them representative. As extremes, successful heroes and abject-ed people together incarnate the limits between which we, inhabitants of the neoliberal world, must navigate. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, the neoliberal imaginary has a peculiar relationship with limits, as it singularly represents a radicalisation of the capitalist promise to bypass them, hence its general attraction for 'extremophiles' (Cooper 2008).¹⁷ By exploring these two extreme metaphorical archetypes, these impossible models and counter-models, I delineate the thin line that the 'normal' neoliberal subject is encouraged to walk; an illusory line between the myth they can only dream of incarnating and the pitfalls of self-obliteration and failure they constantly need to avoid. By the same token, they make the boundaries of the neoliberal world visible, thus helping us to delineate it, to determine what lies inside and outside its mutating limits.

Conclusion

This methodological chapter has examined how the psychoanalytical concept of the imaginary can be used as a tool with which to read and analyse neoliberal discourses. My psychoanalytical approach, I suggest, helps to bring to the fore the libidinal dimension of these discourses, which anchors attachment to neoliberal representations – an aspect that has been left out or only partially explored in the existing literature on neoliberalism. Unlike the current existing literature on neoliberalism, I analyse how neoliberalism imagines and narrates itself through the

¹⁶ For a particularly interesting textual (but not psychoanalytical) dissection of more everyday examples, see Gill and Orgad (2018) on 'resilience' as a regulatory ideal in self-help literature, lifestyle magazines and smartphones apps. The study explores how the injunction to resilience is personified by the promotion of middle-class women as "emblematic 'bounce-backable' subjects" (2018, 477).

¹⁷ Mark Fisher implied that duality was constitutive of neoliberalism when speaking of the "bi-polar disorder" of late-capitalism (Fisher 2009, 35). The exuberance of the entrepreneur is matched by the depression of the addict or the debtor.

voices of its theorists and of the iconic and popular figures it promotes. All taken together, these voices give a thick description of neoliberalism's ideal world and imaginary self.

The four following chapters put this method into practice by analysing three different sets of texts that I consider representative of neoliberalism. I demonstrate that through these texts transpire different fantasies of completion, immortality and omnipotence, but also a deep-rooted morbid anxiety. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the analogies, images and narrative motifs displayed in the canonical texts of neoliberal theory to explore the fantasmatic logics of the utopian world it seeks to put in place. Chapter 4 discusses how the theorists I have selected – namely, Friedrich Hayek, Frank Knight, Joseph Schumpeter, Milton Friedman and Gary Becker – attempt to provide a new structuring image of the social, while Chapter 5 analyses their re-conceptualisation of the agents that populate this reformed social order.

PART II

THE CANONICAL TEXTS OF NEOLIBERAL THEORY

Chapter 4. Becoming the ‘party of life’: an analysis of neoliberalism’s imaginary market order

“All things flow from the sacred engine”
Mason in
Bong Joon-ho, *The Snowpiercer* (2013)

Introduction

Chapter 4 shows how the canonical texts of neoliberal theory attempt to reform what the neoliberal thinkers conceive as an endangered social order by expounding their vision of a utopian market society.

The fear of death and of the degeneration of (Western) civilisation is a significant presence in the work of the neoliberal authors I focus on. Strikingly representative is, from this perspective, Hayek’s 1944 *Road to Serfdom* – the best-selling manifesto that greatly contributed to bringing the nascent neoliberal doctrine to the eyes of the public.¹ From its very introduction, the book dramatically depicts the “shock” of “totalitarian horrors” and the “spectre of totalitarianism” as a “real threat” to “European civilisation” (Hayek 2011c, 13). Crucially, Nazism is not the prime target of Hayek’s apocalyptic premonitions – the book being published in 1944, the end of the Second World War must have seemed rather close. The peril Hayek warns of is the inexorable rise of planners unleashed by the war economy and the advance of the Soviet army. To his mind, planning, through its ambition to rationally organise and regulate human societies, will ineluctably infringe upon the private lives and choices of people, pushing them on the “road to serfdom”. Very simply put, for Hayek, “[s]ocialism means slavery” (2011c, 13).

The *Road to Serfdom* is far from an exception. Throughout the Cold War, the trope of the ‘spectre of socialism’ continues to be invoked by the main propagandists of the neoliberal movement. Milton Friedman in 1962, in *Capitalism and Freedom*, still refers to interventionist governments as the big “Leviathan” (2002, vii), a “master to be blindly worshipped and served”, which threatens to turn man into a “Frankenstein” and to destroy any remnant of freedom

¹ For an account of the popular success of *The Road to Serfdom*, see Burgin 2013, 87–90; Van Horn 2015, 92.

(2002, 2). In 1980, in the *Free to Choose* TV series, Friedman continues to warn against governments which use the 'welfare trap' to blackmail and control people, and to reduce their sacrosanct freedom to choose (1980b).

The violence of the accusations and their baroque catastrophism has been explained by some (for instance Burgin 2013) as resulting from the neoliberal theorists' embittered feeling of being scorned and excluded from the contemporaneous academic community. From this perspective, the ferocious rhetoric seems rather typical of the ruthless epistemological struggles for symbolic capital that regularly animate academia (Bourdieu 1984), or of the long-running battle between the "democratic imaginary" and the "capitalist imaginary" to impose their respective vision of the social world and the symbolic structures that corresponds to it (Castoriadis 1999c). By stirring fear through the denunciation of what they identify as the debilitating 'socialist' imaginary of planning, the neoliberal theorists seek to introduce in stark contrast the liberating utopian world they hope and pray for - the spontaneous order of the market.

Yet, the vehemence of the attack also reveals its libidinal dimension. This is what this chapter investigates. An imaginary is an enclosed world intrinsically pervaded with narcissistic tendencies. Its boundaries mark an insuperable division between an aggressively rejected outside and a cherished inside, guarantor of the cohesion of a society's identity. The dyadic structure of the imaginary entails the construction of an external alien which is bitterly fought against and continually unsettled in order to better comfort one's own identity. Such is precisely the role played by the persistent evocation of the 'spectre' of socialism. Identifying collectivist planning as its rejected other, associated with death and dissolution, enables the neoliberal imaginary to better construct itself as – to draw on Hayek's famous formulation – the "party of life" (Hayek 2011a, 530).

Throughout the chapter, my aim is to address and deconstruct the claim made by Hayek to represent the "party of life" and to fight the forces of obscurantism and death. What exactly constitutes life and death for the neoliberal thinkers? How does such an understanding, necessarily pervaded with existential considerations, influence the way the social is reconfigured in the utopian scenarios they imagine? In other words, I want to displace the anti-metaphysical and rationalistic stance – or what Dotan Leshem calls the "atheist persona" (2016, 168) – taken on by neoliberal theory. I want to bring to the fore its metaphysical, and at times mystical, underpinnings to better understand the emotional appeal of the reformist programme it advocates.

Secondly, I want to develop Foucault's concept of biopolitics via an engagement with psychoanalysis. While the writings of the neoliberal authors I selected are without any doubt about the management of life and death, I want to explore what their emphasis on life and death entails from a psychoanalytical perspective. I demonstrate that aside from their claim to liberate the individual from the crushing arbitrary decisions of embodied authority, their peculiar understanding of life justifies their advocacy for blindly and fully submitting to the deified machinery of the market.

Chapter 4 is divided into three parts. I first analyse the metaphysical presuppositions of the neoliberal theorists, and specifically their understanding of what constitutes life and death. Secondly, I examine how such a conception of what life and death are is at the heart of their rejection of collectivist planning. Lastly, I explore how the neoliberal theorists design their imaginary order in stark opposition, turning it into a machinery engineered to protect life in an epic battle against the forces of degeneracy and deadly stasis.

1. The metaphysical foundations of neoliberal theory

The first part of the chapter excavates the metaphysical preconceptions of neoliberal theory. I demonstrate that, behind the veneer of abstract rationality that characterises neoliberal thought, lies a number of specific, and, at times, rather peculiar, considerations about "being, knowing, identity, time and space" – considerations that the *Oxford English Dictionary* associates with metaphysics. Bringing to the fore these metaphysical foundations is crucial because they constitute the backdrop against which neoliberal scholars reconstitute the social. Moreover, I demonstrate that these preconceptions are suffused with deep-seated beliefs about what constitutes life and death, which animate a Manichean opposition between the deadly other of planning and the redeeming order of the capitalist market.

1.1 Neoliberalism's metaphysical evolutionism

To examine the metaphysical foundations of neoliberal thought, I primarily focus on the works of Friedrich Hayek and Joseph Schumpeter, who both endorse theories on social evolution that have striking vitalistic undertones and which exhibit a distinctive understanding of what constitutes "being, knowing, identity, time and space". As I detail below, societies' evolution becomes tied to Hayek's and Schumpeter's theses on the primacy of change as disrupting the fabric of time and space. For Hayek, it also involves conjectures about the complexity of the

living and about the status of knowledge that have far-reaching consequences for his reformist programme.

According to Schumpeter, the social world is not static, but in constant movement. Its evolution is fundamentally non-linear. Change happens fitfully and is “discontinuous” (Schumpeter 1951, 62–63). It derails the regular unwinding of time and space. Importantly, what characterises change in economic life is that it happens internally: it is not “forced upon it from without but arise[s] by its own initiative, from within” (1951, 63).² Similarly, in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Schumpeter describes capitalism as an “evolutionary process” which comes to embody and give shape to the figure of change (Schumpeter 1954, 82). The internal “impulse” that animates it, that “sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion”, comes from “the new consumers’ goods, the new methods of production and transportation, the new markets, the new forms of industrial organization that capitalist enterprise creates” (1954, 83). Again, “the process of industrial mutation” that capitalism represents is portrayed as fundamentally restless and unstoppable: it “incessantly revolutionizes the economics structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one” (1954, 83).

Change in Hayek might at first sight seem less abrupt. He is equally interested in the notion of evolution (see Gane 2019), but this latter, rather than being solely spurred by the creative genius of entrepreneurs, is instead driven by the ungraspable complexity of human social interactions (what he calls the “great complex society” (Hayek 1978, 12)), the order of which is determined by the “widely dispersed and rapidly fluctuating particular circumstances of time and space” (1978, 12). His cultural evolutionism³ focuses on adaptation and the selection of successful human practices and activities under the pressure of the “millions” of random facts that fundamentally characterise human societies (Hayek 2013, 14). In other words, “essential” or “organised complexity” (1978, 26) is the signature of living matter.⁴

² Schumpeter here contrasts economic evolution with the evolution of species described by Charles Darwin. Whereas evolution is a result of internal changes for the former, it results from environmental (and thus external) changes for the latter.

³ As discussed in Chapter 5, Hayek has an ambivalent relationship with Darwin’s theories, which he both appropriates and dismisses (see Hodgson 1994). He specifically claims to reject Social-Darwinism because of its focus on genetic fitness. According to him, evolution is instead to be understood from a cultural, that is, behavioural, perspective (Hayek 2011b, 116-118; 1978, 68 - see also Hodgson 1994, 416).

⁴ Hayek thus relates his later work to the scientific works developed contemporaneously on chaos theory and complex system. As Geoffrey Hodgson demonstrates, Hayek seeks to understand how order might emerge from “apparent chaos in a far from equilibrium state” (Hodgson 1994, 432) – a concern that strongly echoes Schumpeter’s work.

Hayek's views on the impenetrable complexity of social interactions justifies his anti-rationalist theories on the "unavoidable imperfection of man's knowledge" (Hayek 1945, 530). As I explain further later in the chapter, Hayek considers that "all truly social phenomena" (1945, 528) cannot be the object of an exact predictive science – they cannot "enter into statistics" (1945, 524). As he asserts in his famous 1945 essay 'The use of knowledge in society', the "economic picture" is made of too many "constant small changes" (1945, 523) to be exhaustively grasped. The multiple individuals who constitute society constantly and randomly adapt their activities to an infinity of facts and factors that cannot be fully known to anybody (Hayek 2013, 14). No one within the social order can consciously account for the complex interrelationships and considerations that determine individuals' personal decisions, or access what they inwardly think.

Consequently, for Hayek, no "conscious control" or human mind can gather, predict, and spread the information on the infinite diversity of people's desires and needs, how they will react and adapt to change (Hayek 2011c, 51). One has to acknowledge "the necessary and irremediable ignorance on everyone's part of most of the particular facts which determine the actions of all several members of human society" (Hayek 2013, 13). Human intellect is too imperfect to exhaustively understand the arbitrariness of social interactions, of individual behaviours, choices and decision-making. All remain impervious to human reason, which renders centralised knowledge impossible. For Hayek, "it is impossible for any man to survey more than a limited field, to be aware of the urgency of more than a limited number of needs" (Hayek 2011c, 62). Such a claim takes a peculiar turn in *The Road to Serfdom*, when Hayek describes a mysterious curse that afflicts human civilisation. According to him, the "pursuit of our most cherished ideals" (that is, our secular trust in human reason) has backfired and, instead of leading us on the path to further progress, has plunged us into the "tyranny" of totalitarianism (Hayek 2011c, 11). Misplaced trust in the power of human (collective) rationality is bound to result in disaster.

In contrast, Hayek promotes another type of knowledge that he deems unscientific or "unorganised", and which he refers to as "the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place" that each individual is supposed to have (Hayek 1945, 521) – which I assimilate in Chapter 5 with instinctual knowledge. It is what he calls the "division" (Hayek 2011c, 51) or the "fragmentation" of knowledge (Hayek 2013, 14). Each member of society only possesses a small fraction of human knowledge (that is, the total sum of all individuals' knowledge), while remaining ignorant of anything which exceeds the boundaries of his experience, namely "most of the facts on which the working of society rests" (2013, 14). Although the individual cannot

have an exhaustive understanding of the society in which he lives, he is however the only person who can know the particular circumstances he encounters and his own personal expectations of the future – both factors influencing his way of taking a specific decision (Hayek 2011c, 79).

The fragmentation of knowledge has three important consequences. First, the idea that social phenomena cannot ‘enter into statistics’ fundamentally compromises any possibility to collectively predict the future with any reliability and accuracy. As Frank Knight also claims, there can only be individual expectations about the future, which are themselves limited by the fragmentation of human knowledge (Knight 1965, 210). Second, there is no possibility of determining an “all-inclusive scale of values” common to all (Hayek 2011c, 62). Each individual has his own personal and partial hierarchy of values (Hayek 2011c, 62). This in turn comes to increase even further the complexity of the social as these partial individual scales of values are always in competition with each other in the social sphere, and are thus “inevitably different and often inconsistent with each other” (Hayek 2011c, 62). It also consequently means that there cannot be any agreement on common values and thus, by extension, on a common purpose to collective actions. Any attempt to do so would be, by definition, arbitrary. Thirdly, collective knowledge appears to Hayek fundamentally bankrupt, and so does rationality when representing a transcendent collective human ability.⁵ Generally, as explored in the last part of the chapter, Hayek seems to consider that instinctual knowledge is, to some extent, ‘truer’ than rational knowledge. Unconscious calculations are more reliable than conscious ones.

1.2 Life drives and death drives in psychoanalytical theory

Now that I have presented Hayek’s and Schumpeter’s main presuppositions relating to “being, knowing, identity, time and space”, I want to demonstrate that these presuppositions are animated by a core assumption that movement, complexity, disruption and change equate life, and reversely, that immobility equates death. To make these presuppositions more visible and highlight their internal motivations, I will draw on the psychoanalytical work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.⁶

⁵ In Chapter 5, I discuss how Hayek’s anti-rationalism can be reconciled with the rational choice theory adopted by Chicago School scholars like Gary Becker.

⁶ It is worth noting that Hayek expressed his dislike for Freud on numerous occasions, particularly when calling Freud “the greatest destroyer of culture” because of what Hayek (over-simplistically) views as Freud’s ambition to do away with “culturally acquired repressions” (2013, 505). Again, my point here is to see how Freud’s (and Lacan’s) theories can shed light on certain dynamics at work in Hayek and Schumpeter’s thoughts.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud considers whether “the goal of all life is death” (Freud 2013, 51). According to him organic life is characterised by an inherent “inertia” (2013, 47); all living substance is animated by an “instinct” or a “compulsion” to restore “an earlier stage of things” (2013, 47), to return to the inanimate from which it sprang by a series a “circuitous paths” (2013, 50). In other words, organic life is fundamentally “conservative” (2013, 47). It would have persisted as a “surviving substance” (seemingly close to what Giorgio Agamben (1998) later described as ‘bare life’) in its slow and ineluctable course toward death, had it not been forced to diverge and thus evolve and complexify by external influences (Freud 2013, 50).

Three central dimensions need here to be emphasised for the rest of my analysis. Firstly, there may be a natural tendency for living substances to slip back into an inanimate state that is also associated with death. Stasis, inertia and immobility are thus all tied to death. They constitute a threat inherent to life itself, a looming menace the morbid effects of which may prevail in moments of carelessness. Secondly, external, environmental events can slow down that degenerative tendency and force living substance to postpone its self-erasure. Furthermore, they can force it to adapt to external pressure and to internally develop – and Freud specifically has in mind the evolution of elementary organisms towards more complex forms of life. Importantly, the action of external stimulations is supported by another type of (internal) instincts – what Freud calls the “true life instinct” (Freud 2013, 53) – the sexual drives. These guarantee the reproduction of life but also prolong the journey that lead to death (2013, 54). As creative forces, they are represented by the figure of Eros (“the preserver of all things” (2013, 71)), who can “force together and hold together the portions of the living substance” (2013, 84). Eros and the sublimated sexual impulses are responsible for progress and higher development (2013, 53n.35) – as Freud confirms in *Civilization and its discontents* (2002). As Lacan later puts it, for Freud “the essential mainspring of human progress, the mainspring of the pathetic, of the conflictual, of the fertile, of the creative in human life, is lust” (Lacan 1978, 84). What such a view presupposes is that tension is what ultimately breaks down natural inertia to guarantee the perpetuation of life, as well as creation and progress. This leads me to my third point – which will be especially significant for Chapter 5 – that no matter whether such pressure is ultimately unpleasurable, it is necessary for the preservation of life. From this perspective, Freud offers a rather peculiar understanding of pleasure: pleasure corresponds to a release of tension (2013, 87) or to a diminution of excitation (2013, 2). As a homeostatic principle, it is identified by Freud as serving the death instincts (2013, 87).

Lastly, I want to add a fourth dimension based on Lacan's reinterpretation of *Beyond the pleasure principle*. Lacan's concept of 'desire' can be compared to the Freudian life drives as it finds its source in the ungraspable remainders of vital energies that have not been fixed in imaginary ego-representations (which are themselves conceived of as alienating). Desire is thus animated by the inadequacy of these ego-constructions, but also by the lack that has resulted from the infant's symbolic castration when entering the world of signs, rules and meaning. Such a lack is organised around an empty space (- ϕ), the receptacle of non-imagined and non-symbolised bodily and libidinal remnants. That space is also the home of the *objet a* – the object of desire that always remains unknown to us, but which we tirelessly try to picture in our fantasies. Crucially, as I argued in Chapter 2, Lacan also understands desire to have a structuring function for the human psyche: it "supports man in his existence *qua* man" (Lacan 2004, 52) driving him forward, away from apathy and indolence. It is what leads us in the world of symbols, drives us toward the Other to look for the never found answers that could fill our existential gap. The restlessness and unease caused by this lack is thus, paradoxically, something inherently positive for Lacan.

1.3 Creative drives and deadly stasis

Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalytical theories – and specifically their emphases on life drives and death drives - can be used to reveal what is at work in Schumpeter's and Hayek's celebration of disruptive change and their rejection of stasis. It is, for instance, interesting to consider that Schumpeter's and Hayek's adoption of 'evolutionary economics' is tied to their rejection of neoclassical economics' theory of equilibrium (Cooper 2008, 44; Gane 2013, 16; Robin 2013; Walker and Cooper 2011, 148).⁷ For Schumpeter, "equilibrium is death" (Robin 2013). In stark contrast, capitalism is conceived as being in perpetual movement. Capitalism is a force of creation (and therefore of life) to the extent that it "not only never is but never can be stationary" (Schumpeter 1954, 82). Schumpeter's rejection "'static' analysis" (Schumpeter 1951, 62) is mirrored by Hayek's assertion that the constantly moving realm of social phenomena, because of its complexity, cannot 'enter' the fixed realm of statistics. In his Nobel lecture, Hayek

⁷ It is important to note that this rejection of equilibrium constitutes an important difference between Hayek and Schumpeter on one hand, and Becker and the Chicago School on the other – the latter being still committed to neoclassical economics' assumptions when it comes to the idea of equilibrium and *homo oeconomicus* (Gane 2013, 16). There is however an ambiguity in Hayek's work when it comes to the concept of equilibrium as his catallaxy relies on his belief that 'order' can emerge "from apparent chaos in a far-from equilibrium state" (Hodgson 1994, 432). Doesn't the idea of order resemble common understanding of equilibrium? Hodgson demonstrates that Hayek makes a tenuous distinction between equilibrium and "stability" (which still enables growth and thus movement) (1994, 433).

explicitly endorses biology against “physical sciences” when describing the particularity of social sciences. He proclaims that “the social sciences, like much of biology but unlike most fields of the physical sciences, have to deal with structures of essential complexity” (Hayek 1978, 26). He is even more explicit in one of his earlier interventions, when he states that physical sciences have to do with the study of the “inanimate”, with the static (Hayek 1967, 26). By contrast, economics is about the “animate”; it is interested in the complexity of “the phenomena of life, of mind, and of society” (Hayek 1967, 26). In other words, life and the social are a product of “far-from-equilibrium conditions” (Cooper 2008, 43). They escape any attempt of control through predictive calculations. They remain in the realm of the purely speculative.

In addition, it is striking that Schumpeter uses the word “impulse” to talk about the internal force that animates capitalism.⁸ Like the sexual drives identified by Freud, this force is a force of creation that leads the renewal of the economic environment. It erupts from within and works against the static force of habit. The latter is presented as an “energy-saving function” (Schumpeter 1954, 84) sunk “into the strata of subconsciousness” (1954, 86); it is a homeostatic and sedating influence. As Schumpeter puts it: “[i]n the breast of one who wishes to do something new, the forces of habit rise up and bear witness against the embryonic project” (1954, 86). By contrast, Schumpeter’s creative drive is fundamentally destructive, as reflected in the concept of ‘creative destruction’. It is the irruption of the new that brings in its wake the seeds of the annihilation of previous forms of production. Schumpeter celebrates a regenerative process that gets rid of the obsolete, radically cleanses the social sphere from all remnants of backwardness. It as a sign of ‘progress’ (Schumpeter 1954, 96),

Similarly, Hayek connects his lifework to the scientific researches on “autopoiesis” (Hayek 1988, 9); that is, on systems capable to continually reproduce themselves. For Hayek, the social order is one instance of such systems. It is animated by a principle of self-creation; change happens internally and spontaneously, without planned intervention of a superior consciousness (be it a god or a providential ruler). The omnipresence of the concept of ‘desire’ in Hayek’s work is another manifestation of creative impulses. A simple word-count of the derivatives of the word ‘desire’ (including ‘to desire’, ‘desire’, ‘desired’, ‘desirable’ and ‘desirability’) reveals no less than 216 occurrences in the 533 pages of the *Constitution of Liberty* (2011b). Tellingly, Hayek describes desire as “a spur to further effort” (2011b, 98) and thus, like Lacan, conceives it as a force that drives agents forward. As such, desire must be continually “create[d]” and “aroused”

⁸ One can also think of the “sense of life” celebrated in Ayn Rand’s novels (see Duggan 2019)

by displaying the appealing success of other agents, no matter how “cruel” this stimulation might be (2011b, 98).

Furthermore, Hayek’s depiction of human “institutional ignorance” (Hayek 2013, 14) and Schumpeter’s concept of ‘creative destruction’ play a similar role to the concept of the ‘lack’ in Lacan’s theories. On one hand, in the same way as Lacan understands the lack to create an unease and restlessness that feeds our research for the *objet a*, Schumpeter views creation to be driven by the in-draught created by innovation’s destruction of the precedent forms of production (Schumpeter 1954, 96). In this vitalistic virtuous cycle, the vacuum destruction leaves, and that nature abhors, provides the impetus for the advent of the new. On the other hand, Hayek sees our inherent ignorance of present and future outcomes as something potentially liberating, since it opens possibilities for the advent of alternative visions of the future. Ignorance is consequently inherently tied to the neoliberal concept of sacrosanct liberty. As Hayek claims, “[i]f there were omniscient men, if we could know not only all that affects the attainment of our present wishes but also our future wants and desires, there would be little case for liberty” (Hayek 2011b, 81). Liberty is cherished because we have no way collectively to know the future. We thus have a collective interest to allow the flourishing of as many alternative imaginary scenarios as possible of what is to come, in order to be able to face the surprises that the future keeps for us (Hayek 2013, 169–70).⁹ Liberty is from this perspective a purely instrumental anti-coercive principle (Robin 2013): its value (simply) rests on “the opportunity it provides for unforeseen and unpredictable actions” (Hayek 2013, 55).

I want to conclude by insisting again on the powerful bounds that unite liberty, the unpredictability of the future – its radical uncertainty – desire, and the life drives or creative drives. Like Freud, Hayek, Schumpeter, but also Frank Knight, all cultivate a sense that perturbations are necessary for the liveliness, and thus the perpetuation, of human societies and the economic systems that support them. Disturbances are seen as the very conditions for the emergence of creativity. This is striking in Schumpeter’s description of “creative destruction” as a “process of recurrent rejuvenation of the productive apparatus” (Schumpeter 1954, 68). It is similarly at work in Hayek’s insistence on how randomness and unpredictability characterise the advent of the new (see Walker and Cooper 2011, 150), as well as in Knight’s claim that “life

⁹ Jens Beckert (2016) set forth a similar idea when demonstrating that forecasting amounts to making imagined scenarios of the future.

is no doubt more interesting when conduct involves a certain amount of uncertainty” (1965, 241) while acknowledging the devastating effects of ‘true uncertainty’ (Knight 1965, 232).

Uncertainty is of course heavily disruptive, but it also opens breaches in the space of representation that can be filled by imaginary deployment. Thanks to it, the future can become a “space of promises and hopes” and of opportunities (Esposito 2011, 32). Because they break the debilitating fixity of habits and existing representations and products, because they precipitate the advent of the new, the concept of ‘uncertainty’ and ‘creative destruction’ must be compared with the Lacanian ‘real’, which dismantles the integrity of symbolic and imaginary representations. They are the ineffable - or in Hayek’s words, the ‘unintended’ (Hayek 2013, 32), the “unforeseeable and unpredictable’ (Hayek 2011b, 81) - which comes to undermine any plan made about the future. The irruption of destructive uncertainty is thus also linked, in neoliberal theory, with a paradoxical jubilant enjoyment. It is hailed as a liberating principle, as part of a philosophy that “celebrates capitalism as a catastrophic life principle, a biological and economic law of crisis-ridden yet relentless growth” (Cooper 2008, 43).

2. Fighting the collectivist imaginary

The second part of the chapter investigates how collectivist planning is constructed as the ‘other’ of neoliberalism so as to later better understand how the new order imagined by neoliberal theorists is designed as a polar opposite.

2.1 Collectivism and Death

The dialectic of the animate and the inanimate that I uncovered in the first part of the chapter is used to articulate neoliberal theory’s rejection of socialism and collectivism. Hayek, specifically, incorporates planning in his critique of “physical sciences”. According to him, “central planning” bases its forecasting on “statistical information”, which is sorted in the category of the inanimate. Therefore, “by its nature [planning] cannot take direct account of these circumstances of time and place” (Hayek 1945, 524). It cannot grasp the irreducible spontaneity and randomness of fleeting circumstances. On the contrary, it attempts to fix living matter, to pin it down in its equations.

Similarly, I explained how Hayek’s considerations on the degenerative tendency of stasis, coupled with his analyses on the inherent defect of scientific knowledge resulted in his questioning of the soundness of human consciousness. Strikingly, the “conscious” (as well as the

“deliberate”) is quasi-systematically associated with central planning in *The Road to Serfdom*: Hayek speaks particularly, to name just a few, of “conscious direction” (2011c, 21, 36), of conscious construction (2011c, 37) or “conscious social control” (2011c, 38).¹⁰ Through such a combination, Hayek implies that the very problem of planning is its strict reliance on human reason, its rationalistic rejection of everything it cannot understand, of anything that exceeds its grasp (Hayek 2011c, 209) – in other words, its lack of faith. Because of this hubris, planning closes itself to the irruption of spontaneity. Its stark Apollonian stance (reason, consciousness, control) is stiffening and makes it miss the subterranean potentialities of the Dionysian (instinctual drive, unconsciousness, disruption).¹¹ Central planning’s pretences to rationally organise the future are not just futile, but inherently dangerous. As Hayek hyperbolically asserts, it leads to the “destruction of our civilisation” (Hayek 2011c, 209).

One of the reasons given by Hayek is that, in trying to capture the spark of life, central planning threatens to smother it. The interventionist state is consequently systematically rebranded as “counter-evolutionary” (Walker and Cooper 2011, 150). It comes to represent a collective force of inertia that shackles the irruptive creativity of the individual, thus endangering the future prosperity of the greatest number. Collectivism is accused of threatening the very mechanisms that guarantees the vitality and renewal of the social order, condemning it to a slow degeneration.

In addition, according to Hayek, trying to control the uncertainty of present and future circumstances is fundamentally bound to tragically backfire. The edifice of reason patiently erected by centrally planned efforts will always shatter. Uncertainty here reasserts itself as belonging to Lacan’s register of the real. It reveals the limit of human knowledge and dislocates the space of representation. It thereby delivers individuals from the debilitating pressure of the collective.

Lastly, as dramatically announced in *The Road to Serfdom*, the rationalist hubris of planning will open Pandora’s box and release a curse that afflicts mankind: all attempts to collectively and rationally meet the future will result in the advent of a totalitarian regime. By centrally allocating

¹⁰ The same rhetoric is at work in ‘The Use of Knowledge’ (Hayek 1945, 527)

¹¹ We see here the emergence of a central ambivalence in neoliberal theory, which I will develop in greater detail in Part 3. When hailing instincts as a force of life, Hayek might underestimate the extent of their destructive potentiality. At the same time, he criticises Freud for liberating “natural drives” against culturally (that is, spontaneously) acquired habits (Hayek 2013, 505). In stark contrast, Freud in *Civilisation and its discontents* (2002) associates the instinctual to the death drive, through the figure of Thanatos. Lacan’s concept of the ‘drive’ enables us to go beyond this aporia by stating (*contra* Freud) that life and death drives actually cannot be separated.

resources, by appointing people to certain activities chosen by the state, by using welfare as an incentive to make people do what the government wants them to do, and thus by reducing the scope of individuals' life choices, planning and interventionist policies will plunge humanity into a new dark age. In the next subpart, I explore further this insight with the help of psychoanalytical theory. I discuss how neoliberal theory uses its defence of liberty as an anti-authoritarian principle to oppose traditional theories of sovereignty.

2.2 Escaping the primordial father

The spectre of the interventionist and authoritarian ruler dominating the defenceless citizens is a trope in neoliberal literature, and especially in its libertarian currents – one can think of Friedman invoking Leviathan (2002, xvii), which Thomas Hobbes's frontispiece depicts as a monstrous human figure made of the captivated bodies of its citizens (Malcolm 2002). I want to use this image combined with Lacan's psychoanalytical theories to demonstrate that what poses problem for the neoliberal thinkers is the *incarnated* dimension of authority.

The rise of the neoliberal doctrine is to be placed within the emancipatory context of the second half of the 20th century and its radical questioning of traditional authority¹² - of which Hayek's pamphlet 'Why I Am Not a Conservative' (2011a) is particularly representative. Hayek here understands his 'liberal' approach to be a challenge to the coercive sway of "established authority" (2011a, 523), with the state as its prime instrument.¹³ What Hayek opposes is the determination of the individuals' lives, choices and desires by a superior human authority. In contrast, Hayek advocates for a re-centring around the individual as the only master of her own decisions, in a constant process of self-elaboration and adaptation to change (2011a, 522). In other words, he denounces external constraints on people's freedom of choice, when these constraints come from *someone* else. As I explained in Chapter 1, such stance explains why neoliberal capitalism has been read by Lacan and others as refusing castration, thus establishing a peculiar relationship with the symbolic realm.¹⁴

¹² For an account of the ambivalent relationship that neoliberalism maintains with May '68, see Boltanski and Chiapello (2011).

¹³ Importantly, Hayek targets both socialist planners and conservatives in this pamphlet. He nonetheless maintains ambivalent ties with conservatism (and so does Friedman). For instance, his refusal to guarantee the conservation of established status is contrasted by his claim that inequality of status is necessary (see Chapter 5). His challenge to established authority could result in a challenge to paternalism, yet he advocates the maintenance of an ethics of the family (see Cooper 2017).

¹⁴ See Lacan 1972; McGowan 2004; Mura, 2015; Tomšič 2015

However, when considered in detail, Hayek's position - even in its more libertarian version with Friedman - is far more ambiguous, since he does not reject *all* forms of symbolic authority.¹⁵ As I discuss in the last part of the chapter, Hayek still argues for the maintaining of strict rules (Hayek 2013, 18–19) and for the validity of “culturally acquired repressions” (2013, 505). Neoliberalism generally does not seem to reject authoritarian state intervention when the rule of the market is endangered (Bruff 2014). What Hayek actually denounces is consequently the incarnated version of these rules in a conscious, and thus fallible, figure and not the rules themselves. To use a psychoanalytical vocabulary, it is not the castrating dimension of the symbolic function that the neoliberal theorists wish to abolish but the mortal figure that is supposed hold it up, the figure of the father. This process strikingly recalls Freud's account of the killing of the primordial father in *Totem and Taboo* (Freud 2001, 166–70).

In this tale invented to make sense of both totemism and the prohibition of incest, Freud imagines the ‘first tribe’ – a tribe organised around the authority of the ‘primordial father’, who controls and exclusively disposes of all the females. He systematically kills or banishes his sons in order to make sure that none of them enjoy any of his privileges and specifically so that none has intercourse with his mother, sisters, aunts, cousins. One day, the surviving sons ally to kill and eat their father and hence gain access to all what they desired. They are subsequently seized with a strong feeling of remorse and end up submitting to a disembodied law, which comes as a substitute to their father's will and desire, and which perpetuates his authority (Freud 2001, 166).

What makes this tale important for my investigation is that it highlights the central content of neoliberal thinkers' critique of collectivism. What makes the presence of the primordial father unbearable to his sons is the fact he personifies the Law while not submitting to it - since there is no one above him to punish him. His irrepressible lust prevents him from respecting his own Law (the prohibition of incest), thus highlighting its arbitrariness. In contrast, disincarnated rules appear fairer. Hayek's, as well as Friedman's, critiques thus dismiss the collectivist imaginary as an archaic relapse into primordial times because of its excessive reliance on exceptional figures who never can be blindly and fully trusted, or whose succession by equally wise actors can never be secured (Friedman 1980a). Considering that the tale of the primordial father echoes the story of the Œdipus Complex, the killing of the primordial father becomes a stage in the subjectification of the individual; in her passing from the imaginary world of images to the

¹⁵ As a reminder (see Chapter 2), the symbolic represents the structures, rules and authorities that pre-exist the individual and lie outside his control.

symbolic realm of the Law (Lacan 2004, 126–27). By refusing to give up the manifestation of the law in an incarnated figure, the collectivist imaginary can be accused of being stuck in the imaginary realm of childhood.

Furthermore, when ‘socialism’ reduces the individual’s “range of choices” (Hayek 2011c, 26), it does so by imposing one unique goal common to all in the name of an illusory “general good” - thus creating a debilitating uniformity. Because the conscious decisions of the ruler are as partially informed as any other individual’s (as a consequence of the internal defect of human knowledge), his pretention to impose them to all is at best arbitrary and self-interested. It becomes unfairly moralistic and tyrannical when his rules are motivated by his disapproval of someone’s ends. Such misplaced moralism has important consequences for the future. By ruling out certain possibilities they consider inappropriate while promulgating one inevitably partial and potentially ill-chosen common vision of the future, planners cut society from potential sources of future progress, which they ignore. They cut society from alternative and divergent projects which, in the end, might have brought greater “welfare” to mankind (Hayek 1988).¹⁶

The neoliberal theorists’ rejection of the collectivist imaginary thus highlights a profound distrust of other human beings, whose limitations mirror the restrictions and partiality of our own knowledge. What makes the legislator so suspicious is our shared humanity, the fact that I am aware of my fallibility as a human being. Against this threatening ‘other’, the neoliberal thinkers prefer to advocate, as I examine in part 3, the total submission to the big Other of the Law as a disincarnated figure.

2.3 Rescuing desire

The focus on the desire of the primordial father opens up a second dimension in the neoliberal critique of the collectivist imaginary. One of the main reproaches articulated against planning and interventionism is the fact that when pretending to tell us what to do to serve the common good, they endanger the conditions of desire.

The main heresy of planning in the eyes of Hayek and Friedman is the planners’ implicit ambition to do away with the uncertainty of the future. In so doing, they compromise the possibility for the emergence of the “unexpected” to instead restrain their imagination to the realm of the “possible” (Hayek 2013, 32). The interventionist management of economic trends is, according

¹⁶ Hayek opposes the “welfare of mankind” to the welfare state. The latter, he argues, endangers the former (Hayek 1988, 121).

to them, part of a larger plan to meet unpredictable future events, like the Great Depression. In so doing, planning policies attempt to isolate the potential surprise of the future in order to make sure it will never disrupt the present social organisation. To use a Lacanian vocabulary, they seek to mute the disquieting lack at the heart of society and symbolic representations - the empty space ($-\varphi$) where the *objet a* is usually situated (Lacan 2004, 53). But they fail to recognise that this lack is essential. Consequently, the “support given to us by the lack” in its structuring of our desire comes to disappear (Lacan 2004, 66).

Far from being soothing, the fake fullness that results from this disappearance is lived as a threatening presence (Lacan 2004, 92), as something anguishing and paralysing - hence perhaps Hayek’s and Friedman’s apocalyptic descriptions of planning. By dismantling the structuring lack that fuels desire and drives agents forward, planners create apathy. This is particularly clear in Hayek’s and Friedman’s critique of welfare policies. What seems to particularly worry them is that the welfare state’s provisions for benefits, pensions, affordable social healthcare seek to soften the jolts of economic life. In so doing, they endanger uncertainty as a disruptive life principle. As I discuss in greater length in Chapter 5, by withdrawing the threat of destitution, they disincentivise people to do anything by themselves. They take away people’s will and energy to such an extent that people start disliking the “risk of enterprise” (Hayek 2011c, 134–35; Friedman 1980b).

In other words, the welfare state becomes suspicious because of its very nurturing power. Freud’s work is here useful again to make sense of what might seem a counterintuitive rationale. He specifically suggests the possibility that our “preservative instincts” might in fact be the “myrmidon[s] of death” (Freud 2013, 51).¹⁷ As belonging to organic life, the sole aim of which is to slowly “die in its own fashion” (2013, 51), these instincts are also animated by the death drive. Like Freud’s pleasure principle, the protective welfare state contributes to diminishing the quantity of excitation and tension in the system. In so doing, it anaesthetises the creative life drives and guarantees stasis. It is thus a force of death.

Such a critique of the nurturing welfare state is of course fundamentally misogynist. The neoliberal canonical texts tend to present the collectivist imaginary as an excessively present mother who meets all her children’s needs before they even have time to formulate a demand or actually feel these needs. She determines for them, through planning and redistribution, what

¹⁷ In Greek mythology, the myrmidons are the warriors who accompany Achilles to Troy. By extension, in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word designates “a follower (...) of a powerful person, typically one who (...) carries out orders unquestioningly”.

they require, acting as if she already knew what they truly desire (and telling them eventually what to desire). By providing security to people before they feel the lack that will set their desire into motion and drive them to work and create new things, collectivism is thus accused of doing away with desire. Such a vision finds an echo in Lacan's work on angst where he asserts that what is felt with anguish is not the absence of the mother's nourishing breast, but its over-presence ("*son imminence*") (Lacan 2004, 67) – a comment that resonates with the theme of the abjection of the mother that I uncover in the autobiographical texts I examine in Chapter 7.

The abjection of the smothering, feminine other permits thinkers like Hayek and Friedman to call for the liberation of the individuals from such a suffocating and paralysing presence, so as to allow them to determine by themselves what they truly desire and to grant them the capacity to "shape their own life" (Hayek 2011c, 15).

3. The spontaneous order of the market

The vivid depiction of the menace that the imaginary of planning represents for the future of civilisation and the perpetuation of life in general opens up the way for the deployment of a neoliberal alternative, that of the spontaneous order of the market. Tellingly, Hayek conceives the programme he is fighting for ("*liberalism*") as "the party of life, the party that favours free growth and spontaneous evolution" (Hayek 2011a, 530). As I detail below, this programme is shaped by Hayek's metaphysical presuppositions. Because it understands and respects the dynamics of life and change, it provides the framework necessary for the spontaneous fruition of their regenerative potentialities.

Crucially, Hayek also fully acknowledges the imaginary dimension of that new programme, which "many people will regard as impractical" (Hayek 2013, 62). In his words, "the guiding model of the overall order will always be a utopia" (2013, 62). Yet, he continues, "it is by constantly holding up the guiding conception of an internally consistent model which could be realised by the consistent application of the same principles, that anything like an effective framework for a functioning spontaneous order will be achieved". In other words, only the persistent production and conjuring-up of liberal utopias have the potency to bring about the salutary order he is longing for.¹⁸

¹⁸ As I mentioned in Chapter 3, the utopian dimension of Hayek's work was also identified by Foucault (2004a, 224–225). Michel Senellart, the editor of *The Birth of Biopolitics* put forward that the passage

Hayek's rhetorical twist is to claim that the imaginary market order he wishes to institute derives from what is already 'naturally' there in all social organisations: spontaneous exchanges of goods that overall constitute a market. His plan is thus to better understand these phenomena so as to formalise them into rules that will make up the backbone of his new order. In the last part of the chapter, I thus explore what is necessary to become the 'party of life', highlighting the complex relationship this project has with faith and religion.

3.1 Becoming the 'party of life'

How does (neo)liberalism become the 'party of life'? I argue that the utopian programme needs to reconcile three central elements.

First and foremost, the neoliberal project needs to enable the spontaneous development of life. As implied in the first part of the chapter, 'spontaneity' here must be read as the unpredictable and uncontrollable. Preserving the magic of life thus entails being opened to "the new and the strange" (Hayek 2011a, 526) and not being paralysed by the unruly occurrence of disruptive creativity. It also requires acknowledging that the unbidden force of life exceeds the grasp of the human intellect, and that any attempt to collectively control it is at best counterproductive. One should therefore stoically give up control and accept one's existence to be carried by its erratic flow. Such an attitude requires a certain strength of character, or, in Hayek's words, "courage and confidence" or "a preparedness to let change run its course even if we cannot predict where it will lead" (2011a, 522). Since Hayek claims that "the advance and even the preservation of civilization are dependent upon a maximum of opportunity for accident to happen" (Hayek 2011b, 81), the subsequent step is to ensure that the social order that is being designed can provide such an opportunity. Uncertainty must be inscribed at the core of what Hayek calls his "great society". One must continually artificially stimulate its internal flow of life/creative destruction since, as Hayek proudly claims, "the main point about liberalism is that it wants to go elsewhere, not to stand still" (Hayek 2011a, 521). Moreover, in order to prevent any Promethean pretensions to control the uncontrollable, the designer-in-chief must engineer our collective impotence; he must preserve the fecund unforeseeability of the future by keeping the workings of the new social order outside human conscious agency.

referred to 'Why I am not a conservative', although no explicit mention is made there of 'utopia'. I find it more likely that Foucault was here referring to the quoted passage in *Law, Legislation and Liberty*.

Protecting the openness of the future is directly related to the second requirement the neoliberal utopian programme must integrate: ensuring that the sacrosanct liberty of its social agents is respected. As previously claimed, liberty has here an instrumental function – which does not lessen its importance. Freedom consists in the non-infringement on “the pursuit of unknown individual purposes” as the key to the “general good” (Hayek 2013, 169). No authority should interfere with people’s “freedom of choice” as this would entail wrongly pretending knowing what opportunities the future holds for them (Hayek 2013, 178). Since no collective plan for the future ought to be prescribed, multiple individual ventures are instead encouraged to coexist. Chance (not human consciousness or any higher “authority of supernatural sources of knowledge” (Hayek 2011a, 528)) will decide which of these projects is to be successful. One must therefore find a framework that is able to accommodate and coordinate all these individual imaginary scenarios about possible futures without unfairly constraining any of them; a framework within which the autonomous individual obeys no one but himself (Hayek 1945, 527).¹⁹ The framework organising the new neoliberal social order must be a disincarnated and automatic procedure because, as the bankruptcy of planning has dramatically revealed, all human conscious authorities are ultimately fallible.

Thirdly, there is some level of recognition that the neoliberal programme needs to insulate its social agents from the worst effects of uncertainty. This is particularly clear in Knight’s and Hayek’s theories on uncertainty. Both acknowledge that social agents indeed “do strive to reduce uncertainty” (Knight 1965, 228; see also Hayek 2013, 282–284). As Hayek admits, “[s]ome security is essential if freedom is to be preserved, because most men are willing to bear which freedom inevitably involves only so long as the risk is not too great” (Hayek 2011c, 136). This amounts to conceding that ‘true uncertainty’ might be ultimately unbearable – which comes as no surprise if one thinks of its association with Lacan’s real as the source of *jouissance*. No matter how fascinating the destructive power of real *jouissance* might be (as it liberates us from the immobilising shackles of our imaginary and symbolic representations), it is nonetheless a traumatic confrontation from which the subject is never sure to survive intact (see Chapter 2). As I explore throughout the remaining chapters, the real of *jouissance* must be mediated to be sustainable. The neoliberal theorists share this intuition when they attempt to find devices “for coping with our constitutional ignorance” (Hayek 2013, 176). Hayek specifically engages in tightrope calculations on the right amount of regulations necessary to “reduce uncertainty” without “eliminat[ing] all uncertainty” (Hayek 2013, 283–84). Interestingly, his conclusion is that

¹⁹ Hayek directly references Kant and his theory of autonomy (obeying the moral law because it proceeds from our own will) - see Hayek 2011c, 85.

one needs to craft some “laws” or “rules” (that is, in Lacanian terms, a symbolic apparatus) to provide a loose framework common to all that would provide some limited certainty to all – for instance, by fixing property rights (Hayek 2013, 102) or guaranteeing the sanctity of contract (Friedman 2002, 2) – while not consistently determining individuals’ free choice. As Foucault (2004a) noticed, these ‘laws’ are like the rules of a game in which players can decide their own personal strategy. The rules must be general, with no reference to particular time, place and people (Hayek 2011c, 78). They must always improve the chance of all, and never protect any specific group (Hayek 2013, 48).

In other words, the neoliberal utopian plans can be read as speculations on how to create the right conditions for the emergence and nurturing of life in a social environment. One has to find the right infrastructure: a symbolic infrastructure that can act as a coping mechanism to survive uncertainty, while artificially stimulating it. The solution to this squaring of the circle is Hayek’s depiction of an imaginary market order, the *catallaxy*.²⁰

3.2 Hayek’s *catallaxy*

To emphasise the necessity of realising his imaginary *catallaxy*, Hayek presents his readers with the following problems. Now that it has been established that the radical uncertainty of present and future conditions prevents us from collectively knowing which initiatives will be successful and will increase the general good (Hayek 2013, 280), how is society to allocate its scarce resources and how are individuals to know where to invest their precious entrepreneurial energies? Now that the sheer inanity and dangerousness of pretending having any conscious collective plans about the future, in a world in constant change and where knowledge is disseminated, has been demonstrated, on which basis are some activities to be promoted and rewarded, and other penalised? According to Hayek, “the prime public concern must be directed not toward particular known needs but toward the conditions for the preservation of a spontaneous order which enables the individual to provide for their needs in manner not known to authority” (Hayek 2013, 170).

His solution is that:

because all the details of the changes constantly affecting the condition of demand and supply of the different commodities can never be fully known, or quickly enough be collected and disseminated, by any one centre, what is required is some apparatus of

²⁰ Hayek understands the word ‘*catallaxy*’ to come from the Greek verb ‘*katalattein*’ – “to exchange”, but also “to receive into the community” and “to turn from enemy into friend” (Hayek 1988, 112).

registration which automatically records all the relevant effects of individual actions, and whose indications are at the same time the resultant of, and the guide for, all the individual decisions (Hayek 2011c, 51–52)

This “apparatus of registration” is of course the market’s price system, which functions as a “discovery procedure” (Hayek 2013, 276) – a “marvel” that, according to him, should be “acclaimed as one of the greatest triumphs of the human mind” (Hayek 1945, 527). Prices constitute a “mechanism for communicating information” about the “significance” of the product for the other social agents of the market order (Hayek 1945, 525–26) or “the social importance of different occupations” (Hayek 2011c, 129). They indicate the product’s “subjective”, and therefore objective, value (1945, 526); the ‘just price’ social agents are ready to pay for it.²¹ Crucially, as I will go back to, Hayek sometimes reformulates the concept of ‘significance’ in terms of ‘desire’: he indicates, for instance, that the variations in prices give an account of “conflicts of desires which otherwise would have been overlooked” (Hayek 2013, 275). In other words, they mirror changes in taste and interest.

In addition, the price system functions as a knowledge processor: variations in price reflect the opportunities (or the lack thereof) that have been identified by other individual competitors according to their “knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place” (Hayek 1945, 522). They thus automatically signal opportunities of investment for entrepreneurial energies without having to resort to conscious collective decision-making. By rewarding the social occupations that are subjectively deemed useful by a sufficiently large number of individuals, the price system reveals what the collective good is (Hayek 2011c, 128) and nudges individual actors toward these activities. In so doing, it also automatically coordinates the actions of social actors. The price system constitutes for Hayek a “coherent structure” that brings social actors together despite the fact its “determinants are unknown” to them. They are the backbones of Hayek’s imaginary “great society” – the “purely ‘economic’” and “only ties” that hold it together (Hayek 2013, 272).

3.3 A purer symbolic realm?

The catallaxy can be compared with Lacan’s description of the entrance in the symbolic as a higher stage of subjectification. Unlike the narcissistic imaginary world of childhood (which characterised planning) – where the infant is solely absorbed in the immediate satisfaction of its barest needs, the symbolic is an inherently social realm where the agent is required to learn how

²¹ For Foucault’s take on the “just price”, see Foucault 2004a, 32.

to read the signs other people display in order to better interact with them. Socially interacting also entails accepting to defer the immediate satisfaction of our need and to ultimately have our satisfaction mediated by the help (that is, the labour) of others – a dis-satisfaction that explains why the realm of the symbolic is also associated with desire and the quest to locate the *objet a*. Desire and interdependence are both explicitly present in Hayek's catallaxy. What we are encouraged to pursue is the means of satisfying the wants of others. The catallaxy thus creates a miraculous coincidence between our desires and the desires of others (Dardot and Laval 2010, 260) – in a variation on the Smithian theme of the “invisible hand of the market” (Smith 1991). Nonetheless, the ‘catallactic’ symbolic order has some telling peculiarities. I argue that it particularly presents itself as a ‘purified’ symbolic realm – by which I mean a symbolic realm which has been entirely isolated from human conscious agency. The catallaxy is supposedly built on a triple layer of isolation (or, in Lacanian terms, mediation).

First, it is interesting to go back to Lacan's claim that the ‘capitalist discourse’ constitutes an inversion of the ‘discourse of the Master’ (see Chapter 1). The catallaxy is imagined by Hayek as an order which has been cleansed from any remnant of the ghost of the primordial father. Unlike Lacan's symbolic realm which is still constructed around the figure of the symbolic father,²² Hayek's catallaxy seems to radically do without any tutelary conscious authority (be it a god, a super-planner or a primordial father) – as does Schumpeter's capitalism (Schumpeter 1954, 74–75). All embodied authorities are condemned as inherently fallible and misleadingly moralising. Both Hayekian catallaxy and Schumpeterian capitalism are proclaimed to be led by no external transcendent purpose. They find their principles (or, in Schumpeter, their “impulse”) within themselves under the form of the price signals that echo their internal components' yearnings. They are a self-organised, auto-sufficient “cosmos” (Hayek 2013, 35) within which rewards are not attributed on the basis of any metaphysical (subjective) notion of merit, but, on the contrary, on the sole ability of certain superior internal agents to identify and fulfil other people's needs and desire.

The anti-metaphysical stance is tied to the promotion of automation as a libertarian principle. As the very terms used by Hayek testify – e.g. “impersonal and anonymous mechanism” (Hayek 2011c, 21), “mechanism for communicating information” (Hayek 1945, 526), “machinery” or “system of telecommunication” (1945, 527), the catallaxy is fantasised as a fully automated system. The mechanistic features of the market apparatus are believed to guarantee its

²² See for instance Lacan's concepts of the ‘Name-of-the-father’ or the ‘law and the father’.

neutrality and indifference. The machine has no intent: it simply mirrors what is already there, transparently computes immanent information about what people want. The monadic individual evolves in this world of automatically displayed signs, which she needs to decode in order to know what to strive for. She is made aware of what people need, while being left supremely free (as I explore in Chapter 5, entirely *responsible*) to decide how to interpret and use these oracles to shape her own destiny. The catallaxy thereby seems to fulfil (at first sight) the liberal dream of autonomy, and personal freedom – the dream of obeying *no one* but ourselves, of having *no-body* to tell us what to do.

Secondly, on top of the absence a superior conscious machinist (although, such a stance tellingly leaves out the machine's engineer), the machine is insulated from any attempt of control by the social agents themselves. As Hayek contends, prices will accurately mirror economic reality "only if competition prevails, that is, if the individual producer has to adapt himself to price changes and cannot control them" (Hayek 2011c, 52).²³ In other words, for the individual to live in an environment where nobody constrains him, he needs to be made powerless to change the structure of that environment (something I will go back to). Thirdly, the catallaxy's individual agent does not genuinely see his counterparts – at least not in their embodied form.²⁴ The signals he seems to have access to are not words or gestures (or other traditional semiotic mediums) but *prices* that reflect what an *invisible* other desires. Therefore, it is not what known interlocutors consciously and publicly say they want (which would require a certain level of self-awareness and direct agency) but, on the contrary, what their consumption (often unconscious) habits reveal them to truly want. In what I regard as another instance of defiance for human self-consciousness, Hayek seems to imply that our instinctive behaviour and unconscious tastes are more genuine and truthful than our consciously expressed intentions. What makes the catallaxy such an astute instrument is precisely that it is detached from the social agents' self-control, which gives it the ability to open a door on what is kept invisible in society, on the obscure yearnings and longings, on the repressed and non-verbalised.

3.4 The mirror of desire

Yet, the neoliberal claim to create a pure symbolic system, protected from the degenerating bent of human agency, is illusory. I demonstrate that the catallactic machinery is still very much

²³ This explains why neoliberal thinkers oppose any central control of prices by governments: it would necessarily disturb the fragile equilibrium that makes prices the reflection of reality.

²⁴ Hence the impression that the object of desire is solely self-referential (totally unmediated) in Lacan's 'capitalist discourse'.

entrapped in the snares of the imaginary and in its alienating propensities, which I highlighted in Chapter 2. This is striking when one considers further the instrument the price system is assimilated to: a panoptic mirror that allows people to constantly watch each other, without always properly recognising each other.

On one hand, when focusing on the mechanistic and neutral qualities of the catallaxy, Hayek has a tendency not to discuss the character of the material that is being reflected. And yet, that material is highly fantasmatic, as my comment on prices as reflecting non-verbalised and repressed desires suggested. Building the new social order around the price system entails engineering it to be responsive and attuned to its libidinal core. Moreover, prices are believed to be neutral signals, but as such they are unintentional; they belong to the order of the instinctual. They function as a passive mirror image. Crucially, as I argued in Chapter 2, Lacan's theories stress the unmediated dimension, or immediacy, of the image – as opposed to speech. Images are immediately grasped and only subsequently processed through the mediation of the symbolic function (McGowan 2004, 20), which complicates critical distancing. This is particularly striking in the mirror stage described by Lacan, which he places at the centre of the imaginary realm. The mirror stage is an experience of strong libidinal identification with one's reflection, an experience of alienation in the investment of an external image that is us and not us. In other words, I argue that the mirroring function of prices blurs the line between the subject's desire and the others' desire. Both come to merge with one another as the liminality of the mirror disappears. With the perpetual variations of prices, the subject is continually sent on new trails for what he believes to be his own object of desire, but what is in fact the desires of unknown others. This is perhaps what Lacan has in mind when he speaks of the cycle of consumption at the heart the capitalist discourse which continually reproduces itself ("like on wheels") until the subject's exhaustion.

On the other hand, as I explore further in Chapter 5, the catallaxy functions like a giant libidinal apparatus that is designed to trigger the social agents' desire so as to put their entrepreneurial force in motion. As Hayek argues, "a progressive society (...) recognises the desire it creates only as a spur to further effort" (Hayek 2011b, 98) and that effort is the very motor of the catallaxy as a machinery. To activate desire, the machinery turns itself again into a mirror. Since desire is "aroused by the examples of others", the structure displays in full view of everyone the "gifts" it grants to "some" (2011b, 98), as opposed to all. It exhibits the spectacular success of the few. By so doing, it appeals to people's mimetic competitive instincts ("imitation" being generally believed to motivate people's action (2011b, 98)).

Considering the role of mimetic aggregate behaviours in financial crises (Kindleberger 2000; MacKenzie 2003; Orléan 2009), it is worth questioning the validity of a utopian project that explicitly aims to trigger the spiral of mimetic desire. Moreover, one needs, here again, to interrogate the very status of the mirror as an instrument. Far from being neutral, as the figure of Narcissus reminds us, the mirror encourages an alienating and uncritical identification - a fascination - with the displayed models of success, which remain by definition out of our reach. Hayek seeks to present his machinery as liberating, because its mechanisms automatically mediate the subjects' interactions with others, while allowing them to keep control over their destiny. By contrast, I argue that the mirror constitutes a total absence of mediation; it encourages unmediated identification. Like Snow White's stepmother, consumed by her reflection in the mirror, we are not autonomous but viscerally led by the devastating information the mirror provides. We access unconstrained *jouissance* only on the imaginary level (Dardot and Laval 2010, 453), while being effectively submitted to the mirror's oracles.

3.5 The providential machine

There is thus a fundamental ambiguity at the heart of Hayek's defence of freedom, defined as autonomy within the market structure. Hayek (2011a) promotes (neo)liberalism as the philosophical trend that will liberate individual from the castrating arbitrary pressure of superior figures of authority – from customary and religious authorities to socialist providential figures. Within the market structure, the individual is believed to obey no one but himself. Nonetheless, the catallaxy does not get rid of all form of constraints – and does in no way aim at doing so. As Hayek plainly acknowledges (and as I discuss further in Chapter 5), it is a ruthless, “cruel” and castrating world, which creates frustrations and envy (“the pain of unfulfilled desire”) to better encourage “further effort” (Hayek 2011b, 98). Being driven by mimetic desire, it fundamentally requires inequality to function (2011b, 98). Yet, he believes we can all find solace in the fact that the obstacles to our desires are not determined by a conscious will, that “the obstacles in our path are not due to somebody disapproving of our ends but to the fact that the same means are also wanted elsewhere” (Hayek 2011c, 97). According to him, inequalities created by the market are less likely to lead to social unrest since they are the result of “nobody's conscious choice”; “[i]nequality is undoubtedly more readily borne, and affects the dignity of the personal much less, if it is determined by impersonal forces than when it is due to design” (Hayek 2011c, 110).

A good way to understand this contradiction is to highlight how, despite the neoliberal scholars' attempt to eliminate all transcendent figures of authority from their remaking of the social, their

vision still partakes in what Agamben calls the “providential paradigm” (2011, 285). In their theological genealogy of (neo)liberal economics, Agamben (2011) and Dotan Leshem (2016) invite us to consider the filiation that relates the market economy as a secular institution to scholastic economics (the latter deriving from the Greek *oikonomia*, the management of the household). Drawing on their works, Mitchell Dean demonstrates that the neoliberal concept of spontaneous ‘order’ is not an “empty signifier” but a “signature” that allows the neoliberal thinkers “to move between the mundane and the super-mundane, and the immanent and the transcendent” (2018, 19). This is particularly striking in the case of the catallactic machinery, which markedly resembles the “providential machine” that Agamben (2011) uncovers in scholastic works. The “providential machine” is a “bipolar” machinery (2011, 284) that combines God’s providence - that is, “the general principles of the organisation of the cosmos” or a divine order - with their administration and execution by “a subordinated, yet autonomous power”, fate (which Agamben conceptualises as a distributive, thus economic, mechanism) (2011, 128). The correlation between the two levels guarantees the liberty of the machine’s agents (2011, 141). For the medieval and early-modern Christian theologians, once God has created the world, He lets it unravel “as if it were without God and governs it as though it governs itself” (Bossuet in Agamben 2011, 286). Agamben connects this negative theology to Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” (2011, 283), while Dean extends it to the neoliberal concept of ‘order’. Undoubtedly, the catallactic machine that Hayek conceives is characterised, in his own words, by its inherent “marvel” (1945, 527). It belongs to the order of the miraculous. In other words, despite being rhetorically banished from the catallaxy, the divine still suffuses it – with important consequences.

As highlighted by Agamben, the bipolar constitution of the ‘providential machinery’ enables to legitimate what seems unjust and incomprehensible in daily reality with reference to the transcendental level of providence (Agamben 2011, 129). For instance, as stated above, inequality and poverty are made necessary by the spontaneous workings of providential catallaxy; they are externalities in the functioning of what is otherwise the ‘best of possible worlds’ (Leibniz).

To go one step further, the central consequence of the catallaxy being constructed as a providential machine is that it justifies the fact we should wilfully and absolutely submit to it and to its imaginary structures as they are our lifelines.²⁵ Due to the inherent defect of human

²⁵ One might think of the character of Mason, incarnated by Tilda Swinton in Bong Joon-ho’s dystopia *Snowpiercer* (2013), who fanatically proclaims that “eternal order is prescribed by the sacred engine: all

knowledge, yielding to a transcendent order – “to forces which we cannot understand nor can recognize”, “to the impersonal and seemingly irrational forces of the market” (Hayek 2011c, 210)” – is presented as the only way to guarantee individual autonomy and freedom.²⁶ In a particularly messianic passage of the *Road to Serfdom*, also noticed by Jessica Whyte (2017), Hayek goes as far as to link the very survival and regeneration of civilisation to submission. He proclaims:

It was men’s submission to the impersonal forces of the market that in the past has made possible the growth of a civilization which without this could not have developed; it is by thus submitting that we are everyday helping to build something that is greater than any one of us can fully comprehend (Hayek 2011c, 210).

Tellingly, when mentioning the “past”, Hayek makes explicit the analogy with religion: what guaranteed the “growth of civilization” in the past and kept in check human beings’ self-destructive ambitions was the fear of God. Hayek thus admires “the religious spirit of humility” or “humble awe” of the past, which made men submit to higher forces they accepted not to challenge, out of superstition (Hayek 2011c, 210). What I argue is that, despite Hayek’s attempt to confine religion to the past – as, for instance, when criticising the conservative’s tendency to resort to the “authority of supernatural sources of knowledge where his reason fails him” (Hayek 2011a, 528) - religiosity still imbues the attitude that Hayek advocates for his liberal hero of the present. According to Hayek, the liberal attitude requires a “fundamental belief in the long-run power of ideas” (Hayek 2011a, 526), a trust in “uncontrolled social forces” (2011a, 522), as well as a “faith in the spontaneous forces of adjustment which makes the liberal accept changes without apprehension, even though he does not know how the necessary adaptations will be brought about” (2011a, 522). Hayek wants to convince the more ‘rational’ men of the present to wilfully yield in front of the market’s marvel by resolutely recognising the limits of human knowledge and the superiority of the catallaxy. He demands what Philip Mirowski calls an “irrational leap of faith” (2013, 119). He requires us, collectively, to become believers, to accept the transcendent character of the imaginary order of the market; that is, its insulation from degenerative collective agency and from scrutiny. When constructing the catallaxy as a sacred order whose imaginary structures we should cherish, Hayek thus takes the opposite road from Castoriadis, who instead advocated for collectively regaining control over social imaginaries.

things flow from the sacred engine”. The train (as a metaphor of capitalism) is presented as the characters’ sole lifeline in a post-apocalyptic world.

²⁶ Otherwise, we will be submitted to the “equally uncontrollable and therefore arbitrary power of other men” (Hayek 2011c, 210).

Another consequence of the sacred aura bestowed on the catallactic machine, is that it opens the way for the legitimation of the market agents' sacrifice when the integrity of the market infrastructure is threatened – an idea I develop further in Chapter 5. Wendy Brown interestingly uses the concept of “sacrificial citizenship” to denounce how individuals are today encouraged to accept their sacrifice to protect “the project of economic growth” on which general welfare is argued to depend (2016, 9). Furthermore, because the rules of the catallaxy are the “only values common to all and distinct from the particular ends of individual” (Hayek 2013, 183), they must be preserved at all cost – including the full power of the sovereign state and institutions, “even in their most authoritarian expressions” (Walker and Cooper 2011, 150). The “master or god to be blindly worshipped and served” is no longer Friedman’s state Leviathan (Friedman 2002, 2), but the faceless catallaxy.

3.6 Beyond limits

Crucially, the attitude of faith advocated by Hayek centres on the spiritual acceptance of the limitations of human knowledge as the only way through which these inherent ‘human, all too human’ boundaries (to play with the title of Nietzsche’s book) might be transcended. Respectfully yielding in front of the ‘sacred engine’ of the catallaxy and its computing power is what will enable us to ultimately overcome the immanent limits to our intellectual and corporal abilities as humans. It will open the doors of the “unknown” or “non-yet known” (Hayek 2011b, 94), the “new and the strange” (Hayek 2011a, 526). It will lead “man beyond what he could have ever conceived” (Hayek 1978, 68). The distrust for conscious decision-making can be read in the same way: what the mechanistic of the price system allows us to access is a level *beyond* consciousness, where all dreams and fantasies are given an expression. The potential realisation of these dreams might lead society *beyond* its crumbling present, might open new dimensions otherwise closed by overcautious and killjoy reason. To revisit Melinda Cooper’s remark in a different context, this is part of how neoliberalism intends to “efface the boundaries between (...) the market and living tissues” (2008, 9),²⁷ a merging of life in the inanimate cogs of the machine that has inspired accelerationism.²⁸

As Cooper compellingly argues, “the essentially speculative but nonetheless productive movement of collective belief, faith and apprehension” is central to the “operative emotion of

²⁷ In her original sentence, Cooper – drawing on Marx – denounces the neoliberal “intent to efface the boundaries between the sphere of production and reproduction, labor and life, the market and the living tissues”.

²⁸ See Benjamin Noys (2014) on Nick Land’s accelerationism.

neoliberalism” (2008, 10), and should therefore be highlighted. What makes neoliberal philosophy captivating is not its discourses on interest and rational expectation but its call for spiritual transcendence and for the surpassing of the self. Yet, as I argue in the following chapters, crossing limits and going *beyond* is far from neutral according to psychoanalytical theories. Both Freud and Lacan invite us to consider that what lies *beyond* the pleasure principle is the death drive. What is worshipped by the neoliberal thinkers as a force of life and spontaneity, might indeed ultimately be a force of death and stillness - the stillness of the machine.

From this perspective, I want to finish by briefly recalling the contradictions I found at the heart of Hayek’s depiction of his imaginary market order. The catallaxy is non-religious, to the extent it is designed to do away with the arbitrary domination of gods or rulers with a human face, yet it requires an attitude of blind submission to, and faith in, the ‘sacred engine’. Hayek and his colleagues equate equilibrium with death and dedicate their imaginary order to uncertainty as a force of life, yet they acknowledge that some stability (or equilibrium) is needed within for free initiative to flourish. At the very same time, they also refuse to guarantee any protection to individuals to better nurture their constant adaptability and to force them to surpass themselves. Generally, the neoliberal thinkers claim to fight for the creative advent of the new, yet such a commitment results in inscribing destruction as well as the non-living machine at the core of its infrastructure.

Such an intermeshing of the animate and the inanimate, creative and the destructive should not come as any surprise if we follow Lacan’s critique of Freud’s work on the life and death drives. Lacan particularly rejected Freud’s understanding of the death drive as a return to the inanimate. For Lacan, “the drive as such, and to the extent that it is then a destruction drive, must be beyond the tendency to a return to the inanimate”; it is a “destruction drive, to the extent that it questions what exists. But it is also a will to create from nothing, a will to begin again” (Lacan 1986, 251). Lacan invites us to understand the death drive as a “creating sublimation” (“*une sublimation créationniste*”) (1986, 251). In other words, *contra* Freud, life and death drives should not be separated; they are fundamentally two faces of the same drive. Lacan demonstrates that there is a “paradoxical identity between the death drive and the realisation of a fuller vitality” (Boothby 2001, 151). To go back to neoliberal theory, this means that when Hayek and his colleagues claim to represent the “party of life” and castigate planning for its pathological stillness, they misunderstand (or obfuscate?) the fundamental connections between life and death. Building the new order around untamed creative impulse can only result

in fully consecrating it to the party of destruction and death – as death is hailed as the ultimate source of renewal.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how neoliberal canonical texts participate in the reconstruction of the social around a utopian market order, the catallaxy. Taken together, they form a cohesive imaginary that provides a conceptualisation of what constitutes the social, of the ties that bind social agents together into a coherent whole. They furthermore give articulation to a network of fantasies about life as perpetual movement and creative destruction, as well as death as degenerative stillness.

I demonstrated that the catallaxy is glorified for its ability to coordinate human interactions without imposing any arbitrary and overarching embodied vision of what society should look like. It is perceived as the only social organisation that can unleash the full potential of human creativity and thus guarantee the renewal of the social order – sweeping all the restrictions and barriers placed on its path by individual planners out of their secular mistrust for the marvellous forces they cannot comprehend. The spontaneous order of the catallaxy is thus hailed as representing the “party of life”. Because of its miraculous ability, we are encouraged to invest it with the full strength of our faith and to unreservedly submit to it as our sole lifeline. Submission and sacrifice are thus paradoxically deemed to be liberating.

Despite its attempt to present itself as a pure symbolic order, I argued that the catallaxy is nonetheless trapped in the snares of the imaginary. The signs its machinery automatically displays are still anchored in the libidinality of the body, while its specular structure encourages immediate - that is, uncritical - identifications that stimulate narcissistic drives. In addition, my analysis has uncovered a series of contradictions or paradoxes at the core of the neoliberal imaginary apparatus. The dichotomy between the liberation of the individual from embodied authorities and her submission to the machine is one of them. The same can be said of the neoliberal authors’ rejection of religion and their advocacy of faith in the market. Or, of their celebration of life in concomitance with their championing of the faultless engine of the market over the fallibility and fragility of the living tissues that make its cogs.

My aim has been to demonstrate that such contradictions are not debilitating but are precisely part of the perpetual renewal movement neoliberal theory seeks to put into place through its celebration of disruption as a life principle. In other words, yes, neoliberalism is unstable but, as

Melinda Cooper (2008) brilliantly demonstrates, it thrives on disturbances, flourishes in extreme conditions. To reformulate this in the lights of Lacan's work, the neoliberal attempt to separate life in the catallaxy from death in planning is deceptive. Its consecration of human societies to the "party of life" ends up reconstructing them around and tying them to the principle of destructive uncertainty.

Chapter 5. Guts, ordeal and sacrifice: an anatomy of neoliberalism's imaginary market agents

“[W]hoever has learnt to think of [society] as the continuing, painful birth of those exalted men of culture in whose service everything else has to consume itself, will no longer be deceived by that false gloss the moderns have spread over the origin and meaning of the state.”

Nietzsche, *On the genealogy of morality* (2017)

Introduction

Chapter 5 further investigates the themes I uncovered in Chapter 4 – life as movement, death as stillness and disruptive uncertainty – by focusing on the imaginary actors that populate the catallaxy. I want to enquire into how the neoliberal thinkers conceive these actors and their interactions with the catallaxy's infrastructures, as these infrastructures organise a hostile “world of uncertainty” (Knight 1965, 199) where “facts change in an unpredictable manner” (Hayek 2013, 101). Crucially, the neoliberal thinkers' understanding of the individual self is fundamentally intertwined with their way of conceiving society. This is particularly striking in Hayek's definition of “true individualism” as a “theory of society, an attempt to understand the forces which determine the social life of man” (Hayek 1948, 6).¹ For Hayek, “[men's] whole nature and character is determined by their existence in society” (1948, 6).²

The chapter develops Foucault's analysis on governmentality as the production of an active subject and a subjected object – and, above all, a useful individual (see Dardot and Laval 2010, 409). This leads me to slightly rework, through Lacanian psychoanalysis, Foucault's interpretation of *homo oeconomicus* as the “entrepreneur of the self” (Foucault 2004a). To

¹ Hayek's stance thus complicates Thatcher's assertion that “there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families” (see Harvey 2005, 23). As I detail throughout the chapter, for Hayek human beings are fundamentally social, but social interactions are conflated with economic ties (Hayek 2013, 272).

² Rather unsurprisingly, Hayek conceives humanity exclusively in masculine terms.

perform this reworking, I examine the views on human nature developed in the canonical texts I selected. I then investigate how the catallaxy is a machinery designed to generate a certain ethos deemed compatible with its central aim: the constant stimulation of movement as the way to continually produce the new. It seeks to produce subjectivities that are congruent with its symbolic structures and the neoliberal values – thus illustrating an attribute of imaginaries mentioned by Castoriadis (1999d, 209).

Necessarily, certain subjectivities cannot fit in the catallaxy's structure. Therefore, I conclude the chapter by showing how the neoliberal thinkers actively foster a hierarchy between the successful few and those who failed or/and can only follow. Although all agents in the market are allegedly treated neutrally and equally by being exposed to the same rules, the neoliberal thinkers do not consider them to be "equal in their natural endowments and capacities" (Hayek 1948, 15). The catallaxy is the instrument that reveals the superior few by exposing all to the inflexible rules of uncertainty; it distinguishes those whose instincts are best attuned to recognising the signs it displays and to metamorphosing themselves accordingly. I compare this process to the 'ordeal', an ancient judicial practice that used the inflection of pain as a way to trigger the manifestation of God's judgement on the accused's innocence or guilt. This analysis leads me to explore further the religious dimension of the neoliberal market order. I argue that the catallaxy acts as a cruel divinity that demands constant attention and investments from its subjects to recognise its omen and make sacrifices; it punishes those who fail and spectacularly rewards those who prevail.

1. *Homo Œconomicus*

The first part of the chapter examines how the thinkers of my corpus conceptualise human nature and the self, so as to bring to the fore the main features of the imaginary personae that populate the catallaxy. This leads me to rework with the help of psychoanalytical theory, the figure of *homo œconomicus* famously analysed by Foucault in the *Birth of Biopolitics* (2004a) as part of his reading of Gary Becker's work. *Homo œconomicus* has been associated with neoliberalism as a central part of neoliberalism's "dissemination of market metrics to all spheres of life" (Brown 2015, 82). Stating that neoliberal theory conceptualises man as an 'economic man' entails that it presupposes all human beings to be animated by an economic behaviour; that is, by constant evaluations of opportunities, by calculations of efficiencies and by a will to maximise their self-interested actions. It also means that neoliberalism conceives of the self as an economy (Engelmann 2003). Furthermore, when used by scholars like Wendy Brown, the

expression suggests that, in the neoliberal era, the ‘political man’ celebrated in classical philosophy tends to disappear under the pressure of market rationality: the private man of the *oikos* eclipses the public man of the *polis* (Brown 2015, 87-99).

There are two main trends in the scholarship on the neoliberal *homo œconomicus*. The first derives from and revises Foucault’s analyses (Brown 2016; Feher 2017). It focuses on how neoliberal theory reworks the figure of *homo œconomicus* found in classical liberalism, with a passage from “an image of man as a creature of needs satisfied through exchange” to “an image of man as an entrepreneur of himself” (Brown 2015, 82; see also Foucault 2004a, 232). Brown adds that the neoliberal *homo œconomicus* is a responsabilised individual (2015, 84), who is forced to internalise the consequence of his choice (Cooper 2017, 174). She argues that such a partial view of what it is to be human is now hegemonic; it has become “normative across all spheres, and (...) *the governing truth of public life, social life, work life, welfare, education and the family*” (Brown 2015, 104).

The second trend brings to light differences within the neoliberal tradition when conceptualising the self. Nicholas Gane (2013) examines the divergences between the late Chicago School and the Austrian School when it comes to *homo œconomicus*. Following Gane’s insights, my reading compares and differentiates the Beckerian and Hayekian understandings of the individual self. Yet, I find in both a common reliance on human instinctual knowledge, which I thus analyse via psychoanalytical theory so as to emphasise the instinctive and embodied character given to the fictional inhabitants of the catallaxy.

1.1 Anatomy of the economic man

Despite their differences, Becker and Hayek both claim to objectively depict human-ness, without recognising the performative dimension of their interventions.³ As I suggest below, their understandings of human behaviour do not avoid normativity – starting with their core “methodological individualism”, which translates all social phenomena in terms of the properties, goals and beliefs of individuals (Hodgson 1994, 409).⁴

³ This follows a similar pattern as the one described in Ian Bruff and Kathryn Starnes’s (2019) analysis of Hayek’s and Friedman’s rhetorical construction of free markets.

⁴ Hodgson focuses on Hayek and Misses, but the same could be said for Becker and Friedman.

1.1.1 Becker's *homo oeconomicus*

Becker's understanding of human behaviour tends to be taken as a model in the scholarship on the figure of the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* (Brown 2015; Engelmann 2003). Strikingly, the individuals that populate Becker's world are relentless utility maximisers. They calculate the outcome of their decisions and actions at each moment of their daily life. With his customary lack of nuance, Becker states that "[a]ll human behavior can be viewed as involving participants who maximize their utility from a stable set of preferences and accumulate an optimal amount of information and other inputs in a variety of markets" (Becker 1976b, 14). Human beings are thus imagined as fundamentally rational. Specifically, "[s]elf-interest is assumed to dominate other motives", with the crucial exception that "a prominent place also assigned to benevolence toward children" (Becker 1976a, 817). This exception is explicable through the centrality given to the family unit in the neoliberal imaginary, as analysed by Melinda Cooper (2017). In the absence of any kind of state-funded social security net, the family takes on a critical role in filling in the gaps that would once have been filled by the welfare state; it becomes the only acceptable buffer to alleviate the externalities generated by uncertainty.

With Becker, we therefore end up with a minimalistic understanding of the self. Human psychology becomes reduced to a few attributes, such as rational calculation, self-interestedness and utility maximisation. One can distinguish two tendencies in this construction. On the one hand, human beings are fundamentally inward-looking and self-interested. They only listen to their longing, identify their pleasure, evaluate their choices, gauge their actions (Engelmann 2003).⁵ On the other hand, they are seen as radically responsive to fluctuations in their environment. They constantly adapt to circumstances to better maximise their utility.

When combined, these two tendencies paradoxically give the impression that Becker's economic agents are frozen stereotypes (see Mirowski 2013, 135). Rather than displaying the complexity and randomness of living matter, Becker's characters are more like monomaniacal (but entirely predictable) automatons, characterised by unidimensional psychological traits and reducible to easily expressed binaries. The Beckerian gallery of characters is inhabited, to mention just a few, by "egoists" and "altruists" (Becker 1976a), happy and "very unhappy or

⁵ Engelmann (2003) argues that this introspective attitude is the legacy of Jeremy Bentham's definition of utility as the maximization of pleasure. He adds that despite its individualist scope, neoliberal theory as exemplified in Becker's work still assumes that individuals' choices and imagined expectations are commensurable with each other – thus signalling that, like for Hayek, they are made compatible and integrated within a social whole.

miserable individuals” (Becker and Posner 2004, 1). These subjects are given a rigid set of subject positions to occupy (the selfish wife, the altruistic daughter, the “rotten kid” (to whom is dedicated a “theorem”) or whatever (Becker 1976b; 1991)), from which positions they are expected to respond like plants to the stimulating sunlight of the market, moving while also fixed in place. There is no place for nuance; no competing and conflicting feelings. For instance, the ‘rotten kid’ is purely selfish: all signs of care and love he might show to his parents and siblings (or any decisions not to ‘harm’ them) are purely instrumental, based on the child’s understanding that his own thriving is tied to his family’s thriving (Becker 1991, 288).

This fixity is of course part of Becker’s attempt as an economist to simplify the randomness of human behaviour so as to better model it with mathematics. His “economic approach” is explicitly characterised by three “combined assumptions”, which include “market equilibrium” and “maximizing behavior”, but also, more peculiarly, “stable preferences” (Becker 1976b, 5). This hypothesis assumes tastes have “basic and enduring properties”, that they are relatively stable and unchanging in their structure and can thus be considered as “given” (Becker 1976a, 817). The preferences of each individual are hence the product of the conflation of the given tastes and interests attributed to the socio-economic categories that constitute them, such as gender, race, religion, wealth and marital status.⁶ The deep-seated preferences of the market agents (that is, their desires) appear to be frozen in time. Any detailed interpretative discussion of these tastes is delegated “to the sociologist, psychologist, or anthropologist” (Becker 1976a, 817).

From these human automatons to the ‘skill-machines’ described by Foucault, there is only one step. In the same way that one psychological trait comes to characterise the individual, “skills come to form one body with the worker” to become a “productive machine” (Foucault 2004a, 230). As productive machines, individuals also necessarily become a form of capital – a human capital with its specific obsolescence and longevity (2004a, 231). They invest in the development of their skills to be better employable; from the man of exchange of classical liberalism, *homo oeconomicus* becomes entrepreneur of the self (2004a, 232).

⁶ For instance, a rich and religious male individual will have different preferences when it comes to having children than a poor and atheist female individual. The preferences of each category can be mathematically calculated to determine what the preference of the target individual will be (Becker 1991; 1976b).

1.1.2 Hayek's individual

In contrast, Hayek straightforwardly rejects the “bogy of the ‘economic man’” (Hayek 1948, 11; see also Gane 2013, 15). He is hostile to what he calls a ‘rationalistic’ philosophy of ‘false individualism’ (or Cartesianism), which “assumes that Reason, with a capital *R*, is always fully and equally available to all humans and that everything which man achieves is the direct result of, and therefore subject to, the control of individual reason” (Hayek 1948, 8). Identifying himself instead with the “true individualism” of Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith, Hayek advocates considering man “not as a highly rational and intelligent but as a very irrational and fallible being” (1948, 8).

In his reinterpretation of classical liberalism, Hayek also denies that individualism means that human beings are fundamentally egoistic “in the narrow sense of concern with only the immediate needs of one's proper person” (Hayek 1948, 13). The “self” at the centre of self-interest may also include “family and friends” (1948, 13). Generally, as I mentioned in the chapter's introduction, individuals cannot be separated from their social environment. They are not “isolated or self-contained” but “determined by their existence in society” in their whole nature and character (1948, 6). In a reworking of the theme of the ‘invisible hand’, it is the very inclusion of the individual agents inside the coherent whole of society that has the power of cancelling out their potential irrationality. Nonetheless, the “ties” that hold society together are “purely ‘economic’”; social interactions are based on economic exchanges (Hayek 2013, 272).⁷

It is important to stress that Hayek does not genuinely give his own interpretation of human nature. He instead hides behind his re-reading of the classical liberal thinkers. Rather than the rather outrageous types depicted by Becker, his market agents thus seem mysterious and faceless. They might be selfish or might not, they might be inherently “good” or “bad”, “intelligent” or “stupid” – we cannot know for sure, hence the superiority of the catallaxy, which does not rely on the morality of its agents for its optimal functioning (Hayek 1948, 12). The market agents' inner motivations and psychology are fundamentally inaccessible to the “social scientist”; instead Hayek agrees with Becker that this is a task for “psychology but not for economics” (Hayek 1948, 67).⁸ For this reason, despite their anonymity and like their Beckerian

⁷ For this reason, Hayek considers that there can be no genuine solidarity beyond the immediately personal sphere. Altruism is only granted to the people one knows in person (Hayek 1948, 14). Similarly, one will be more inclined to sacrifice “unknown lives” when needs be (Hayek 1988, 132).

⁸ Consequently, Hayek admits that he still needs to use “classifications”, with the assumptions that come with it. According to Hodgson, Hayek thus does not completely escape neoclassical economics' tendency to take the ‘individual’, as a category, for granted (Hodgson 1994, 410). This is the prime

counterparts, the Hayekian individuals come with psychological assumptions (or programming) that are themselves kept outside the social scientist's scrutiny. The economics advocated by both Hayek and Becker is fundamentally behavioural: one can only analyse people's actions (assumed to be the product of utility calculation) to estimate what their motivations might have been.

Here again, the apparent fixity of the Hayekian individuals is displaced by the imperative that weighs on their shoulders to constantly adapt and "adjust" themselves to change (Hayek 1948, 22) – an imperative that I will analyse in further details throughout the remaining chapters. To be fully responsive to new demands, subjects are required to be ready to transform themselves at all times, to take on new activities and, by extension, a new identity (Dardot and Laval 2010, 412). Mirowski thus speaks of a "constantly revised self" (Mirowski 2013, 133). The individual subject is thrown into a ceaseless and iterative process of self-fashioning. She does not work toward an attainable self-completion (as perhaps suggested by Foucault's 'skill-machines') but is, on the contrary, expected to work on herself perpetually. To reformulate this in psychoanalytical terms, neoliberal subjects are not allowed to settle in one imaginary representation for too long. Although the catallaxy functions as a giant mirror that reflects (as detailed later in the chapters) the images of different social models, its agents cannot remain motionless, with the implication being that stasis is analogous to petrification or fossilization. To draw on the Freudian categories I introduced in Chapter 4, the forced movement that is imposed on them is what breathes life into the automatons and animates them; it is the life drives that disrupt the dead-bound fixity of the still imaginary matter. It introduces fluidity in otherwise fixed personalities.

1.2 The rational and the subconscious

I will now return to the apparent differences between Becker's and Hayek's positions on rationality to show that they are less incompatible than they seem.

On the one hand, Hayek's individuals might well be at first sight "irrational and fallible". But they also need to be calculating if they are to "fit their plans in with those of others" (Hayek 1945, 521). Again, what Hayek rejects is a certain kind of "scientific" rationality that presupposes perfect knowledge and omniscience. He still very much admires a second kind of, less conscious

defect of "methodological individualism": all social phenomena are explained in term of individual preferences, yet the theory takes these as already given or out of the reach of scientific scrutiny.

and more instinctual, rationality – what he calls “the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place” (1945, 521) based on practical experience. This experiential knowledge is a rationality of “constant deliberate adjustments” and adaptation in decision-making to shifting information and the irruption of the new (1945, 524). A similar analysis can be found in Frank Knight’s writings on the “psychology of ordinary conduct” (Knight 1965, 230). He differentiates the “subconscious” mental processes present in everyday affairs and opinions (which demands quick evaluations, deliberations and decisions) from the “knowledge of the scientist”, and crucially compares the former with the “subconscious processes of ‘intuition’” (Knight 1965, 230).

On the other hand, as I explore in greater detail in Chapter 7, Becker’s rational choice theory cannot ignore what might appear like irrational choices and failings. If individuals are utility maximisers who constantly calculate the result of their actions and attempt to take advantage of all opportunities to make them profitable at all times, how are we to explain that some people drink themselves to death or commit suicide, or simply pick up a less profitable option? In his *Economic Approach to Human Behavior*, Becker argues that instead of taking “refuge in assertions about irrationality”, an “economic approach” should assume that what seems to the majority of people to be the more rational or profitable option might have for some individuals “monetary and psychic” costs that “eliminate their profitability” (Becker 1976b, 7). When life has become unbearable, death might have more “utility”, hence decisions not to invest further in life (Becker and Posner 2004, 6). In other words, all kinds of behaviours, no matter how self-defeating, can be reformulated in terms of rational choice. To go a step further, Becker believes that the individuals’ efforts at maximisation might not be “necessarily conscious”, which, as he conveniently indicates, is “consistent with the emphasis on the subconscious in modern psychology” (Becker 1976b, 7). As in Hayek and Knight, rational calculation here belongs to the realm of the unconscious, of the intuitive; it is an essential reflex that needs not to be noticed and intellectualised by the subject.⁹

What I suggest is that by appealing to this kind of subconscious, instinctive knowledge, neoliberal thinkers are seeking to stimulate the subjects’ drives. They operate to bring to the surface gut feelings and physical desires and needs. To use Lacan’s words, they seek to trigger the “speaking body” as the seat of real *jouissance*. Rather than appealing to the subject’s

⁹ Foucault similarly argues that Becker’s “economic analysis” goes “beyond rational behaviours”; it is about “responding in a systematic way to modifications in the environment variables” (Foucault 2004a, 273).

thinking substance, they want the body to speak as an “enjoying substance” (*substance jouissante*) (Lacan 2016, 33).

1.3 Desiring agents

The status given to affects and emotions in the texts of my corpus illustrates the neoliberal imaginary’s reliance on the “enjoying substance” of the speaking body. Within these texts, the realm of affects comes to constitute a separate sphere from which neoliberal economic theory remains aloof – as it cannot interpret or ‘explain’ it. Yet, affects are, at the same time, central to the way market agents are imagined to behave. The economist cannot have access to people’s minds; yet, people are still believed to be led by their emotions.

This tautology is particularly striking in Hayek’s work. As I noted in Chapter 4, the imaginary characters that populate Hayek’s world are driven by their libidinal instincts and desires. They participate in what I qualify as a deeply corporeal and visceral vision of social and economic interactions. For instance, in *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Hayek claims that although collective rules and conventions tell agents *how* they will be “allowed to achieve” what they want, the actual content of what each individual wants will be determined by their “emotion and impulse” (Hayek 2013, 179). These impulses and emotions can be acted upon, as the *Constitution of Liberty* makes clear, by turning desire into a “spur to further progress” (Hayek 2011b, 98). As I explore in the second part of the chapter, the catallaxy is designed to cultivate a permanent desiring attitude in its inhabitants by creating “unsatisfied wants” (2011b, 98) – that is, cravings and aspirations that it both fashions and frustrates to stimulate entrepreneurial initiatives. Despite the fact these desires are cultural and “usually no longer physical needs” (2011b, 98), they nonetheless remain anchored in the body through the feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction.

Although desire is imagined by Hayek as the motor that drives civilization forward, he nonetheless recognises it is potentially (self)-destructive. The ambivalence of desire, for instance, materialises in “our occasional impetuous desire to smash the whole entangling machinery of civilisation” due to “the inability of man to understand what he is doing” (Hayek 2011b, 76). In other words, our inability to grasp the marvellous mechanisms of the catallaxy creates “resentment rather than wonder and curiosity” (2011b, 76) and leads us to attempt to smash the source of our collective and individual prosperity.

Desire has a similar double-edged dimension in Gary Becker's work. People's actions are understood to be driven by their (presupposed fixed) tastes and preferences. As I mentioned above and develop in greater length in Chapter 7, Becker also acknowledges that people might have self-destructive tastes, like smoking, over-eating or taking drugs (Becker and Posner 2004, 1).¹⁰ Such rationale takes an even grimmer turn in the writings of one of Becker's regular co-authors at the Chicago School, Richard Posner. In his analysis of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States, Posner states that a large number of people who caught the disease have given more utility to sexual pleasure than to health; their desire for bodily pleasure has outmatched their desire for life (Philipson and Posner 1993). In Becker and Posner's works, the "death wish" (Becker 1976b, 10) competes with the "desire to live" (Becker and Posner 2004, 13). This insistence on the ambivalence of desire is compatible with Freud and Lacan's theories on the "paradoxical origins of desire" (Lacan 1986, 13). As I explained in the preceding chapters, in psychoanalysis, desire is both what drives the individual forward, and what is fundamentally connected with *jouissance*. In Lacanian theory, the collapse of imaginary and symbolic structures that *jouissance* induces is desired because our mental constructions tend to be felt (resented)¹¹ as a form of alienating bondage (Boothby 1991, 70; Ruti 2012, 21). By constantly stimulating its agents' desire, by forcing them to knot their desire to the desire of the Other, the catallaxy invites the agents to go beyond themselves – opening the floodgates to *jouissance*.

2. Embracing the catallactic ordeal

Although the market agents' drives are taken as a given in neoliberal theory, they constitute a central piece of the catallaxy's engineering. As Foucault pointed out, drives can be stimulated and manipulated to obtain certain responses (Foucault 2004a, 274). Now that the individual self has been conceptualised as driven by its instincts, it becomes a pliable surface fully responsive to nudges. The second part of the chapter thus explores how the catallaxy stands as a life-size social experiment that aims at producing certain personalities or, in Hayek's words, at "breeding certain types of mind" – a "commercial spirit" (Hayek 2013, 413–14). I discuss below some of the mechanisms by which this commercial ethos is produced.

¹⁰ Similarly, Hayek argues that people might enjoy precarious ways of life, like working "irregular hours" or "happy go lucky existence with a small and perhaps uncertain income" (Hayek 2011c, 99). In a puzzling variation, Friedman glorifies those who reject compulsory health insurance. As he claims, "True, the number of citizens who regard compulsory old age insurance as a deprivation of freedom may be few, but the believer in freedom has never counted noses" (Friedman 2002, 8). Here freedom trumps protection.

¹¹ It is interesting to consider that the French verb for 'feel', '*ressentir*', can also mean 'resent'.

2.1 An economy of pain

As I suggested above, one of the prime mechanisms to foster this ‘commercial spirit’ is the stimulation of desire through the creation of new imaginary needs that no longer automatically correspond to the reproduction of ‘bare life’. The catallaxy particularly acts on the triggering of mimetic desire.¹² As such, it amplifies a mimetic phenomenon that is generally already at work in the functioning of desire. Lacan specifically highlights that the individual supports her desire by “coupling it, knotting it” to what she believes to be the desire of the Big Other (Lacan 2004, 33). She localises her desire in the fantasmatic image of the desire of the Other (see Chapter 2). As a giant mirror, the catallaxy precisely constantly holds up the image of the successful few in front of the majority of followers. In so doing, “it increases the desire of all in proportion as it increases its gift to some” (Hayek 2011b, 98).

In other words, the catallaxy is a machinery that produces envy and frustration as a way to stimulate and motivate its market agents in their entrepreneurial pursuits. What I want to stress again is the corporeal and visceral dimension of this mechanism. Using desire as a ‘spur’ equates to inflicting pain – something explicitly acknowledged by Hayek when he admits that his “progressive society” (the catallaxy) appears “cruel” because it “disregards the pain of unfulfilled desire aroused by the examples of others” (Hayek 2011b, 98). Pain and frustration are nonetheless necessary as they are granted a social function. The very adaptation and progress of the ‘Great Society’ are seen as inherently relying on the “constant undesigned frustration of some efforts” (Hayek 2013, 171), on the fact “that someone is going to be hurt, that someone’s expectations will be disappointed and his effort frustrated” (Hayek 2013, 61).¹³ Pain and frustration are endowed with energetic properties; they become the motor of social progress.

Nonetheless, like all sources of energy, they are potentially overwhelming and thus need to be used carefully, with economy – hence careful considerations on the right amount of pain that needs to be applied. For instance, people need to “achieve usefulness at a minimum of pain and

¹² Tellingly, mimetic desire (mediated through the work of René Girard) will be found in Chapter 6 to be central to the fantasmatic scenarios developed by Peter Thiel. Furthermore, the fact mimetic desire is amplified by a mechanical intervention to put agents in motion shows how, in the neoliberal worldview, human behaviour can be bent and modified. This idea is developed in Richard H. Thaler’s work on nudges.

¹³ A similar violence is at work in Schumpeter’s concept of ‘creative destruction’. He explicitly states that “[p]rogress entails (...) the destruction of capital values in the strata with which the new commodity or method of production competes. In perfect competition, the old investment must be adapted at a sacrifice or abandoned” (Schumpeter 1954, 96).

sacrifice” (Hayek 2011b, 160).¹⁴ An enlightening parallel can be here drawn with Freud’s “economic” reflections on the “quantity of excitation that is present in the mind” (Freud 2013, 1), which I mentioned in Chapter 4. In the Hayekian economy of pain, ‘unpleasure’ is not discarded because it corresponds to the very ‘increase in the quantity of excitation’ that keeps the catallatic system running.

2.2 Sacrifice

Sacrifice and the ordeal are two other breeding mechanisms of this economy of pain. The prevalence of the theme of sacrifice has also been pointed by Wendy Brown, who argues that, with the passage from classical liberalism to neoliberalism, the “throne of interest” is replaced by the “throne of sacrifice” (Brown 2015, 84). As I briefly discussed in Chapter 4, Brown uses the trope of sacrifice to highlight how, with neoliberalism, the “sacrificial citizen” is made available to be “sacrificed to capital’s needs” (Brown 2016, 9). The subject internalises its “oblatory status” by being encouraged to accept to “empt[y] itself for a higher purpose”: the safeguarding of the “project of economic growth” (2016, 11). While I agree with Brown, I suggest that the demand for sacrifice takes on an even deeper ontological and existential dimension. The subject is not only inculcated to accept its sacrifice for the well-being of the catallaxy as a transcendent (and thus external) principle, it is also incited to consider sacrifice as an opportunity for self-realisation. As I demonstrate below, the external and internal reach of the act of sacrifice are intrinsically intertwined in the texts of my corpus.

The term ‘sacrifice’ is often used by Hayek and Schumpeter, but also by Becker. In Schumpeter, ‘sacrifice’ relates to the necessity for existing investments to adapt to the disruptions caused by the of creative destruction” (Schumpeter 1954, 84). In his words, the “old investment must be adapted at a sacrifice or abandoned” (1954, 96). The ‘sacrifice’ here is the ‘pound of flesh’ that the capitalist accepts to lose as the price for adaptation and thus survival. It is like a consented offering to the god of “creative destruction”. In the *Fatal Conceit*,¹⁵ Hayek adopts an even

¹⁴ This vision of pain as an instrument of social engineering strongly resonates with utilitarian philosophy, and particularly with the work of Jeremy Bentham (2000), for whom individuals are animated by their pursuit of pleasure and their avoidance of pain. What I suggest is that, by contrast, pain and pleasure are radically imbricated in the neoliberal vision. Despite economic considerations on the right amount of pain, seeking pleasure becomes an experience of pain and frustration in the Hayekian imaginary.

¹⁵ Hayek’s authorship of the *Fatal Conceit* has been questioned by Bruce Caldwell (2000) who argues that parts of the book were written by its editor, William Warren Bartley. Nonetheless, this is relatively unimportant for my work which focuses on a pluri-authored corpus of canonical neoliberal texts as a site where a distinctive imaginary is elaborated. As such, the *Fatal Conceit* finds its place there because of its posterity in neoliberal circles.

stronger Neo-Darwinist tone when discussing how “the calculus of costs is a calculus of lives” (Hayek 1988, 132). As I discuss in the last part of the chapter, “[t]he requirement of preserving the maximum number of lives is not that all individual lives be regarded as equally important” (1988, 132). Some lives are worth more than others. To take an example that is particularly resonant in the context of Covid-19, Hayek claims that the life of a doctor is more valuable than that of his patients (1988, 132). The “question of sacrificing a few lives in order to serve a larger number” has thus to be considered (1988, 132). In this vision where biopower (Foucault 1997) and necropower (Mbembe 2006) meet, the less-socially-useful, the obsolete might be sacrificed to the preservation of the productive ones.

Hayek uses the concept of sacrifice in another context that might seem at first sight in tension with his readiness to sacrifice the less-useful. In the *Road to Serfdom*, he argues that a “competitive society” is not exclusionary since the “less able or less suitable (...), if they value the position sufficiently, (...) will frequently be able to get a start by a financial sacrifice and will later make good through qualities which at first are not so obvious” (Hayek 2011c, 99). Opportunities might be granted on those who desire a position enough to renounce getting a good wage. The sacrifice is here only at first sight monetary; considered more broadly, it has an existential inflection. It might be about renouncing better living conditions (housing, food) in the present, in the hope of being rewarded in the future with felicity and success. Such logic generally permeates Becker’s concept of ‘human capital’. In the *Treatise on the Family*, Becker discusses how “[altruistic parents] sometimes sacrifice their own consumption and comfort to increase that of their children” (Becker 1991, 364).¹⁶ This peculiarly echoes Hayek’s argument that “there is a strong case for enabling parents who greatly care for education to secure it for their children by a material sacrifice, even if on other grounds these children may appear less deserving than others who will not get it” (Hayek 2011a, 508). It becomes clear here that what counts is, of course, not ‘merit’, which has been dismissed for its potential normative undertone. What counts is the very act of sacrificing, of wilfully renouncing something in the present for

¹⁶ Wendy Brown denounces the inconsistency she identifies between Becker’s construction of the individual as fundamentally egoistic and his description of the family as a sacrificial domain. She argues that “Becker leaves fundamentally untouched what holds the family together, given the lack of social stickiness in human capital itself” (2015, 102). Becker circumvents this issue by a series of presuppositions like his notion of “psychic income” to justify altruism towards children (Becker 1991, 300) to which needs to be added his Social-Darwinist considerations on how individuals are involved in calculations to preserve their genetic capital (Becker 1976a).

potential future goods that remain uncertain.¹⁷ Having the moral strength of accepting to be hurt in the present is what grounds any legitimacy to a future reward.

Lacanian theory can help to understand what is at work in the logic of sacrifice. First, Richard Boothby indicates that sacrifice “transforms the sacrificer’s relation to the Other from whom fulfilment might come” (Boothby 2001, 186). The Big Other in the name of which the sacrifice is made in the neoliberal texts is the force that manifests itself in the market mechanisms – the force that rewards the enterprise of a few, while frustrating the effort of the remaining others.¹⁸ Boothby suggests that “the function of sacrifice” is “to prepare the array of object and events – (...), the outcomes of battles (...) – by which the Other will evidence itself”. In other words, sacrifice might be read as a demand for that force to manifest itself, either by expressing its omens through the price system or by granting its goods and riches on the sacrificer – a dimension that is also at work in the ordeal.

Secondly, Lacanian theory emphasises the transactional dimension of sacrifice. We give up something in order to better regain it in a new form. Particularly, Boothby indicates that, with sacrifice, “[t]he destruction and loss of the object (...) opens up a symbolic dimension in which what is lost might be recovered in a new form” (Boothby 2001, 188). With ‘human capital’, the materiality of money is meant to be transmuted into something at first sight immaterial – social success or chance. In addition, the act of sacrifice also “founds the very being of the gift” (Boothby 2001, 189) and this for two main reasons. On one hand, deferring enjoyment by accepting to sacrifice (that is, to renounce) in the present recreates the conditions for the possibility of desire.¹⁹

On the other hand, Lacan indicates that “sacrifice signifies that, in the object of our desires, we are trying to find the testimony of the presence of the desire of that Other, who I call here the *obscure God*” (Lacan 2014, 306). Taken literally, the sentence suggests that sacrifice, as a ritual act, founds the value of the thing sacrificed. It signals to all that what is sacrificed is worthy of the gods. Yet, it also implies that the thing is sacrificed because it is *desired* by the gods – hence

¹⁷ Interestingly, Hayek grounds his mistrust of democracy in this logic of sacrifice: the problem of the rule of the majority is that it won’t have the moral strength to accept being hurt in the present in the hope of a “better future” (Hayek 2011b, 104).

¹⁸ Dardot and Laval also speak of money, the firm and the market as “tutelary figures” through which “modern power turns itself into the Other of the subject” (Dardot and Laval 2010, 409). One can also think of tropes of the like of “the markets want...”, spread by policymakers and the media in the context of post-2008 austerity measures.

¹⁹ As such, sacrifice also re-enacts the original castration and the symbolic structuration by which the infant learned to accept to differ the satisfaction of its immediate needs (Boothby 2001, 185).

its value. In neoliberal theory, what is sacrificed is primarily “material” or “financial”. Financial sacrifice signals ‘money’ as having a central value in the neoliberal imaginary world (what we should all aspire to, and what the god of the market desires). Money is marvellous because it is a neutral medium through which each individual can obtain what they desire the most (whatever this might be) – or in Hayek’s words, it is a “means to be used for unknown future needs” (Hayek 2013, 176). Money should therefore not be considered only for itself. It is more like a metonymy that encompasses everything it can buy – from bare necessities to leisure activities. But it is even more than that.

What “material sacrifice” exactly entails fully (and rather abruptly) materialises when Becker matter-of-factly discusses how, in poor families, parents invest in “abler children”, thus “sacrificing the interests of other children” (Becker 1991, 190). There is therefore a strong sense that what is sacrificed goes beyond money. What is sacrificed as desired by the god is more like present living matter (the supposedly ‘less-able’ children). This points toward another, darker interpretation of Lacan’s sibylline sentence. What we desire, and what we externalise as coming from the “obscure god” of the market, is the sacrifice itself; in Lacan’s words, we “succumb to the fascination for the sacrifice itself” (Lacan 2014, 306). The act of faith that sacrifice represents is itself inherently tempting because of its destructive dimension. As I explore in greater detail below, sacrifice is here tied to the Lacanian *jouissance*. Despite the pain, the violence that is done to ourselves is paradoxically lived as liberatory as it tears asunder the very structure of our present and the coherence of our ego formations (Boothby 2001, 153).

2.3 Trials by ordeal

The self-destructive dimension of sacrifice appears even more clearly when put in relation with the motif of the ‘ordeal’. The ordeal isn’t explicitly referred to in the neoliberal canonical texts I chose to focus on. It is nonetheless interesting to note that it is studied by Peter T. Leeson (2012), a professor of economics at George Mason University closely associated with James Buchanan’s Virginia School of Public Choice, and who published his article on ordeal in the Chicago School’s *Journal of Law & Economics*. Leeson claims that trials by ordeal were an efficient mechanism of judgement as the widespread belief in the omniscience of the judgement of God entailed that “only innocent defendants were willing to undergo ordeals”, whereas the guilty would confess to avoid a trial that would guarantee swift divine punishment (Leeson 2012, 691). The ordeal is also mentioned by the popular economists Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner, who in their best-selling *Freakonomics* series of books apply Chicago School economic to social phenomena, such as

the names given to children or legalizing abortion to reduce crime. Turning the ordeal into an economic mechanism of selection, Levitt and Dubner (2014) argue that businesses should make job applications as difficult and tedious as possible to ensure only the most motivated applicants will actually apply.

I use the metaphor of the 'ordeal' as a historical reference to the 'trial by ordeal', an ancient judicial practice – with a religious character – which, in its most known form, consisted in subjecting the accused to a terribly painful, potentially fatal, test (e.g. ordeal by fire and ordeal by water) so as to determine their innocence or guilt. Survival would indicate innocence. Importantly, the exceptional violence (or cruelty) of these tasks were justified by the fact the judicial authorities sought to directly appeal to the judgement of God, demanding a divine intervention to separate the wheat from the chaff, or, in other words, to publicly recognise the deserving innocent and discard the unworthy. For this reason, Lacan argues that “the one who subjects himself to the ordeal finds at its last term its premise; that is, the Other in front of whom this ordeal present itself, the Judge in the end of the latter” (Lacan 1986, 12). The ordeal stands as a challenge to the divine; it is an encounter with the authorities that are assumed to regulate the imaginary world the individual lives in. Recently, the concept of the 'ordeal' has been taken up by psychopathology to discuss certain addictive behaviours as 'ordealic'. Marc Valleur defines 'ordealic behaviours' as the subject's endeavour to “engage himself more or less repetitively in a test that involves a potentially fatal risk” (Valleur 2005, 13). He adds that the corresponding “ordealic fantasy” relates to the fact that, by facing potential death, one “puts oneself in the hands of the Other, of fate, of destiny, of chance, either to master it or to become its elected one, and, by one's survival, to prove one's right to life, if not one's exceptional character, maybe one's immortality...” (2005, 14).

I argue that the metaphor of the ordeal²⁰ enlightens what is exactly at work in the logic of sacrifice since it emphasises elements that I consider core in its functioning: a divine judgement of election or rejection; potentially fatal risk and uncertainty; and mental or physical pain. Particularly, the notion of 'ordealic behaviour' resonates with the centrality given to risk and uncertainty in neoliberal thought – as is explicit in Knight's *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (1965).

²⁰ Corey Robins also uses the metaphor of the ordeal in his article on the affinities between Nietzsche and neoliberal theory. About Hayek, he particularly writes that: “[b]y imposing this drama of choice, the economy becomes a theater of self-disclosure, the stage upon which we discover and reveal our ultimate ends. It is not in the casual chatter of a seminar or the cloistered pews of a church that we determine our values; it is in the duress—the ordeal—of our lived lives, those moments when we are not only free to choose but forced to choose” (Robin 2013).

As Dardot and Laval observe, risk takes on an “ontological dimension” (Dardot and Laval 2010, 428). They indicate that “the entrepreneurial subject is exposed in all the spheres of his existence to vital risks, which he cannot escape from, their management being a matter for strictly private decisions” (2010, 427). Risk-taking is structurally imposed on the subject from above.²¹ She is placed in uncertain situations so as to assess her ability for adaptation, her flexibility; that is, her worthiness. This is particularly clear in Schumpeter’s vitalistic perspective on ‘creative destruction’ that I uncovered in Chapter 4. As a ‘perennial gale’, ‘creative destruction’ stands as a test of efficiency through which services and productive technologies (but also ultimately people) must prove their value, their *raison d’être*. They must pass the trial of uncertainty, survive it, in order not to be suspected of redundancy and then swiftly sacrificed. As I discuss in the third part of the chapter, the violence of the mental, and sometimes physical, strains put on people is justified by the fact survival stands as a sign of election. By overcoming the difficulties put on her path by uncertainty, the market agent demonstrates at the very least her adequacy with the rules of the catallaxy, and, in some cases (when the pain is judged supra-human), her exceptionality, her legitimate superiority.²² On the contrary, a failure to sustain uncertainty, as expressed in mental, physical or financial collapse, becomes a sure sign of unworthiness, and a justification for marginalisation and exclusion.²³

Yet, risk becomes “ontological” in a deeper sense: it is internalised by the market agents and fully integrated to their subjectivities. As Dardot and Laval powerfully put it, riskiness becomes the “double of the desire that animates anyone. To obey one’s desire, is to run risks” (Dardot and Laval 2010, 428). In other words, when desire merges with risk, individuals are encouraged to love taking risks, to see risk-taking as an inherently positive sign of self-realisation. This is what is at work behind Hayek’s celebration of the “spirit of commercial enterprise” as willingness to take on risk (the ‘risk of enterprise’) (Hayek 2011c, 134–35). The thinkers of my corpus generally praise those who have the mental strength to willingly impose suffering on themselves. They see such an act of will as something intoxicating. That ‘fascination’ (to take on Lacan’s comment on sacrifice) has once again to do with *jouissance*, as the attempt to cross the

²¹ The religious dimension of risk is also discussed by Mirowski when he states that “[a] denizen of modern neoliberal society has not demonstrated real flexibility of personal identity until they have prostrated themselves before the capricious god of risk” (Mirowski 2013, 120). He also adds that, in the context of the 2008 financial crisis, “[s]alvation through the market comes (...) [from] bold assertion of individuality through capitulation to a life of risk” (2013, 120).

²² The ability to survive exceptional mental and physical strain will be found to be central in the discourse of the entrepreneur – see Chapter 6.

²³ One can think of Mirowski’s analysis of the “everyday sadism” displayed in “every crisis-porn news story” (Mirowski 2013, 131). Similarly, Valerie Walkerdine and Jessica Ringrose, as well as Imogen Tyler examined the ‘abjection’ of the poor in popular culture (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008; Tyler 2013).

limit that separates the subject from the object of her desire. As I discuss further in Chapter 6, Lacan specifically indicates that pain is a manifestation of the crossing of this limit, of the opening of “all the floodgates of desire” (Lacan 1986, 97).

Through the ‘risk of enterprise’, one thus tests one’s mortal limits by seeking to go beyond them. Dardot and Laval argue that the neoliberal subject is constantly urged to “‘transcend itself’, to ‘push back the limits’”, as well as to “target a beyond” (Dardot and Laval 2010, 437). Drawing on Lacanian theories, they talk about the “extraction of a ‘surplus jouissance’ (*plus de jouir*)” from the subject, which they characterise as “teared out from itself, from its pleasure to live” (2010, 437). Reusing Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, they also claim that neoliberalism does not promise “a surplus of happiness to be better adapted, but to make them pass from the pleasure principle to beyond the pleasure principle” (2010, 441); that is, from pleasure to *jouissance*. As with sacrifice, embracing the ordeal of uncertainty and risk needs to be understood from an accelerationist perspective. It offers a break from the homeostatic principle that regulates the world of pleasure – which, according to Freud, reduces excitations and thus corresponds to a certain self-control and mastery of the drives. By contrast, what the neoliberal thinkers depict as thrilling is the “logic of intensification and illumination” (Dardot and Laval 2010, 441). By embracing the risk of enterprise, we are offered a unique opportunity to transcend ourselves and test our limits. Yet, what Freud and Lacan remind us is that going beyond the pleasure principle marks an encounter with the death drive. When facing the judgement of the blind force that stands behind market mechanisms, we are also confronting the very possibility of our own mental, physical or financial annihilation. What the neoliberal thinkers imply (and that Lacan analyses in his work) is that radically endangering our psychic and material foundation is itself a source of paradoxical enjoyment.

2.4 Anxiety and Omens

Yet, although the risk of disintegration is paradoxically tempting, the neoliberal theorists do argue against letting oneself be passively taken up by uncertainty. What they have in mind is more like an epic fight, or a heroic and defiant play around the limit that separates us from collapse. Knight’s differentiation between calculable risks and “true uncertainty” needs to be understood in such a way (Knight 1965, 232). True uncertainty is potentially debilitating and paralysing. By contrast, decision-making is the product of probabilistic calculations and forecasting. It is about calculating the risks on a long-term basis to avoid loss and failure. Yet, in order to win, one needs to challenge the odds by maintaining oneself on the brink, thus flirting

with the limit between the probable and the uncertain (again, recalling ordealic behaviours). Uncertainty is therefore the energy that animates the economic calculations that surround the evaluation of risk. One needs to survive uncertainty while confronting it – a psychological disposition the neoliberal thinkers would like to see spreading.

2.4.1 Reading the Omens

Probabilistic calculations of risk are part of Hayek's understanding of choice and decision-making (Hayek 2013, 101–2). Earlier in the chapter, I argued that Hayek has an experiential understanding of knowledge, as the “special knowledge of circumstances of the fleeting moment not known to others” (Hayek 1945, 522). Such a view implies that individuals are always on the look-out for “facts”; that is, for signs and signals to interpret. Drawing on the metaphor of sacrifice, I suggest that these ‘facts’ should be considered as ‘omens’ – as signs portending a future event. In the catallaxy, the omens take the shape of the signals sent by the price system – signals which are meant to echo people's needs and desires (see Chapter 4). These auguries have an existential weight as the market agents need to detect them, but also to rightly interpret them and weight the risks attached to them, “in order to anticipate impending changes as accurately as possible” (Hayek 2013, 284). Their adaptation, and therefore their resilience and survival, are at stake.

In other words, receiving and interpreting these always-changing demands require a constant alertness, a “permanent adaptability to extremes of turbulence” (Walker and Cooper 2011, 156). Hayek's catallaxy being primarily conceived as an imaginary project of social engineering, his reflection focuses on how to cultivate the ethos that allows ceaseless preparedness and accuracy. His answer is mainly behavioural: people need to be provided “inducements (...) to use their skill” (Hayek 2013, 284).

2.4.2 Competitive threat

One of these inducements is to create an atmosphere of persistent psychic and physical threat by nurturing competition as a disciplinary instrument. Such a dimension is explicit in Schumpeter's work, who presents competition as “an ever-present threat” (Schumpeter 1954, 85). To motivate its troops, capitalist society holds together “[t]he promises of wealth and the threat of destitution” (Schumpeter 1954, 73). Competition is a cleansing force that results in “the competitive elimination of the old” (Schumpeter 1951, 67). Schumpeter specifically

describes the general insecurity created by the emergence of “new things”, which forces economic actors to renounce “conserving established positions” (1954, 87).

The threat that competition represents is generally more implicit in Hayek’s work, yet he still states that “competition will make it necessary for people to act rationally in order to maintain themselves” – strongly suggesting that they might otherwise be eliminated and that emulation is a question of survival (Hayek 2013, 413–14). In Hayek’s catallaxy, having competitors is “a nuisance that prevents a quiet life” (2013, 415). It provokes an unrest that forces the market agents out of the soothing and reinsuring realm of acquired habits to make them adapt to new conditions. For such a reason, it is competition that Hayek explicitly designates as the very “method for breeding” the “types of mind” he is after (2013, 414). Through competition emerges the “highly developed commercial spirit” he celebrates (2013, 413), but also “the very cast of thinking of the great entrepreneurs” (2013, 414).

2.4.3 Tearing social protections down

Another way of keeping market agents alert is to strip them from protection as an incentive for them to “continually adapts the use of resources to conditions unforeseen and unknown to most people” (Hayek 2013, 280). While some certainty is necessary for people to take on the risk of enterprise (and is generated by the legal infrastructure of the catallaxy (Hayek 2013, 172)), security comes to be associated with indolence and carelessness, and is thus turned into a social problem that needs to be acted upon. Hayek tellingly compares it to a “social rank”, a remnant of or a reversion into feudalism that should be discarded (Hayek 2011c, 134).

The absence of safeguarding has several justifications. First, people should not be “shelter[ed] from the vicissitudes of the market” (Hayek 2011c, 127) because, as with the catallaxy’s rules, shielding them would dull their instinctive ability to perceive market omens and would create an aversion to risk (2011c, 134). It would disrupt the purity of the price signals, thus meddling with the agents’ ability to adequately (and individually) respond to them.²⁴ Individuals must, on the contrary, be left bare in the face of disruptions to be able to feel in their guts what is

²⁴ An extreme version of this rejection of protection is found in Milton Friedman’s work. For Friedman, the basic protection of welfare takes away the ‘energy’ of people, their force to support themselves, turning them into apathetic and lifeless benefit receivers (Friedman 1980b). Far from representing a human tragedy, the suppression of any benefits, for someone like Friedman, signs the return of the true individual agency of life instincts in a society corrupted by the socialist utopia.

expected of them. They must feel the mental and physical strain associated with uncertainty so as to trigger their instinctive response.

Secondly, no protection should be given to the obsolete, as it would encourage its maintenance and slow down the 'Great Society' in its entirety. With a view that smacks of Social-Darwinism, Hayek thus asserts that "if success proves that [new views] are more effective, those who stick to their old ways must not be protected against a relative or even absolute decline in their position" (Hayek 2013, 415). He adamantly criticises what he calls 'absolute security' (Hayek 2011c, 126); that is, the certainty that one's job will be saved and guaranteed at all cost. For Hayek as for Schumpeter, government should not go against the destruction of uncompetitive activities by artificially maintaining them in order to protect threatened jobs (Hayek 2011c, 127; Schumpeter 1954, 70). Although writing a few years after the devastating crises of the 1930s and gesturally acknowledging the tragedy of mass unemployment, they argue (in an implicit critique of the New Deal) that the public urge to alleviate the suffering of those whose livelihood is destroyed by the destructive mechanisms of competition is misguided. Hardship is shocking but also somewhat necessary for the good working and the efficiency of the competitive system. As discussed in Chapter 4, creative destruction is a cleansing mechanism. Any obstruction of it would thus undermine the general welfare by "impairing the conditions of further development" (Schumpeter 1954, 70).

Lastly, in order to be incentivised to take the right decisions, people should feel they will "carry the risk of loss" by themselves (Hayek 2013, 284). They must internalise that they won't be protected in case of failure. Interestingly, it is not just the individual that is made to carry the weight of her own fault. Responsibilisation is spread over generations as made clear by the chapter of Becker's *Treatise on the Family* dedicated to the 'Rise and Fall of Families'. Similarly, it motivates Hayek's claim that people's decisions will be accurate only if they weigh on several generations; "only if the risk is borne not only by those who decide but also by their descendants" (Hayek 2013, 177). Webs of obligations and guilt connect generations – something I will return to in the last part of the chapter.²⁵

²⁵ For Becker, debt is generational (Becker 1991). Lazzarato (following Nietzsche (2007)) similarly stresses the homonymy between 'debt' and 'guilt' in German ('*Schuld*') to discuss how the guilt of debt is carried over several generations (Lazzarato 2012, 32).

2.4.4 Anxiety

Stripping market agents from protection and exposing them to the threats of competition and economic downturn is a way of producing individuals that will be characterised by their responsiveness and their “permanent adaptability in and through crisis” (Walker and Cooper 2011, 156). The ‘quiet life’ is defiantly rejected as a manifestation of the human temptation for morbid fixity associated with the death drives. To trigger their life drives, the catallaxy’s imaginary agents are kept on their toes. Unlike with socialism, they should not be insulated “from the compulsion of the circumstances” (Hayek 2011c, 26). On the contrary, they must be made vulnerable to these circumstances to open to the surprise of the future and adopt uncertainty as a way of life.

I argue that such a programme aims at nurturing anxiety – what Freud describes as a continual sense of imminent but unknown danger, which motivates a permanent preparedness to meet a threat (Freud 2003, 10). This disturbing mental state is paradoxically celebrated by the thinkers of my corpus as a heightened sense of self, as the intoxicating feeling to be in position to transcend one’s physical and mental boundaries by one’s own strength. Or to reformulate this in Lacanian terms, with anxiety people are given the exhilarating opportunity to come near their *jouissance*, even when it entails facing the possibility of their dissolution.

3. The chosen and the doomed

By submitting its agents to trials by ordeal and sacrifices, by exposing them to pain to make them better read its omens, the catallaxy asserts itself as a cruel divinity.²⁶ In the last part of the chapter, I examine how the hostile environment the catallaxy generates is designed to uncover who the best market agents (the modern ‘*aristos*’) are. Considering the neoliberal theorists’ non-normative claims, their seeming reluctance to impose a moral order, they cannot give any substantial definition of the features their ideal character should display. These need to be determined by the blind workings of the catallaxy itself as a mechanism by which exceptional individuals come to be recognised as the chosen. In so doing, the catallaxy creates new social

²⁶ The jubilant cruelty at work in the neoliberal imaginary is also stressed in Lisa Duggan’s analysis of “optimistic cruelty” as a “structure of feeling” at work in the work of Ayn Rand, who celebrates the neoliberal heroic ethos (Duggan 2019, 5). Similarly, Mirowski examines the “theater of cruelty” of everyday neoliberalism (Mirowski 2013, 130).

hierarchies – presenting them as the only legitimate ones - based on a Manichean opposition between those who fail and those who succeed.

3.1 Unequal agents

The catallaxy's reliance on mimetic mechanisms entails an essential inequality between the different market agents. To activate the "spur" of desire, some need to open the road to enjoyment so as to become models for the majority of others – models to imitate in the hope of reaching the same imaginary fulfilment. These selected few will automatically be put under the spotlight by the catallaxy; they will be offered to the envious gaze of the majority and will become the object of people's fantasies of self-realisation. To reformulate this in a Lacanian vocabulary, they will become our Other, new secular gods that help us to localise and anchor our desire in what we believe them to desire and enjoy. Progress, according to Hayek, lies in this imitation game and in order to work, it needs scarcity and differed (or unequal) access to the object of desire so that some models can emerge. As Hayek claims, "at each stage [of civilization] some of the things most people desire can be provided only for a few and can be made accessible to all only by further progress" or, to put it even more bluntly, "so long as it remains a progressive society, some must lead, as the rest must follow" (Hayek 2011b, 98).

Yet, it is not solely a question of unequal access to artificially created objects of desire. Psychoanalytical theory invites us to appreciate the way we hear certain propositions. And "some must lead, as the rest must follow" takes on a somewhat more troubling resonance when understood through this lens. It indicates that, despite their anti-metaphysical pretensions, neoliberal thinkers fundamentally believe that some people are intrinsically and objectively superior to others (Hayek 1948, 15).²⁷ The sole difference they have with their 'conservative' counterparts is that the 'liberals' believe that only the catallaxy can designate these surpassing figures in a non-arbitrary way. Or, as soberly stated by Hayek, "[t]he liberal, of course, does not deny that there are some superior people – he is not an egalitarian but he denies that anyone has authority to decide who these superior people are" (Hayek 2011a, 524).²⁸ The noble soul is

²⁷ In *Individualism and Economic Order*, Hayek cultivates the ambiguity by stating that "only because men are in fact unequal can we treat them equally" by applying the same rules to them (1948, 15). In Hayek's rationale, social organisation inherently needs "differentiation of functions" (1948, 16). If all men were equal in their "gifts and inclinations", we would have to treat them unequally so as to arbitrarily ensure this differentiation (1948, 15). Similarly, he differentiates "treating people equally" from "attempting to make them equal", the latter being fundamentally arbitrary and despotic (1948, 16).

²⁸ As Gane (2013) reminds us, this constitutes a fundamental difference with classical liberalism, which puts greater emphasis on equality.

still very much there, but it can only be singled out by the blind mechanisms of the market and not by any “established” hierarchies or values (2011a, 524). In other words, all agents are seemingly given the same chance to shine but some are ontologically superior and deserve to dominate.

The catallaxy, which is inequalitarian at its core, will both function as a machinery to ensure the best come forth, but will also redirect resources towards them to guarantee that they and their innovative ideas can flourish. As Corey Robin reminds us, at the end of the day, the “freedom of some is worth more than freedom of others” (Robin 2013). Conversely, such a hierarchy by extension entails that all lives don’t have equal values. Some are dispensable and can be ‘sacrificed’ for the preservation of the more useful ones (Hayek 1988, 132).

3.2 Separating the wheat from the chaff

The mechanisms I described in Part 2 contribute to the construction of this hierarchy of utility. They are designed to ‘objectively’ separate the worthy from the dispensable, the wheat from the chaff, by revealing and differentiating the abilities of the catallaxy’s agents.²⁹

At first sight, they function as an ideal utilitarian metric. The catallaxy’s mechanisms aim at producing attuned individuals, who are constantly responsive and adaptable to the emergence of new needs. In other words, rewards and remunerations are no longer based on “subjective merits” (Hayek 1948, 21). It is not a question of efforts and good-will put into the task, nor it is about “goodness or badness of [the agent’s] intentions” (1948, 22). The only thing that ultimately counts is “the objective results of [the agent’s] efforts”; that is, whether they succeed in making themselves useful. There is of course an important ambiguity here since, as I discussed in Chapter 4, the ‘utility’ talked about has a fundamentally subjective, imaginary and fantasmatic dimension. It is not genuinely what is objectively more useful to the very survival of society (as the debate surrounding the remuneration of nurses in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic has made amply clear),³⁰ but about what is most desired by social agents and is thus spontaneously granted more “value” (Hayek 1948, 22).

²⁹ This separation thus represents a secularised version of the logic of election and damnation described by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic* (2001).

³⁰ For an interesting discussion of Hayek’s understanding of ‘social utility’ and remuneration in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, see Godin (2020). The fact stockbrokers are far better remunerated than nurses could be interpreted in the light of Castoriadis’ work as another proof that society can be alienated to their own imaginary and led to destroy, because of it, the very foundations on which their survival rests.

Furthermore, as I stressed in my examination of the concept of ‘sacrifice’, Hayek and Becker tend to also reward the willingness to make a sacrifice, as revealing both a strength of character and a certain faith in the future and in market mechanisms. In his depiction of the catallaxy as a cruel divinity whose judgement is rash, blind and ruthless, Schumpeter also acknowledges that “failure also threatens or actually overtakes many an able man, thus whipping up *everyone*, again much more efficaciously than a more equal and more ‘just’ system of penalties would” (Schumpeter 1954, 74) – thus insisting on the unfair and aleatory dimension of the process and suggesting that “objective results” are far from being systematically rewarded.³¹

For this reason, I argue that focusing on the catallaxy’s mechanism as objective metric of utility is ultimately misleading because it obfuscates what is actually at work in the catallaxy. What I suggest is that the mechanisms function less as an apparatus to reveal objective usefulness than as an ordealic (and Neo-Darwinist) trial of efficiency around which new social hierarchies are based. Rather than the actual content of what is put on offer by the market agents, what counts is their existential capability to survive the test of uncertainty. The test itself, and the adaptability that derives from it, are constituted as the ‘objective’ category that will determine the subject’s ontological worth. This is particularly clear in Hayek and Schumpeter’s considerations on risk-taking and creative destruction. As I analysed in the second part of the chapter, the latter is described as a tide that overwhelms the now-inadequate (not to even mention the weak). It “promptly” eliminates “the incompetent men and the obsolete methods” (Schumpeter 1954, 74). Those who remain have proved their worth by surviving the dislocating force of uncertainty as an emanation of the real. Cruelty is thus a method through which the catallaxy demands its agents to prove at all time their continual relevance through their resilience.³²

In what resembles an ancient tragedy,³³ the trial by ordeal imposed by the cruel catallactic divinity separates those who embrace and survive the mental, physical and financial strain of uncertainty from those who crumble and are designated non-useful. Individuals and families are propelled by their performance and wiped out as soon as they fail to adapt to new circumstances. No matter how established and deserving they might be, they cannot escape the trial of uncertainty. This is what is at work in Hayek’s ambiguous relationship with “cultural and

³¹ Schumpeter remains more cautious than Hayek when discussing the fairness of capitalism when compared to redistributive systems. Yet efficiency still takes precedence over justice.

³² For a discussion of the principle of resilience see Walker and Cooper (2011).

³³ The tragic dimension is present in Becker’s (1991) and Schumpeter’s (1954) descriptions of the “rise and fall of families” and capitalist dynasties.

intellectual elites” (Hayek 2011a, 524). Hayek is without a doubt elitist and does not hide his preference for social elites that have an “important role (...) in the evolution of civilisation”. Yet, to prevail legitimately, they still need to demonstrate their continued social value by “prov[ing] themselves by their capacity to maintain their position under the same rule that apply to all other” (2011a, 524).

The dichotomy between success and failure orchestrated by the catallaxy has a social function. It orients its agents in their self-disciplinary and their self-fashioning endeavours by displaying images of positive and negative models. While inviting its agents to transcend their own limits, it simultaneously re-inscribes limits between those who have the strength to lead the renewal of the social order - and for whom “everything has to consume itself” (Nietzsche 2007, 168), and those whose surplus life is not “worth the costs of its own reproduction” (Cooper 2008, 60–61). In the last two sub-parts of the chapters, I briefly examine each of these two extremes as an introduction to my two case-studies.

3.3 ‘We the living’

The trial by ordeal of uncertainty acts as a mechanism that brings to light the superiority of certain individuals. These are selected according to their ability to risk their existence and overcome the adversities on their path. Having proven themselves, they can legitimately become the social elites of the catallaxy.

Hayek manages to brush off accusations of Social Darwinism by arguing that the selection process he has in mind (and that he thinks is already at work in society) is not based on the inheritance of certain “physical” – that is, genetic properties – but on “ideas and skills – in short, the whole cultural inheritance which is passed on by learning and imitation” (Hayek 2011b, 118).³⁴ Yet, he does conceive this selection as the “survival of the successful” (2011b, 112), thus suggesting that it is still an agonistic process from which the fittest or the most efficient are supposed to emerge. The difference is that, instead of physical superiority, intellectual aptitudes are foregrounded. The distinction between the intellectual and the physical is even more ambivalent when it comes to Becker and Schumpeter. As I briefly mention below and develop in greater length in Chapter 6, the type that is better adapted for the world of capitalism is,

³⁴ For an analysis of Hayek’s ambivalent appropriation of Darwin’s theories on evolution, see Hodgson, 1994. Hodgson particularly demonstrates that Hayek has a tendency to diminish the ground-breaking dimension of Darwin’s work – attributing instead the idea of evolution to the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment through their “theories of social evolution” (Hayek 2011b, 116).

according to Schumpeter, the entrepreneur. Notably, while the abilities displayed by entrepreneurs are mainly intellectual, Schumpeter has a tendency to describe them with a vocabulary that is embedded in the body. He, for instance, speaks of the “supernormal brains” of the entrepreneurs (Schumpeter 1954, 73), how they “wrest” against the sedative power of habit and are animated by “a great surplus force” (Schumpeter 1951, 86), and how they have an “impulse to fight, to prove oneself superior to others” (1951, 93). As for Becker, he does not hesitate to discuss how individuals are involved in calculations to lower or increase their “genetic fitness” (Becker 1976a, 818).

As Schumpeter argues for the entrepreneur, the prevailing individuals’ “surplus force (...) is something peculiar and by nature rare” (Schumpeter 1951, 86). Those who pass the test of uncertainty are characterised by their exceptionality and their super-human dispositions. Although less exuberant and striking in its content, exceptionality is also present in Hayek’s work because of the necessity to engineer the emergence of precursors or “pioneer[r]” of taste so as to set in motion the machinery of mimetic desire (Hayek 2011b, 195). These chosen ones – from the entrepreneurs to leisured ‘playboys’ – become central cogs of the catallaxy. By setting examples, they drive the “normal” agents forward. The desires they set alight, as well as the insecurities they create through their innovations that disrupt the productive apparatus, force the normal individuals to want more or to adapt to the new set of circumstances. The illustrative stories of their exploits must therefore be disseminated by the catallactic mirror so as to spread their “art of living” (Hayek 2011b, 195). As Hayek claims, “let merely a few rise and be esteemed and powerful because they have successfully tried new ways, (...) and let those tempted to imitate them be free to do so, (...) and the spirit of enterprise will emerge by the only method that can produce it” (Hayek 2013, 414).

As attractive models, their outstanding way of life becomes a “promise” for the other market agents of what may be granted to them if they play by the rule of the catallaxy and accept to take risk (Schumpeter 1954, 73). Crucially, Schumpeter recognises that the spectacle is fundamentally illusory. The “spectacular prizes” are only “thrown to a minority of winners” and are characterised by their outrageousness as they are “greater than would have been necessary to call forth the particular effort” (Schumpeter 1954, 73–74). Yet, it is this very disproportion that makes the process of mimetic desire efficient. It propels “the activity of that large majority of businessmen who receive in return very modest compensation or nothing or less than nothing, and yet do their utmost because they have the big prizes before their eyes and overrate

their chances of doing equally well” (1954, 74). Similarly, Hayek reckons that “even the most absurd experimentation in living” will have positive results (Hayek 2011b, 195).

Finally, these exceptional figures have a strong messianic aura. They are generally the embodiment of the creative energies that the catallaxy aims at liberating. In Hayek’s work, this materialises by the liberal ability to face the “new and the strange” (Hayek 2011a, 526). More strikingly, like Ayn Rand’s heroes, the Schumpeterian entrepreneur comes to stand, in his body and mind, as the epitome of the life and sexual drives (which explains why he has been compared to Nietzsche’s *‘Übermensch’*).³⁵ The entrepreneur tirelessly aims to “brea[k] up the old, and creat[e] the new, tradition” (Schumpeter 1951, 92). He tirelessly “dream[s]” of founding “a private kingdom”, a “dynasty” (Schumpeter 1951, 93) – or, in other words, of turning himself into a legend.

3.4 The ‘miserable individuals’

Those who do not manage to pass the test of the trial by ordeal of uncertainty are kept at the periphery of the catallaxy, when they are not eliminated by the ‘perennial gale of creative destruction’. In Schumpeter, the doomed are represented by the ‘old’ and the ‘obsolete’ to which is promised swift ‘destitution’. Hayek offers a similar picture when he discusses the fall and economic hardship of often zealous and deserving producers who lost their social “usefulness” (Hayek 2011c, 126) and are thus marked by poverty as a sign (that is, a ‘stigma’ (Tyler 2020)) of their (temporary) loss of ontological value. Rather grimly, the Social-Darwinian “calculus of lives” put forward in the *Fatal Conceit* states that the less socially ‘useful’ lives are to be sacrificed to the preservation of the productive ones when needs be (Hayek 1988, 132).

Hayek associates poverty with sacrifice in a second instance. He, rather bizarrely, argues that poverty stands as an empowering experience of choice. Although they are helplessly being submitted to economic disruptions, people suffering economic loss still have “in [their] power to decide which of [their] needs or desires shall be affected” (Hayek 2011c, 93). Despite being forced to do so, they are made active in making hard “bitter choices” and sacrifices (Hayek 2011c, 100–101). As choosing agents, they are generally considered as “free” to choose another better-paid employment (Hayek 2011c, 127). Poverty is thus minimised and extreme cases of hardship (or the “pathological case of miser” (Hayek 2011c, 92)) are silenced.

³⁵ The Schumpeterian entrepreneur inspired Ayn Rand in her depiction of her heroes’ “sense of life” – see Duggan (2019).

Poverty is furthermore considered to be impossible to eliminate (Hayek 2011c, 101). If its persistence is primarily blamed on the ineluctable scarcity of resources, there is nonetheless a strong sense that poverty is also useful to the good functioning of the catallaxy's core mechanisms. First, the strains and pains imposed by poverty constitute a nudge for the now-useless subject to adapt to new circumstances and find a more lucrative (that is, useful) activity (Hayek 2011c, 127). Secondly, poverty signals an individual failure to choose the right occupation or a misevaluation of the risks it entailed. Within an imaginary world symbolically organised around uncertainty and risk, any failure becomes personal. For Hayek, "the freedom of our economic activity" as well as "the right of choice" inevitably come with "the risk and the responsibility of that right" that the individual needs to assume by herself (Hayek 2011c, 104). As Mirowski states, "[t]aking a risk means that, in the final analysis, you have bought the failure upon yourself" (Mirowski 2013, 120). Generally, reformulating economic hardship in terms of not choosing the right occupation implies that the subject in difficulty has somewhat decided to be in trouble. The spectre of Becker's suicidal market agents who see more utility in death than in life is not far.

Blaming individuals for their failure is also a way to redirect attention from the fact economic hardship is systemic in the catallaxy. Hayek specifically acknowledges that "losses imposing severe hardship" have "no moral justification" yet they are "inseparable from the competitive system" (Hayek 2011c, 126). For it to work, the system needs winners and losers; it nonetheless cannot be blamed as it is not "designed to affect particular people in a particular way" (Hayek 2011c, 82). Inequality and scarcity are crucial to trigger envy and the urge to imitate the successful. This brings me to my third point: in the same way as success functions as an attractive model, failure functions as an overt example of what other people should not be. In other words, because the catallaxy functions as the behaviourist social experiment to breed a 'commercial spirit', poverty is both repressed but also made visible. As I will examine further in Chapter 7 when exploring narratives on abjection, poverty becomes a signifier, an abject symbol of failure.

As a repelling sign for the other market agents, poverty cannot be alleviated by governmental intervention, since such an intervention would disrupt the fragile mechanics that drives the catallaxy. It must be fully endured, even when it is inherited through generations, as it then signals the failure of some forebears who did not rightly respond to the signal of the market, or misevaluated it (or who were, simply, unlucky). As Hayek reminds us, "under competition the probability that a man who starts poor will reach great wealth is much smaller than is true for the man who has inherited property"; nonetheless solace might be found in the fact the

catallatic competitive system is “the only one where it depends solely on him and not on the favours of the mighty” (Hayek 2011c, 106).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the interactions between two central elements of the neoliberal imaginary: the structure of the market order and the fictive characters that populate it. I have demonstrated that the neoliberal individuals find their ontological texture and worth in the constant demonstration of their putative social utility.

I argued that the imaginary catallaxy is engineered to breed a commercial and entrepreneurial ethos in its inhabitants by submitting them to pain and uncertainty, as well as by triggering mimetic desire. As such it functions as a trial by ordeal the tests of which are deemed to reveal the social worth of each individual. The creation of this hostile environment – in which the only source of certainty is the legal and minimalist rules of the catallaxy - is also a way to push the market agents beyond their limits by constantly stimulating their responsiveness and their instinct of survival. The catallaxy presented in the canonical texts I selected thus stands as a fundamentally Neo-Darwinist social experiment, despite Hayek’s denial.

Lastly, I discussed how the mirror structure of the catallaxy functions as a self-disciplinary apparatus. Like a modern panopticon, it reflects images of success and failure. The positive models of spectacular success it promotes, like the figure of the entrepreneur I explore in Chapter 6, are meant to lighten the burning fire of mimetic desire and to encourage people to embrace the pain of risk and sacrifice as an intoxicating form of self-realisation or self-transcendence. Conversely, poverty stands as a mark of failure. While being repressed and made disposable (offered to sacrifice), poverty as a stigma still has an exemplary function. As I explore in Chapter 7, it comes to symbolise what the market agents need to avoid being at all cost.

The case-studies in Chapters 6 and 7 examine how these different fantasmatic motifs are reflected by, invested in and reinterpreted in contemporary popular culture. I demonstrate that popular culture acts as a medium for the fashioning of a series of “image, stories and legends” (Taylor 2007, 23) that give the neoliberal imaginary its material and fantasmatic texture, and root it through the dissemination of identity models and counter-models.

PART III

SELF-NARRATIONS AND MEMOIRS

Chapter 6. 'Founder as victim, Founder as God': The two bodies of the entrepreneur

"We can destroy only as creators"
Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1974, 122)

Introduction

Chapter 6 explores the top of the social hierarchy imagined by the neoliberal theorists, by focusing on a prominent figure in popular culture: the Silicon Valley entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs occupy a central place in neoliberal theory, where they come to embody the urge to be responsive at all times, and to embrace risk as an intoxicating form of self-realisation or self-transcendence. Two understandings of entrepreneurship generally coexist: the entrepreneur is either imagined as an *exceptional* force of nature that brings into motion the process of creative destruction (Schumpeter) or, on the contrary, the spirit that animates him – the spirit of entrepreneurship – is thought to be innate to every human beings and as such capable of being widely stimulated (Hayek and Mises). The discourse on entrepreneurship found in today's popular culture oscillates between these two variations. As Dardot and Laval claim, enterprise is "not only a general model to be imitated, but also a certain attitude to be promoted among children and students, a potential energy to be tapped in wage-earners" (Dardot and Laval 2013, 264). Whole countries, like France, have recently been invited by their heads of state to become "start-up Nation[s]" and "thin[k] and mov[e] like a start-up" (Macron 2017; Ibled 2019). At the same time, such visions remain anchored by an elitism that excludes ordinary people to instead glorify the exceptional innovators, the "*premiers de cordée*" (literally, 'the first in the rope line') (Macron 2018).

The ambivalence is latent in Wendy Liu's recent memoir *Abolish Silicon Valley* (2020), which recounts her failed attempt to build a start-up in emulation of her idols from the high-tech world. Liu presents Silicon Valley as a "dream" in which creative freedom and unbounded innovation meet the promise of phenomenal riches (2020, 9). Like generations of talented young graduates (see also Anna Wiener (2016)), Liu is fascinated by the success stories of the Valley.

She tells the reader of her past admiration for those she once saw as the heroic ‘founders’ of corporations opening the door to a better future, like Elon Musk with SpaceX and Tesla, or the now-infamous Elizabeth Holmes with Theranos. The account of her personal experience is pervaded with the tales of Steve Job’s and Tim Cook’s Apple, Larry Page’s and Sergey Brin’s Google, Bill Gates’s Microsoft, Mark Zuckerberg’s Facebook or Jack Dorsey’s Twitter. She devours self-help books and blogs written by other iconic startupper, like Peter Thiel’s *Zero to One* (2014), Eric Ries’s *Lean Startup* (2011) and Paul Graham’s essays. She dreams of becoming a graduate of Graham’s and Sam Altman’s Y Combinator, a startup ‘accelerator’ that counts among its alumni Brian Chesky’s Airbnb, as well as Steve Huffman’s and Alexis Ohanian’s Reddit. By emulating these iconic figures, she, like many others, hopes to get her share of the dream. Interestingly, while the entrepreneurial super-stars she evokes seem more than willing to share their tips with wannabe founders in a plethora of lucrative books, blogposts, TedTalks, interviews, seminar classes and bootcamps – thus showing interest in spreading the entrepreneurial ethos - they remain convinced of their intrinsic superiority. As I demonstrate throughout the chapter, their interventions are designed to recognise their peers, uncover their exceptionality and designate them as worthy of success. The younger Liu is intuitively aware of this: when she encounters Paul Graham’s essays for the first time, she reads them “as proof that [she] was special and would eventually get just [her] deserts” (2020, 42).

Considering their role in Liu’s psychic formation and that of many other individuals of her generation, Chapter 6 investigates the discursive construction of the iconic entrepreneurs in popular culture. As icons, they are given as role models and are the objects of numerous fantasies about success, immortality and the future. As Campbell Jones and André Spicer (2005) argue, the category of the entrepreneur functions as a “sublime object” that structures “phantasmic attachment”; the entrepreneurship discourse offers “a narrative structure to the fantasy that coordinates desire” (2005, 237). This is particularly striking when considering the narratives that surround Peter Thiel and Elon Musk, two figures I have selected because of their emblematic status in the media. Both are part of what Fortune Magazine has branded the ‘PayPal mafia’, the team that founded PayPal and since invested in some of the most successful Silicon Valley start-ups (O’Brien 2007). As such, the ‘mafia’ has been endowed with a special aura. The accounts of its members’ legendary exploits widely circulate in the Silicon Valley bubble, where they stand as a quasi-institutionalised ‘ruling class’ (A. Vance 2016, 93).

Peter Thiel has used his PayPal business success to create and lead the Founders Fund, a prominent venture capital firm that invests in companies building future technologies, ranging

from nuclear energies, artificial intelligence and aerospace, to crypto-currencies and biotechnologies (Founders Fund 2020).¹ Because of what he describes as his role as “supporter, mentor, and financier” (Thiel 2015), Thiel is now an extremely influential figure in Silicon Valley (O’Brien 2007). He has also acquired a nefarious reputation for steadfastly supporting Donald Trump and the libertarian cause (Streitfeld 2018), as well as for his obsessional fear of death. Moreover, Thiel has been connected to the ‘neoliberal thought-collective’. He spoke (Thiel and Robinson 2020) at the 2020 Special Meeting of the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS), the gathering club of the neoliberal elite, and participated in other events organised by the Hoover Institution at Stanford (his alma mater) – both closely associated with the MPS.² Importantly, Thiel gave a series of nineteen seminars on entrepreneurship at Stanford in 2012, which were later published as a book, *Zero to One* (Thiel and Masters 2014), now a *New York Times* best-seller. Thiel is therefore engaged in a public performance of self-reflection on his role as an entrepreneur.

Whereas Thiel seems to delight in playing the role of Silicon Valley’s unnerving villain, Elon Musk is a more ambiguous figure. After selling PayPal, Musk went on to found and co-found SpaceX and Tesla, today acting as the CEO of both companies. He cultivates an appetite for media attention – appearing as much in the financial press for the rockets (or cars) he launches into space, and in the tabloids for his love life and his supposed eccentricities.³ Musk is particularly visible on social media where he orchestrates jokes and pranks that make abundant references to popular culture, such as those made to David Bowie’s *Starman* and Douglas Adam’s *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* when launching his Tesla Roadster into space in February 2018 (Malkin 2018). He is renowned for proposing spectacular, and allegedly unachievable, projects like the colonisation of Mars. However, behind this apparent playfulness emerges the

¹ The 2020 portfolio includes among many others: Airbnb, SpaceX, Anduril, Palantir, Facebook, Spotify, Oculus and DeepMind.

² For instance, Thiel took part, along with Reid Hoffman (the founder of LinkedIn and fellow ‘PayPal mafia’ member), in the ‘Cardinal Conversations’ series hosted by Niall Ferguson (Thiel, Hoffman, and Ferguson 2018). Niall Ferguson is himself a Hoover Institution senior fellow and has been a member of the MPS since 2011; he also talked at the 2020 MPS’s special meeting in Stanford (‘The Mont Pèlerin Society: From the Past to the Future: Ideas and Action for a Free Society’ 2019). The 2018-2020 president of the MPS was John B. Taylor, who is also professor of economics at Stanford and senior fellow at the Hoover Institution (Mont Pèlerin Society n.d.). The MPS does not communicate on its current membership, but the 2013 list of the MPS membership has been published by *DeSmog*, an investigative environmental journalism platform (see *DeSmog* n.d.). Generally, the archives of the MPS, of Friedrich Hayek and of Milton Friedman are located at the Hoover Institution.

³ Musk and his partner, the musician Grimes, were widely discussed after announcing on Twitter that they named their first born ‘X Æ A-12’ (Grimes 2020). As I discuss in the rest of the chapter, this name seems representative of Musk’s attraction for the idea of merging the human with the machine (the A-12 being an aircraft). Considering that a number of Musk’s corporations have ‘X’ in their names (e.g. SpaceX, X.com), the name also stands as a peculiar attempt to literally brand his son.

personality of an inflexible employer, noted for his lack of empathy (A. Vance 2016, 342),⁴ as well as a ruthless public relations manager who does not hesitate to spread false rumours or organise diversions on social media to manipulate the price of his firms' options (Bonnet 2018; Gelles et al. 2018). In spite of this, Musk is today recognised by his counterparts, like Google Alphabet's CEO Larry Page, as a model to be widely emulated (A. Vance 2016, 355).

Alongside Foucault and later poststructuralist scholars (Foucault 2004a; Brown 2015; Dardot and Laval 2010; Bröckling 2016), I am interested in the spread of neoliberal governmentality as an internalisation of entrepreneurial subjectivity. Yet, by engaging in a kind of 'hero study' or iconology, I end up taking a slightly different route from the other poststructuralists who have focused on the psychic dimension of this process, and specifically from Christina Scharff (2015). In her exploration of the "psychic life of neoliberalism" and of entrepreneurial subjectivity from the ground up, Scharff uses in-depth interviews with young female musicians to show how these women frame their self-narrations with entrepreneurial tropes, like the injunction to embrace risk and to be resilient – thus indicating how they internalise and live out neoliberal governmentality. In contrast, I use psychoanalytical theory to examine the imaginary models (or 'imagos') around which these entrepreneurial subjectivities crystallise. In so doing, my aim is to disrupt the impression of fulfilment and completion that these imagos are meant to display, and which we are encouraged to adopt in our psychic construction. What psychoanalytical theory particularly allows us to do is to point to the internal limits and shortcomings of these representations. It enables us to highlight how the imaginary models promoted as our key to success are fundamentally impossible to emulate.

As I discuss in the rest of the chapter, this impossibility is double. As Liu's (but also Wiener's) disappointment reminds us, many are called by the Silicon Valley sirens' song, but few are chosen. The dream that Silicon Valley comes to represent is fundamentally illusory and out of the reach of the overwhelming majority. Yet, the model of completion and success that Musk and Thiel are supposed to incarnate at its purest level reveals itself to be impossible to sustain even for them. Their narratives about glorious futures and the vanquishing of human frailties are pervaded by an anguished fear of death and dissolution. The second and third parts of the chapter thus examine how Musk and Thiel conceive themselves both as deified founders and paranoid sacrificial victims.

⁴ Ashlee Vance, Elon Musk's authorised biographer, mentions the case of Mary Beth Brown, Musk's executive assistant, who dedicated her life to him but was fired when she asked to be compensated for working excessively long hours (A. Vance 2016, 341)

1. The entrepreneur in neoliberal theory

The figure of the entrepreneur occupies a central place in the imaginary landscape that transpires through the canonical texts of Austro-American neoliberal theory. However, as Dieter Plehwe (2020) has demonstrated, there are important variations between the elitist version promoted by Schumpeter, and Ludwig von Mises's and his follower Israël Kirzner's views on entrepreneurship as a largely diffused faculty among the population. As for Hayek, he is generally considered to stand with the latter tradition (Dardot and Laval 2010). Yet, as I discuss below, Hayek's work can actually be used to link the Schumpeterian and Misesian theories of entrepreneurship, while Knight offers an important perspective on the relation between risk and entrepreneurship present in both of them. In the first part of the chapter, I briefly present these different versions, as they all display characteristics that I find at work in Thiel's and Musk's narratives. Taken together, they promote competition and enterprise as a reformist model for society and the self (Dardot and Laval 2010, 241).

1.1 Kirzner's instinctual entrepreneur

Israël Kirzner's *Competition and Entrepreneurship* (1973) is often considered to offer a synthesis of Hayek's theory of information and Mises's theory of entrepreneurship as an innate behavioural disposition (Dardot and Laval 2010, 234). As a direct answer to Knight's and Schumpeter's works, it offers a good perspective from which to introduce the debate on entrepreneurship in Austrian and American neoliberal circles, as well as some of the core features of the iconic entrepreneur.

Kirzner is inspired primarily by Mises's replacement of *homo œconomicus* by *homo agens* – the acting man (Kirzner 1973, 34). Mises and Kirzner oppose the classical understanding of human nature as driven solely by economising and maximising efficiency behaviours (1973, 31). According to them, one needs also to take into account another core element present in “all human action”: entrepreneurship (1973, 31). Kirzner specifically understands entrepreneurship as an innate ability to identify opportunities for profit that haven't yet been noticed by other market agents (1973, 37).⁵ The entrepreneur is the person who identifies price discrepancies

⁵ Like its Misesian counterpart, the Hayekian entrepreneurial being is motivated by the perspective of making profit by discovering what is not yet known (Hayek 1988, 104). Price and profit are similarly described as “tools for searching” (1988, 104).

and then acts on his⁶ discovery by creating a system of means and ends. He is therefore a “decision-maker” who exploits the opportunities for profit he has uncovered (1973, 50).

Several specificities must be drawn out from this short introduction. First, Kirzner’s theory develops Hayek’s diagnosis of the limitations of human knowledge (1945) (see Chapters 4 and 5). If human beings were omniscient, there would be nothing for them to discover. The fact the market agents’ knowledge is partial is a paradoxical benediction as it enables them to discover and profit from opportunities that are not yet seen by their counterparts. In Hayek’s words, they are free to exploit the “special knowledge of circumstances of the fleeting moment not known to others” (1945, 522). This theme will reemerge in Thiel’s emphasis on the discovery of “secrets”.

Similarly, the identification of price discrepancies manifests as an “alertness” (Kirzner 1973, 46), which is itself entirely compatible with Hayek’s promotion of instinctive knowledge as the knowledge of “the particular circumstances of time and place” (Hayek 1945, 521). Kirzner insists particularly on the fact that the entrepreneur needs not to have any kind of “superior [that is, intellectual] knowledge” (1973, 67); after all, experts can be hired. The knowledge of the entrepreneur is instead more like an acute feeling of awareness, or a deeply ingrained conviction, that something can be done at that time and place, and that it will be profitable. In order to catch these tenuous opportunities, the entrepreneurial agent must be always on the lookout. He must be ready to pounce on these opportunities as soon as they appear.

Thirdly, the ‘entrepreneurial element’ of action is what makes it “active, creative and human”, rather than “passive, automatic and mechanical” (Kirzner 1973, 35). Entrepreneurship brings the catallactic system to life by breaking mechanical repetition (in the now-familiar opposition of movement and stasis); it introduces a rupture through the act of wilful decision-making - a theme also at work in Schumpeter. Unlike Schumpeter however, entrepreneurship is here considered to be an innate and collective element of human behaviour – a “potentially universal behavioural principle” (Dardot and Laval 2010, 221). As Mises writes, “[i]n any real and living economy every actor is always an entrepreneur” (quoted in Kirzner 1973, 39). As such, this ability can be exercised, spread and nurtured through policymaking and education, by creating an environment compatible with its development. As seen in Chapter 5, competition plays this role in Hayek’s work by helping to spread the entrepreneurial spirit (Hayek 2013, 413–14). By

⁶ I use masculine pronouns throughout the chapter to reflect the fact the entrepreneur tends to be understood by the neoliberal theorists, and by Musk and Thiel, in masculine terms.

extension, the fact that entrepreneurship is not exclusive to a brilliant and innovative elite also means its creations can be quite mundane. It is not just about the creation of new technologies, but also about the recognition “that doing something even a little different from what is currently being done may more accurately anticipate the actual opportunities available” (Kirzner 1973, 129).

Another central difference with Schumpeter stressed by Kirzner is their respective relationships with disruption. As detailed further below, the former celebrates disequilibrium through the concept of creative destruction. In contrast, Kirzner understands entrepreneurship as an operation of arbitrage. The entrepreneur identifies a disequilibrium within the social fabric and then acts to close that gap. In other words, he brings back equilibrium through his creative intervention (Kirzner 1973, 127). As a consequence, the entrepreneur does not create anything ex-nihilo, but, on the contrary, acts on opportunities that already exist (1973, 74).

Lastly, entrepreneurship is understood by Kirzner in competitive and agonistic terms (Dardot and Laval 2010, 221). Because the discovery will only be profitable if the entrepreneur seizes it first, he is always in rivalry with his counterparts. This dimension will be found to be central in both Schumpeter’s work and in Musk’s and Thiel’s accounts.

1.2 Schumpeter’s daimonic entrepreneur

The Schumpeterian account of entrepreneurship is comparatively flamboyant. It is in many ways the closest to the way Musk and Thiel understand their own role as iconic entrepreneurs. As implied in my presentation of Kirzner’s theses, the Schumpeterian entrepreneur is characterised by his physical and intellectual exceptionality. The entrepreneurs are endowed with the “supernormal brains” and are characterised by their “ability, energy and supernormal capacity for work” (Schumpeter 1954, 73). They constitute “a special type, and their behavior a special problem” (Schumpeter 1951, 81–82).

The entrepreneur’s exceptionality is rooted in his creative power, which demarcates him from the mass of common imitators and constitutes him as a demiurge. He has the quasi-magic ability to create “new combinations” (Schumpeter 1951, 81); e.g. “new consumers’ goods, (...) new methods of production and transportation, (...) new markets, (...) new forms of industrial organization” (Schumpeter 1954, 83)). His innovative power “does not consist simply in finding or creating the new thing” (Schumpeter 1951, 88) but also in taking the decisions that enable the new to erupt. As Corey Robins remarks, “[i]t is the entrepreneur’s ability to recognize that

sweet spot of novelty and occasion (an untried technology, a new method of production, a different way to market or distribute a product) that enables him to revolutionize the way business gets done” (Robin 2013). In other words, the entrepreneur’s function is to mediate the act of creation. He is a demiurge only to the extent he can channel and animate the creative energies around him to found new things – a dimension that will be found again in Musk and Thiel’s narratives. As such, what counts in entrepreneurship is not so much the object created, but the act of creation itself as an energy, “the fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion” (Schumpeter 1954, 83). As soon as the entrepreneur “settles down” to manage on an everyday basis the business he has created, he “loses that character [of the entrepreneur]” (Schumpeter 1951, 78). The creative act needs to be constantly renewed for the demiurge not to fall back into sterile normality.

The entrepreneur’s exceptionality and privileged social function revolve around three further qualities that are intertwined: his will, foresight and leadership. He differentiates himself from the great majority because he has the character of a leader. While most of the people can see what is to be done, “they want someone to speak out, to lead and to organise” (Schumpeter 1951, 88). As a leader, the charismatic entrepreneur “impress[es] the social group” so as to draw it in [his] wake” (1951, 88). He convinces them to allocate the available resources to the realisation of the project he has imagined. As such, what matters is the entrepreneur’s intrinsic authority and his ability to take decisions where others cannot – in a way that is not dissimilar to Carl Schmitt’s (2007) understanding of the political leader, or sovereign, as the one who decides on the state of exception. He establishes his authority thanks to his uncommon foresight and intuition, his “capacity of seeing things in a way which afterwards proves to be true, even if it cannot be established at the moment” (Schumpeter 1951, 85). Faced with the “impossibility of surveying exhaustively all the effects and counter-effects of the projected enterprise”, the entrepreneur can only rely on his intuition and guess what the future holds for him (Schumpeter 1951, 85).

As a decision-maker, the entrepreneur is also endowed with a “mental freedom [that] presupposes a great surplus force over the everyday demand and is something peculiar and by nature rare” (Schumpeter 1951, 85). Such an exceptional mental strength gives the entrepreneur the capacity to escape the centripetal force of habits and routine, which paralyzes normal individuals in their actions (1951, 80). Repetitive behaviours represent a security that only the most courageous are able to abdicate and discard. For this reason, the entrepreneur is truly heroic when breaking the old to create the new (1951, 92). Schumpeter refers to this

driving force as the 'will', in an implicit reference to Nietzsche's 'will to power' (Nietzsche 1990). He notably describes it as "the will to conquer: the impulse to fight, to prove oneself superior to others, to succeed for the sake, not of the fruits of success, but of success itself" (Schumpeter 1951, 93). Entrepreneurship is compared to sport, to "boxing-matches" (1951, 93). The entrepreneur is animated by a brutal and agonistic energy that enables him to focus on his aim and overcome any resistance (Robin 2013).

Such an energy is to be linked to the violence of the entrepreneur's all-consuming desire for wealth and social promotion (Schumpeter 1954, 73–74), which makes him "the most rational and egoistical of all", as well as "more self-centred than other types" (Schumpeter 1951, 91–92). The thirst for distinction leads the entrepreneur in a quest for symbols of recognition, for "a symptom of victory" (1951, 93), like money or the "found[ing of] a private kingdom, usually, though not necessarily, also a dynasty" (1951, 92). In the entrepreneur's 'dream' of greatness, the firm becomes intertwined with the very personality of its creator.

As a human with occult and godly powers, the entrepreneur is imagined as a modern superhero who can swim "against the stream" to "change the channel" (Schumpeter 1951, 80) and who can thus bend the future to his will. He is what Fritz Redlich – Schumpeter's fellow at Harvard Research Centre in Entrepreneurial History – called a "daimonic" figure, an ambivalent and almost monstrous character who comes to represent the "mystical, personified unity of 'creation' and 'destruction'" (Fredona and Reinert 2017, 295). As such, while admired, entrepreneurs are also met by their 'normal' counterparts with resentment and hostility. Their uncommon behaviour is interpreted as a "deviating conduct" and condemned through diverse legal and political impediments (Schumpeter 1951, 86), that "may even come to social ostracism and finally to physical prevention or to direct attack" (Schumpeter 1951, 87). Such an alarmist depiction of entrepreneurs as a minority oppressed by the resentful masses strongly recalls Nietzsche's views on heroic nobility and hateful crowds (Nietzsche 2007) – a reference that also permeates Peter Thiel's narrative. It further confirms that entrepreneurs belong to an exclusive and somewhat isolated social class, which evolves 'far from the madding crowd'.

1.3 Hayek's mimetic theory

Hayek's understanding of the entrepreneur seems at first sight to be in accordance with Mises's and Kirzner's, rather than Schumpeter's. The entrepreneurial spirit is a potentiality present in all market agents. In Chapter 5, I described how such spirit could be nurtured through a series of mechanisms – the catallaxy being a large scale *dispositif* of self-education (Dardot and Laval

2010, 226) and social engineering. These included encouraging market agents to take risk, and placing them in uncertain situations, for instance by exposing them to the disquiet of competition.

Hayek's work amplifies the ambivalence that lies at the core of the Austro-American understanding of the entrepreneur. While, "in discovering the best use of our abilities, we are all entrepreneurs" (Hayek 2011b, 144), we are not all animated by the entrepreneurial spirit to the same degree (Dardot and Laval 2010, 222). Hayek admits himself that he is not an "egalitarian" and that he is convinced that some people are just "superior" (Hayek 2011a, 524). In other words, the fact we all potentially have some entrepreneurial spirit does not change the fact we are intrinsically different and that this difference determines our social function (and implicitly how we are rewarded) (see Hayek 1948, 15–16). Consequently, in the *Fatal Conceit*, he comes to the conclusion that all lives cannot "be regarded as equally important"; some lives are worth more, socially speaking, as they enable other lives to be preserved (1988, 132).⁷ Because of his belief in the intrinsic differences between individuals' abilities, Hayek is led to create similar oppositions as Schumpeter between the "individual innovator" and the "great majority" whose views on what is "right and proper" have historically barred the way of the former (Hayek 2011c, 16). Hayek shares with Nietzsche and Schumpeter a fundamental mistrust in the 'majority' and its collective decisions (and thus, by extension, in democracy). As he states in the *Constitution of Liberty*, "[i]f the majority were asked their opinion of all the changes involved in progress, they would probably want to prevent many of its necessary conditions and consequences and thus ultimately stop progress itself" (2011b, 104). In other words, the "majority" can only be a coalition of the weak, who, unlike "some governing elite", lacks the mental strength and courage to embrace the "sacrifices" that come with progress and the "interest of a better future" (2011b, 104). Progress can only be carried out on an individual basis as a break from majority thinking. This, of course, means that the entrepreneur becomes an object of envy and jealousy for the holders of the dominant views. The resentment of the weak majority finds its expression, according to Hayek, in the rise of socialism and the way the "spirit of commercial enterprise has been represented as disreputable and the making of profit as immoral" (Hayek 2011c, 135).

⁷ Hayek's concept of the 'calculus of life' interestingly takes as an example reproductive labour (as well as medicine) because of its focus on evolution. One can nonetheless see how it can be tweaked to refer to an ambivalent conception of social utility. The life of the innovator, who opens future perspectives to human 'civilisation' (Hayek 2011c, 16–17), would have a higher 'worth' than the lives of imitators.

But what I find interesting is the way Hayek integrates envy within the very workings of the nurturing mechanisms of his imagined catallaxy. As I examined in Chapter 5, the catallaxy is driven by mimetic behaviour. It uses the image of success displayed by its winners to better trigger the desire of the other market agents (Hayek 2011b, 98). Desire is a “spur to further effort” that can be instrumentalised to make individuals strive to match and overtake those richer than them, because as a general rule “[m]ost of what we strive for are things we want because others already have them” (2011b, 98). Consequently, the catallaxy needs to create “merely a few” icons and idols, that it can “let (...) rise”, to produce the “spirit of enterprise” (Hayek 2013, 414). By definition, mimetic desire will work even better when success is rare. After all, the catallaxy “increases the desire of all in proportion as it increases its gifts to some” (Hayek 2011b, 98). Thus, results cannot be guaranteed to “everyone”, and the effort of most will necessarily be frustrated. When desire is not simply triggered by the successful innovators’ extraordinary rewards, still the “few relatively more rational individuals will make it necessary for the rest to emulate them in order to prevail” (Hayek 2013, 413–14). By making established productive processes obsolete, they make imitation a question of survival. Crucially, the theory of mimetic behaviour will be shown to play a central part in Thiel’s narrative.

1.4 Knight’s entrepreneurial risk

Lastly, Thiel’s and Musk’s interventions revisit neoliberal theory’s emphasis on the concomitance between risk and entrepreneurship. For Frank Knight, the entrepreneurial class emerges because of our collective incapacity to predict the future (Knight 1965, 268). To be able to mitigate the disquiet brought by the unknowability of the future, society needs a new narrow class of “economic functionar[ies]”, the entrepreneurs, to decide “what to do and how to do it” (1965, 268). In other words, the entrepreneur is responsible for proposing a scenario about the future (what Knight refers to as “forecasting” (1965, 268)) and for indicating how to allocate and use resources to realise this vision. These scenarios must be sufficiently convincing for the other actors to agree to either submit to it (for the workers) (1965, 276) or fund it (for the investors) (1965, 279). There is therefore a competition between different entrepreneurial visions of the future to determine which will be given the resources to actualise themselves (1965, 273).

By offering concrete direction for the future, entrepreneurs isolate us (and specifically isolate the “owners of productive services” (Knight 1965, 278)) from the worst effects of uncertainty. They act as a buffer and, as such, are given “ascendancy” over actual production processes (1965, 268). They are thus entitled to important rewards if successful, all the more so as they

take upon themselves full “*responsibility*” for correct predictions (1965, 276). Their risk-taking has a very personal and psychological dimension – which is also explicit in Hayek’s work (Hayek 2011b, 161; 2013, 410). In both instances, the credibility, success and wealth of the entrepreneur find their validation on his ability to sustain the weight of uncertainty. This is what I called in Chapter 5 the ‘trial by ordeal’ of uncertainty.

2. The entrepreneur as deified founder

My incursion into the different neoliberal theories of entrepreneurship has been designed to highlight the main features of the entrepreneur as an archetype. The entrepreneur is a model that must trigger people’s desire so as to spread the entrepreneurial spirit. He uncovers secrets he can then profit from, but that can also drive humanity forward. He is a decision-maker that takes upon himself the weight of uncertainty. Most importantly, he is a daimonic figure, somewhat godly and often uncannily destructive. He arouses the envy and resentment of the more ‘normal’ market agents.

The second and third parts of the chapter examine how these themes are re-invested and transformed by two contemporary iconic figures of entrepreneurship: Peter Thiel and Elon Musk. The second part focuses on how both men appear at first sight as the perfect embodiments of the theoretical model I described. In their self-narrations they present Silicon Valley entrepreneurs as the ultimate creators, who transform their world thanks to their extraordinary abilities. Crucially, their behaviours display the ambivalence I uncovered in part one. While they assert their role as models, by providing advice to hopeful future ‘founders’, they also reassert themselves as exceptions standing out in a world characterised by sameness and mimetic behaviour.

2.1 The entrepreneur as exception

Thiel’s and Musk’s narratives are first characterised by their relentless effort to construct their public images as figures of exception. This is particularly striking in Thiel’s account, which stands out as an adamant rejection of sameness, as well as a celebration of individualism and singularity.

Thiel has publicly acknowledged his admiration for René Girard, his former lecturer at Stanford, and specifically for Girard’s theory of mimetic desire – going as far as creating a whole ‘Imitatio Program’ dedicated to the French philosopher in his Thiel Foundation (Imitatio 2007). Tellingly,

Thiel has argued that he foresaw the potential of Facebook – to which he gave its first outside investment – thanks to Girard’s insight on herd behaviour (Hardy 2015). As he claims in a 2018 interview, “our desires are not our own” (Thiel in Streitfeld 2018); they are shaped by our observations of people we admire, with Facebook supposedly providing us with a direct insight into our friends’ lives. In Thiel’s mind, because imitation is part of “our nature” (Thiel in Hardy 2015), the majority of people will have a tendency to uncritically copy what is around them. Due to its size, the ‘crowd’ needs to be seduced and conquered if the entrepreneur is to be successful. It is nonetheless, by definition, too fickle to be trusted, too temperamental not to be secretly despised. In contrast, Thiel advises aspiring entrepreneurs to differentiate themselves at all cost. The company they create must be unique if they are to maintain themselves (Thiel and Masters 2014, 34).

Thiel’s worldview is fundamentally inegalitarian, perhaps even Social-Darwinian. This is well summarised by his “Power Law”, his name for a pattern which “surrounds us everywhere in the natural and social world” and states that a “small few radically outstrips all rivals” in both producing output and concentrating property (Thiel and Masters 2014, 83). The successful entrepreneur unsurprisingly belongs to this exclusive category. As with Nietzsche’s superman, he stands out from the ‘crowd’ or ‘unthinking demos’ (Thiel 2009) because of his abnormality. This is apparent in his extraordinary psychic and physical powers (Thiel and Masters 2014, 173–89), such as the ability to work for long periods without sleeping. Thiel expounds a rather bizarre theory of population distribution which asserts that normal people are in their extreme majority ‘average’, meaning (to quote just a few) that they are neither “weak” nor “strong”, “idiot savant” nor “polymath”, “disagreeable” nor “charismatic”, “outsider” nor “insider” (2014, 175; 2012). By contrast, entrepreneurs have a tendency to simultaneously combine both extremes. They are not “entirely normal” and are “unusual” (2014, 174). Like the tutelary figure of Howard Hughes,⁸ Thiel’s entrepreneur seems to oscillate constantly between genius and madness – an oscillation that can be also found in Musk abruptly asking his biographer whether he thinks Musk is insane (A. Vance 2016, 4). As I argue throughout the chapter, the entrepreneur is presented as a liminal figure, which reveals the limits of the human capacities that he is simultaneously supposed to transcend.

⁸ The ambivalent figure of Howard Hughes - a famous pilot, business magnate and film director and producer, who sank into madness at the end of his life - is a reference for both Thiel and Musk (Thiel and Masters 2014, 184–185; A. Vance 2016, 21).

Interestingly, Thiel himself questions whether exceptionalism is 'natural' or 'nurtured' (Thiel and Masters 2014, 177). He personally believes it is both. The entrepreneur constructs his own legend by nurturing his super-human skills and extreme traits to emphasise further his intrinsic difference. Musk seems to be animated, according to his biographer, by the same determination "to shape his life story" (A. Vance 2016, 55), to create a myth around his blossoming as a modern hero. As an example, his account of experiencing and witnessing violence during his childhood in South Africa is used by Musk to explain his willingness to take on exceptional risks (A. Vance 2016, 39). Similarly, his "insistence on explaining the early origins of his passion for electric cars, solar energy and rockets" is there to convey the impression that "[h]e has been in pursuit of a master plan all along" (A. Vance 2016, 55), suggesting he has an innate foresight.

The construction of oneself as a legend goes along with the reinvention of a heroic body. A comparison of recent photos of Elon Musk with the photos of his more 'nerdy' PayPal years shows how Musk reinvented his image to correspond to standards of hyper-masculinity with muscles and hair implants. It is, from this perspective, particularly telling that he notoriously inspired Robert Downey Jr.'s interpretation of the billionaire superhero Tony Stark in the cinema adaptation of the comic books *Iron Man* (A. Vance 2016, 181). The film depicts how Stark, an outstanding inventor, constructs a powered suit of armour that makes him invincible in order to overcome the limitations of his mortal body (after a nearly fatal chest injury during a kidnapping) and escape his enemies. Fiction is today caught up by reality, after Elon Musk co-founded Neuralink in 2016, a programme to develop brain-computer interfaces to boost human intellectual capacities to match the development of potentially harmful or hostile Artificial Intelligences. These new enhanced heroic bodies of steel represent a fantasised and idealised vision of the masculine body, which must be paralleled with the strong masculine ethos at work in Silicon Valley (Wiener 2016; Chang 2018). In neoliberal theoretical texts as in Musk and Thiel's narratives, the entrepreneurial world is imagined as a world of men.⁹ Interestingly, as I explain further later in the chapter, Lacan associates masculinity with the exception to the norm. Men share a common identity as castrated (the 'norm-male' in Lacan) and are thus "grounded in the

⁹ Elizabeth Holmes, the infamous founder of Theranos, offers a peculiar example of the masculine ethos at work. To craft her entrepreneurial persona, she was rumoured to have adopted a fake deep baritone voice, along with a 'Steve Jobs'-like black turtleneck uniform (Jarvis 2019). Similarly, Wendy Liu confesses that she had internalised the conclusion that "feminine traits were inferior", and modelled her behaviour in consequence (2020, 32). These examples are to be contrasted with a parallel feminine version of entrepreneurship, as represented by personalities like Sheryl Sandberg, Marissa Mayer or Gwyneth Paltrow, which capitalises on what it promotes as positive feminine values for a more sustainable market – relationality, emotionality, care, motherliness.

exception” (Pound 2008, 108). The hyperbolic masculinity of Elon Musk can thus be read as an attempt to go further in the exceptionalism that is already at the heart of masculinity.

Peter Thiel’s willingness to enhance human intellect and physiognomy with new technologies goes even further, in spite of the risk of publicly appearing as a monster. There are countless rumours spread by Thiel himself (Bercovici 2016) about him engaging in parabiosis; that is, being injected with young people’s blood to stay young. In addition, Thiel is generally famous for his connection with the transhumanist movement, and especially with its libertarian branch, of which he is one of the main funders (Hughes 2012; O’Connell 2017). Thiel notably shares transhumanism’s concern about the biological limitations of the human body that make it prone to death. In his quest for solutions, Thiel became particularly interested in ‘the Technological Singularity’;¹⁰ that is, “an eschatological prophecy about how the advent of AI will usher a new human dispensation, a merger of people and machine, and a final eradication of death” (O’Connell 2017, 17). Like many radical transhumanists, Thiel seems to fantasise about transcending a frustrating mortal (normal) biological body, in order to craft an idealised imaginary body - a body characterised by its exceptionalism, immortality, superhuman intelligence and strength. What emerges here is the divided body of the entrepreneur; a theme that will be analysed further in the later part of the chapter.

2.2 The entrepreneur’s will to power

When comparing the entrepreneur (and therefore himself) to the ambiguous mythological figures of Œdipus and Romulus (Thiel and Masters 2014, 180),¹¹ Thiel constructs the entrepreneur as an ambivalent object of fascination; someone both adored and hated, godlike and monstrous. This translates in Thiel’s case into an acknowledged and professed effort to always be “contrarian, to go against the crowd, to identify opportunities in places where people are not looking” (Thiel in Packer 2011). Thiel’s contrarian ethos famously led him to introduce the Thiel Fellowship, a \$100,000 fellowship for promising young entrepreneurs who accept not to go to university, to “build new things instead of sitting in a classroom” (‘The Thiel Fellowship’ 2011). For Thiel, mainstream education is about learning to copy and reproduce things that already exist and as such it should be disdained. The same scorn for imitation can be found in

¹⁰ For instance, Thiel was on the board of the defunct Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence (O’Brien, 2017).

¹¹ Œdipus is both the hero who delivers Thebes from the sphinx, and a villain, whose unconscious incest brings the plague on the city. Similarly, Romulus is the mythical founder of Rome, but the city’s foundation is marred with him murdering his twin brother, Remus.

Musk's narrative against bankers who he criticises for copying "what everyone else did" in their investment strategies (A. Vance 2016, 77).

On the contrary and as in Schumpeter's work, by an act of sheer willpower, the entrepreneur must transcend the human tendency to imitate in order to create entirely new things; in Thiel's words, he must be a "founder" (Thiel and Masters 2014).¹² Creation is therefore rebranded as a question of willing and is a central motif in Thiel's imaginary world. Success or failure is determined by the founder's ability to want something strongly enough.¹³ According to his puzzled biographer, Musk seems to be animated by the same will of steel, to "possess a level of conviction that is so intense and exceptional as to be off-putting to some" (A. Vance 2016, 359). Musk's relentless will translates into his tendency to set unthinkable targets to his employees (e.g. constructing commercial rockets) and to make them fulfil these targets thanks to his unflinching determination (A. Vance 2016, 97–143) – even during a global pandemic (Siddiqui and Dawsey 2020). Musk's willpower explains why he is recognised by other tech colossuses, like Larry Page, as "a force of nature able to accomplish things in the business world that others would never even try" (Page in A. Vance 2016, 355), as someone who can achieve the impossible.

As Thiel recurrently claims, the entrepreneur is on a "mission" (Thiel and Masters 2014, 10). He is responsible for identifying problems that need to be solved with competitive solutions. Where Elon Musk strives to "commercialize space" (Thiel 2009), Thiel is particularly concerned by death and mortality, a haunting problem that has been accepted and ignored because of the "complacency of the mob" (Packer 2011). Thiel argues that the entrepreneur must "dedicat[e] [his] life" to the resolution of such existential issues (Thiel and Masters 2014, 98). Fixing them must become his sole obsession. Similarly, in the same way the Schumpeterian entrepreneur was consumed by his relentless ambition, Musk has been, according to his biographer, "consum[ed] for decades" by "problems" he is trying to solve (A. Vance 2016, 344). Interestingly, where the neoliberal theorists believe that all social issues have market solutions, Thiel and

¹² The title of Thiel's book, *Zero to One*, is meant to symbolise his admiration for the act of founding and his scorn for copying. In his rationale, it is easy to copy and multiply things that we "already know" (that is, going from 1 to n). What is hard and heroic is to create entirely new things; that is, to "go from 0 to 1". He adds that "the act of creation is singular, as is the moment of creation, and the result is something fresh and strange" (Thiel and Masters 2014, 1). The term "founder" is meant to represent this heroic act and is now commonly used by aspiring tech entrepreneurs rushing to Silicon Valley (see for instance Liu 2020).

¹³ As similar point is made by Marc Andreessen, the famous cofounder of the venture capital firm, Andreessen Horowitz. He recently explained the West technological unpreparedness revealed by the Covid-19 crisis as a "problem [of] desire" and "will" (Andreessen 2020).

Musk do their utmost to turn metaphysical questions like the mysteries of death or of space into technological problems (O’Connell 2017, 180).

2.3 Disrupting the status quo

The resolution of mysteries is conceived by Thiel as a “fight” (Thiel 2015), recalling the warlike ethos of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur. Ruthless competitiveness is generally recognised as an important dimension of the activities of the ‘PayPal mafia’ (O’Brien 2007; A. Vance 2016, 85). In his book, Thiel specifically remembers the brutal warfare that opposed early PayPal to Musk’s X.com;¹⁴ a warfare in which each participants’ obsession was to “beat” the enemy – leading a PayPal engineer to design “a bomb for this purpose” (Thiel and Masters 2014, 42).

Such a battle of hyper-testosteroned egos must be understood as a battle for leadership, determining who will impose his worldview and lead the start-up troops, in marching order, for the conquest of new markets.¹⁵ As already noted, Musk is known for being a particularly ruthless employer, who has been accused of using intimidation practices as anti-union tactics (Sainato 2018). Workers questioned by his biographer explicitly connected his impressive determination with an exploitative management of the workforce. One anonymous former employee specifically compares the workers to “ammunition: used for a specific purpose until exhausted and discarded” and suspects that this behaviour might be “calculated to keep the rest of the workforce on their toes and scared” (quoted in A. Vance 2016, 340). The will of the leader is to be blindly and immediately obeyed and never questioned.¹⁶

This focus on ultracompetitive behaviour is inflected slightly differently by Thiel. Although the Silicon Valley bubble generally appeals to the “competitive nature” of a workforce predominantly composed of ambitious young men (A. Vance 2016, 88) allegedly to encourage them to surpass themselves, Thiel appears to criticise what he calls the “ideology of

¹⁴ The two start-ups offered similar online payment systems and ended-up merging under the flagship of PayPal. The merger did not end warfare, nevertheless. In a particularly grim episode, Thiel and Max Levchin staged a successful coup to replace Musk as CEO, while Musk was on a plane to his honeymoon (and could thus not retaliate) (O’Brien 2007; A. Vance 2016, 87–88).

¹⁵ One could also interpret this fight as a Hegelian struggle for recognition.

¹⁶ Musk’s autocratic management has found a good illustration in the Covid-19 pandemic. He defied health authorities by reopening his Californian Tesla factory while the state was still in official lockdown (Siddiqui and Dawsey 2020). The *Washington Post* recently reported that workers who did not come back to work (and took unpaid leaves instead) had seen their contracts terminated (Siddiqui 2020), despite Tesla’s prior commitments.

competition” (Thiel and Masters 2014, 35–43).¹⁷ He particularly warns against “imitative competition” that makes entrepreneurs “hallucinate opportunities” (Thiel and Masters 2014, 40). Competitive instincts must be, on the contrary, placed in the service of the creation of radically new things, and the destruction of the old and superfluous.

This aggressiveness must be seen in relation to Thiel’s description of the entrepreneur’s eager impatience with the status quo (Thiel and Masters, 2012a). The Silicon Valley entrepreneur is someone who is fundamentally dissatisfied with the current institutional order and who therefore longs to disrupt it. This entails, at least in Thiel’s case, an unapologetic libertarianism and results in a radical questioning of the static world of politics, conceived of as an environment of endless degenerative and bureaucratic reproduction, as opposed to the creative world of entrepreneurship (Thiel 2009). The state is particularly blamed for reinforcing mimetic behaviour by encouraging the risk-averse reproduction of things that already exist. Through his creations, the entrepreneur must therefore break people’s passive complacency and “escape from politics in all its forms” by creating “a new world” (Thiel 2009).

Crucially, the creation of a new world entails the destruction of the former. To make this point, Thiel takes Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber,¹⁸ as an example, and states that the bombs that Kaczynski mailed were meant “to destroy existing institutions (...) and let people start over and work on hard problems anew” (Thiel and Masters 2014, 95).¹⁹ Similarly, Thiel insists in his Stanford lecture that entrepreneurs “don’t play by the rules” (Thiel and Masters 2012a). As further developed in the last part of the chapter, Thiel implies that the entrepreneur can free himself from the constraints of the symbolic order he inherited, and particularly of its legal and institutional frameworks.

¹⁷ Similarly, Thiel opposes economists’ “obsess[ion] with competition as an ideal state” (which is static and, as such, noxious) to advocate instead for “creative monopolies” (Thiel and Masters 2014, 33). Like Hayek (2013; 2011b), Thiel considers that these monopolies will constitute an incentive for firms to innovate, as they will be guaranteed a monopoly position on their creations. Thiel takes Microsoft and IBM as examples (Thiel and Masters 2014, 32-33).

¹⁸ Kaczynski was an American mathematics professor who abandoned his career to embrace a nature-centred form of anarchism. A fervent critic of modern technology and industrialisation (see his manifesto, ‘Industrial Society and Its Future’ (Kaczynski 1995)), he led a bombing campaign from 1978 to 1995. The mailed bombs targeted scientists, engineers and representants of industries. In total, three people were killed and another twenty-three were injured.

¹⁹ There is here a striking parallel with Nick Land’s and Warwick Cybernetic Culture Research Unit’s call for accelerationism, and the fusion of humans and machines. Land’s “mechanic revolution” presses “toward ever more uninhibited marketization of the processes that are tearing down the social field, ‘still further’ with ‘the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization’” (Land in Noys 2014, 55). Markets are used as “monstrously powerful cybernetic forces” (Noys 2014, 56) that rip apart the fabric of time, space and materiality in today’s capitalism (which accelerationists consider stagnant).

2.4 A fantasmatic vision of the future

The attempt to unsettle the fabric of the present symbolic order is clear in Thiel's insistence on the necessity for entrepreneurs to uncover 'secrets' (Thiel and Masters 2014, 93–106), to discover and conquer new inaccessible territories and push back the last earthly and spatial frontiers (Thiel 2009; Thiel and Masters 2014, 97). Unlike the repetitive and infertile world of politics, the room opened by the entrepreneur in cyberspace, outer space or on the sea (with seasteading) is seen by Thiel as creating "a new space for freedom" (Thiel 2009). Musk's project to go to Mars and turn humanity into an interplanetary species is lauded by Thiel as it "gives the public hope" (Thiel in A. Vance 2016, 336).

Interestingly, the entrepreneur's creative propositions are rebranded as dreams and fantasies in both Thiel's and Musk's self-narrations, and in the media coverage of their works. Typically, the entrepreneur is depicted as the person who strives to make his childhood fantasies come true: for Thiel, fantasies about immortality, "oceanic city-states" and Tolkien (Packer 2011),²⁰ for Musk, "space and battles against good and evil" (A. Vance 2016, 24). The entrepreneur is heroic because he does not immediately discard these dreams as 'crazy'. On the contrary, he sustains the imaginary moment to subsequently make the dreams reality. As a consequence, fantasy and reality are always intertwined both in Thiel's and Musk's self-presentations and the analyses of their commentators. For Vance, Musk is the man who "takes these fantasies seriously" or for whom "fantasy and reality" are "hard to separate" (A. Vance 2016, 24). For this very reason, he is the one who has the strength to make "his very wild dreams possible" (2016, 89). On the other hand, although Thiel fears that the newly opened worlds might be "more imaginative than real", he still hopes that they will "impact and force change on the existing social and political order" (Thiel 2009).

Jens Beckert's *Imagined Futures* (2016) analyses particularly well how entrepreneurship revolves around a passage from virtuality to reality. For Beckert, entrepreneurship is a two-stages process. While I detail the second stage in the next subpart, Beckert indicates that the first is about presenting "[u]topian visions of a pretended reality – imagined futures" as "an

²⁰ At least two of the Founders Fund's companies, Palantir and Anduril, have been named after artefacts from *The Lord of the Rings*. Palantir specialises in big data analytics, while Anduril ('the flame of the West' in Tolkien) develops AI-powered military technology specifically used for border control. Both start-ups claim they provide their clients with the ability to see everything: suspicious data traces that could betray the presence of terrorist activities or, more recently, the resurgence of a virus in a given place (Palantir 2020); movements of illegal migrants at the border (Levy 2018). This of course recalls the motif of the panoptical mirror I described in Chapter 4 - price signals being here replaced by data.

impetus for innovative creativity” (2016, 169). Entrepreneurs are responsible for presenting society with appealing and desirable visions of the future – with ‘hope’. For example, Vance describes how Musk, through his PR campaigns, keeps “promising the sun, moon, and stars to the media” (A. Vance 2016, 82). Yet, such visions are by definition fragile; they “may tumble like a house of cards” and their “strength lies only in [their] promises” (Beckert 2016, 177). As Knight also points out, sustaining the imaginary moment thus entails sustaining a moment of true uncertainty. As a consequence, the greatest strength of the entrepreneur becomes, for Musk and Thiel, his fragile ability to dream – capitalist economies being “in no small measure a struggle over imaginaries of future technologies” (Beckert 2016, 170). The entrepreneur’s imagination must therefore be protected, which explains why the Thiel Fellowship is presented by Thiel as an attempt to rescue young talents’ dreams before they get spoiled by higher education and conformism (Packer 2011). By opening new grounds to society beyond present physical and mental borders, Thiel and Musk see themselves as the source of its constant renewal. As trendsetters, they become the godlike incarnations of society’s imaginary, guaranteeing its vigour and bringing it out of the degenerative spiral of imitation.

As such, they must be attuned to people’s unconscious desires and fantasies, to which they give shape thanks to their inventions. In the same way that, for Freud, dreams are the translations of the individual’s drives in imaginary terms, Thiel’s and Musk’s dreams come to express the drives that animate the society they live in. Their fantasies of the conquest of mysterious new space and of bypassing limits are concomitant with capitalism’s urges to find and penetrate new markets, to discover and exploit new resources from which to extract surplus value – or what Melinda Cooper in her reading of Marx summarises as the capitalist imperative to “expand into a new space-time of accumulation, beyond its actual limits” (Cooper 2008, 25).²¹ It also has some obvious resonances with the Western colonial project.²²

²¹ Crucially, Cooper reminds us that the capitalist urge to go beyond limits to find surpluses of life from which to profit is followed by a “recapture [of] the new within the property form” which tends to paradoxically devalue it (2008, 25). Furthermore, creative destruction means that the “promissory moment” of capitalism is always “accompanied by a simultaneous move to disinvest from, devalue and lay waste to whole sectors of unprofitable production” (2008, 60). This second moment (the production of waste) will be analysed in Chapter 7.

²² On the topic of coloniality, it is important to note that Thiel is a firm believer in the theory of the clash of civilisations (with markedly orientalist views of China and what he keeps calling ‘Islam’) (Thiel and Robinson 2020; Thiel 2007). Although Musk has been discreet on the matter, one needs to remember that his family was deeply embedded in the South-African apartheid’s economy (A. Vance 2016).

2.5 The 'entrepreneur-king'

Jens Beckert indicates that the second stage of entrepreneurship is the ability of the entrepreneur to transmute his dreams into something real. On top of designating desirable futures through the stories he tells, the entrepreneur must also be able to give "a more realistic assessment" of his visionary project (Beckert 2016, 177). He must indicate how the project can be concretely achieved. Importantly, this does not mean that he makes the objects of his dreams himself; the making is a task for his subordinates. What he does is rather to show new exciting directions to take and how to reach them via a collective effort that he is responsible for organising and directing. As such, similar to Knight and Schumpeter, he is the archetype of the charismatic leader characterised by the strength of his determination and decision-making. The impossible targets that Musk sets for his employees must be understood in this context: he points toward what has not yet been achieved and demands his employees to go beyond present limits. Similarly, as the head of the Founder Fund, Thiel indirectly crafts the world of tomorrow by deciding which projects for the future are sufficiently fertile to fund.

For Thiel, Musk and their peers, the entrepreneur thus comes to represent a positive alternative to the way politics is traditionally done, due to his far-reaching ambitions and his forecasting powers. For Larry Page, Musk is "a figure that should be replicated during a time in which the businessmen and politicians have fixated on short-term, inconsequential goals" (A. Vance 2016, 355). Similarly, Thiel believes that corporate 'creative monopolies', like Apple's and Microsoft's on their operating systems, are more efficient at making innovations (or at "adding entirely new categories of abundance to the world") than governmental action (Thiel and Masters 2014, 32); they are the drivers of "progress" (2014, 33). Thiel's opinion on the matter takes a more disturbing turn in a 2007 essay on Girard's work, in which he claims that Western civilisation is threatened in its very existence by Islamist terrorism. As he states, traditional politics, with its "interminable and inconclusive parliamentary debates" (2007, 208), cannot do much against it. Thiel thus advocates, with Leo Strauss (the essay being called 'The Straussian Moment'), adopting non-constitutional strategies of deception and counterinsurgency, by specifically relying on intelligence and secret services (2007, 208). Characteristically, such vision leaves ample space for intervention for (non-elected) "ambitious people" (Thiel 2007, 207), who can discretely offer their services to governmental agencies, and thereby fashion and influence the politics of the future outside public scrutiny – as Thiel most surely did when founding surveillance start-ups of the like of Palantir and Anduril, whose clients today include the CIA, NSA and the FBI (Lucas 2017).

The Thielian/Muskian entrepreneur belongs to what I call the exclusive class of the ‘entrepreneur-kings’, as a reference to Plato’s ‘philosopher-kings’ (Plato 1998, 190–226) – and it is in this instance telling that Thiel picked Strauss, a neo-Platonic philosopher with clearly expressed elitist views, to make his point (Thiel 2007, 204).²³ Plato’s (exclusively male) philosopher-kings are destined for governing the *polis* because of their privileged relationship with eternal Truth and Beauty. Thanks to their philosophical works, they access immortality (Plato 2008). For Plato (1998), the divine soul of the philosopher is reinforced by a sound and healthy mortal body; physical qualities that contribute in differentiating the philosopher from ordinary people. In the same way, the Thielian/Muskian entrepreneur is deemed worthy of leading and reconfiguring the symbolic order because of his privileged relationship with creation that grants him access to immortality through the imaginary visions of the future he proposes. Interestingly, the exceptionalism that designates the entrepreneur as the ideal modern ruler is based on an alleged superiority that is equally both intellectual and physical. Thiel’s attempt to reach immortality is particularly situated both at the level of the revolutionary technological projects whose birth he enables, as well as at the level of his body that he attempts to reconfigure in his fight against death itself.

3. The entrepreneur as sacrificial victim

The features ascribed to the iconic entrepreneur in Musk’s and Thiel’s narratives combine the different entrepreneurial personalities found in neoliberal theory. The entrepreneur is presented as a model to be widely imitated, but also as an exception and a demiurge, whose creative potency is revered as a force of renewal. Nonetheless, these bright visions hinting at utopian worlds of hope and freedom hide an intrinsic violence. In a typically Schumpeterian fashion, every act of creation becomes entangled with destruction. For instance, the image of the good-natured and heroic Elon Musk has a negative: Musk as a versatile divinity exploitative to his workforce. Now I have examined the narrative motifs that relate to the iconic entrepreneur’s creativity, I shall explore their negative – and at times, morbid - dimension and thus reveal the entrenched existential anxieties they enclose.

²³ Thiel stresses Strauss’s ambition to write “esoterically” to be understood by “intelligent” reader only (2007, 204).

3.1 Facing the 'end of the future'

Part 2 introduced the idea that Musk's and Thiel's fantasmatic scenarios of futuristic imaginary orders are constructed as negations of the present symbolic order. I wish to go a step further to describe this negation as an exorcism of the world of the status quo. The status quo is presented as an imminent existential threat, in a way that strongly recalls Hayek's apocalyptic description of planning (see Chapter 4).

Thiel seems particularly worried about what he calls in an article the "end of the future" (2011). He firmly believes in "Progress"; that is, in "the ever-expanding universe of human knowledge" (2011), which is synonymous for him with a healthy society. According to him, the vigour and viability of a given society can be measured by its relentless creativity, by a constant engagement in technological development. Consequently, Thiel is extremely concerned by what he sees as a 'technological slowdown' or a "non-acceleration" of technological progress (2011). The manifesto that launched his Founders Fund details further his apprehension. Whereas the post-war period was characterised by extraordinary technical achievements, like walking on the moon, current modernity is disappointing because human beings have lost their ability to translate their wildest dreams into concrete technological inventions. Instead of creating flying cars, we lose time in developing useless apps and "underpowered hybrid cars", thus reaching "a sort of technological end of history" (Gibney 2011). Musk's narrative takes on a similar apocalyptic undertone. His biographer describes how Musk "sees man as self-limiting and in peril" (A. Vance 2016, 344) and fears that "mankind has lost much of its will to push the boundaries" (2016, 101). His concerns over potentially hostile Artificial Intelligence articulates his anxieties concerning the decline of the human race (Friend 2016).²⁴

Like the neoliberal theorists, Thiel and Musk generally adopt a vision of stasis and movement that resembles Freud's understanding of the interaction between life and death instincts. For Freud, the death drives (Thanatos) represent a tendency to go back toward the inanimate and thus toward self-destruction; as such, Freud also associates them with the "ego instincts" (Freud 2013, 58). In contrast, the sexual drives (Eros) disrupt this deadly fixity and are thus associated with the life drives (2013, 58). Similarly, technological stagnation is intrinsically connected, in Thiel's and Musk's narratives, with the slow death of (Western) civilisation. This dimension is

²⁴ In addition to Neuralink, Musk teamed with Sam Altman, another prominent figure of Silicon Valley obsessed with human degeneracy and death, to found OpenAI, which aims at developing forms of AI friendly to humans (see Friend 2016).

made explicit when Thiel writes that “in business, equilibrium means stasis, and stasis means death” (Thiel and Masters 2014, 34). The founder thus becomes the hero that can kick-start civilisation’s creative power by revitalising the collective imaginary. In other words, the tormenting fear of nothingness and death acts as a vacuum that drives the development of the imaginary scenarios proposed by Musk and Thiel. The entrepreneur’s promises are tainted with an uncanny dimension, an anxiety about the future that the entrepreneur’s imaginary creations are meant to suture.

3.2 The ‘denial of death’

Such existential anxiety is apparent in Peter Thiel’s narrative, as he develops an obsessional fear of the “ideology of the inevitability of the death of every individual” (Thiel in Packer 2011). As seen in Part 2, death is, according to him, the most important problem that faces humanity; a problem that has been insufficiently taken into account because of the general denial that is associated with it (Thiel 2015). Death thus functions in Thiel’s accounts as the motivating factor for the continual search for innovations that could ward off human decay and alleviate suffering (Thiel and Masters 2012b). It led Thiel to invest, personally or through the Founders Fund, in biotech start-ups targeting aging and disease, like Aubrey de Grey’s Methuselah Foundation, a non-profit organisation that develops regenerative treatments to extend life (Methuselah Foundation 2020).²⁵

Thiel’s fear of death and decay, his interest in parabiosis, cryogenics and transhumanism, highlights the striking corporeal anchorage of his narration. The extreme narcissism that stands out in Thiel’s depiction of his extraordinary abilities appears to be matched only by a deep anxiety about his own bodily decline. This fear of aging must be read, I suggest, as a fear of physical and mental dissolution, and can be explained through Lacan’s psychoanalytical theories. As I explained in Chapter 2, the Lacanian imaginary is intrinsically related to the body image. For Lacan, the infant’s troubling experience of an inability to apprehend the unity of its body (the infant’s ‘body in pieces’ (Lacan 1978, 72)) endures as a haunting trace throughout life (Lacan 1978, 66). The ‘mirror stage’ is supposed to ease this disquiet by allowing the infant to identify with its specular image, under the symbolic aegis of its parents who validate the identification (‘This is you’) (Lacan 2004, 42). Through this process, the infant gains a grasp of its bodily integrity, as well as a first sense of self-consciousness, from which it can start constructing its psychic personality - the ‘ego’. In other words, according to Lacan, the imaginary, intertwined

²⁵ See also De Grey’s interview in Marc O’Connell’s *To be a machine* (2017)

with the symbolic order, directs the narcissistic construction of the ego and guarantees its coherence and consistency. The ego is also, consequently, fundamentally connected with the real, which it is supposed to ward off, and by extension with death (Lacan 1978, 245). At first sight, death - understood as the sensory chaos of the early infant's life - is thus postponed and left aside thanks to the imaginary and symbolic constructions of the subject.

The transhumanist theories dear to Peter Thiel offer a good illustration. They are animated by the fear of death, apprehended as the slow decrepitude of the imperfect mortal body (O'Connell 2017, 40); and, thus, as a return of the Lacanian real, understood as a dissolution of mental and bodily representations. The fight against death is consequently conceived by Thiel as an "escape" from a threatening and ineluctable natural destiny (Thiel 2015). The construction of a heroic legend and an immortal body described in Part 2 must be interpreted in such a light. Ernest Becker, interpreting Otto Rank's psychoanalytical writings, explicitly associates heroism with the sublimation of the "terror of death" (E. Becker 1973, 11). Heroic men, according to him, overcome their existential fear by always orientating themselves "beyond their bodies" and "toward explicit immortality – ideologies, myths of heroic transcendence" (1973, 285). Similarly, the division of the entrepreneur's body between a finite and mortal body and an imaginary and enhanced heroic body is characteristic of Thiel's (and to a lesser extent Musk's) quest for immortality.²⁶ This dual body strongly recalls Ernst Kantorowicz's description of the *King's Two Bodies* (1957), a medieval doctrine that differentiates the mortal natural body of the King from his immortal spiritual body, which symbolises dynastic continuity, and by extension the immortality of the monarch as a symbolic function. When trying to incarnate the archetype of the mythical entrepreneur, or when imagining themselves as the 'entrepreneur-kings', the ideal rulers of a future utopian society, Musk and Thiel precisely try to transcend what Lacan has called the 'first death' (the biological death) in order to imaginarily construct themselves as immortal symbols (Lacan 1986).

3.3 Suffering and self-sacrifice

Musk's and Thiel's attempted transformation into a mythological archetype to escape death, paradoxically, ends up reinforcing its presence. Death markedly appears in a second instance in Lacan's writings on the ego. Both the symbolic and imaginary orders are intimately connected,

²⁶ The duality is also at work in Wendy Liu's account of her uneasiness with the "physical impediments" of her female body that she would like to "transcend". She writes, "if I couldn't literally escape my body, then at least I could seek refuge in the mind. Through preserving my achievements on the Internet, I could attain a kind of virtual immortality denied to those grounded solely in the flesh" (2020, 24).

according to him, with death. The unity that results from the mirror stage is an “alienated, virtual unity” (Lacan 1978, 66). The imaginary constructions of the ego and the settling around the fantasised and fascinating image of a coherent body cannot grasp the entirety of the individual’s “psychological reality” (Lacan 1978, 245). From the start, the symbolic validation of the image formulated by the infant’s parents is interpreted by Lacan as a cut on the subject’s personality, ultimately represented by the figure of castration. Imaginary and symbolic representations necessarily inhibit – kill - certain drives and energies, annihilating many potentialities of what we could have been. As such, they are an “encroachment of death on life” (Lacan 1986, 321), an intimate encounter with the possibility of death.

From this perspective, Thiel’s and Musk’s attempts to construct themselves as the imaginary heroic figures of the triumphant entrepreneur represent already, at some level, a certain death. This is particularly apparent in the recurring motifs of sacrifice and suffering in their self-narrations, especially when trying to embody the mythical entrepreneur’s ability to withstand menacing risk. Tellingly, most of Musk’s counterparts, partners, and family members interviewed by Vance agree that what differentiates Musk from the “mere mortals” is his ability to “take an insane amount of personal risk” (Ed Ho in A. Vance 2016, 80), to risk “more than anyone else” (J.B. Straubel in A. Vance 2016, 339). The biographer is himself fascinated by the fact that “Musk remains willing to lose it all” (A. Vance 2016, 328) and that “[d]ramatic risks accompany just about everything Musk does” (2016, 359).

Strikingly, the aptitude to take important risks is explicitly connected, in the case of Musk, with his capacity to endure pain; what Larry Page describes as a willingness “to suffer some personal cost” (Page in A. Vance 2016, 355). By an interesting metonymical slippage, what Elon Musk is said to put at stake through his risky business ventures is his own “major skin” (Ed Ho in A. Vance 2016, 80), “his blood, sweat and tears” (J.B. Straubel A. Vance 2016, 339). Musk seems animated by a self-destructive drive to “forever pus[h] his business to the edge”, which entails “abus[ing] himself by working inhumane hours” (A. Vance 2016, 356). In a 2018 interview to the *New York Times*, Musk talked about his “excruciating” pain and physical exhaustion after not leaving the Tesla factory for sometimes “three or four days” (Musk in Gelles et al. 2018). Similarly, Thiel’s depiction of start-up founding is full of mentions of ‘extreme sleep deprivation’ and dubious diets that leave the entrepreneurs and their team on the verge of madness (Thiel and Masters 2014, 42).²⁷ These different accounts keep emphasizing the violence that these men claim to

²⁷ Similarly, the deregulation of workers’ rights participates in the creation of an uncertain environment where workers are exposed to risk without protection. See also Chapter 5 for a parallel in Hayek’s work.

inflict on their own body and mind. Musk appears to push masochism even further and regrets that his kids “won’t suffer as he did”, because he “feels that the suffering helped to make him who he is and gave him extra reserve of strength and will” (A. Vance 2016, 357).

The mention of the entrepreneur’s willingness to suffer is certainly meant to highlight their uncommon ability to endure stress and keep functioning; their leadership capacity to get hyper-rational in situations of adversity (A. Vance 2016, 211). In a striking parallel with the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* described by Max Weber, the ability to sustain (and preach) “hard, continuous bodily and mental labour” thus becomes a sign of one’s election (Weber 2001, 105).²⁸ But, to go one step further, I contend that it should also be understood in its dimension of ritualistic sacrifice (“sacrifice” being a word explicitly used by Musk’s first wife, Justine (A. Vance 2016, 97)).²⁹ These self-sacrifices, in which the iconic entrepreneur risks his mental and physical health, must first be read as ordeals (see Chapter 5). The entrepreneur must mentally and physically bear the weight of risk and survive unusual suffering, to be deemed worthy of succeeding. In these trials by ordeal, the Gods of destiny will choose who will collapse, and who will be rewarded – thus somewhat cyclically cleansing the creative jungle of the Silicon Valley start-ups. The ordeal stands as a ritual summoning of the Gods; a defying injunction for them to declare themselves and support, or cruelly abandon, their chosen hero (Lacan 1986, 12)

Secondly, self-sacrifice must be comprehended as an offering meant to magically ensure the realisation of the entrepreneur’s dreams, “to prepare the array of objects and events – (...), the outcomes of battles (...) – by which the Other will evidence itself” (Boothby 2001, 186). Thiel explicitly claims that start-ups are like a ‘cult’ (Thiel and Masters 2014, 125), to the extent that they demand total dedication and, as seen in Part 2, the consuming of all of the entrepreneur’s strengths. They function like small Molochs to which are sacrificed the vital energy and time of young ambitious individuals.

Like all sacrifices (Boothby 2001, 189), these offerings of the self are inextricably taken into the matrix of desire. Sacrifice is for Lacan an attempt to locate our own desires in the desires of the Gods (Lacan 2004, 321), that is, the Other that presides over the symbolic order. The self-

²⁸ Weber, for instance, discusses how the protestant ethic stipulates that short nights (“six at the most eight hours”) are essential to “make sure of one’s election” (2001, 104). Conversely, the “unwillingness to work is symptomatic of the lack of grace” (2001, 105).

²⁹ Interestingly, the motifs of pain and sacrifice as ordealic mechanisms are also explicitly mentioned in Wendy Liu’s account. She particularly highlights how she had come to believe that “suffering would make [her] stronger” (2020, 109), and how willing she and her partners were to “sacrifice [their] youth at the altar of start-up success” (2020, 127) by working around the clock. She also describes start-up success as an “all-consuming quest” (2020, 129).

sacrifice of the entrepreneur can therefore be understood as an attempt to transmute the thing created as the object of the entrepreneur's personal desire into the thing that all individuals generally are supposed to desire. In other words, it reinforces the sacred aura of what is being constructed. But, more importantly, the recurrent evocations of sacrifice can be interpreted as an attempt to reinforce the entrepreneur's self-image of his own worth and social status. Since the entrepreneur is the desiring subject *par excellence* – since his desire must be strong enough to bring the object of his desire to life - he must also be the person who makes the hardest sacrifice. By extension, if he survives suffering in his flesh and mind, he must be entitled to rule as an 'entrepreneur-king'. As Boothby claims, sacrifices "found the very being of the gift" (Boothby 2001, 189): by annihilating it in the common reality, they rehearse "the possibility of regaining it in a new [symbolic] form" (Boothby 2001, 188). Boothby importantly remarks that "[i]n manifold ways, the cleaved body of the sacrificial victim offers itself as an originary lexicon, a primal alphabet of tissues and organs" (Boothby 2001, 185). Considering that we are dealing here with self-sacrifice, the mortal body of the entrepreneur is here sacrificed to be recreated as an immortal symbol.

3.4 Beyond the limit

The desire to reconstitute the body as an immortal body demands the renunciation of the mortal human body, an acceptance of the first death. By aiming to live for ever, perhaps by consuming human blood or growth hormones, or by enhancing the body with machine parts, by accepting to become perhaps barely human, Thiel (and, to a lesser degree, Musk) situate themselves *beyond* mortal life, and thus *beyond* life itself. This dimension is already present in the doctrine of the King's two bodies described by Kantorowicz (1957). The King's immortal body becomes separately visible after the King's earthly death, during an institutional ceremony in which a life size wax doll is made at the image of the deceased and then fed for the whole duration of the interregnum. Although the doll, as a figure of transition, incarnates the eternity of the transcendent royal function, it is nonetheless a still and lifeless eternity, petrified in its cold representation of everlasting glory.

The liminal dimension of the iconic entrepreneur's personality must be reinterpreted in such light. As demonstrated in Part 2, both Musk and Thiel conceive of themselves as exceptional men with extraordinary features. By trying to prove to the world - and to themselves - that they surpass the majority in their intellectual and physical abilities, they tend to highlight a limit to

normal human capacities that they are meant to systematically bypass.³⁰ The minute crafting of their exceptionalism signals their desire to escape symbolic constraints. This emancipation from the symbolic must be paralleled with the Lacanian understanding of masculinity mentioned earlier. According to Lacan, masculinity, or phallic sexuality, is structured by an antinomy: the “possibility of an unlimited existence is maintained” through the retention of the image of the murdered primordial father evoked by Freud, and who symbolises the exception to the law and unlimited *jouissance* (Shepherdson 2003, 138). However, living within the symbolic, in the social world, requires this obscene and antisocial *jouissance* be sacrificed to submit to the universality of the symbolic signifier. Symbolic universality thus presupposes an exception. I argue that, through their questioning of the status quo, their evocation of possible imaginary futures and their personal reinvention as supermen, Musk and especially Thiel place themselves beyond the norm, which they implicitly challenge, and thus beyond the symbolic order. They thereby attempt to revive and incarnate the figure of the primordial father, the figure of the ultimate exception, of an unmediated access to absolute *jouissance*. Through the appealing visions of the future they provide in the media, they also invite us to cross the invisible limit that separates us from our dreams and desires. They encourage us to go beyond ourselves.

As such, Thiel’s and Musk’s bypassing of the limit must be read, in my view, as attempts to reach what Lacan calls the ‘Thing’ (from Freud’s *das Ding*) as the object/promise of unconstrained *jouissance* that lies outside the law, and by extension outside the symbolic (Lacan 2006; 2004; 1986).³¹ Pain, however, marks the access to the Thing: it accompanies the attempt to “absolutely reach *das Ding*, to open all the floodgates of desire” (Lacan 1986, 97). The recurrence of the motive of suffering in Thiel’s and Musk’s narrations can thus be read as signals of the crossing. Musk’s 2018 *New York Times* interview is a particularly telling example. Recounting the interview, the journalists stressed Musk’s disturbing emotionality and his struggle “to maintain his composure” when exposing his mental and financial difficulties (Gelles et al. 2018). What I suggest is that they were witnessing the irruption of cracks in the heroic persona Musk crafted for himself and which he cannot ultimately sustain. Lacan claims that unmediated access to the Thing is ultimately unbearable, that we cannot bear “extreme pleasure, as far as it consists in forcing access to the Thing” (Lacan 1986, 97). The Thing is intrinsically connected with the real as it likewise radically cannot be formulated and conceptualised. An excessive proximity with it

³⁰ Dardot and Laval write that “[t]he ‘natural frame of the human body’ imposed limits on *jouissance* and on performance that have become unacceptable today. (...) [Today], the new discourse on *jouissance* and performance obliges people to furnish themselves with a body that can always surpass its current capacities for production and pleasure” (Dardot and Laval 2010, 438).

³¹ The ‘Thing’ is partly reinterpreted as the ‘*objet a*’ in Lacan’s later work. See Lacan (2004).

would cause the dissolution of all our mental constructions, explaining why, for Lacan, “*jouissance* (...) precisely implies the acceptance of death” (Lacan 1986, 222).

The limit, from this perspective, must be read as what keeps us away from the desirable but destructive Thing. It is a cut, a rift, constituted by the Law, and generally by the elements of the symbolic order (Lacan 1986, 325), “which prevent me from crossing a certain border at the limit of the Thing” (Lacan 1986, 219). The limit thus symbolises an in-between, a link between life and death, the symbolic and the real. Interestingly, when claiming to cross this limit (as detailed in Part 2), Thiel explicitly refers to his imaginary parentage with the tragic figure of Œdipus, who transgresses the taboo of incest that marks the limits of civilisation. Lacan, fortuitously, chose Antigone, Œdipus’s daughter, to illustrate the heroic bypassing of the limit to enter in the realm of the Thing, or what Lacan calls the zone of the “between-two-deaths” (Lacan 1986, 315–33). To some degree, as in Thiel’s self-narration, Antigone is described as “inflexible”, as inhuman and as coming out “the human limits”, her desire pointing her towards her tragic destiny (1986, 306). When choosing to cross the limit – the law of the polis embodied by Creon, which Antigone chooses to disregard to bury her brother, she walks willingly toward her imminent death, and thus becomes the incarnation of the death drive. As such, she is already dead in life (Lacan 1986, 317). Her crossing is compared to Niobe’s petrification (Lacan 1986, 326) – paralleling the King’s motionless wax doll or Thiel’s non-aging body fixed in time.

3.5 The sacrifice of the entrepreneur-king

By constituting themselves as exceptions and placing themselves beyond symbolic constraints, by reviving the figure of the primordial father as the bearer of an excessive *jouissance*, Thiel (and to a lesser degree Musk) indirectly call for their own sacrifice. This dimension is again explicit in Thiel’s fascination with Girard’s theory of mimetic desire. The idea that retains his attention is that ‘mimetic desire’ ineluctably leads to the sacrifice of a scapegoat to buy social peace and institute the social bond (Thiel 2007) – hence the grandiose title of one of his Stanford seminars, ‘Founder as Victim, Founder as God’ (Thiel and Masters 2012a).

In this seminar, Thiel explicitly assimilates the iconic entrepreneur to the scapegoat, who attracts social hostility because of his extraordinary abilities. Through this comparison, Thiel turns the entrepreneur into a Christlike figure, sacrificed for the greater good of humanity by the resentful mob. In so doing, Thiel recreates a new social contract– “the bond of the [group’s] solidarity” (Boothby 2001, 180) - built around the providential figure of the entrepreneur, who must be a god since he is the object of public hatred. In an echo of Freud’s killing of the

primordial father, the sacrificed and vilified body of the entrepreneur becomes a space in which society represents and deciphers itself, the repository of its fantasies and hopes. For Freud, the *jouissance* of the primordial father is fundamentally asocial, as well as absolutely unbearable to his sons; the primordial father must be sacrificed for 'civilisation' to emerge as a renunciation and sublimation of forbidden *jouissance* (Freud 2002). The guilt of the sons means that the frozen image of the murdered father is forever remembered and revered. In other words, the exception must be sacrificed to guarantee the Law as binding society together, but the Law simultaneously keeps alive the image of the exception in a static form and thereby keeps desire alive (Lacan 1986, 101).

3.6 An impossible symbolic model

Although Thiel considers the sacrifice of the iconic entrepreneur by the crowd to be the ultimate sanction of his extraordinary superiority, he nonetheless seems horrified by this possibility – to the point of retiring in a fortified bunker in New Zealand (followed by some of his counterparts) to survive the coming apocalypse (Osnos 2017). Thiel thus thinks that the 'entrepreneur-king' must reproduce the founding act *ad aeternam*, in order to postpone his ineluctable sacrifice and hypnotise the hateful crowd. He must keep alive the flame of creation and achieve 'perpetual innovation' not to become a sacrificial victim (Thiel and Masters 2012a).

We reach here the crux of Thiel's paradoxical desire. On one hand, Thiel fantasises about becoming a symbol, which entails the sacrifice of his mortal body and the suspension of his immortal image in eternity. On the other hand, he seems terrified by his own death wish, and thus advocates constant activity to postpone his annihilation. The recurrence of the motif of suffering could thus signal the fact that the entrepreneur always remains at the border of the limit, in the twilight zone. As Lacan claims, "suffering is here conceived as a stasis that asserts that what is cannot re-enter in the nothingness from which it came out" (Lacan 1986, 304).

Pain, suffering and existential anxiety, on top of signalling the proximity of the Thing, also represent the limits of imaginary constructions. Anxiety specifically appears, according to Lacan, in the rift opened by the symbolic that marks the limit of the specular image formed in the mirror stage (Lacan 2004, 125). Crucially, anxiety also marks the emerging of the intimate "non-imagined residue of the body" (Lacan 2004, 74). In other words, anxiety, on one hand, signals the return of the repressed real of the body that comes to disrupt our structuring, but also alienating, imaginary ego constructions. On the other hand, it is also a product of the

fundamental limit of all imaginary dreams of omnipotence; a reminder of both the symbolic castration and the irrepressible presence of the body.

Thiel (and to a lesser extent, Musk's) desire to become an immortal god is an example of a particularly extreme imaginary ego construction: a rejection of all symbolic and body constraints, a dream of unrepressed *jouissance*. The immortal body, into which Thiel desires to transmute himself, exercises a violent constraint on his subjectivity. From this perspective, I argue that Thiel's dread of bodily decline must be interpreted as signalling the breaches opened by the real in his meticulously composed imaginary self-image – breaches which seem to him terrifying, but also fascinating if we consider their obsessive reiteration in his fight against mortality. To go back to the terms used by Kantorowicz, Thiel's fear of aging signals the return of the inhibited and repressed mortal body that comes to dislocate the logics of the still and inert imaginary immortal body.

The suspension of the entrepreneur in suffering, and his existential anxiety, reminds us that Thiel's and Musk's ambitions to constitute themselves as a mythological body and their relentless effort to impersonate the archetype of the mythical entrepreneur might actually be doomed to failure. As an archetype, the model of the entrepreneur is fundamentally impossible to attain and maintain.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the network of fantasies that surround the image of the iconic entrepreneur. Men like Peter Thiel and Elon Musk give a human face to the ideal subject celebrated in neoliberal theory: an uncompromising individual animated by the visions of promising (and lucrative) futures which he has foreseen and now fights to impose; an instinctive trend-maker, who can perceive and give coherence to the amorphous desires of his counterparts, as well as identify secrets and opportunities; a risk-taker who can bear the weight of uncertainty to better transcend the limits of his psychic, physical and social environment; an icon who can trigger the envy and desire of entire generations of young ambitious people, who take him as a model to emulate. By incarnating this ideal, Thiel and Musk provide the neoliberal imaginary with greater fantasmatic substance and reinforce its grip. The way they constitute themselves as extreme figures of desire – the desire to reach *jouissance* by bypassing common humanity, the desire to perpetually create and go beyond the frontiers of the possible - turn them into fascinating and uncanny, godlike and monstrous, presences.

Through their examples, they animate the selection mechanisms of the catallaxy. They provide their admirers with tips and invitations to distinguish themselves by taking part in trials by ordeal characterised by mental and physical hardship. In so doing, they mobilise the ideology of self-sacrifice to convince their workers to accept dubious working conditions and to perpetually increase productivity. Those who cannot bear the weight of suffering or fail, like Wendy Liu or Anna Wiener, are simply told that they didn't "want it enough" (Wiener, 2016) or that they weren't good enough. Consequently, while involved in the spread of the entrepreneurial ethos, Musk and Thiel remain inhabited by their deep-seated conviction that they are the best, deified figures who have the future of human destiny in their hands.

Yet, by analysing their narrations through psychoanalytical lenses, what I have aimed to demonstrate is that Musk and Thiel, in their attempt to incarnate the neoliberal archetype of the successful individual, also reveal the very limits of this ideal, and at several levels.³² They first expose, brashly, the implications of that model being carried out to its full realisation. Specifically, the neoliberal injunction to constantly adapt to new conditions and withstand risk, to always transcend the boundaries of the present world to find a surplus of life and creativity beyond them, actually results in the potential mental dissolution of the individual, with his sacrifice – even when incarnated by so-called heroic figures. As I suggested in Chapter 4, the "party of life" invites the individuals to cross the limits that separate them from their *jouissance*, and in so doing consecrates them in what Lacan calls the realm of the 'between-two-deaths'.

Secondly and by extension, a psychoanalytically-informed exegesis of Thiel and Musk's narratives illustrates how the archetypes promoted in the neoliberal imaginary as models are impossible to sustain – even for themselves. Such an impossibility manifests itself in the contradictions and the angst that pervade their self-narrations. It is patent in the way their attempt to go beyond the materiality of the present world and human flesh is met with an anxious and obsessive return to their self-contained body, that they fantasise as threatened and struggle to keep together – like Musk facing the gaze of the *New York Times'* journalists. Thiel's dream of enlightened leadership ends up in a bunker in the desperate attempt to postpone his sacrifice and in the paranoid wait for the apocalypse to come.

³² They thus confirm Jones and Spicer's (2005) claim that the category of the entrepreneur is a "sublime" and thus impossible object.

Chapter 7. Choosing death and letting die: the addict's abjection

Introduction

Chapter 6 focused on the figure of the entrepreneur, which is one of the central idealised or heroic subjects of the neoliberal imaginary. In contrast, Chapter 7 explores an equally iconic figure of that world, albeit one that neoliberalism discursively constructs as repulsive and maintains at the margins: the addicted drug user as incarnation of the underserving poor.

I demonstrated that the neoliberal catallaxy acts as a mechanism that recognises and brings to the fore the most innovative market agents, who become models to be emulated. In doing this, it simultaneously castigates the losers of the economic game, who are turned into anti-models. Therefore, as Melinda Cooper writes, “the capitalist promise of a more abundant life” is coeval with the “creation of surplus population, of a life not worth the cost of its own reproduction”, of waste (Cooper 2008, 61). In producing heroes, the neoliberal imaginary world also produces “discredited” (Feher 2020), “abject” and “revolting” (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008; Tyler 2013) populations: the indebted poor, the migrant, the youth offender, or the drug addict, among others. Chapter 7 demonstrates that abjection is a necessary part of the neoliberal imaginary’s structure. I particularly examine how the discursive and fantasmatic construction of certain populations as abject plays a central part in the making of a normalised neoliberal subjectivity.

From this perspective, focusing on the figure of the drug addict suggests an illuminating line of inquiry, in part because the addict is a recurrent figure of the later Chicago School’s gallery of characters. As I discuss in the first part of the chapter, the question of addiction is given an important place in Milton Friedman’s, Gary Becker’s and Richard Posner’s weekly columns and blogposts. What I want to concentrate on is the emerging sense of disquiet behind the seemingly matter-of-fact and non-judgemental tone of cold economic evaluations and quasi-ethological considerations, when faced with individuals who are seen as actively engaged in their own destruction. As the representatives of those who choose death, addicts must be made to internalise the cost of their choices. That is, they must be left to die – thus opening the way to a

neoliberal 'necropolitics' (to draw on Achille Mbembe's (2006) concept) doubled with a neoliberal ethics of personal responsibility.

The second and third parts of the chapter examine how popular culture is mobilised to give a human face to the metaphorical figure of those who are animated by self-destructive desires, again with a focus on the character of the addicted drug user. I choose to do so to analyse two recent best-selling autobiographies which have received extensive media coverage: Darren McGarvey's *Poverty Safari* (2017) and J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016). Both recount similar life stories of poor young white men escaping the bleak and self-defeating socio-economic conditions which they were born into. Although these narratives might, at first glance, seem only loosely connected to neoliberalism, they repeat a discourse about poverty and addiction that is found in neoliberal theoretical texts¹ – thus participating in the banalisation of social exclusion. Part 2 concentrates on the discursive construction of the impoverished addict as abject (using Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical concept of 'abjection' (1980)). Part 3 explores how the motif of abjection is in turn used in Vance's and McGarvey's narratives as a cathartic mechanism to rebuild a purer and reformed self that conforms to neoliberal life principles, delineating the contours of a distinctive neoliberal ethics of the self, reminiscent of the Christian 'economy of the fault and of salvation' (Foucault 2018, 466).

The chapter does four connected things. It analyses how the catallaxy's selective processes, as described in Chapter 5, are implemented. Secondly, it shows how, via these processes, the neoliberal imaginary occludes structural factors in the creation of poverty in favour of individualistic narratives. Thirdly, it explores the way in which this occlusion is attached to a normative set of ethical principles, in spite of neoliberal theorists' claims of amorality. Finally, this chapters shows how these ethical principles are used to discursively construct abject figures, which function as counter-models or 'negative imagos' (Dawson 1994) and are therefore consubstantial with their heroized counterpart, the entrepreneur. While being violently stigmatised, excluded and exposed to punishment or the logic of a policy of 'letting die', made-abject populations come to reveal the limits of neoliberal ideals. They also help shape a normalised neoliberal subjectivity by highlighting what people should not be.

¹ Such rationale is also at work in recent public policy discourse. See as a telling example President Macron's 'Poverty plan' aimed at giving a sense of responsibility to the poor (Macron 2018; see also Ibled 2019), as well as his recent comment that some people in difficulty "fool around" (Berdah 2019).

1. Addiction and the death wish in neoliberal theory

The first part of this chapter explores how, despite its claim to be non-normative or even amoral, neoliberal theory “does not so much eliminate moral philosophy as posit an immanent ethics of virtue (...) that it expects to rise automatically from the mechanics of the free market system” (Cooper 2017, 57). In order to do so, I demonstrate that the psychoanalytical concept of the ‘death wish’ is used to posit the existence of marginal populations – symbolised by the addict – which choose death and must thus be left to follow their choice. I argue that the addict is a disruptive borderline case for neoliberal theory, as it potentially endangers the workings of the catallaxy and, specifically, its articulation around desire. The addict as a figure must thus be neutralised by deploying an ethics of personal responsibility against him.

1.1 The catallatic libidinal machinery

Chapter 4 examined how the Hayekian catallaxy is imagined as a giant libidinal apparatus that can coordinate human interactions by putting individual desires into relation with each other. The catallaxy is like a giant mirror that transparently reflects people’s desires – even when these are obscure to those who have them – through price signals. It moreover uses desire as “a spur” to put its agents into motion by displaying the image of successful heroes and triggering people’s covetousness (Hayek 2011b, 98).

Importantly, I showed that Hayek’s belief in the limitations of human reason means that all kinds of libidinal displays, even the “most absurd experimentations in living” or distasteful “lavish outlays”, must be accommodated by the catallaxy, as they might unexpectedly “produce generally beneficial results” in the future (Hayek 2011b, 195). The catallaxy is thus meant to be morally blind and non-judgemental. Such a rationale allows Hayek to defend what he believes to be a non-moralistic approach to pleasure, which he conceives as the exact opposite of the moralising stance of planners, who – he thinks – pretend to dictate what people should want. By banning certain aspirations deemed incompatible with the common good, socialism reduces people’s “range of choices” (Hayek 2011c, 26) and endangers the future prosperity of all.

The allegedly non-judgemental dimension of neoliberal theory is well illustrated by the later Chicago School’s crusade against what, along with today’s libertarians, they call the moralising “nanny state” (Becker and Posner 2009, 143). They specifically denounce public health

legislations against self-detrimental behaviours like smoking, drinking and unhealthy eating.² Becker, for instance, opposes any plans to tax cigarettes as they represent small “pleasures” for the poor and because smokers only “mainly harm themselves” (Becker and Nashat Becker 1997, 147). Along with Posner, he also denounces plans to tax fast-food (the “fat tax”) as “regressive” as they allegedly primarily target the less educated and the poor (Becker and Posner 2009, 133–45). In other words, all individuals should be left free to follow their desire and seek their own pleasure, as long as it does not have too great of a social price - that is, as long as it does not endanger the rest of the community.³ For instance, an alcoholic can drink her full in peace, as long as she does not drive a car afterwards. With their theory of sacrosanct free choice, neoliberal theorists state that choices are individual and that they cannot be dictated by any superior authority. With the same reasoning, Friedman (1972) argues that “on ethical grounds”, we have “no right” to use “the machinery of government” or “force, directly or indirectly” to prevent a responsible “fellow man from committing suicide, let alone from taking alcohol or drugs”. According to him, the “corrupted” addict “would be far better off” if drugs were to be legalised, as they would be cheaper, and he would take less risk to get his dose. Likewise, the community would benefit, from a decrease in criminality that gravitates around illegal drug markets (1972). This apparently liberal positioning on drugs explains why neoliberalism has, at times, been accused of being amoral by its conservative counterparts such as Irving Kristol (Cooper 2017, 57).

Nonetheless, I want to emphasise is that there is already an ethical dimension present in this commitment to be non-judgemental. This is particularly clear when one compares the neoliberal, allegedly non-moralistic approach to pleasure, with the “ethics of psychoanalysis” proposed by Lacan at the end of *Seminar VII* (2019). Lacan offers “Do not give up on your desire [*ne pas céder sur son désir*]” as a key ethical principle (2019, 515), by which he means that individuals should not cede to the moralising force of the social order (which he call the “service of the goods” (2019, 514)). Historically and traditionally, different instituted social orders (the

² Today’s British and American neoliberal think-tanks perpetuate this ‘reflection’ with regular reports on the abuses of the moralising ‘nanny state’ which predominantly targets the pleasures of the poor (e.g. smoking, drinking, overconsuming fast-food) because it assumes that individuals cannot rationally decide for themselves. As an example, Donald J. Boudreaux (a senior fellow with the Hayek program for Advanced Study in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at George Mason University) wrote an opinion piece titled “Freedom Necessarily Includes the Freedom to Act Self-Destructively” (2018) for the Foundation of Economic Education. Similarly, Institute of Economic Affairs’ ‘Head of Lifestyle Economics’ Christopher Snowdon regularly publishes articles about state ‘killjoy paternalism’ (2017) and ‘sin taxes’ (2018).

³ Neoliberal scholars thus adopt classical liberalism’s conception of liberty as negative liberty. See particularly John Stuart Mill’s ‘harm principle’ (2015).

“orders of power”) have demanded from the individual a temperance, a repression of desire to defend their own specific idea of the good (2019, 508). Desire has been “anesthetised” and “domesticated” by generations of moralists and educators (2019, 524) – including “post-revolutionary regimes” like Soviet “communism” (2019, 514). For Lacan, ceding one’s desire represents a kind of self-betrayal (2019, 518) as desire is “the metonym of our being” (2019, 520). According to psychoanalysis, and as has been discussed throughout the thesis, the subject is constituted by her desire and by the lack around which it is structured. Consequently, ceding one’s desire, renouncing the quest of the *objet a* – the obscure object of desire - equates to renouncing one’s personal “destiny” and therefore one’s self (2019, 518). The ethics of psychoanalysis is therefore a journey of self-knowledge: it is about attempting to recognise one’s desire and face it. From this perspective, one could argue that the catallaxy is a machinery that helps the individual on this journey, by allowing her to formulate her obscure desires protected by the anonymity of the price system.

Yet, Lacan also recognises that fulfilling one’s desire cannot be harmless. He reiterates that there is a “price to pay” to reach *jouissance* (Lacan 2019, 521). As I discussed in Chapter 6, when examining Musk’s and Thiel’s confrontation with their own *jouissance*, forcing access to the ‘Thing’ (that is, to enjoyment) entails for Lacan a dissolution of one’s mental constructions, self-destruction and the acceptance of death (Lacan 1986, 222). Such a risk is integrated in the Lacanian ethics of the self, which ultimately must be understood as the individual’s continual negotiation with her desire and her disruptive *jouissance*. After all, the original sentence (*ne pas céder sur son désir*) is ambiguous enough to also signify “do not give up to your desire” – thus inviting the subject to remain at a distance with her own enjoyment. What both Freud (2013) and Lacan tell us in their analyses of what lies ‘beyond the pleasure principle’ is, that fulfilling our desire represents a certain death.

1.2 An economic approach to death

Interestingly, the scholars of the later Chicago School have also attempted to include deathly desires in their theoretical framework. They have particularly sought to reconcile the existence of self-destructive behaviours with their all-encompassing assumption that individuals always make rational choices; that is, that individuals are, at all moments, driven by calculations of present and future utility (Becker 1976). Against the backdrop of these assumptions, how do we explain that some people do things which are inherently detrimental to them? Why do they

engage in self-harming behaviours, like drug use, which may result in their early death and the dissolution of their social relations?

In his introduction to *Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (1976), Becker explicitly acknowledges this issue. There and in subsequent works, he seeks to reintegrate what have commonly been identified as irrational behaviours into an economic framework based on rational choice theory. One of the recurrent examples he uses is suicide, which is interestingly presented as the ultimate end of a disparate series of self-defeating behaviours that include “marrying in haste” or “taking highly risky jobs”, but also smoking, over-eating and taking drugs (Becker and Posner 2004, 1; see also Friedman, 1972 for a similar connection between addiction and suicide). Even more radically, in the *Economic Approach to Human Behavior*, Becker goes as far as claiming that “[a]ccording to the economic approach, (...) most (if not all!) deaths are to some extent ‘suicides’ in the sense that they could have been postponed if more resources had been invested in prolonging life” (Becker 1976, 10). In both instances, the authors seek to demonstrate that death is always the result of a series of utility calculations and the product of a rational choice formulated in terms of enjoyment and desire.

Claiming that these self-defeating behaviours follow the general pattern of utility maximisation can be read as a strategy to mitigate the threat that they represent for the coherence of neoliberal economic theories. The neoliberal scholars can, nonetheless, only do so by presupposing the existence of a powerful desire to die, which explains, they say, psychoanalysis’ relative failure in treating “deep and possibly suicidal depressions” (Becker and Posner 2004, 9). According to this rationale, we can find pleasure in self-destructive activities that trump our interest in living longer, or, as Becker states, “somewhat better health and longer life may be sacrificed because they conflict with other aims” (Becker 1976, 9). Crucially, such apparently self-defeating desire does not have to be conscious, which Becker rather allusively attempts to justify by referring to the “subconscious in modern psychology” (1976, 7).⁴ Becker subsequently makes an explicit mention of a “death wish [that] lies behind many ‘accidental’ deaths and others allegedly due to ‘natural’ causes” (1976, 10). Psychoanalytical categories are here used to posit the existence of a desire to die.

However, there is an important caveat, which results in the neoliberal scholars’ rejection of psychoanalytical theory’s insight that desire is fundamentally connected to the death drive. In a

⁴ Becker also mentions the “ego and the id” in the same text (1976, 13), which I read as an implicit reference to Freud’s work.

later article written in collaboration with Posner, Becker states that they do not “presuppose any ‘death instinct’” (Becker and Posner 2004, 13) – meaning any general instinctive orientation towards death. Self-harming behaviours are the result of a *choice* made by some “miserable people” to escape their present circumstances. These people have a “weak desire to live” and are therefore “willing to take these risks to their lives because they would be worse off if they did not” (2004, 13). They see a low level of “utility” in life compared to the “utility of death” (2004, 6) and therefore do not wish to invest further in life. I argue that the hypothesis of the “miserable people” is an attempt to border and contain the potential unrest associated with the half-expressed awareness that death is consubstantial with desire. Recognising this would mean acknowledging that the neoliberal project, built around triggering desire, is bound to unleash self-destructive tendencies. To avoid this uncomfortable epiphany Becker and Posner insist that the death wish is limited to a gaggle of hopeless individuals, with “low self-respect” (2004, 12), although how and why people might pass into this lamentable state is not part of their enquiry.

Two important points emerge from this analysis. First, moralism still re-enters through the back doors in spite of neoliberal scholars’ claim to be morally neutral when focusing on the category of choice rather than ontological categories of normality and abnormality. The vocabulary used to describe suicidal people in a supposedly unprejudiced way (‘miserable’, ‘low self-respect’) can barely conceal the authors’ distaste for the few who are said to choose death. The same dissonance can be heard in Becker’s supposedly neutral presentation of other specimens of his gallery of characters: the “rotten kids” and their “rotten parents”, the “selfish families” and “selfish beneficiaries” (Becker 1991). There is a strong sense that our disposition towards life and death and the choices attached to it are what constitute us as thriving or deficient subjects in their eyes.

Secondly, focusing on rational choice enables these thinkers to overlook the structural socio-economic environment in which actions take place, despite the fact that they patronizingly recognise that life is harder for the poor (as implied in Becker’s acknowledgement that smoking is part of the “pleasures [the] poor better get from dreaming of a better life with less drudgery” (Becker and Nashat Becker 1997, 147)). As already pointed out in my examination of Hayek’s work in Chapter 5, the ideology of choice allows the neoliberal theorists to posit structural conditions as less significant than individual will-power, which is always strong enough to transcend these conditions. Instead of being “irrational impulsive actions induced by desperation” (Becker and Posner 2004, 9), suicides become the result of cool-headed *rational* calculations of personal interest in desperate conditions.

1.3 Comparing the addict and the entrepreneur

Below I demonstrate that the precarity of neoliberal scholars' exceptionalising of those who choose death is rather precarious. This precarity is especially pronounced when comparing their discursive construction of those who take risks with their lives, such as the addict, with the heroized figure of the entrepreneur.

First, addiction and suicide are formulated in terms of "risk"-taking (Becker and Posner 2004, 4) with a vocabulary reminiscent of the one used to characterise the entrepreneur – especially when it comes to risking (or gambling on) the integrity of one's body (through sleep deprivation, unhealthy lifestyle) to fulfil one's desire. Becker and Posner's article aims to demonstrate that the "persons who are 'prone' to suicide are tempted to accept gambles and lotteries with their life – at work, using drugs, in suicide 'attempts' and in other ways" (2004, 3). Put differently, using Becker and Posner's vocabulary, people with 'low utility in life' will be ready to take greater risks. If they 'lose' their 'gamble', they will actually come closer to what they genuinely want: finding a "way out of their circumstances" through death (2004, 13; underlining by Becker and Posner). They embrace uncertainty and the dramatic possibility of losing it all, thus seemingly conforming to the ontological dimension given to risk in neoliberal thought. They carry out to its extreme the neoliberal belief that to follow one's desire is to take some risk (see Chapter 5). Like the entrepreneur, suicidal people are animated by a radical willingness to transgress the boundaries of the symbolic order, the 'status quo' denounced by Thiel, to reach the object of their desire and enjoy it.

Conversely, entrepreneurship is not immune to addiction – especially when considering the habits of those who Spivack, McKelvie, and Haynie call the "habitual entrepreneurs" in their study on 'entrepreneurship addiction' (2014). The term designates entrepreneurs who, like Musk and Thiel, launch multiple start-ups during their careers and who are often animated by a compulsion to create new ventures. As Spivack, McKelvie, and Haynie argue, the habitual entrepreneurs tend to exhibit symptoms (like obsessive thoughts, withdrawal and engagement cycles, neglect of physical and social activities, increasing tolerance and physical strains) that are comparable to those of other behavioural addictions like gambling.⁵ Like other behavioural addicts, the object of their obsession – or desire – becomes tied to their very sense of self-worth

⁵ Similarly Johns Hopkins' professor of neuroscience David Linden describes Jeff Bezos and Steve Jobs as "compulsive risk-takers" in the *New York Times* and implies that, as "leaders", they often have "the same kind of personality type that is found in addicts, whether they are dependent on gambling, alcohol, sex or drugs" (2011).

(2014, 653). Interestingly, as I examined in Chapter 6, Thiel presents these diverse characteristics as necessary qualities to become a successful “founder” (Thiel and Masters 2014).

Thirdly, addicted drug users are the agents of a subterranean market that itself relies on entrepreneurialism. The current American opioid crisis – which is the partial context for one of the chapter’s case studies - results from an intertwining of structural factors (deindustrialisation; the marketisation of the health sector) and of a series of disparate entrepreneurial ventures by individuals who, as good neoliberal subjects, have identified opportunities for profit. In his account of the opioid crisis, Sam Quinones (2015) brings together the actions of pharmaceutical companies exploiting a change in medical conceptions of pain, crooked doctors exploiting breaches in state legislations to open pill-mills, individuals selling their prescriptions on the black market, and small cells of Mexican heroin-dealers revolutionising drug delivery by developing customer services. Generally, as Ole Bjerg remarks, there is a “certain homology between the use of drugs and the ideology of consumption in contemporary capitalism” (2008, 15). The drug user should be regarded as a “saint” for capitalism, because “he puts his entire existence into the effort of achieving the ultimate enjoyment” (2008, 15). In a similar way, in their analysis of “drug literature” (including the works of William Burroughs and Linda Yablonsky), Jayson Althofer and Brian Grove highlight the “economic parallels” between the capitalist economy and its “doppelganger”: the underground drug economy (2018, 7). As they argue, any “perceived distinction” between them “becomes a categorical collapse – they are indistinct” (2018, 7).

Taking these factors into account, one needs to question by which criteria the dim ‘perceived distinction’ made by the neoliberal theorists between the heroic entrepreneur and the ‘miserable’ addict is articulated. The distinction reproduces the dichotomy I examined between the “party of life” (the entrepreneur) and the party of death (the addict). It takes, first and foremost, a spatiotemporal dimension. The actions and desires of the entrepreneur are supposed to be directed outward, towards new territories and boundaries that he wants to conquer. The ventures he develops in the present are orientated towards a future he is imagining and strives to realise (Beckert 2016), towards greater life and vitality (Cooper 2008). While eager to witness the advent of the future, he has the patience to wait for the long-term development of his projects. Capitalist enterprise requires differed gratification. As Max Weber discussed in his study on the correlation between the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, the ability to resist one’s irrational impulses through the “ascetic compulsion to save” is the sign of divine providence, while also ensuring the “accumulation of capital” (Weber 2001,

116). In contrast, the addict's energy is directed inwards. He is seen as consumed by the present and by his demand for immediate satisfaction. In its neoliberal version, this interpretation tends to leave out any considerations of structural socio-economic factors.⁶ Even more empathetic readings of compulsion and addiction highlight a suspension of time and space, but this time interpreted as a protective mechanism against - and therefore a symptom of - the strains of capitalist life and its attritive injunctions. One can especially mention the brilliant works of Lauren Berlant on over-eating (2007) and Natasha Dow Schüll on machine gambling (2012).⁷

To reformulate the distinction between the addict and the entrepreneur with a Lacanian vocabulary, the entrepreneur stimulates our imagination by pointing toward the limit that separates us from our enjoyment. Yet, as I demonstrated when analysing Musk's and Thiel's narratives, he does not completely cross it. Or when he does, he almost breaks down. Instead, he heroically flirts with the limit. In contrast, the addict is already situated beyond the limit and is already immersed in her own *jouissance* (see Lacan 1986, 97). Again, the distinction is subtle, and it is from this perspective that both figures can be compared to the mythical character of Antigone (as I do with the addict below). One must keep in mind Thiel's fantasy about being simultaneously godly and monstrous. Likewise, the addict stands as an anti-hero that reveals the limits of the neoliberal imaginary world.

1.4 Disrupting capitalist ideology

In this subsection, I want to briefly come back to the psychoanalytical approach to addiction, to better highlight how addiction is interpreted by Slavoj Žižek and his followers as radically disrupting the logic of neoliberal capitalist ideology.

For Lacan, there is something slightly disturbing about heroes of Greek tragedies. Their radicalism – the cathartic spectacle 'purging' the spectator of pity and fear (2019, 522) – is

⁶ On delayed gratification and structural factors, one may think of the 'marshmallow experiment' led by Stanford's Walter Mischel in the 1960s. Children were offered to choose between being given one marshmallow that they could eat immediately, or two marshmallows if they waited for a period of time before eating the first. The researchers claimed that children who could wait (and thus differed gratification for a greater future reward) tended to have better life outcomes. Yet, a 2018 study by NYU's Tyler Watts and UC Irvine's Greg Duncan and Haonan Quan, questioned Mischel's conclusions by arguing that capacity to hold out was shaped by children's social and economic backgrounds (McCrorry Calarco 2018).

⁷ For Berlant, over-eating is a "relief" from the attrition and exhaustion of capitalist ordinary life, the injunctions of which it temporarily suspends (2007, 779). For Dow Schüll, machine gambling mutes daily contingencies by enabling gamblers to penetrate a "zone" in which constraints of space and time, as well as social interactions, disappear (2012, 199).

unsettling, hence the hatred their adversaries feel for them. There is something fundamentally obscene, narcissistic and asocial about the *jouissance* these heroes seek and reach, as it both echoes the *jouissance* of the primordial father and is intertwined with the death drive. Embracing one's *jouissance* signifies "opposing the necessity of loss, of the symbolic debt, refusing the imperative of the sacrifice of *jouissance*" (Escande 2002, 5). In other words, it equates to refusing the symbolic castration that enables the subjects to inhabit the social world and take part in the symbolic exchanges that constitute it. Rejecting the symbolic laws of the *polis*, deaf to the appeal of their closest relations, both Antigone and the addict walk towards the realisation of their desire and, by the same token, towards certain death. In psychoanalytical theory, the realm of the 'Thing' they both embrace is conceived as remaining outside symbolisation, as "excluded from language" (Escande 2002, 4). Addiction thus remains outside the realm of social exchanges. It is, in contrast, tied to the body, which it ends up physically marking by its excess (2002, 4).⁸

Importantly, the addict's narcissistic enjoyment ends up going against the mechanisms around which the neoliberal catallaxy is organised: the economy of desire. A number of Lacanian social critics, like Todd McGowan (2016) and Slavoj Žižek (1989), have used Lacan's work on the *objet a* – the unattainable object of desire which holds the illusory promise to fill the lack constitutive of the subject and the search for which pulls the subject in the symbolic realm of social exchanges - to discuss the (neoliberal) ideology of consumption. According to them, contemporary capitalism keeps deceptively promising satisfaction through the objects it advertises as truly needed. It does so despite the fact that full satisfaction is either structurally impossible (lack being constitutive of the subject) or fatal (fulfilment leading to *jouissance* and, with it, to mental and physical dissolution).

According to Ole Bjerg, addiction endangers contemporary capitalism's promise by short-circuiting the economy of desire (2008, 18). The drug user does not 'desire' (which is a mental construct), he craves (which is a physical need). Enjoyment generally cancels out desire by fulfilling it. Unlike with the shapeless *objet a*, the addict already knows precisely what he lacks and which product his body needs to prevent withdrawal and bring extasy. His quest to identify the *objet a* is over; with drugs, the addict has found "the product that ends all products" (2008, 16). Consequently, while apparently being the consumer *par excellence*, the addict "commits a

⁸ According to clinical psychologist and addiction specialist Claude Escande, these marks on the body represent themselves an attempt by the addicted subject to reconnect with the means of symbolic exchange, to faintly materialise and give shape to her *jouissance*, to "connect the death drive to the life drive" (2002, 5).

kind of counterfeiting in the economy of desire since he satisfies his desire with an enjoyment produced outside of the official symbolic circulation regulated by capitalism and independently from the ‘truths’ produced in this circulation” (2008, 16). The addict stands ambivalently as an incarnation of the “paradoxical condition of living, yet not living in the regime of capitalist modernity” (Althofer and Musgrove 2018, 9), as the best and yet the worst kind of consumer, the fulfilment of desire and the limit of enjoyment. As such, he remains a fundamentally problematic figure for the neoliberal imaginary and must be dealt with accordingly.

1.5 The price of *jouissance*

The epistemic threat that the figure of the addict represents for neoliberal theory needs to be put in relation with the implicit violence of public policies on addiction advocated by the Chicago School thinkers. When addiction is not considered to be the consequence of structural causes (like poverty), but, on the contrary, is seen as the product of individual lifestyle choices in which life is put at risk to reach an obscure desire, the drug user must be enabled to carry out his actions to their full logic: death. This is particularly palpable when they refer to addictions that are deemed more socially acceptable, like smoking and drinking. As I signalled earlier, these must not be restricted in any manner, as long as they do not have too great of a social price - in which case they must be appropriately punished. Addiction to hard drugs, on the other hand, is the object of more intricate theoretical reasonings, due to its ‘social price’ - namely the higher rate of criminality among drug-addicts. Becker, for example, tends to take addiction as a given that cannot be eliminated but only managed. He is thus primarily interested in policies influencing the market price of drugs in order to reduce crimes related to inelastic addiction, without encouraging more people to enter the drug consumption market (Foucault 2004, 262–64). In other words, for the already addicted, drugs must be made as cheap as possible – which marks a step in the logic of ‘letting die’.

Richard Posner’s policy recommendations on the contagious diseases associated with drug use reaches another level, as discussed in Chapter 5. In his book on the AIDS epidemic *Private Choices and Public Health* (co-authored with Tomas J. Philipson), Posner compares contagions within the gay community with contagions among drug users, applying to both an economic reasoning (Philipson and Posner, 1993; see also Cooper, 2017 for a detailed analysis). He claims that “unshielded sexual intercourse” (and, by extension, sharing syringes) is “analytically similar to conventional market transactions that take place under uncertainty concerning the reliability of the transactors or the sale of potentially defective goods” (Philipson and Posner 1993, 31). In

other words, under the conditions of uncertainty and “with full knowledge of the risks of HIV”, actors need to decide what they value the most: their health and their life, or their immediate pleasure (Cooper 2017, 168). Because “addiction to a dangerous drug implies trading future health and income for present satisfaction” (Philipson and Posner 1993, 34), addicted subjects are expected to choose the latter. Crucially, Posner and Philipson’s point is that, since this is an instance of voluntary ‘private choice’, resulting enormous health costs should not be externalised to the community, but should be entirely borne by the individual.⁹ Welfare policies would, on the contrary, have a perverse effect since they would equate to “lowering the price of high-risk behaviour and endorsing irresponsible lifestyle choices such as promiscuity or addiction” (Cooper 2017, 172). It would “distor[t] the otherwise bracing psychological effects of risk in a competitive free market environment” (Cooper 2017, 178).

In other words, there is a price to pay to enjoy; an injunction at the core of the neoliberal ethic of personal responsibility. Here again, the Lacanian ‘ethics of psychoanalysis’ can be used to illuminate this commitment. As I examined earlier in the chapter, Lacan argues that those who cross the rift that separates them from their *jouissance* “becom[e] a creditor in the great book of debt” (1986, 208). For having accomplished her desire, Antigone must accept to be walled up alive; those who enter the realm of *jouissance* must sacrifice a “pound of flesh” (Lacan 2019, 521). Hence the rather macabre psychoanalytical interpretation of addiction, which states that the traces left on the body by syringes stand as a visible sign of that transaction (Escande 2002, 5). The same logic is at work, I argue, inside neoliberal theory. Instead of characterising a general relationship between the subject and her desire, however, it comes to target a transgressive minority that must be left to die and/or forced to bear the full price of their transgression since they allegedly desire it.

By extension, the injunction for the individual to bear the full cost of their enjoyment brings to the fore the neoliberal scholars’ normative disgust for any form of dependency.¹⁰ The imperative of evading dependence is to be read as another example of the rejection of the collective Other (see Chapter 4), but it also signals the presence of an ethic of self-control, that may recall the Cartesian ethic of the individual in control of his unruly passions. In addition, once social hierarchies - particularly wealth and poverty - are reformulated and justified in terms of efficient (that is: good) and inefficient (that is: bad) choices, bad choices must be severely castigated in a

⁹ See also Becker and Posner (2009, 136) for a similar reasoning applied to private health insurance.

¹⁰ See particularly MacLean, 2017 for an analysis of James Buchanan’s work on dependency as revolting. Buchanan, a former president of the Mont-Pèlerin Society, headed the Virginia School of Economics, which had close ties with the Chicago School.

dire Social-Darwinian learning process. Failing individuals must not be prevented from taking the wrong decision and must be left to individually face the full consequences of their self-defeating choices, without any collective protection. Transferring “the true cost of risk-taking back to the consumer” (Cooper 2017, 178) is, by the same token, supposed to inculcate an ethic of personal responsibility. Individuals must be ready to carry the weight of their mistake. The addict thus must become a cathartic example (a ‘negative imago’ (Dawson 1994, 47)) for the rest of society, keeping the “rest of us” (Friedman 1972; Friedman and Friedman 1985, 134) at a distance and dissuading us from taking the same path.

In other words, the Chicago School’s reasoning (which is to some extent already latent in Hayek’s work) that following one’s private appetite is acceptable as long as the individual can internalise the costs of their behaviour and does not generate any social cost (Cooper 2017, 115), opens the way to a slippage towards a policy of ‘letting die’. Such policy seems to be the norm since the advent (after 2008) of what William Davies calls “punitive neoliberalism”, which “operates with an ethos of heavily moralized – as opposed to utilitarian - punishment” and which contributes to unleashing “hatred and violence” upon certain populations (W. Davies 2016b, 130). It motivates the stigmatisation of those who are constructed as abject and ‘revolting subjects’ (Tyler 2013; 2020): the non-white migrant, the welfare recipient, the drug addict, the indebted. As the current US opioid epidemic or the British universal credit crisis illustrate, it justifies a neoliberal ‘necropolitics’ (Mbembe 2006) which, I argue, is itself inherent to the “calculus of lives”: the claim that some lives are worth more than others, which may thus be sacrificed, as mentioned by Hayek and analysed in Chapter 5. This ‘necropolitics’ includes the neoliberal states’ active ‘neglect’, ‘harassment’, and ‘replacement’ of ‘discredited’ populations that they would like to see disappear and are often left to die (Feher 2020).

2. The making of the abject addicted other in best-selling memoirs

The second part of the chapter explores how popular discourses on poverty, widely present in the dominant culture and in the media, integrate and transform the tropes on choice and addiction found in neoliberal theory. In so doing, they play a central part in the composition of “shared imaginary repertoires” (Tyler 2013, 20) that construct the figure of the impoverished addict as a repulsive anti-model (or ‘negative imago’) and publicise the ethic of personal responsibility that accompanies it. To do so, I analyse J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) and Darren McGarvey’s *Poverty Safari* (2017), best-selling autobiographies recounting the trajectory

of two successful poor young white men, which have been widely commented on and read across the political spectrum.

The former is an Ohio-born author and venture capitalist, who worked as a principal for Peter Thiel's Mithril Capital Management and whose brand new VC Fund, Narya, is backed by Thiel (Chapman 2020).¹¹ Vance publicly identifies as a Republican libertarian and speaks at events organised by US neoliberal and libertarian think-tanks, such as the 2016 public conversation with controversial 'social scientist' Charles Murray at the American Enterprise Institute (American Enterprise Institute 2016). His memoirs have been listed twice in the *New York Times* best-sellers list and have received large media and political coverage (Rothman 2016), turning him "into a national figure in the US, as the spokesman cum anthropological explainer for the downtrodden people of rural Appalachia" (Donnan 2018). Interestingly, his recent relocation to his native Ohio to "battle the brain drain" (Romm 2017) was, according to him, also motivated by his ambition to deal with the current American opioid crisis, which is particularly stark in Ohio (Barber 2017).¹² He regularly communicates on the issue of addiction (ICF 2017) and created "Our Ohio Renewal", a non-profit organisation that works primarily with children of addicted parents (although it has not been active since 2018) (Our Ohio Renewal 2017).

Darren McGarvey is a Scottish rapper (under the stage name of Loki) and social commentator identifying himself with the liberal left. He publicly supported the Scottish National Party and subsequently Jeremy Corbyn (McGarvey 2018). His book also featured in best-seller lists, reaching Amazon's top ten best-sellers across all genres and the number one for best-selling memoirs (Deerin 2017). It received the 2018 Orwell Prize, the UK's top award for political writing, for its description of Britain's "underclass" and its depiction of McGarvey's difficult childhood and teenage years in a suburb of Glasgow, where he battled with addiction. In his ceremony speech, chair of the judges and former New Labour Minister of State for Education, Andrew Adonis, described the book as an "hymn in praise of the power of the individual" (Flood 2018) – a comment which foretells the affinities between McGarvey's positions and individualist philosophy at work in the neoliberal imaginary.

At first sight, both books come from seemingly different sides of the political spectrum. However, I contend that these texts have some striking resemblances that highlight important

¹¹ Tellingly Narya (like Thiel's Mithril, Palantir and Anduril) is also taken from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* – signalling Vance's ambition to imitate Thiel as an icon.

¹² For a study of the American opioid crisis see Case and Deaton (2017; 2015) and Quinones (2015).

commonalities between the liberal left and the libertarian right. As I demonstrate below, both narratives are embedded in the same imaginary of the poor abject addicted other.

2.1 Going on a 'Poverty Safari'

The originality of *Hillbilly Elegy* and *Poverty Safari* lies in the professed positionality of their respective authors. Advertising themselves as having insider knowledge, Vance and McGarvey claim that they can explain the psychological strains that poverty puts on (white) working-class people and on their children, leading to the intergenerational reproduction of social exclusion and the feeling of inequation and powerlessness.

Both texts directly interpellate the readers (J.D. Vance 2016, 1–2), who are imagined by default as middle-class people with some level of social awareness. The texts function as an invitation to the readers to temporarily step on the other side of the poverty “fence” (Deerin 2017) and set out on a ‘safari’ in a foreign and mysterious land. Although the irony of McGarvey’s title is deliberate, with the implicit intent to force the readers to face their privilege and their latent voyeurism, it nonetheless contributes to set up two drastically separated worlds, unreachable and alien to one another: the everyday world of the readers and its converse, the savage world of poverty.¹³ Similarly, when Vance candidly states that he “want[s] people to know what happen in the lives of the poor” (2016, 2), he implicitly suggests that the “poor” are separated in their daily reality from “people”; they operate in a “hub of misery” (2016, 4). They are “hillbillies, rednecks or white trash” (2016, 3), “Scotland’s underclass” (Deerin 2017)¹⁴ – a loved but “deeply flawed”, wild and brutal community that comprises potential murderers, abusers and drug users (J.D. Vance 2016, 9).

Considering that the readers come from “spheres where poverty is discussed at a distance” (Deerin 2017) and is fundamentally “misunderstood” (Moss 2018), the two authors offer to be the readers’ pilot in this unknown world. They are playing the role of go-betweens: an ambiguous position which is reflected in Vance’s tendency to constantly oscillate between a feeling of nostalgia and mild disgust, and the first and third person plural, when describing his Middle Town neighbours (for instance see J.D. Vance 2016, 145–146 on failing mothers, immediately followed by a long self-deprecating passage on 'we', hillbillies (2016, 146–148)). As I explore further in the third part of this chapter, the fluctuation between identity and distancing

¹³ See Deerin (2017) for a manifestation of this dichotomy in the Scottish Daily Mail’s review of the book

¹⁴ It is worth noting that, in both cases, these worlds are strikingly (mis-)represented as almost exclusively and homogeneously white. See Catte (2017) for a critique of *Hillbilly Elegy*.

is representative of the ambivalence of both Vance and McGarvey when it comes to the world they are from. Thanks to their narrations, they come to be recognised as incarnating the “single, articulate, authentic voice” of the voiceless (Deerin 2017; Donnan 2018), while appealing to the social mobility that has enabled them to give shape, through the mastery of language, to this otherwise inexpressible experience. In other words, their transitive status gives them an authority to speak as experts of what is presented as lying outside the (normal) realm of the readers’ experience.

2.2 The ‘otherness’ of poverty

On the other side of the readers’ experience lies the underworld of grinding poverty. McGarvey’s and Vance’s narrations are from this perspective particularly bleak. McGarvey describes his precarious childhood in an estate of a deprived suburb of Glasgow, whereas Vance depicts the hollowing out of “the manufacturing centers of industrial Midwest”, the loss of economic security followed soon by the slow dissolution of family ties and the intensification of the drug epidemic (J.D. Vance 2016, 5). Both descriptions are characterised by the centrality of despair. Vance’s elegy (his lament of the dead) particularly recounts how his neighbours have “a kind of desperate sadness in their lives” (2016, 141), how Ohio’s steel towns are “haemorrhaging jobs and hope” (2016, 1–2), how generally the heroic working-class of the post-war is slowly descending into the “abyss” (2016, 99). Addiction becomes, as I argue in further detail later, the symptoms of this decay – in an interesting echo of Case and Deaton’s decision to graphically call (without much justification) drug-related deaths ‘death of despair’ (2017; 2015).

For both Vance and McGarvey, the prime victims of this noxious environment are children. Using their own traumatic experiences from childhood, the two authors demonstrate how stress, the constant feeling of imminent danger and daily violence have had long term consequences on their mental health, self-confidence and relationships. Vance, for instance, explains how children with multiple “Adverse Childhood Experiences” are “more likely to struggle with anxiety and depression, to suffer from heart disease and obesity, and to contract certain types of cancers” (2016, 226), while their “fight-or-flight response” acquired after years of domestic abuse is the cause of their “destructive behavior” (2016, 228). On the other hand, McGarvey claims that “stress is the connective tissue between social problems such as addiction, violence and chronic illness as well as the multiple crisis in our public services” (2017, 194).

In both cases, there is an ambition to map the “psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on [the poor’s] children” (J.D. Vance 2016, 2), and to understand ‘experiential’

poverty (Moss 2018) and “how class and poverty affect the poor” (J.D. Vance 2016, 8). Although poverty is clearly presented within these texts as structural, it is nonetheless strangely redefined as a hostile but given (that is, ahistorical) environment in which some individuals, particularly unlucky with the lottery of birth, interact. It is, from this perspective, interesting to read that McGarvey – who identifies with the liberal left – considers that a “systemic analysis” should not too hastily blame “external factors” (e.g. conservative politicians, capitalism) (2017, 129), the “environment” (2017, 131) or the “system” (2017, 195). Echoing with Hayek’s views on the catallaxy, McGarvey on the contrary acknowledges, with today’s distance, that “the very society [he] was praying would fall, for all of its glaring flaws, was providing for [his] ever-mutating needs” (2017, 197). Similarly, Vance refuses to put the blame of the spiralling poverty that followed the collapse of the steel industry on industrialists or politicians (J.D. Vance 2016, 55).

2.3 A self-defeating culture

To go one step further, there is generally a strong sense that poverty is somewhat inescapable, because it is not just material. This dim prospect is incarnated by Vance’s grand-mother, ‘Mamaw’, who “had thought she escaped the poverty of the hills, but poverty – emotional, not financial – had followed her” (2016, 142–43). To use a Lacanian vocabulary, poverty is not just part of the material symbolic dimension of reality, but more fundamentally has to do with the real of the individual.

Since poverty is presented as a given that cannot be suppressed (McGarvey 2017, 195), what becomes problematic is not so much the conditions those who are called the ‘underclass’ or the ‘hillbillies’ have to live in, but their own mentality, a “culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it” (J.D. Vance 2016, 7). Or, as Vance also puts it, “Our elegy is a social one, yes, but it is also about psychology and community and culture and faith” (2016, 145). In other words, both McGarvey’s and Vance’s depictions of systemic poverty lead them to the conclusion that poor marginalised individuals are partly responsible for being maintained in such deleterious circumstances. In McGarvey’s words, “we are part of that system and are, on some level, complicit in the dysfunction” (2017, 195): “our problems” are “self-generated” (2017, 131).

The poor’s culture and attitudes are, in both cases, recurrently described as a tendency to deny any wrongdoing and to perpetually shift responsibility to the system instead of recognising one’s fault (McGarvey 2017, 131, 193). This dimension is particularly central to McGarvey’s narrative, but is also present in Vance’s account when he confesses having “spent the first eighteen years

of [his] life pretending that everything in the world was a problem except [him]" (2016, 20). According to both Vance and McGarvey, this constant denial signals the fact that poor marginalised people have given up their responsibility and with that, also their agency. This translates to a general 'immun[ity] to hard work' (J.D. Vance 2016, 7), as well as a tendency to take the benefits of the welfare-state and employment for granted (2016, 58). More generally, it results in the false belief that, as an individual, "you have little control over your life" (J.D. Vance 2016, 7) and you are "not responsible for [your] own thoughts, feelings and actions" (McGarvey 2017, 198). This inertia and lack of impetus explains why, according to Vance, these communities do not manage to adapt to change, here symbolised by the inability to foresee deindustrialisation (2016, 55). They cannot, in other words, rightly interpret the signs given by the market (see Chapter 4). Refusing to accept revitalising uncertainty, they, on the contrary, demand to be protected.

The interventions of the "poverty industry" (McGarvey 2017, 193) (that is, state-funded welfare programs and experts), however, worsens these delusions as they perpetuate the disempowerment of the poor individual with their assistance (2017, 195). It is rather unsurprising to find a self-advocated republican libertarian like Vance referring to Charles Murray's work on the "way our government encouraged social decay through the welfare state" (J.D. Vance 2016, 144). McGarvey's quasi-systematic critique of the social services might, however, seem more unexpected and, consequently, telling. Although he explicitly recognises that social services and benefits might have saved his life (McGarvey 2017, 154), they also provided him with the financial means to buy drugs (2017, 154) or enough housing security to keep indulging his substance abuse (2017, 88–89). They also encouraged him to "defer" to their expertise (2017, 193) and let them "intervene on [his] behalf" to ban, curtail or regulate what might be for him sources of temptations (like junk-food and drugs) (2017, 221), thereby leading him to give up any will to shape his own life.

With such accounts, McGarvey and Vance seem to provide the exact illustration of what was feared by the neoliberal scholars in their denunciation of the Big Other of planning (see Chapter 4), and its tendency to smother individuals' life energy, will and independency – turning them into apathetic and dependent creatures and thus condemning them to a shameful and abject life.

2.4 Giving shape to the abject

According to both McGarvey and Vance, the poor's systematic and paranoid blaming of the system, while depending on it, is part of a large-scale self-delusion; a "sense of victimhood [which] closed [people] off from reality behind a wall of delusional self-justification" (McGarvey 2017, 186). This inconsistency is significantly pathologized, in McGarvey's case, as he confesses having blamed his failure on his (according to him, chimerical) mental sickness, thus "blind[ing]" himself further to "the truth" (2017, 196).¹⁵ For Vance, the shifting of one's responsibility combined with a false "rhetoric of hard work" (J.D. Vance 2016, 58) are part of the "lies we tell ourselves to solve the cognitive dissonance – the broken connection between the world we see and the values we preach" (2016, 147). These lies and delusions are here to prevent the marginalised subject from facing what he truly is: an abject individual.

As the section below demonstrates the portraits that Vance and McGarvey give of their former selves and their acquaintances are typical constructions of what Imogen Tyler (reinterpreting Julia Kristeva's theories) has described as the social construction of an abject other; that is, the channelling of "public anxieties and hostilities" toward "those groups within the population, such as the unemployed, welfare recipients and irregular migrants, who are imagined to be a parasitical drain and threat to scarce national resources" (Tyler 2013, 9). The passages quoted thereafter are particularly striking by the sheer violence of the expressions used, in which nostalgia easily gives way to bare (self) hatred and disgust.

The portrayals display the tropes usually associated with the motif of social abjection. An inability to control anger is, for instance, a recurrent theme (McGarvey 2017, 156; J.D. Vance 2016, 146–47; 224). It contributes further to highlight what is presented as an inherent savage brutality and an inability to maintain stable love and family relationships (McGarvey 2017, 221). As already implied, the marginalised subject also makes dubious use of welfare benefits – a charge that is particularly violent in Vance's narrative, who at several points lets himself go at his "resentment" and "mistrust" for those of his "own kind" who "gamed the welfare system" (and, for example, used food-stamps while having a separate bill for alcohol) (J.D. Vance 2016, 139). In both cases, the abject subject indulges in an "atrocious lifestyle" (McGarvey 2017, 196),

¹⁵ McGarvey dismisses the idea that his drinking was connected to "mental health problems" as delusive (2017, 195). This is part of a generalised (and typical) critique of the medicalising tendencies of social-work policies, which are accused of contributing to the deresponsibilisation, and thus the disempowerment, of the poor. On the contrary, according to him, his depression was a consequence of his drinking, here brought back to its status of bad lifestyle choice. As he writes, "Waiting around for a mental health diagnosis added about five years to my destructive thinking" (2017, 196).

characterised by unhealthy diets (junk food (McGarvey 2017, 221; J.D. Vance 2016, 148) or 'Mountain dew' (J.D. Vance 2016, 19)), no exercise, alcoholism and drug addiction. These dubious habits more generally signal a "truly irrational behavior" (J.D. Vance 2016, 146) when it comes to consumption. Both authors describe spiralling consumption frenzies, in which the market acts as a neutral and disinterested provider "supplying a demand from [them] and people like [them], who are driven by [their] emotional needs" (McGarvey 2017, 195). For Vance, "We spend our way into the poorhouse", compulsively buying non-essential "giant TVs and iPads", "nice clothes" and houses till bankruptcy (2016, 146). The waste that these purchases represent is symbolised by the "garbage" and "chaotic mess" that are said to be left in their wake, as well as by the fact the over-spending cancels the possibility of the future, represented in Vance's narrative by the "kids" who are denied tuition for college (2016, 146).

What I find particularly interesting, is that Vance's acknowledgement that 'hillbillies' cannot prevent themselves from acting in such a way highlights the libidinal dimension of these purchases – a dimension that makes them fundamentally irresistible. This is even more palpable in McGarvey's narrative, which explicitly and minutely depicts the "interplay of [his] emotional discomfort and a desire to consume junk food" (2017, 195). Both authors seem therefore to diagnose in their 'own kind' a disordered desire acting against the subject and going against their very survival. As an echo of Case and Deaton's 'death of despair', these unhealthy habits are explicitly identified as "designed to send us to an early grave" (J.D. Vance 2016, 148); they are part of a "destructive mentality" (J.D. Vance 2016, 176) on a "path of delusional self-obliteration" (McGarvey 2017, 197). The motif of drug addiction functions as the epitome of this self-destructive desire and is consequently omnipresent in both Vance's and McGarvey's narratives. McGarvey particularly presents the "nightmare of addiction" as a liminal experience, orientated (unlike the liminality of the entrepreneur) towards a radical and self-consuming inwardness. Addiction has at its "core (...) no longer simply pain and emotional trauma (...) but a deep and malignant selfishness and lack of concern for the need of others"; it is an "inability to see beyond my own pain, my narrow worldview" (McGarvey 2017, 188). Keeping in mind that, according to Lacan, pain marks the attempt to "absolutely reach *das Ding*, to open all the floodgates of desire" (Lacan 1986, 97), this account is compatible with the psychoanalytical reading of addiction that I gave in the first part of this chapter. Addiction specifically comes to represent an all absorptive activity that suspends the subject's relationship with the world and all its stressful contingencies. It makes the subject fundamentally incapable or unwilling to follow the signals given by the market. But more fundamentally, to use Natasha Dow Schüll's work again, compulsive addiction aims at suspending the very "sense of self", at achieving "the

state of desubjectification and magical ‘oneness’ with the world” that is the aim of the Freudian death drive (Dow Schüll 2012, 223–24). This dimension is absolutely explicit in a chapter in which McGarvey minutely depicts how “defeated” and “mortified” he finds himself at McDonald after indulging his junk-food addiction (2017, 132–38). His addiction is compared to a routine habit in which he relapses when triggered by stress (2017, 132). Consuming junk-food is thus presented as “a powerful impulse that can override all other considerations”, an “urge” that also paradoxically protects him from the hostile social world (2017, 132), plunging him into an “obscene” and self-destructive “gluttonous trance” (2017, 133).

Tellingly, McGarvey describes his former addicted self and friends as the “walking dead”, as those “who have no insight in what [they] had become” (2017, 186) – even describing his ‘anti-social’ behaviour during a night of substance abuse as “a good example of how a person can cross the threshold into a far more dangerous place” (2017, 185). There is here a clear sense of transgression, of stepping out the norms of social life to enter the realm of living death (although it is worth noting that the confessed crimes seem comparatively and bizarrely innocuous since it is all about standing “in someone else’s property [an alleyway], having forced the door to access, talking loudly, smoking cigarettes and urinating” (2017, 186)). Interestingly, the permeability of the border between pain and pleasure, the inside and the outside is, according to Kristeva, the very place where the feeling of disgust that comes with the abject occurs (Kristeva 1980, 75). The depiction of this blurriness triggers the subject’s apprehensiveness about his own dissolution (1980, 49).

Addiction thus comes, by extension, to symbolise the internal corruption of the communities that Vance and McGarvey describe. In Vance’s account, addiction becomes the signifier of all what is going wrong within the once hard-working hillbilly community. Presented as an epidemic and as part of an “underworld” (J.D. Vance 2016, 115), addiction is the metonym of those who have been turned, who have given up to wilderness. For example, *Hillbilly Elegy*’s opening chapter introduces the readers to Jackson, a city full of the nicest people, but, in stark contrast, “also full of addicts” – a horde who ransacks the once lively houses, left empty by the collapse of the steel industry (2016, 20–21). Addiction becomes part of an everyday threat looming on the author’s former self, and which brings its share of premature deaths represented by “the obituaries for teenage kids” who lost their life to drugs (2016, 191).

2.5 Abject mothers

Crucially, in both narrations, the dissolution of the community and of the self that addiction introduces is powerfully epitomised by the addiction of the mother, whose body becomes the repository of abjection.

The iconic status of the mother is particularly evident in Vance's account as he explicitly presents his mother's drug issues as revealing "the underworld of American addiction" (J.D. Vance 2016, 115). His mother's downfall is furthermore echoed by the exhibition of a series of feminine figures of failed maternity, like Pattie, the neighbour and "naked druggie", who reveals "the reality of our community" by flooding her house when falling asleep while the tap is running, thus "destroying what little value exists in her life" and causing her kids to "lose their toys and clothes to a mother's addiction" (2016, 145). Or this unnamed neighbour who leaves her toddler boy wander around in the neighbourhood; an unemployed mother "who had all the time in the world" but who "couldn't keep a close enough watch on her child to prevent him from straying in the homes of strangers" (2016, 145). Or lastly this other spectre of the (deracialised) welfare queen who "had never held a job and seemed interested 'only in breeding' as Mamaw put it" (2016, 146) – a classic trope as stressed by Tyler in which welfare recipient black women are constructed as abject figures of hyperfertility and laziness (Tyler 2013, 26). The lives of all these women are characterised, according to Vance, by spiralling substance abuse¹⁶ and abusive and violent relationships, leaving their children "feeling empty and distrustful of men" (2016, 150).

Both authors describe their mothers as utterly unpredictable, as bursting into moments of terrifying violence, driven by a quasi-murderous instinct, creating in their children a "chronic sense of dread" (McGarvey 2017, 31). McGarvey and Vance recount a similar traumatic childhood event when, they thought their mothers were going to kill them. McGarvey was chased to his room by his enraged mother with a bread knife. As she put the knife under his throat, he thought he "was about to be cut open" but was saved by his father's timely intervention (2017, 31). One day, Vance and his mother were both in the car when she lost her temper and threatened to crash the car and kill them both, before chasing him across a field – only stopping when she was arrested for domestic abuse by the police (2016, 76). Like Medea, both mothers are presented as having given life to their children but also as ready to take it back

¹⁶ McGarvey's mother was a heroin user (McGarvey 2017, 64) and died of her heavy drinking at the age of thirty-six (McGarvey 2017, 180); Vance recounts his mother's constant relapse into her narcotics and prescription pills (and later heroin) abuse (J.D. Vance 2016, 130)

at any moment. They generally schizophrenically oscillate between excessive demonstration of affection and love (J.D. Vance 2016, 183) and betrayal. Like the addicted subjects analysed above, their addiction places them outside social borders, as they are “unable to follow the basic norms of adult behavior” (J.D. Vance 2016, 113). Despite moments of tenderness and although both recognise their mothers to be themselves “survivors” of abuse (Moss 2018; J.D. Vance 2016, 130), McGarvey and Vance confess having wished their mothers’ deaths (McGarvey 2017, 180; J.D. Vance 2016, 233)– thus confirming their ambivalent feelings toward them.

What I think is particularly interesting with this recurrent focus on the mother’s addiction is that it resonates with Kristeva’s analysis of the abject and her reinterpretation of Lacanian psychoanalytical theories. The abject, according to Kristeva, is precisely placed under the sign of the maternal. The prime reason for the figure of the mother to become the very representation of abjection lies in the fact that her body, through its reproductive ability, comes to symbolise the limit between the inside (that is, gestational life) and the outside (the realm of social life). Keeping in mind that the feeling of abjection, according to Kristeva, results from the blurriness between “inside and outside, pain and pleasure, action and verb” (Kristeva 1980, 79), birth is reformulated as a traumatic event in which the subject has to pass through “*l’horreur des entrailles maternelles*”¹⁷ (1980, 65). Kristeva thus insists on the iconic status of the maternal body and especially of its “desirable yet terrifying, nourishing yet murderous, fascinating yet abject inside” (1980, 66).

Kristeva’s depiction of the ambivalence of the mother, the fact she is both an object of desire and dread, can be explained by the function that the maternal plays in psychoanalytical theory. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian theses, Kristeva is interested in the dual and fusional relation between the mother and her child both during gestation and the infant’s first years. In this period in which the paternal/symbolic castrating cut has not yet separated mother and child, the child is entirely dependent on his mother for its survival; it is not yet a separated and autonomous subject, and the mother has a power of life and death on her baby, for instance by refusing to breastfeed. Although the feeling of oneness with the nourishing maternal body is itself exhilarating (which is symbolised by the infant’s desire for the breast), like with all objects of *jouissance*, there is always some risk of losing one’s own being, some concern for the child to

¹⁷ I kept here the French original expression to show that, in French, the ‘entrails’ is tellingly used to metonymically speak about the mother’s womb, which suggests connections with the digestive system and by extension with faeces – which are a current object of feelings of abjection. For instance, in the French translation of the Bible, ‘Jesus, the fruit of her womb’ (referring to Marie) appears as “*Jésus, le fruit de ses entrailles*”.

be re-assimilated and disappear in its entirety in its mother's womb. Kristeva notably mentions some of her patients' "horror, terror, fear of being rotten, emptied and stuck" when referring to the dual relationship with their mothers (1980, 78).

Even after the cut of castration symbolised by the figure of the father, the maternal remains a cause of a mild feeling of unrest, a reminder of this jubilating yet disquieting fusional period. As a consequence, the feminine is not seen as a fixed "primeval essence" but as an "other" which disrupts and conflicts with the illusory identity of the subject (1980, 73) – thereby coming close to the figure of the real in Lacan. "[B]eyond and through the paternal function", the maternal forces the subject to come "face to face with an unspeakable alterity – the rock of *jouissance* and writing" (1980, 73).

Kristeva highlights how these terrifying maternal figures also point out the limits and failures of the paternal function – an element which is particularly significant in McGarvey's and Vance's accounts. As explored in the preceding chapters, the father figure symbolically represents normative social interdictions (with the prohibition of incest) and castration, but is paradoxically soothing. Unlike "the engulfing in the dual relationship", it is about only losing "a part" of oneself and not "oneself entirely as living" (1980, 79). It protects the integrity of the subject's identity by "cutting short the temptation of a return, abject and *jouissant*, toward the status of passivity" (1980, 78). The re-emergence of the maternal abject thus suggests that the "imperative of symbolic exclusion which does constitute collective existence, does not seem to have, in this case, the sufficient strength to contain the abject and diabolical power of the feminine" (1980, 79–80). As a consequence, the feminine/maternal comes to threaten social norms, all based on exclusions (the taboo of addiction in McGarvey and Vance's cases), as well as the subject's mental constructions. It is, from this perspective, particularly telling that father figures are resoundingly either missing or failing in Vance's and McGarvey's narratives. McGarvey mentions being estranged from his father until recently (2017, 218–19), without revealing any details (which comes as a contrast with his treatment of his mother's abject behaviour); he only recognises that his "father's wisdom" provided him "with the firmest possible footing". Vance describes at length the absence of his biological father (2016, 89) and his rejection of the temporary and hollow father figures who populated his childhood, "goddamned strangers" he wanted "to stay the fuck out" (2016, 151). The instability of the paternal/symbolic function is bizarrely illustrated by the fact that Vance's mum forced him to change his name and surname after her divorce from his father (2016, 63) – a peripeteia which interestingly echoes Lacan's work on the 'name-of-the father' as the anchorage of the symbolic function. Without mediations

to protect them from the annihilating maternal attraction force, teenage Vance and teenage McGarvey could also have succumbed to and dissolved themselves in their *jouissance*.

3. Stories of redemption: constructing an ethical neoliberal self

In order to counter this self-dissolution, McGarvey and Vance encourage the individual to struggle against dependency. As I demonstrate in the last part of this chapter, the memory of their former selves – and the ghosts of their mothers – are used to reconstruct their new personality in a diametrically opposite way. The abject mother, as an incarnation of the abject self, becomes a photo negative, a counter-model, that needs to be repressed.

3.1 Exorcising the abject within

Kristeva's concept of abjection must particularly be understood as a survival mechanism that prevents a new fusion between the subject and his object of desire (the mother), by creating an intense and uncontainable feeling of disgust, a bout of nausea. This powerful feeling of rejection, which is inherently anchored in the body, functions as a "symptom" (Kristeva 1980, 18). It is a creative defence against a more or less consciously perceived problem, a barrier erected by the subject to protect himself from his overpowering *jouissance*. *Jouissance*, through the maternal abject, is thereby made disgusting so that "'I' does not disappear into [the other]" (1980, 17), so that the subject is pushed back in the realm of symbolic social life. Abjection is therefore an "ongoing process of bordering that makes and unmakes both the psychological and material boundaries of the subject" (Tyler 2013, 28), a war in which the subject fights against the maternal within him in order to create for himself an autonomous being and body, distinct from hers (Kristeva 1980, 20). A process that Kristeva assimilates (through the concept of "*ab-ject*"/'to throw from') with a second self-birth (1980, 20). McGarvey's and Vance's disgust for their own mother has this precise function within their narrations. As I argue later in further detail, it enables them to define what they must not be, thus giving a shape to their own identity.

Yet, it is important to consider that the abject is fundamentally twofold. As stated above, the war that is led by the subject is internal and fought within himself. Because of her procreative power, because the subject is the 'fruit of her womb', the figure of the mother is by definition an ambiguous figure (which is powerfully illustrated by Vance's acknowledgement that "Throughout my life, no one could inspire me so much emotions as my mom (...) When I was a kid, I loved her so much" (2016, 232)). She is neither quite the same as the subject, neither totally other. Her abjection must thus be read as a synecdoche that stands for the rejection of

some abject tendencies internal to the self; a materialisation in the flesh of the abject within. Therefore, by bordering the maternal abject, the subject borders an unbearable part of himself, an “excess that threatens from within” (Tyler 2013, 10). This is made particularly explicit in Vance’s account when he realises that he is acting like his mother and anxiously confesses that “Nothing compares to the fear that you’re becoming the monster in your closet” (2016, 224). Similarly, McGarvey’s constant comparison of his own addiction with his mum’s and his disquiet about reaching the same age as her when she died (2017, 180) must be read as another instance when the metonymic relation between the abject-mother and abject-self manifests itself.¹⁸ Pointing at the abjection in the mother is another way to uproot the abjection within themselves.

As Kristeva argues, the feeling of abjection must therefore also be interpreted as a ritual of purification. Interestingly, Kristeva refers to and complements Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (2001) with the claim that the sacred is in fact two-sided. One side is sacrifice, which - through the sacrifice of the primordial father - funds the social bond, the symbolic character of the law and institutes the very possibility of desire (see Chapter 4). The other is “as a lining, an even more secret, invisible and non-representable side” that Kristeva associates with taboo and sacred stains (Kristeva 1980, 72). Interestingly, Freud offers menstruations as an instance of taboo and describes rituals of periodic exclusion of menstruating women (Freud 2001, 24) – thus again illustrating the link that is drawn in many civilisations between the abject, the feminine and social exclusion. Unlike sacrifice, which establishes the object sacrificed to the gods as desirable to the sacrificer, the taboo is marked as an object of “non-desire” (Kristeva 1980, 80) and is castigated beyond the margins of society, outside the realm of the living. It is violently excluded as a disgusting waste, repressed and denied. It becomes, in Kristeva’s words, an ‘abomination’ (1980, 129). It is marked by the feeling of repugnance and horror inspired by the ungodly, the monstrous.

¹⁸ The same can be said of the fluctuating positionality of the authors that I highlighted earlier in the chapter: the authors’ disgust and disquiet for their abject kinds is (sometimes explicitly) an expression of their own self-hatred.

3.2 Redemption

Crucially, when the un-proper is constituted as a “sacred stain”, as an “object of non-desire”, it simultaneously funds what is “proper”¹⁹ to each social group, if not to each subject”²⁰ (Kristeva 1980, 80). What has been violently excluded from the social “symbolic system” defines the very boundaries of this system, as well as what is considered as sacred within it.

The tale of their mothers’ addiction – and all the instances of misplaced libidinal investments they picture – thus helps Vance and McGarvey to delineate, in systematic contrast, a new redemptive ethic of the self. This is particularly striking in Vance’s account. When going to university, what gives him “an incredible momentum” is primarily the cathartic recollection of the “many years of fearing [his] own future, of worrying that [he] would end up like many of [his] neighbors or family – addicted to alcohol, in prison or with kids [he] couldn’t or wouldn’t take care of” (2016, 182–83). Social mobility is also assumed not to be “just about money and economics” but about “lifestyle changes”; or repressing old abject habits as “everything about your old life becomes unfashionable at best and unhealthy at worst” (2016, 207).

More significantly, recognising and uprooting the abject in one’s former way of life is in both cases connected with the ability to accept the weight of one’s own fault. Vance opposes the “friends [who] blossom[ed] into successful adults” and those who “[fell] victim to the worst of Middletown’s temptations” by their unequal willingness to face their personal responsibility when it comes to success and failure (2016, 194). McGarvey’s message is even more straightforward as his book stands as an appeal, which relentlessly reiterates taking “personal responsibility” as an “important virtue in life” (2017, 193–94). He invites the left to “open a new frontier” by reclaiming this idea from the right, by taking “ownership of as many of our problems as we can” (2017, 130). From this perspective, McGarvey’s and Vance’s narratives fit into a larger tradition of the autobiography as a literary genre influenced by Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* (2001). The authors’ confessions, the deprecation of their former sinful life, are used as a redemptive mechanism for the advent of a purer self and moral life (Foucault 1976, 83). Both McGarvey’s and Vance’s narratives are infused with religious, ethical and moral referents – like the terms ‘temptation’ and ‘virtue’ quoted above. The notions of ‘fault’ (McGarvey 2017, 193; J.D. Vance 2016, 194) or ‘blame’ (McGarvey 2017, 186) are particularly notable and always

¹⁹ Kristeva here plays with ambiguity of the adjective ‘*propre*’ which both means ‘clean’ but also ‘one’s own’.

²⁰ Like Cornelius Castoriadis and Graham Dawson (see Chapter 2), Kristeva here considers that social and individual imaginary constructions are inherently connected.

appear in a precise context: when a character categorically refuses to face their responsibility thus precluding their recovery. As McGarvey puts it, “I never got sober, at least for any length of time, until I admitted to myself that many of the predicaments in my adult life were of my own making” (2017, 193). In this “economy of the fault and of salvation” (Foucault 2018, 466), guilt needs to be avowed and accepted to achieve salvation and be given the right to succeed. Like the *‘hamartia’* of the Greek tragedy – a primordial fault, the recognition of which leads the hero either to her downfall or triumph (Aristotle 2013) – McGarvey and Vance argue that the individual can “transcend” his difficulty (McGarvey 2017, 196) only to the extent that he is willing to fully incorporate the weight of his errors.

Nonetheless, McGarvey’s and Vance’s restored individuals can never be fully absolved in the same way as original sin remains intrinsically unredeemable in the Christian doctrine: they cannot leave their past behind. The fault, in Kristeva’s words, is an evil that “will not stop to work the subject from the inside”, as it is the very expression of the “ineradicable repulsion of his divided, contradictory being” (1980, 137). In other words, the subject is perpetually haunted by his abjection, a fault that cannot be erased as it is by definition a ‘non-object’ (1980, 16) that threatens the subject’s imaginary constructions (like Lacan’s real). This is palpable in McGarvey’s ambivalent reminiscence of his dead mother’s tormented ghost, or in Vance’s dread in realising that “the demons of the life we left behind continue to chase us” (2016, 2). The abject is difficult to repress and demands a constant self-monitoring of one’s behaviour to keep it at bay and maintain a fragile identity. Its repression entails internalising the neoliberal behavioural norms I analysed throughout the thesis, along with the technologies of self-management and the culture of self-enterprise that come with them.

3.3 A neoliberal ethics of the self

The constant monitoring of one’s deep-rooted flaws helps Vance and McGarvey to alchemise their negative drives into a positive way of life that has all the characteristics of the successful neoliberal subject sketched in Chapter 6.

As with the neoliberal scholars, the individuation of responsibility is here first to be connected with a larger reflection on choice. In order to be reborn into a successful social life, the abject-self on the path to salvation needs to understand the “social implications of [his] choice” (McGarvey 2017, 196), to stop thinking that the “choices [he] made had no effect on the outcomes in [his] life” (J.D. Vance 2016, 163). Vance argues that the army taught him that “choices matter” (2016, 163), while McGarvey claimed that “choice is the proximate cause of

any triumph over adversity” in an interview with the *Scottish Daily Mail* (Deerin 2017). Like in neoliberal theory, a direct consequence of this belief is that the blame of failure is put on the individual and not on the structural circumstances that might have prevented the individual to succeed. This is even clearer in a passage where Vance directly connects “status in life” to bad or good choices, arguing that a challenging environment can even be positive by forcing the individual “to ask tough questions about himself” – provided the individual is strong enough to take his distance with his self-defeating culture (2016, 193–94).

Internalising responsibility and taking ownership of your problems is thus, by extension, presented as a way to regain control over your own life, as the solution to “rebuil[d] the depleted human capacity in our poorest communities” (McGarvey 2017, 130). While agency is a central concern in McGarvey’s narrative, the abject individuals’ total lack of agency (due to their alleged laziness) is met, in Vance’s account, with an equivalent but opposite excess: a masochistic thirst for compulsive work that leads the author to the verge of physical collapse after working several jobs and sleeping three hours a night to write his academic assignments (2016, 182). Vance’s recognition of having taken it “absolutely” too far (2016, 183) reminds of the entrepreneur’s work ethic - specifically its propensity to test the limits of human physical and mental capacities, which comes as no surprise knowing Vance’s relationship and admiration for Thiel. In both cases, success will be determined by an individual’s ability to lift himself out of his bad circumstances by the sheer force of his will.

Lastly, as analysed in the second part of the chapter, both authors refuse to defer their lives to governmental experts as it undermines their agency. With Vance, this translates to an intense pride to do “fine on [his] own” (2016, 183) and later to take care of his aging grand-mother by paying for the health insurance she can no longer afford (2016, 166). Vance’s portrait of his grand-mother is generally used as a contrast to the underserving poor. She is presented as an example of a hard-working poor who kept her “almost religious faith” in the American dream, refusing failure despite always struggling against the odds and always being self-reliant (2016, 35–36). At first glance, it could seem odd for him not to be revolted by her being kept in poverty. Nonetheless, Vance’s absence of indignation is plainly compatible with what Melinda Cooper has described as the central role of the family in the neoliberal imaginary and the proclivity of the “imperative of *personal responsibility*” to “slid[e] ineluctably into that of *family responsibility* when it comes to managing the inevitable problem of economic dependence” (2017, 71). As Cooper demonstrated, the family is used to palliate the otherwise unbearable uncertainty introduced by neoliberal theories in the social sphere (2017, 58). The “responsibility to care for

those [you] love” is rebranded into a source of “empowerment” (J.D. Vance 2016, 166), a tangible proof that you control your destiny, as well as the destiny of those you love.

Agency, responsibility, self-reliance, resilience: What these different social imperatives outline is the emergence of a distinctive ethics of the self. For the ‘common’ individual, control over one’s life and one’s desire is brought about by self-knowledge, by the recognition that there is a part of abjection inside us (the ‘*hamartia*’ or fault) that needs to be identified and fought against at all time. We need to keep it at bay by constantly watching ourselves, by incessantly adapting to environmental changes, by accepting to face alone and independently the full consequences of our choices and desire, of our fault and fortune. In other words, the neoliberal subject is invited to walk the thin line that separates two metaphorical figures. On one side sits enthroned the exceptional entrepreneur, the unreachable hero of the neoliberal imaginary, inviting us to fantasise about and imitate him. On the other side lies the abject-ed addict, and more generally the undeserving poor, who stand as the living image of failure resulting from their irrational libidinal investments and their lack of a life-drive sufficient enough to overcome the shifting environmental obstacles in their way.

Conclusion

What this chapter has demonstrated is that abject figures, like the figure of the underserving drug addict, play a structural part in the neoliberal imaginary. As the polar opposite of the iconic entrepreneur, they are forced into the interplay between positive and negative imagos (Dawson 1994), models and anti-models, which contributes to shaping and spreading a normative neoliberal identity. Abject figures, like the addict, come to epitomise what the neoliberal subject should strive not to be – which is particularly clear in McGarvey’s and Vance’s attempts to reconstruct themselves in opposition to their addicted mothers. Both narratives, along with other cultural productions, thus give flesh to this metaphorical figure; they actively participate in the composition of “shared imaginary repertoires” (Tyler 2013, 20).

Yet, I indicated that there is a marked porosity between these models and anti-models, as symbolised by Vance and McGarvey being haunted by the ghosts of their mothers. Both models and anti-models stand as figures of transgression, orientated towards the fulfilment of their individual desire outside the fetters of a moralising status quo. What is problematic about the figure of the addict is that she seems to take the neoliberal injunction to enjoy to its extreme. She nonetheless becomes the symbol of those who lose themselves in their desire to the point of becoming unproductive and self-destructive. The chapter thus analysed how figures of

abjection are neutralised, either by their repression or by distancing (for Vance and McGarvey). Or, more radically, by being forced to bear the full cost of their transgression until death follows. Abjection opens the door to an active policy of 'letting die', a 'necropolitics'.

Forcing those with abnormal – that is, self-effacing – desires to face the full consequences of their choices contributes to delineate what Melinda Cooper calls a neoliberal “immanent ethics of virtue” (2017, 57). The existence of such an ethics undermines neoliberal theory’s claim to be non-judgemental or even amoral. On the contrary, both neoliberal theory and the cultural productions that derive from it, exhibit a distinctive ethics of the self, organised around the principle of agency, responsibility, self-reliance, self-control and resilience. Crucially, such a positive subjectivity, on which the entrepreneurial ethos relies, is produced through the purging (the catharsis) of people’s negative drives that prevents them from being adequate neoliberal subjects orientated towards life. From this perspective, the cultural productions studied in the chapter are disciplinary apparatuses. On the one hand, they help us identify abject figures around us; they motivate us to dismiss those who fail by blaming their failure on their bad choices and their pathologic self-destructive desires. In so doing, these cultural productions render unimportant - while paradoxically exhibiting - the structural conditions of contemporary capitalist society (specifically as these are constellated around gender, race and class) to concentrate again on individual choice and will-power, regardless of people’s position within the social structure. By making these structural factors relatively meaningless on the imaginary level, they reinforce their potency on the material level in a similar dynamic as the one highlighted by Dardot and Laval when analysing the coexistence of fantasies of freedom (at least at the rhetorical level) and disciplinary and surveillance apparatuses (Dardot and Laval 2010, 455) in neoliberal societies.

On the other hand, they also invite us to localise *within ourselves* a core and unredeemable abject-self that we must keep expurgating, again and again. Constant movement, engagement with and faith in the catallatic structures and its promises are demanded so we can keep this abject inside us at bay. Any failure must be blamed on ourselves (and not on the system) as it signals a relapse into our internal abject. This reworking of the theme of the Christian ‘economy of the fault and of salvation’ (Foucault 2018), as well as the depiction of the abyss of abjection is what, I argue, sustains the ‘normative’ dimension given to the entrepreneurship of the self in the neoliberal imaginary (Brown 2015, 36). It gives it the strength of a moral imperative and turns it into a new *credo*.

Afterword

As an afterword, I would like to summarise the main conclusions reached in this thesis, so as to reflect on their analytical and political implications and open up several questions for further study.

1. Research questions and the neoliberal imaginary

As I explained in Chapter 2, the concept of the ‘neoliberal imaginary’ regularly appears in the literature on neoliberalism, although it tends to be used generically. When it does, it is often to examine the other imaginaries it is taken to corrode (like the democratic imaginary in Brown (2015)) or to reassert the necessity of creating imaginaries that offer a radical alternative to the hegemony of neoliberal rationality (see Dardot (2020)). In this thesis, I propose a further conceptualisation of the neoliberal imaginary. I have argued that using the concept of the ‘imaginary’ allows us to consider neoliberal discursive representations in their radical strangeness. I have also argued that, when taken in its psychoanalytical sense, the ‘imaginary’ allows us to acknowledge the fantasmatic dimension of these representations – which anchor attachment to them – as well as their internal limits. In my introduction, each of the three dimensions were associated with different, but interwoven, sets of questions, which I now want to explicitly address.

1.1 Stranger things: a step into the neoliberal imaginary world

One of the main goals of the thesis is to offer an account of what the neoliberal imaginary world exactly consists of. To answer this question, Chapters 4 and 5 explored the canonical texts of neoliberal economic theory as a discursive space within which the neoliberal imaginary is given a formal conceptualisation by its main architects. My analysis has focused on two related dimensions.

First, I have concentrated on the foundations of the neoliberal imaginary world. Specifically, I have questioned the anti-metaphysical claims of neoliberal scholars by highlighting that neoliberal representations are suffused with metaphysical considerations. To draw on William Davies’s argument, neoliberal theory *is* animated by a desire to “eliminate normative judgement from public life to the greatest possible extent”, to replace subjective “intrinsic values” by

measurable “extrinsic values”, to “disenchant” politics with the cold, impersonal and rational force of economics (2014a, 8). But this desire needs to be read as a fantasy of self-referentiality and self-control; as Davies argues, neoliberal rationalisation “still rests on certain vocational commitments and intrinsic notions of the common good, albeit unarticulated ones” (2014a, 8).

Throughout the thesis, I have sought to excavate these metaphysical preconceptions by demonstrating how neoliberal theory does, at least implicitly, provide a reflection on abstract concepts such as being, knowing, identity, time and space. I have specifically demonstrated that the neoliberal doctrine, which fantasises itself as the “party of life” (Hayek 2011a, 530), relies on a peculiar understanding of life as perpetual movement and death as stasis – a reliance which explains its ambiguous celebration of uncertainty and creative destruction. Similarly, while they do not offer a definition of human nature *per se*, the neoliberal thinkers still draw a picture of human beings as morally indeterminate and as not exactly rational. Instead, according to the neoliberal ontology, human beings are relentless utility calculators constantly assessing opportunities around them. More importantly, they are instinctive beings, driven to the core by their desires, drives and intuitions. Such a view results in a conception of knowledge as exclusively experiential, and therefore as ineluctably fragmented. As I discussed in Chapter 4, neoliberal (and specifically Hayekian) philosophy is animated by a fundamental doubt about the all-encompassing dimension of human knowledge, by a deep-seated belief in human “institutional ignorance” (Hayek 2013, 14). Any attempt by a human intelligence to manage and coordinate collective effort in the name of having superior knowledge – like allegedly with planning – is doomed to failure and can only be arbitrary, or even tyrannical. Lastly, I discussed throughout the thesis how neoliberal thinking is characterised by a distinctive understanding of time and space in which the space of the present is subsumed under imaginary visions of the future. Specifically, the space of the present is conceived of as being pervaded by lack – gaps that are identifiable and can be turned into opportunities for enterprise and future wealth.

Such metaphysical underpinnings need to be understood because they are connected to two developments. The first of these constitutes the second dimension on which I concentrated in Chapters 4 and 5, namely a description of the discursive productions that derive from these metaphysical preconceptions. In particular, the catallaxy – the market order imagined in Hayek’s work – is designed to accommodate the neoliberal vision of life as perpetual movement, its defence of uncertainty, as well as its beliefs in the limitations of human knowledge and its rejection of stasis. I particularly emphasised how the catallaxy functions like a machine that computes sets of individual knowledge and coordinates individual endeavours in a non-arbitrary

- because anonymous - way, and how its apparently fragile mechanisms are insulated from people's reach, so as to escape the curse of human knowledge. Through the smooth mechanics of the price system, the catallaxy indicates to the market agents where to invest their entrepreneurial energy, but it also constantly spurs their drives to keep them active. Its often-cruel mechanisms are generally engineered to breed a "commercial spirit" (Hayek 2013, 413) by submitting the market agents to the rules of uncertainty. While the hardship of uncertainty forces agents continually to adapt and be alert, it also enables to distinguish those who *can* adapt from those who *cannot*. Considering that mimetic desire is at the heart of entrepreneurial drives for thinkers like Hayek, the winners of the uncertainty-game need to be exceptionally rewarded so as to act as a further trigger.

The second development is about the porosity between metaphysics and normativity. Namely, highlighting the metaphysical underpinnings of neoliberal representations brings proofs to a common intuition, namely that neoliberalism is far-less non-normative than it claims. What I demonstrated throughout the thesis is that neoliberal philosophy's understanding of life as constant movement and death as stasis, is intrinsically connected to normative and ethical considerations about what human beings *should* do – namely, to be on the look-out, to be adaptable, to be entrepreneurial. Despite the neoliberal scholars' claim to be open to "even the most absurd experimentation in living" (Hayek 2011b, 195), to be a-moral or at least non-judgemental, I demonstrated that moralism re-enters their worldview by the back door. As I argued in Chapter 7, non-conforming behaviours become repulsive, an illustration of an obscure and 'miserable' death wish.

This leads me to close this section on the recurrence of Christian motifs in my interpretation of the texts I analysed in the thesis (with, to name just a few, the motifs of the ordeal, sacrifice, faith, elects, abjection, and the ethic of personal responsibility). While I do agree with Jessica Whyte that religion is used by Hayek and his colleagues in a pragmatic and instrumental way to inculcate submission and reverence for the market order (Whyte 2019, 174), I tend to think that there is something more to it. Whether they intend it or not, the world imagined by the neoliberal scholars is pervaded by a sense of magic and marvel – which is at the heart of their call for total devotion to the sacred engine of the catallaxy.

1.2 The neoliberal imaginary as a fantasmatic object

The second set of questions turned on the status of neoliberal discourses as a 'fantasmatic objects' (Howarth, Glynos, and Griggs 2016). To address this dimension, Chapter 2 has

elaborated a psychoanalytical theory of the 'imaginary' that can be applied to political science and to the study of neoliberalism. I came to define the 'imaginary' as a frame around which a certain number of fantasies can be articulated together and given consistence so as to provide a structuring – but ultimately unsustainable – image of the self and of the social. This image wards off the dislocating tendencies of the real (taken in a Lacanian sense) and is, as such, invested with libidinal affects. People use imaginaries to structure their identity but also simultaneously project their expectation, repressions, fantasies and desires into the cultural representations available to them.

Neoliberal rationality fits this definition rather well. First, the catallaxy imagined in neoliberal theory is meant to provide a new structuring image of the social. As I argued in Chapter 4, the market order is an infrastructure that, by mechanically putting into relation and coordinating individual market agents' actions with one another, enables those agents to obey no-conscious-body in particular – they obey only signals sent by the market. Therefore, the neoliberal scholars I studied conclude, it is a perfect social organisation, which respects every agents' individual freedom. What founds the (moral) imperative to submit to the catallaxy is thus that the latter protects us from tyrannical and anti-evolutionary tendencies of centralised human decision-making, as exemplified by planning. From this perspective, the catallaxy does attempt to contain an immanent and imminent threat associated with the defect of human knowledge and the Promethean pretences of planners. It offers the promise of an ordered world, organised around the faultless engine of the market.

Yet, I have argued that what makes the catallaxy a peculiar social infrastructure is that, while it is built to ward-off the dislocating tendencies of the real associated with centralised human decision-making, its architects' rejection of planning and their cult of creative destruction force them to re-inscribe the real as a force of disruption at the heart the catallatic machine, and specifically in its mechanisms of social selection. The market agents are integrated in a stable ensemble, which they are enjoined to revere because of its protective qualities, while being simultaneously submitted to uncertainty. On the imaginary level, they are encouraged to fantasise the catallaxy as a lifeline, while being condemned to perpetual unrest in the materiality of their daily life.

Second, I have argued that the catallaxy is constructed as a giant libidinal apparatus that is meant to trigger people's mimetic desire, understood as the motor of entrepreneurial drives. From a Lacanian perspective, it is particularly interesting that the market order is conceived by

its authors as a mirror, which transparently reflects people's desires through the price system, but also displays the brilliant successes and extravagant lifestyles of its most successful agents so as to produce envy and imitative enterprises. Inequality is a central cog of the libidinal machine, which is animated by its component's desires. The market agents are invited to dream to become and emulate the most successful, who in turn become fantasmatic figures that represent power, control and riches. Like with Lacan's mirror stage, this process is a process of identity formation and composure, in which the market subjects structure the scattered pieces of their identity according to the image offered to them, but also invest this image with their fantasies and desires.

Such a process is at work in the discourses and narratives that surround the iconic entrepreneur in popular culture, as explored in Chapter 6. It is particularly striking in Wendy Liu (2020)'s dreams of following the path of her idols, the mythical Silicon Valley 'founders' of the like of Elon Musk and Peter Thiel. What I demonstrated is that the figure of the iconic entrepreneur comes to incarnate alluring promises and to unleash fantasises associated with them: promises of fame and glory, promises of self-control and will-power, but also and especially promises to break the stillness of the present, to go beyond material and mental boundaries toward a future that one has the power to personally shape. In other words, dreams of immortality, creative omnipotence and boundless enjoyment. The fantasmatic power of these dreams is what initially motivates Liu in going always beyond her physical and mental strength, in accepting working impossible hours and in bracketing her personal life. When she finally gives up – and later rebel, the fact she didn't make it become rebranded by her critics as a failure of the will, and inability to dream strongly enough.

Similarly, my analysis in Chapter 7 of the discursive production in popular culture of the figure of the impoverished addict was designed to demonstrate that fantasmatic processes were also at work in the construction of counter-models or negative imagos. Through processes of abjection and abomination, these discourses are meant to induce a feeling of repulsion, thus creating a pull-back effect, a fantasmatic process of radical non-identification but also of expurgation of everything inside us that might resemble these figures.

1.3 Alienation and the neoliberal imaginary

The third set of questions I highlighted in the introduction of the thesis were to do with the question of alienation and imaginaries.

One of the aims of the thesis has been to illustrate how well the neoliberal imaginary fits the description of the autonomised and thus alienating imaginaries that Castoriadis denounced. Interestingly, I showed that, far from being an unwanted effect, Hayek and his colleagues have explicitly intended to insulate the infrastructure of their imaginary market order from popular control and sovereignty, to counter what they believe to be the inherent defect of human knowledge. I therefore reach the same conclusions as Brown (2015) and Cornelissen (2018), while focusing on the metaphysics that justifies the engineering of the disempowerment of the people. I argued that the alienation that results from it is double. On one hand, the market agents cannot alter the structure that supports the catallaxy, no matter how much it affects their lives; they lose the auto-nomy, their ability to meaningfully rule themselves (Castoriadis 1999c). On the other hand, they are submitted to the social engineering the catallaxy puts into place: they see imposed on them the logics of the ordeal (to prove their putative utility and adaptability), of sacrifice (to prove they want something strongly enough), of frustrating mimetic desire (as the alleged motor of the entrepreneurial spirit), of structural uncertainty and insecurity (to force them to adapt). In other words, they are subjected to an elaborate economics of pain, forced to be active at one level while being made passive on the other. I have argued that these mechanisms need to be understood in their Social-Darwinian – or even eugenicist – dimension: they act as mechanisms of social selection that reveal the stronger (breed them and reward them) and violently discard the losers. Generally, as the neoliberal scholars' reflection on submission and sacrifice (with Hayek's "calculus of lives" (1988)) made amply clear the health of the market engine trumps the wellbeing, and at times the very survival, of the living populating it.

My thesis has consequently emphasised the internal tensions that exist between the celebration of the catallatic machine as the guarantee of life and future growth, and the striking disregard for the actuality of the living flesh. It has put this tension in relation with other immanent contradictions that transpire through the neoliberal imaginary order. The tension between the machine and the flesh is accompanied by tensions between creation and destruction; movement and stasis (the stable structure of the catallaxy vs. the uncertainty around which it is constructed); life and death; individual freedom and submission. According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, bridging these tensions is the very function of the imaginary. The stable (and illusory) image that is formed through the mirror stage is the result of an attempt to bring together the elements of the 'body in pieces' of the child (Lacan 1978, 72). In the case of neoliberalism, the imaginary dimension of its rationality enables it to bring consistence to

scattered metaphysical commitments – a key to its extraordinary capacity to adapt to new circumstances and critiques.

Crucially, I want to argue that these tensions – through which the real may erupt – also suggest breaking points within the neoliberal imaginary. This is what I have aimed to investigate in my two final case-studies when showing that the identities promoted in neoliberal discourses are ultimately untenable. In Chapter 6, I have examined how the attempts by Thiel and Musk to incarnate the promise of perpetual creativity and movement, of the transgression of material, mental and corporeal boundaries, paradoxically end up with their petrification into barely human figures obsessed with their ineluctable death and their paranoia for the apocalypse to come. I have been interested in the way Musk's and Thiel's composites seem to crumble under the pressure of their desire led to its completion. In Chapter 7, I have shown how there seems to be a disturbing porosity between the celebrated figure of the entrepreneur and the abject-ed figure of the addict, and that the drives the neoliberal scholars celebrate seem sometimes to result – to their own horror – in people wishing death (leading to the prompt suppression of these defective/ab-normal individuals).

As I have argued throughout the thesis, such intermingling of life and death is a consequence of the place given to desire, enjoyment and libidinality in the neoliberal imaginary, which builds its utopian order around them. Psychoanalytical theory particularly invites us to reconsider neoliberalism's central promise; that of going beyond our present physical and mental capacities, beyond the boundaries of the possible and the limits of life. Lacan's work emphasises that crossing the limit that separates us from the realisation of our desire (that is, from enjoyment) is not harmless but comes with a heavy price. It equates an encounter with the unintelligibility of the real, and thus with our own mental and physical dissolution, and ultimately with death. It is therefore logical that a machinery dedicated to life as the unleashing of desire should turn in the machinery of the 'let die' and necropolitics. While I have suggested that neoliberal philosophy invites us to flirt with this exciting limit without genuinely crossing it, to walk the thin metaphorical line that separates the iconic entrepreneur from the abject-ed addict, the exercise seems rather slippery – explaining perhaps neoliberalism's ruthless violence against those who it identifies as the losers.

2. Contribution to knowledge

Chapter 1 provided the opportunity to reassert, along with other scholars (see Glynos 2014; Walkerdine 2020; Layton 2014), the necessity of introducing a psychoanalytical approach to the

study of neoliberalism. My original contribution has been to do so via the re-mobilisation along psychoanalytical lines of a concept that is already used in the scholarship on neoliberalism, that of the 'imaginary', so as to address the fantasmatic dimension of neoliberal representations.

Secondly, my thesis has put in relation corpuses of texts and scholarly traditions, which hadn't been systematically related. The project is consequently interdisciplinary at its core and brings together economic theory and history, psychoanalytical theory, psychosocial and cultural studies. On the one hand the method I have adopted has entailed providing a psychoanalytical interpretative analysis of the canonical texts of neoliberal economic theory – something which hadn't been systematically done despite a recent renewed emphasis given to the study of these texts in the scholarship on neoliberalism (Bruff and Starnes 2019; Cornelissen 2018; Whyte 2017; Brown 2020).

On the other hand, the thesis has confronted these canonical economic texts with their echoes in the cultural sphere. By rallying together economic theory and cultural studies, I have aimed to provide a thicker and kaleidoscopic account of the neoliberal imaginary. As I explained earlier in the thesis, such a method was made necessary by the fact that a rationality is not simply the result of an ideological campaign intentionally orchestrated in the intellectual spheres. As the Foucauldian scholarship has suggested, the development of a rationality is a multimodal process that involves the deployment disciplinary apparatuses, techniques and discourses disseminated – not always intentionally - in social relations (Dardot and Laval 2010, 277). Examining how the imaginary world conceptualised in the second part of the twentieth century in neoliberal economic theory comes to imbue today's cultural productions was for me a way to address this multimodal dimension. I suggested that these cultural productions are crucial cogs in the rooting of the neoliberal representations in subjectivities as they give the neoliberal imaginary a material and fantasmatic texture. As such, they also contribute to signalling points of rupture within these imaginary representations when these are carried out to their extremes. As implementations, they contribute to highlight the morbid dimension of the neoliberal ambition to reform society and the soul around market lines.

3. Further research

In *The imaginary institution of society* (1975), Castoriadis acknowledges the difficulty of grasping imaginaries in their entirety because of their nebulous, immaterial and often contradictory dimensions. One can only proceed "indirectly and obliquely" (Castoriadis 1975, 216). Analysing the neoliberal imaginary in this thesis has therefore been somewhat of a challenge and I plainly

recognise that my account of it can only be partial and non-exhaustive. There are a few areas I would like to develop in future research on the question.

One of these is to take a more thematic approach to the neoliberal imaginary, separately focusing on its conceptualisations of gender, race and religion. I have highlighted these three dimensions in my work (for instance when highlighting the colonial dimension of transcending limits, or when discussing masculinities in entrepreneurship and the abjection of the mother in Vance's and McGarvey's redemptive stances), but constraints of time and space have prevented me to give these themes the full attention they deserve.

A second areas for future research would be to expand on the case studies. I could offer a comparative analysis of the different geographical schools of neoliberal theory, so as to address how they differ in their metaphysical underpinnings and how these differences affect the world they imagine and seek to put into place. I am also interested in developing the chapter on the entrepreneur by examining cultural productions which reflect upon questions of transhumanism and death. During my research, I was struck by the corporeal anchorage of Thiel's and Musk's narratives, and by their willingness to enhance their bodies' capacities by supplementing them with machine parts. This future research would therefore interrogate cultural manifestations of today's anxious obsession with the limits and weaknesses of biological existence, and the desire to transcend or obviate these limits. One idea would be to read the texts on transhumanism alongside the alternative visions of biotechnology and politics advocated by the cyberfeminist, and more recently, the xenofeminist movements.

A third area for future research would be to examine how my analysis of the canonical texts of neoliberal theory resonates with today's policy discourse. While writing Chapters 6 and 7, I was particularly struck by how the themes I was uncovering resonated with the speeches of the newly elected French president, Emmanuel Macron. I have had a similar impression, more recently, with the British government's (now revoked) decision to cancel free school meals. I would like to develop these insights to examine how today's policy discourse on growth, entrepreneurship and poverty, but also on economic and biological health, are pervaded by the imaginary I discussed throughout the thesis, and specifically by its embrace of disruption as a life drive and stasis as a death drive.

4. Implications for our neoliberal present

This research has been done part-time, in the space of seven years. It started in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, when the Occupy movement provided new hopes about the creation of alternative ‘non-alienating’ imaginaries. In a rather odd arc, I am now finishing this work in the middle of a global pandemic, at the beginning of what promises to be a new global economic, financial and social crisis. In the face of the abandonment – not to say the active suppression - of discredited lives (black lives; elderly lives; young lives; poor lives), in the face of an always growing gap between the richest and poorest (with Jeff Bezos, another Silicon Valley tycoon, soon to be the world’s first trillionaire), the question today is not exactly whether neoliberalism is about to end, but rather about how its imaginary imbues the way Western societies understand and conceive themselves, as well as the way we are led to compose ourselves as subjects living in the neoliberal present.

From this perspective, what I believe transpires in the present moment is the collective and individual incorporation of neoliberal imaginary representations. Not only those highlighted in my analyses of the iconic entrepreneur (transcending boundaries; resilience and willpower; embracing uncertainty as a creative force) and the figure of the abject-ed addict (the ethic of self-responsibility), but also and especially the Social-Darwinist and eugenicist procedures that accompany the neoliberal dichotomy between winners to be infinitely and obscenely rewarded, and losers to be discarded. The cruelty of the present moment – exemplified by excessive figures of the like of Donald Trump or Peter Thiel – tends to make the neofeudal nightmare of “exterminism”, one of the four futures imagined by Peter Frase (2016), not that remote: a future in which the combination of resource scarcity (caused by climate change) and automation makes it more convenient for the rich to exterminate the now-useless poor (Frase 2016). Indeed, similar procedures are already at work on Europe’s borders, where racialised migrants fleeing violence and poverty (including poverty caused by climate change) are effectively killed by Western states’ active inaction in their explicit differentiation between formal (white) citizens who are integrated in market processes (that is, who are allowed to compete and to be entrepreneurial), and racialised and othered populations who are excluded from care, left to die and made disposable.¹

¹ See T. Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi (2017) for an analysis of the necropolitical experience of refugee in Europe, see Issar (2020) for an analysis of neoliberalism's impact on racialised populations in relation to Black Lives Matter.

Neoliberal imaginary representations are also at work in the way the Covid-19 crisis has forced governments to make explicit their positions with regards to the price of biological life versus the price of economic health – deliberations which, I suggest, might explain the British government’s hesitations on calling a national lockdown in March 2020. This is particularly clear in a speech given in September 2020 in the House of Commons by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak. Announcing his plan for the reopening of the British economy in the context of Covid-19, Sunak states that “life means more than simply existing. We find meaning and hope through our friends and family, through our work, through our community” (Sunak 2020). In other words, life is not mere biological life (‘bare life’ in Agamben), but a social, relational life. With Boris Johnson (PA Media 2020) and seemingly contra Thatcher’s mantra, Sunak seems to surprisingly acknowledge here that there is such a thing as society after all.

Yet, the end of Sunak’s speech suggests otherwise. There is a slippage between medical health and economic health, represented by his framing of the Covid-19 crisis in terms of “price”, “costs”, “trade-offs” and “risks”, as well as in terms of “collective” and “individual responsibility” rather governmental one (Sunak 2020). Sunak conflates economy with society, social life with life *in* the market. The consequence is that, while recognising the extent of “lives lost”, he immediately adds that “the price our country is paying is wider than that” – implying that the greatest cost is economic. While claiming that the “government has done much to mitigate the effects of the awful trade-offs between health, education and employment” (Sunak 2020), he implies that the trade-offs exist nonetheless: people have to take risks with their ‘existence’ and go back to work, as this is *real* life. In accordance with the logics of Hayek’s “calculus of lives”, because individual survival is believed to be pegged on the survival of the market engine, individual life can be easily given up (or sacrificed) when the economic system is under threat.

The neoliberal imaginary is like the roots of a gigantic tree that smothers the articulation of alternative imaginaries. To find another relationship with it not characterised by overinvestment, it is necessary to understand how these roots burrow into our psyches, institutions and social representations. This thesis has contributed to that work.

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