



# Anti-capitalist subjectivity: considerations of fantasy, (in)action, and solidarity building

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## Abstract

Anti-capitalist subjectivities are produced through politically generative refusals of the divisive, profit-oriented, and manageable subject positions made available by capitalism's socio-symbolic order. Pushing back against liberal political theories which presume subjectivity to be a priori or coherent, this article employs psychoanalytic theory to grapple with the flowing, changing, patterned, and disjointed nature of anti-capitalist subject formations. Although mainstream psychoanalysis has, historically, aligned with the dictates of capital, I argue that psychoanalytic theory nonetheless offers a useful resource for understanding how anti-capitalist refusal can foster emancipatory desires and situated political commitments within and among subjects. In fleshing out these arguments, I engage with the role that fantasy plays in forming anti-capitalist subjectivities. I also consider what solidarity building and political action mean with respect to anti-capitalist subjectivity. By way of conclusion, I argue why we should make the case for anti-capitalist subjectivity, offering some directions that future work may take.

**Keywords** Subjectivity · Psychoanalysis · Anti-capitalism · Fantasy · Action · Solidarity

## Introduction

Capital accumulation demands that subjectivity is made recognisable within terms of market exchange, accumulation, hierarchy, exploitation, and/or expropriation (see Fraser 2022). To resist capitalism's subjective imposition and to craft subject positions through refusal is, then, to assume what I am calling anti-capitalist subjectivity. In rejecting capitalism's false fixities and pseudo-sureties,

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anti-capitalist subjectivity is forged through continual, generative, and plural refusals that seek to make clear the illegitimacy of capitalism's structurally violent social ordering. In this article, I aim to demonstrate how anti-capitalist subjectivity negates and creates through an emphatic No (Holloway 2010), defining itself negatively through negotiated becomings and collective actions. Psychoanalytic theory, I posit, can assist us in understanding how anti-capitalist subjectivity opens up the kinds of solidaristic, action-oriented, and fantasmatic avenues which prove indispensable in advancing an intersectional and internationalist emancipatory politics. In other words, by responding to capital's material and psychological valances, anti-capitalist subjectivity reflects the broad-based and audacious psychic appeal that liberation from capitalism demands.

At the broader level, one might ask how politics and subjectivity relate to one another. If we understand subjectivity as "the generative axes around which psychic life is organised, that are themselves elements in an ideological space" (Frosh 1999, p. 273), then it follows that subjectivity shapes and is shaped by an individual's political commitments (Gordon 2021). Bringing political theory to bear on subject formation can, however, prove challenging precisely because so much political theory—and liberal political theory in particular (e.g. Hobbes, Locke, Rawls)—assumes the subject to be a priori; a self-contained entity whose freedom is consciously and intentionally enacted or thwarted without impediment (Stavrakakis 2008). What emerges from political theory of this sort is a coherent political subject, bereft of an unconscious, who acts in accordance with a coherent politics. In turning away from this kind of political theory and attempting to grasp at the flowing, changing, patterned, productive, and disjointed nature of political subject formation, several theorists have turned to psychoanalysis (see Frosh 1999; Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar 2021).

For psychoanalysis, and for Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular, the subject cannot be reduced to fixed, definable, or measurable conceptual categories (e.g. mind, personality, intelligence). The subject is, instead, realised through language and symbols. In this regard, we can think of the subject as a "speech event" (Hook 2018, p. 63), one that is thought and elucidated in the play of signs (Bailly 2012), but never definitively known (Coole 2002). It is because language and symbols are shared that the individual subject always includes others in its formation. The subject, in this regard, remains open to societal and political influences—being both inhabited and divided by the outside world (Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar 2021). Yet, at the same time, subjectivity is also fundamentally unstable. This is because language is unstable, ever-changing, and constituted through socio-historical forces. There is also a gap between what one says and how one is heard, as well as between signifiers and what they signify (Bailly 2012). As such, the subject is composed through a series of shifting miscommunications and splits (Hook 2018). It is because subjectivity is reproduced through the contradictions inherent to available signs and ideologies that subjects are, themselves, never entirely beholden to the symbols and languages through which they are made. Subjects, in other words, can exert agency and affect change because they are not entirely accessed by or fully integrated into ideology (Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar 2021).



In this article, I draw from psychoanalytic theory to grapple with and make a case for what I am calling anti-capitalist subjectivities. Eschewing definitive political content, anti-capitalist subjectivities are formed through refusing capital's imposition (see McGranahan 2016), that is, through the generative and strategic rejection of the divisive, stifling, profit-oriented, and manageable subjectivities made available by capital (Brown 2015). It is in what Marcuse (1966) called the Great Refusal, "the protest against that which is" (p. 63) that anti-capitalist subjectivities are forged; refusing, breaking, recreating, revealing, or abstaining from the illegitimacy of the capitalist social order. Anti-capitalist subjectivities are necessarily plural, embodying "the experience of lived multiplicities of positionings" (Blackman et al. 2008, p. 6), insofar as they strive to take up social and symbolic positions denied by a structural adversary (i.e. capitalism) that is, itself, always in flux (see Malherbe 2023). Thus, if the anti-capitalist subject is to be understood as plural, its plurality is forged through a wide-ranging set of politically committed refusals (Wood 1995).

Anti-capitalist subjectivity refuses integration into capitalism's social order. It is, instead, a subjectivity that is made in the turn away from this order (see Canham 2023). To negate capitalist hegemony in this way is to be negative, with anti-capitalist subjectivity orbiting around a base negativity. As Coole (2002) argues, negativity embraces the strategies of subversion, negation, opposition, resistance, and transgression that positively defined institutions exclude in the name of an apparent harmonious, permanent stability. Putting negativity into the service of a progressive politics, as is the case with anti-capitalism, means however that the negative cannot translate into pure negation. As Holloway (2010) writes, there should always be "another-doing implicit in the No" (p. 29). Politicising negativity, thus, requires that the negative remain in dialectical tension with the positive, thereby ensuring that all organisational formations, tactics, subject positions, and knowledge forms are open to being remade, and that the negative—or non-self-identical nature—inherent to the positive is repeatedly emphasised. Negativity, we might then say, serves as a ceaseless "creative–destructive force that engenders as well as ruins positive forms" (Coole 2002, p. 6). The anti-capitalist subject, as a subject of negativity, thus, rejects fetishised attachments to pure refusal, and instead locates its ontological bearings within an unstable negation-creation dialectic attuned to the shifting requirements of liberation. In using symbolic resources that refuse the capitalist order from within (see Saketopoulou and Pellegrin 2023; Hook 2018), the anti-capitalist subject is not defined simply by what it is not (i.e. a subject of capitalism), but rather by ever-negotiated, negative actions, styles, performances, and becomings that stand opposed to capitalist oppression while, at the same time, looking beyond such oppression (see Coole 2002).

We see anti-capitalist subjectivities being reproduced in those radical moments and movements that demonstrate a committed refusal of capital at the sites of production, reproduction, realisation in the market, appropriation, and consumption (Malherbe 2023). Although anti-capitalists are unlikely to identify, in every instance, as anti-capitalists, I hope to show that the term *anti-capitalist*—and the negativity it implies—nonetheless assists us in understanding the symbolic functioning and psychic undercurrents of subjectivities forged in the refusal of capital. Psychoanalysis is, in this respect, helpful for demonstrating how the refusal of capitalism's



crystallisation of meaning opens space for a radical and continuous re-articulation of subjectivity (Žižek 2006). In other words, unlike liberal political theory, psychoanalysis can illuminate how subjectivity is forged through misfitting with the subjective dictates of capital, and how such misfitting denotes a particular sort of psychic appeal that is by and large unavailable to capitalism's (oftentimes positively constituted) subjectivities.

There is, of course, a large body of psychoanalytic literature that explores the formation of what I am calling anti-capitalist subjectivity. Although the full scope of this work is beyond the purview of this article, it perhaps suffices to say that psychoanalysis (as theory and as practice) has been used to engage, understand, and foster subjectivities forged in the refusal of nuclear family structures; capitalism's consumer and/or producer dictates; capital's racist, hetero-patriarchal, sexually oppressive, and colonial apparatuses; the psychic incentives offered by the capitalist market; the undemocratic functioning of capitalist State apparatuses; and many other facets of the world capitalist order (see Frosh 1999 and Malherbe 2023 for expanded summaries here). My own conceptualisation of anti-capitalist subjectivity is unquestionably situated in this body of work. Yet my conceptualisation also remains somewhat distinctive in its use and naming of anti-capitalism as a means by which to engage those subjectivities formed through a politicised and politicising negativity, that is, through a range of (sometimes incompatible) emancipatory traditions (e.g. communism, anarchism, decoloniality, radical feminism) that refuse the dictates of the capitalist social order, and whose political vitality is premised on such refusal.

In what follows, and to conceptually frame anti-capitalist subjectivity in a suitably dialectical fashion, I describe how capitalist subjectivity avails constrictive, divisive, and dehumanising ways of being, knowing, and relating. I then explicate how anti-capitalist refusal is able to foster desire and political commitment in and among subjects. Following this, and as a means of fleshing out these arguments, I engage with the role that fantasy plays in forming anti-capitalist subjectivities. I also consider what solidarity building and political action mean with respect to anti-capitalist subjectivity. By way of conclusion, I reflect on why we should continue making the case for anti-capitalist subjectivity, offering some directions that future work in this area may take.

## Capitalism and subjectivity

Capitalism is not monolithic. It has mutated across time and space and, as such, has been theorised in many different ways. An especially useful and suitably expansive understanding of the intersectional nature of contemporary capitalism (sometimes referred to as neoliberal capitalism) has been put forth by Fraser (2022). Fraser, *a la* classic Marxism (see e.g. Marx 1867/1977), insists that under capitalism, the monetised value of a small class of investors and owners is shored up by exploiting workers' surplus labour. Fraser, however, pushes the Marxian analysis further by arguing that the exploitation of workers (i.e. paying workers less than the value that they produce) necessitates the expropriation of the uncapitalised wealth (i.e. wealth taken



without compensation) produced by care workers, colonies, and the environment. In other words, productive labour and the economy depend on the expropriation of non-commodified zones of social reproduction. We see this today, for example, in the (largely feminised) un- or underpaid care work required to reproduce the capitalist workforce; the increasing levels of carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere; the destruction of land necessitated by industrial development; and enduring neocolonial trade relations. Capital, Fraser (2022) concludes, cannibalises the conditions of its existence, refusing to replenish or repair that which it consumes or damages. Capitalism, in short, depends on exploitation *and* expropriation, functioning as a fundamentally undemocratic financialised, imperial, patriarchal, and ecologically destructive social order that, if it is to be resisted effectively, must be refused on these fronts.

Under contemporary capitalism, people are rendered non-relational pieces of human capital determined by market forces and value-enhancing utilitarian technical knowledge (Brown 2015; Teo 2018). Subjectivity, under these conditions, is reduced to quantifiable, surveilled, and/or marketable labour power held to various metrics of ‘progress’ (Tomšič 2015). Self-interest and marketability, thus, serve as the master signifiers (or orienting principles) for capitalist subjects to self-manage within capital’s consolidated social hierarchies (see Teo 2017). However, as Mbembe (2019) and Fraser (2022) have demonstrated, the subject of liberal capitalist democracy is dependent on global conditions of coloniality<sup>1</sup> that rely on the expropriation of the lands, labours, and lives of colonised populations. Thus, we might say that even though capitalism is never entirely successful in determining or foreclosing subjectivity, it is in, with, and against the violent, impositional forces of capitalist modernity that subjectivity is made, managed, and fixed in place—determining who is regarded as human and worthy of life, and who is not (Sithole 2016). It is under these conditions, Brown (2015) writes, that “capitalism finally swallows humanity” (p. 44).

What, then, are the psychic drivers of capitalism’s subjectivities? McGowan (2016) argues that the capitalist promise functions as capitalist ideology’s principle of legitimacy (see Conway and Singh 2011). The capitalist promise refers to a state of psychic wholeness that is to be achieved when one abides by the ever-shifting dictates and logic of capital. The capitalist promise may, thus, speak to upward class mobility; a return on investments; unmitigated pleasure; gratifying or more commodities; financial success; and/or social recognition. Capitalism cannot, however, deliver on any of its promises for several reasons. On the most basic material level, capital requires poverty, making the promise of a better life structurally impossible for the vast majority (see Marx 1867/1977). On the psychic level, the capitalist promise remains impossible because a positively defined subjective essence does not exist and cannot be arrived at (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008). This is because, as noted earlier, the language and symbols through which subjectivity is made are at a remove from our experience (language, for instance, fails to capture and keep up

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<sup>1</sup> Coloniality posits that colonialism is not a historical event, but a lasting, present-day global system (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).



with affective, racialised, and gendered experiences, and has also served as a tool for advancing coloniality; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1993; Saketopoulou and Pellegrin 2023). Subjectivity can, therefore, only ever encircle the capitalist promise—approaching it differently, trying harder, striving better, or competing more ruthlessly—rather than successfully arrive at it (Stavrakakis 2010). It is this inability to achieve the capitalist promise that neurotically foists our desires to capitalism's socio-symbolic order (Frosh 1999). Continually missing the capitalist promise pushes the individual to strive harder, faster, and better, and in so doing consolidates a psychic attachment and commitment to capital. Capitalist subjectivity is, in this way, held together by desires that are dictated by capital (see Blackman et al. 2008), positioning subjectivity as an extension of capital (Marcuse 1966).

Of course, the psychic grip of the capitalist promise is not uniform. For most people living under the grinding poverty inherited by the modern capitalist order, participation in capitalism underdelivers on the most basic conditions of survival. As such, the fantasmatic qualities of the capitalist promise are, for the majority of people, revealed on a daily basis (Lau 2021). Nonetheless, the capitalist promise can serve to foster hope for a better life under capitalism (Hartman 2019), with capitalist promises of wholeness allowing for a fleeting sense of certainty that temporarily appeases anxieties around ontological contingency (Ruti 2008). As we will see, the individual may well attain psychic comfort from the familiarity and fixity of capitalist subjectivity (its constancy and scripts of being), even if the conditions of this subjectivity simultaneously wound people at both material and psychic levels (Fromm 1947). The point to be made, then, is that the capitalist promise does not exert an equally powerful psychic grip over everyone. At different moments, for different reasons, and at different intensities, someone might accept the capitalist promise, commit to it out of resignation or necessity, engage critically with it, reject it, disavow it, or display conscious awareness of it. In this, capitalist subjectivity, like all subjectivity, is not singular or stable. Rather, capital relies on the promise of singularity and stability (i.e. the fiction of a secured, satisfyingly whole position within capital's social order).

Capitalist ideology's attempts to contain our desires within the socio-symbolic limitations of capital are representative of how capitalism organises our *enjoyment*, a Lacanian psychoanalytic term referring to the unconscious, momentary satisfactions attained from the dissatisfaction that comes with disturbing a seemingly coherent symbolic order (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008). Capitalism tends to organise our enjoyment through loss and excess (Tomšič 2015). To enjoy capitalism through loss, one may sacrifice time, savings, and/or well-being for the profit motive; over-identifying with the austerity and false scarcity imposed by capital (McGowan 2016). Enjoying through capitalist loss may, for example, see racist and/or xenophobic discourse being mobilised to accuse the disenfranchised, other of stealing one's enjoyment (Hook 2013). On the side of excess, it is not difficult to imagine how people enjoy excessively in a consumer capitalist society. However, what is perhaps less clear is how capital pairs the enjoyment of loss with the enjoyment of excess. Excessively consuming and working excessively hard, for instance, require different sorts of loss (e.g. the loss of time, relationships, money). Moreover, those who enjoy the excess of a fascistic politics may also believe that their enjoyment is being stolen by



a racialised, gendered, and/or nationalised other (again, coupling loss with excess). Finally, people may enjoy excessively transgressing capitalist Law (i.e. officially sanctioned normative ideals) within the confines of capitalism, while enduring the kinds of loss of social standing that may come with this (Stavrakakis 2010). For example, although xenophobic violence appears to operate at a distance from the official dictates of liberal capitalism (such violence is in only a minority of cases officially sanctioned), it coheres with the divisive, competitive, marketised, and nationalistic logic upon which capital depends; meaning that the subject's dissident psychic energies are subsumed within capitalistic logic (see Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008; Mbembe 2019). At the same time, the xenophobic actor may also experience various losses (e.g. retaliatory violence or a diminishing of social status).

Through enjoying and psychically investing in capitalism's socio-symbolic structure (i.e. the signs, symbols, ideologies, and logics that support capitalism as an institutionalised social order), the subject develops an unusually personal link with political economy. Indeed, capitalism's structural exploitation can feel like the fault of the individual: a result of one's choices, defective agency, or insufficient ability to compete, work hard, display mastery, or obey (Chandler and Reid 2016). To fail in the capitalist marketplace is to fail as a subject (Teo 2018), and one is encouraged to turn inwards to address this failure rather than fight outwards. Through this emphasis on individual responsibility, capitalism conceals how our fates are entangled via cycles of exploitative dependency and the collective nature of production and reproduction (Fields and Fields 2022). At the same time, the feeling of individual responsibility can paradoxically lead us to feel a kind of autonomy in the face of capitalist oppression; a feeling that they, by their own will, are able to alter their position within capitalism's structurally oppressive social order (Hartman 2019). People may also come to resent or fear the pseudo or limited sorts of freedoms and autonomies allowed for by capital, seeking solace in a more authoritarian, fascistic kind of capitalist control (Fromm 1947).

It is certainly true that liberal capitalism permits a degree of subjective fluidity, so long as such fluidity coheres with or does not disturb the profit-making mandate (Fraser 2022; Saketopoulou and Pellegrin 2023). It is, however, also true that under capitalism, subjective fluidity co-exists "with grinding stability and exploitative continuity" (Blackman et al. 2008, p. 19). Indeed, capitalism necessitates rigid and fundamentally divisive identifications by which to fix subjectivity (oftentimes rendering the subject an object through stereotypes; Sithole 2016). The fixing of identifications is part of how capitalist ideology personalises structural violence; ordering this violence and making it appear inevitable within a hierarchy of being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). For instance, the ownership of land, labour, and people has historically enabled whiteness to function not only as an identification, but also as a property right and social status (Harris 2020). The symbolic and material power of whiteness is, in this way, ensured by the degradation and commodification of blackness and indigenous lands (Hartman 2019; Rodney 1972). As ka Canham (2023) writes, colonial capitalism unhumans Black subjects within modernity's chain of being (in some instances expelling blackness from being altogether; Sithole 2016), representing these subjects as "monsters who feed on each other to access the impossible promise of consumer capitalism" (p. 196), thereby drawing attention away from



capitalism as a monstrous global order. Capital's patriarchal mechanisms similarly attribute underpaid or unpaid care work—upon which all life depends—to feminised subjects (Malherbe 2021). Those subjects who refuse categorisation within capitalism's hetero-patriarchal order are increasingly the target of violent attempts to fix gendered expression into place (see, for instance, the violence faced by transgender and gender non-conforming subjects; Duford 2022; Saketopoulou and Pellegrin 2023). From this, we can see how the majority of people under colonial and patriarchal capitalism are marked by an embodied alienation that places them at a distance from the material and symbolic value afforded to subjects identified as white, able-bodied, cisgendered, and masculine (see Sheehi and Sheehi 2022). In turn, such identifications (e.g. whiteness, masculinity) carry with them their own promise of psychic wholeness, meaning that people may enjoy, violently defend, and/or invest in these identifications regardless of whether they deliver on their promised satisfactions (Malherbe 2021).

There is, of course, no biological basis to the identifications fixed by capital. There are also varieties within and intersections between these identifications (Fields and Fields 2022; Saketopoulou and Pellegrin 2023). Nonetheless, it is by fixing identifications, or making them appear natural, that capitalist ideology manages and/or imposes identifiable roles and expectations onto the class-bound subject. Resultantly, as Conway and Singh (2011) formulate it, capital hails subjugated peoples through *good subjectivity* which is compliant with capitalist identifications and colonial modernity, *bad subjectivity* which is frozen in perpetual revolt and, thus, must be managed, or *non-subjectivity* which, oftentimes in the interests of survival, takes up symbols and actions removed capitalism's colonial modern order, and is in turn made to seem a non-subject by the ideological standards of this order. While capital can and does punish those who actively violate its roles and expectations (Hartman 2019), there are instances where the very appearance of a particular, identifiable subject provokes violence (seen, for example, in the global prevalence of racist police killings; Gordon 2021). It is in this way that, within capitalism's ideological frame, racial or gendered violence becomes what the racialised or gendered *is*, rather than what a violent individual does (Fields and Fields 2022). The vast majority of those under capitalism are, therefore, placed within an impossibly contradictory social position, one marked by expulsion (e.g. racialised and gender-based violence; social repression and death; symbolic erasure) and hyper-exploitative dependence (e.g. unwaged or under-waged feminised labour; surplus extraction; the expropriation and/or degradation of land). As such, capitalism's identity-based oppressions weaken resistance to capital and act to "win peace for the exploiting classes and nations" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1993, p. 122).

In considering what we have argued so far, Stavrakakis (2008) raises several important questions that complicate how we understand capitalist subjectivity. He asks why capitalist domination never totally succeeds in eliminating resistance or erasing emancipatory imaginaries; how new, seemingly non-capitalist subjectivities produce new forms of subjugation; and why some political positions are more successful than others in achieving ideological hegemony. He also troubles those theories that posit the subject as a passive reciprocal of domination, as well as those that conceive of the subject as an always-becoming social being that can be mastered but





never fully contained. In considering some of these questions, I turn now to my principal concern: anti-capitalist subjectivity.

## Anti-capitalist subjectivity

Specific anti-capitalist projects carry psychic appeal because they offer to replace the capitalist promise with another, more promising, emancipatory promise, one defined by beauty and equality rather than austerity or excess. This emancipatory promise, thus, proposes a different sort of impossible psychic completion to that offered by the capitalist promise. There are those, for instance, who purport that the value of socialism lies in its “resolving [of capitalism’s] specific contradictions” (Wood 1995, p. 142). Marx (1844/1978) himself, writing as a young man, proclaimed that “Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution” (p. 84), while Trotsky (1923/2005), in a hyperbolic statement mired in Euro- and Andro-centrism, proclaimed that under communism:

Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical ... The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise. (p. 263)

Of course, not all anti-capitalist projects promise to settle contradiction. Some are, indeed, defined by their situational contingency. Projects committed to fostering the decolonial attitude, for example, suggest subjectivities whose ontological foundation rests on a fundamentally human pluriversity of knowing and being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Anarchist subjectivities are similarly produced prefiguratively, through direct action (Hartman 2019), whereas radical feminist subjectivities are oftentimes produced through consciousness-raising and dissensus, rather than an assumed, a priori, or unchallenged consensus (Ewa 2001). Even Marx (1867/1977), in his mature writings, warned communists against “writing recipes for the cook-shops of the future” (p. 99), or delineating what communism *must be*.

Anti-capitalist subjects are forged through politicised negativity, and in their refusal of capitalism, open themselves up to different emancipatory promises and situational contingencies. Together, these promises and contingencies are unlikely to permit a neat synthesis. However, the radically negative foundation of the anti-capitalist subject enables the subject to traverse this contradictory space, making use of definitive emancipatory promises *and* contingent negotiation at different moments and for different political purposes. It may, at one moment, serve anti-capitalist strategy to delineate exactly what kinds of healthcare benefits are being demanded from employers, while at other moments it may be useful to negotiate and dream about the conditions of universal healthcare for all. As such, the radical negativity of anti-capitalist subjectivity is not a “morass of negativity” (Hook and Neill 2008, p. 248). Rather, such politicised negativity facilitates the sorts of plurality required to act in opposition to and conceive of a world outside of capitalism’s normative, unequal, and oppressive social ordering (see Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar 2021). In this, anti-capitalist subjects refuse capital’s bad, good, or non-subjectivities (see Conway



and Singh 2011), and instead draw libidinal energy from their negative position in capitalism's established social order, and specifically from the politically committed transgression demanded by this position.

As with all subjectivity, anti-capitalist subjectivities are produced in and against the limitations of capital's signs, identifications, and symbols. These signs, identifications, and symbols are, however, repurposed in ways that seek to alter the structuring principles of capital's broader socio-symbolic order (Hook 2013). Within anti-capitalist formations, signifiers like 'Freedom', 'Democracy', 'Entrepreneurship', and 'Solidarity' are all signified very differently than they are within capitalist symbolic orders. Anti-capitalist subjects are tasked with using symbolic resources to rearrange, de-arrange, and mutate subjectivity in idiosyncratic ways; exercising agency in how they relate to a given set of symbolic parameters (parameters that comprise and reveal subjectivity), while exposing the illusionary certainty of signifiers and identifications. Saketopoulou and Pellegrin (2023) refer to this as self-theorisation. Anti-capitalist self-theorisation, we might say, translates given codes from a place not commanded by the ego or the socio-symbolic dictates and desires of capital. As such, the anti-capitalist subject refuses being *identified* by the fixed strictures, categories, desires, and knowledges of capitalism (thus, pushing beyond Marx's class-in-itself), and in this refusal moves towards the freedoms inherited by *identifying with* an always-in-motion, collective, anti-capitalist becoming (thereby embracing the Marxist class-for-itself) (see Fraser 2022; Saketopoulou and Pellegrin 2023). For example, to be identified by capitalist conceptions of freedom is to tie subjectivity to a market economy and marketised political system (Fromm 1947), but to identify with anti-capitalist freedom is to open freedom's signifying capacities up to the multitude, and to grapple collectively with what a freeing freedom might look and feel like. In this, anti-capitalist subjects refuse capital's scripted identifications and its incessant command to declare one's position relative to capital accumulation (Hartman 2019), assuming instead another position in relation to capital's symbolic order (Parker 2011). Anti-capitalist subjects, thus, derive a different mode of enjoyment by exceeding the limited identifications and ways of being that comprise capitalism's subjectivities.

By filling its radically negative foundation with differently arranged, existing, and/or novel symbols and identifications (Ruti 2008), anti-capitalist subjects engage in an ongoing, creative drive to achieve impossibly satisfying meaning that lies beyond capitalist dictates, thereby taking responsibility for their desires rather than cede this responsibility to capitalism (McGowan 2016). It may well be the case that the freedoms and deep feelings that accompany dislocating desire from capitalism's symbolic coordinates (i.e. negatively embracing symbolic failure within these coordinates) give rise to feelings of insecurity, ontological instability, loss, failure disappointment, and shame (Hartman 2019). Nonetheless, anti-capitalist subjectivity offers modes of security that capitalism structurally disallows to the vast majority (e.g. connectedness, mutuality, creativity, and the space to desire freely). Reconciling or tarrying with subjective failure—the subject's negativity, or non-fit, within the capitalist symbolic order (see Holloway 2010)—can facilitate reflective modes of “invention, suture, and survivance” (ka Canham 2023, p. 199). The negative, desiring, and refusing subject of anti-capitalism stands in contrast to capitalism's



subjective flattening and its demand for identifiable, essentialised, and manageable subjective coherence (Parker 2011; Sheehi and Sheehi, 2022). The anti-capitalist subject, we might say, makes ontological demands that enable our full, contradictory humanity to come into focus (Sithole 2016).

As I hope to have made clear, anti-capitalist subjectivities are not defined by eternal negation. It is to some degree necessary to repress the instability of our meaning-making systems if these systems are to be rendered bearable (Stavrakakis 2008). Moreover, refusing capital's reliance on maiming and degrading colonised populations necessitates the articulation of insurgent subject positions that foreground defiant modes of being (Conway and Singh 2011; Sheehi and Sheehi 2022). Anti-capitalist subjectivities are oftentimes made and remade within politically committed encounters that resist the identifications thrust upon individuals by capital, wielding these identifications against capitalism (Fields and Fields 2022). For example, the Black Consciousness Movement in apartheid South Africa sought to reclaim blackness from the state's white supremacist ideological hail, signifying blackness through pride, freedom, and beauty. As Sithole (2016) puts it, "The politics of life is the struggle for Blackness in the anti-Black world" (p. 36). Anti-capitalist subjectivity, therefore, refuses not only the capitalist promise, but also the logic of the capitalist promise that disallows disruption, insurgency, and full humanity.

To take up anti-capitalist subjectivity is to be placed within a complex history of refusal (ka Canham 2023), one that presumes human subjectivity as an end in itself rather than a means for capital accumulation (Fromm 1947). It is because anti-capitalist subjectivity is constituted by its refusal to cohere with capitalism's symbolic order that it appeals to the what (desires, values, politics, humanity) and the who (workers, lumpen, refugees, colonised populations) excluded from and/or repressed by this order (Malherbe 2023). The radical negativity of anti-capitalist subjectivities, in other words, advances political commitments, actions, and life through a shared exclusion from capital (Marcuse 1966). In this regard, anti-capitalist subjects occupy a queer, improper symbolic position in the capitalist order, a position out-of-sync with, or in excess to, the partialised humanity availed by capitalist identifications (Edelman 2006; ka Canham 2023). In modifying the formulation put forth by Glynos and Stavrakakis (2008), we might then say that where capitalism offers social subjectivities that take for granted dominant societal norms, anti-capitalist refusal demands political subjectivities formed via the contestation of social norms and, in so doing, creates new anti-foundational norms that are always open to being made and remade in contexts of struggle (see Holloway 2010).

## Anti-capitalist fantasy

Fantasy functions as an organised illusion that covers over, defends against, and/or narrativises the subject's immanent psychic tensions (Parker 2022). Identifications, different social practices, and reality itself can appear unified, complete, and worthwhile when placed within a fantasy frame and as such, fantasies alleviate anxieties over the fragmentations and even the negativities that mark the social and subjective worlds (Ruti 2008). Exiting fantasy can, therefore, be difficult and even traumatic



because doing so upturns symbolic consistency and dislocates the (impossible) promise of attaining a permanent state of enjoyment (Stavrakakis 2008). Those who flee from one fantasy tend to retreat into another. In this way, fantasy serves as the structuring principle—or the psychic mediator—of a subject’s reality (Ruti 2008), with both fantasy and reality dialectally entangled; each infecting the other.

If how reality is represented or staged in fantasy shapes subjective reality, then it is not especially useful, politically, to engage fantasy as inherently progressive or regressive; capitalist or anti-capitalist. Fantasies can, at different moments, be comforting, disturbing, illusionary, liberatory, and dangerous (Parker 2022). They can obscure oppressive social conditions and bind subjects to symbolic and material subordination (*a la* the capitalist promise), and they can facilitate disinvestment from such subordination, revealing inconsistencies in the hegemonic capitalist social order while facilitating psychic re-investment in an emancipatory project (e.g. socialist visions of utopia) (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008). It is, therefore, what anti-capitalist subjects do with fantasy that matters (Hook 2013).

Ruti (2008) usefully differentiates between two kinds of fantasy: unconscious and imaginative. Unconscious fantasy curbs the subject’s existential options, disguising their lack while emphasising a singular, positive, ego-affirming vision of the self. With unconscious fantasy, the world and the subject’s enjoyment of it appear foreclosed, readable, and instituted in advance rather than contingent or created in the process of living. Unconscious fantasy supports reality, linking the promise of enjoyment that comes with psychically investing in the given capitalist order, and thus, cedes the subject’s desire to this order (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008). It operates unconsciously because we are not necessarily aware of how such fantasy determines our experience of reality. The second kind of fantasy outlined by Ruti (2008), imaginative fantasy, enables the subject to see the world in new ways. Imaginative fantasy can challenge the basic structure of capitalism’s symbolic order, revealing the hidden or seemingly impossible excesses of this order (McGowan 2022). Imaginative fantasy loosens the psychic grip of unconscious fantasy on the subject’s political imagination, reinstating subjective frameworks in new, creative fantasmatic frames.

Imaginative fantasy facilitates an affective encounter with the symbolic limits of unconscious capitalist fantasies; disrupting identifications with these fantasies while moving the subject towards enjoying refusal and contingent political commitments (see Laclau 1990). Imaginative fantasies formed within organised anti-capitalist refusal can, for example, reveal that the realisation of individual autonomy upon which the capitalist promise (i.e. unconscious fantasy) is founded cannot, in fact, be realised from within capitalism. Imaginative fantasies might also unmask the ruthless acts of exploitation and dispossession upon which every realisation of the capitalist promise depends. Loosening the grip of unconscious capitalist fantasy in these ways can mean that the “pulse of desire becomes more audible, more determinedly solicitous of the subject’s response” (Ruti 2008, p. 504). Imaginative fantasy, in other words, assists in distinguishing the subject’s desire from what is being demanded by capital, and serves as an affective and, thus, psychically appealing bind between anti-capitalist subjects. It follows, then, that anti-capitalist subjects do not repress, ignore, or claim to operate outside of fantasy, but rather shift their



fantasmatic attachments towards new identifications and forms of resistance that extend beyond capitalism's rational possibilities (Stavrakakis 2008).

Anti-capitalist subjectivities develop through a self-conscious identification with the imaginative fantasy frame (McGowan 2022). Put differently, anti-capitalist subjects embrace fantasy inasmuch as fantasy facilitates scrutiny of the capitalist order, striving to remake this order in a manner that is more desirable and carries with it a different representational logic (Lara Junior and Ribeiro 2009). In this, anti-capitalist subjects struggle to expand capital's limits of representation while, at the same time, revealing these limits, entering into them and performing their paradoxes and aporias (Coole 2002). Realising, even if only in part, the conditions that can better see to our material needs, for example, brings the fantasy of liberation to bear on the present capitalist order, fostering the desire to see more of this fantasy reflected in our reality. Winning the struggle for higher wages leaves the trace of an imaginative fantasmatic frame on workers' experiences, and can, thus, drive the demand to see more of this frame reflected in reality (e.g. better conditions, improved benefits, shorter hours, union protections). Imaginative fantasy then enables the anti-capitalist subject to take up a position that persists outside of the symbolic logic of capital, and to act in a manner that refuses finality and does not necessarily require a pre-determined outcome (see Edelman 2006; Gordon 2021). Unlike unconscious fantasy, imaginative fantasy does not seek to obtain an impossible state of enjoyment, but instead facilitates the subject's enjoyment of encircling fantasy; pushing fantasy frames further, demanding more of them (Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar 2021). Subjects cannot realise the fantasy of complete liberation (a non-place free from all contradiction and negativity), but they can continue striving for, desiring, and negotiating this realisation within a plurality of political demands, tactics, and actions. In this, imaginative fantasies can be used strategically to dislocate the capitalist promise of excess and accumulation.

To embrace imaginative fantasy is not to ignore or repress unconscious fantasy. Imaginative fantasies can and indeed should make space for the 'surprise knowings' revealed by the unconscious (see Lau 2021). Although up until now we have engaged psychoanalysis as theory, the practice of psychoanalysis may assist us in taking responsibility for the unconscious within imaginative fantasies; to assist subjects in tearing from those parts of the self which are willed towards the kinds of domination encouraged and rewarded by capital (Mbembe 2019). For example, the feminist identifying anti-capitalist man may well repress unconscious patriarchal fantasies that contradict his conscious political identifications (Malherbe 2021). Psychoanalytic practice can assist this subject in revealing the contradictory structure of fantasy; opening this structure up to feminist interventions, like consciousness-raising, that expose the psychic hold of patriarchy and force a confrontation with and responsibility for this hold (Leland 1988). The point here is not to cover over unconscious fantasy with uncontested, positive, ego-affirming knowledge (a cover which only represses and, thus, emboldens the grip of such fantasies), but to engage with the unconscious so that we might take up a new subject position (informed by imaginative fantasy) relative to unconscious fantasy (Stavrakakis 2010).

As noted earlier, imaginative fantasy enables us to bear not only the contradictions that mark society and the self, but also the wounds, fixed subject positions,



and sense of worthlessness that are thrust upon the majority living under racial and patriarchal capitalism (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). For most of us, anti-capitalist refusal necessitates a struggle to recover the self; to link subjective liberation to the feminist imagination and political decolonisation (Nandy 1983). We see this, for example, in contemporary resistance to capitalist appropriation of land (e.g. the Goringhaicona Khoi Khoi Indigenous Traditional Council's struggle against Amazon building its head offices on Indigenous South African land in 2022) and in queer militancy the world over (e.g. the Rebel Queers collective in Ukraine fighting for LGBTQIA+ liberation and against Russia's 2022 invasion of their country). Imaginative fantasy refuses representational frames that cast the subject's symbolic misfitting as a malady or illness, and instead embraces the subject's waywardness (Hartman 2019), relying on negative subjective misfitting to highlight the psychopathy of the capitalist order (Sheehi and Sheehi 2022). In this regard, fantasy can open up individuals to the suffering of others (see Gordon 2021).

Fantasy can disrupt the egoistic visions of the subject as individual and self-contained, and it can assert insurgent notions of subjectivity, both of which are crucial for advancing anti-capitalist struggle across different plains (see Parker 2022). At the level of representation, Wood (1995) writes that "a humane, 'social', truly democratic and equitable capitalism is more unrealistically Utopian than socialism" (p. 293). What is rendered impossible—a *mere fantasy*—within capitalism's social order may well be within reach. Imaginative fantasies can make this clear.

## Anti-capitalist solidarity and (in)action

Capitalism creates the conditions required for building anti-capitalist solidarity. As Marx (1847/1963) explains:

capital has created for this mass [of people] a common situation, common interests. This mass is, thus, already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself (p. 173).

The majority of people are positioned negatively, as classes, against capital, meaning that for most of us, our objective interests stand opposed to capitalism's reliance on exploitation and expropriation for endless growth and accumulation. However, it is only when individuals enter into a relation of solidarity that they become a class that acts *for itself*; that refuses the conditions created by capitalist classes to support the system that these classes represent (Wood 1995). For decolonisation, this means moving away from conditions that determine colonised populations from without, and towards establishing the conditions by which colonised individuals act for themselves (Sithole 2016). Yet, while solidarity is a precondition for creating classes for themselves, subjectivity as such cannot exist for itself (Blackman et al. 2008). Subject formation is always part of a broader socio-historical assemblage that serves particular purposes. It is, therefore, in establishing the solidarity bond that anti-capitalist subjectivity is reproduced, rather than vice versa.



The radically negative foundation of anti-capitalist subjectivity resists definitively knowing the self or others, with negativity functioning as the limit point of knowledge (Edelman 2006). As Coole (2002) puts it “Negativity remains immanent, not transcendent, to knowledge” (p. 54). Anti-capitalist subjects, thus, continually encircle the coordinates and conditions of solidarity; searching for and experimenting with various solidarities and refusals rather than arriving at a singular point of solidarity. Because subjects are not self-identical, they are unable to find psychic solace within a given set of signs and symbols (a situation exacerbated in colonial contexts where the imposition of language and culture form part of the colonising mission; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1993), and they remain open to other subjects (Hook and Neill 2008). In other words, individuals do not arrive at the solidarity relation, wholesale, just as they do not arrive at a wholly intact subjectivity. Rather, solidarity and subjectivity are made and remade in dialectical continuity. It is in the forging of the solidarity bond that people negotiate how they connect to their collective humanity which is by and large denied by the colonial mechanisms of capital accumulation (Fields and Fields 2022). In this, anti-capitalist solidarity-making refuses mastery, striving instead towards desiring for and with others (Stevens 2023).

Solidarity, as described here, does not represent a linear movement towards pre-determined political goals. Rather, solidarity and the manner by which it produces subjectivities, advance via agitation and conflict (DuFord 2022). So conceived, solidarity is reproduced through gaps and negativities (i.e. struggles over what the solidarity-relation means), and through acts of striving rather than states of foreclosure (see Stevens 2023). It is with conflict that anti-capitalist refusal remains alive to the political concerns of the moment and challenges normative assumptions within the collective. The sorts of conflict that define the solidarity relation are not, by their nature, inherently generative. It is certainly possible that a subject invests psychically in conflict; enjoying conflict’s potential to fracture and undermine collective refusal (potentially driving one-time comrades into reactionary fantasies). As such, conflict-in-solidarity should not be understood as perpetual disagreement. It is anchored by nodal points, or knowingly contingent signifiers whose determination remains open to a democratic remaking (Laclau 1990). These nodal points are able to guide solidarity’s conflict, ensuring that such conflict serves political rather than psychologically enjoyable purposes (DuFord 2022). Radical democracy within social movements might, for example, mean that conflict and debate must conclude at a certain point (a point that is to be democratically decided on), or that consensus will only be accepted if it is arrived at by a specified majority (e.g. more than three-quarters of a movement voting in favour of particular a motion). Nodal points are, therefore, useful for orienting conscious political activity as well as engaging with the unconscious elements that undermine this activity via a will towards perpetual conflict (Stevens 2023).

Teo (2017) posits that if subjectivity is understood as both a standpoint (denoting bodies, social positions, unconscious and conscious processes) and a change-point (denoting alterations within particular subjects), it also infers a do-point whereby subjectivity is expressed in action. Anti-capitalist solidarity is action-oriented in many ways. Action may very well signify or give meaning to struggle and that which people demand from the solidarity relation. As Marx (1852/1978) put it, “the



content [of action] goes beyond the phrase” (p. 597). We see this in the prefigurative solidarity actions (e.g. spokescouncils and cooperative organisations) that seek to bring about a radically democratic world that does not yet exist and, within the contemporary capitalist order, can only be experienced momentarily.

Although the action–solidarity dialectic is crucial within anti-capitalist subject formation, true emancipation, Hartman (2019) insists, must also include the right not to act. Activity as such is by no means a mark of freedom. Capitalist subjects are by and large constituted by perpetual demands to act (e.g. to generate capital, to self-survey, and to enjoy excessively). Moreover, unreflective political action can serve to reproduce the goal-oriented mastery upon which capitalist logic relies. It is because action so often mediates our psychic investment in subjectivity or ideology that the oppressive burden to know the self definitively can be unburdened by inaction; allowing individuals to take up new actions that locate enjoyment in sacrifice and political commitment rather than capitalist excess (Žižek 2006). Refusing to participate in or act for capitalist reproduction (i.e. withdrawal and disengagement as refusal) can open up a reflective space for engaging in different sorts of solidarity action that produce different subjectivities (Lara Junior and Ribeiro 2009; Nandy 1983). Indeed, it is often through inactivity that solidarity is produced (e.g. during labour strikes). By taking up selective contact with capitalism, individuals can evaluate, with others, how to escape from the identifications, beliefs, and subjectivities made available by capital (see Pfaller 2017). In what Marcuse (1966) calls the pacification of existence, solidarity building can be rearticulated through an understanding of human existence as an end rather than a means.

Just as action arising from the solidarity relation should be approached reflectively, inaction should also be engaged with caution. Indeed, just as capitalism encourages perpetual action, it also encourages passivity by implementing distance between citizens and their political participation (Wood 1995), welcoming the docility of non-working bodies, and enforcing temporary subjective stasis through violent State apparatuses like the police (Gordon 2021). Moreover, through what Pfaller (2017) calls interpassivity, enjoyment can be delegated to a person or object so that this person or object bears the symbolic burden of enjoyment, thereby enabling the subject to enjoy through another. Art, for example, can perform an anti-capitalist disposition for the subject who passively enjoys consuming this element of the artwork. It should also be noted that anti-capitalist fantasy, which might be found in a particular work of art, may also be passively enjoyed and confined to the individual. Subjects, in this way, can become alienated from their revolutionary impulses, rendering these impulses less immediately accessible or individualising them. Therefore, a passivity that seeks to serve anti-capitalist solidarity must be grounded in a mode of reflection that returns subjects to the sorts of desires and actions that connect to rather than disinvest from a politically active and fundamentally collective restoration of humanity.

There are, of course, many challenges that face those who commit to building anti-capitalist solidarity. Power differentials, for example, always mark the solidarity relation, and efforts must be made to connect struggles rather than retain capitalism’s segregation of them (see Fraser 2022). Sithole (2016) recounts that white subjects are likely to fall back on merely critiquing racism rather than engaging in





anti-capitalist struggles to abolish racism at the structural level (i.e. interpreting rather than acting on the basis of interpretation). It is also possible that capital compensates and thus deflates anti-capitalist refusal in ways that are more satisfying and less taxing than solidarity building (Marcuse 1966). Although there are no simple answers here, the radical negativity of anti-capitalist subjectivity can be relied on to negotiate refusal and the disinvestment from those identifications rewarded by capital. This may well entail separate organisation and rejecting some reformist measures while accepting others, and it will mean that certain groups lose out on material and symbolic privileges. Anti-capitalist subjects approach these political quandaries in contingent and radically democratic ways that fuse the reflection-action dialectic with the Great Refusal.

## Conclusion

Refusing capitalism's logic, labour formations, expropriative technologies, ideological impositions, and exploitative mandates seeds the formation of anti-capitalist subjectivity. The radically negative foundation of the anti-capitalist subject ensures that this subject remains alive to the requirements of refusal. Therefore, while anti-capitalist subjectivity is constituted by difference, this is never the sort of class difference upon which capitalist subjectivities depend (Wood 1995). Liberal capitalist ideology can certainly tolerate difference, keeping capital's hierarchy of being intact by fetishising a diversity of fixed subjectivities while remaining blind to power differentials (see Fields and Fields 2022). When harnessed in the service of capitalist ideology, diversity and difference serve as surrogates for struggle and liberation (see Edelman 2006). Accordingly, anti-capitalist subjectivity must reflect a genuinely plural "humanism made to the measure of the world" (Césaire 1972, p. 73), one that seeks to realise a mode of liberation that is attentive to both difference *and* power.

Although anti-capitalist subjectivity refuses definitive content, we can engage critically with its political valances. I have attempted to do so in this article by considering what fantasy, solidarity, and (in)action mean in relation to forming, advancing, and consolidating anti-capitalist subjectivity. Much of what I offer here is, however, nascent and, in the interest of space constraints, underdeveloped. Moreover, there is little doubt that my arguments are constrained by my own subject position (white, male, able-bodied, with relative economic security) and political biases (an intersectional socialism). It is, thus, my hope that others will take up this article's provocations—critiquing some of them, rejecting others, and developing some of them further. Future work of this sort can advance in many directions. It may, for example, be fruitful to consider anti-capitalist subjectivities in the context of statecraft and technological innovation, or to probe further into the nature of capitalist co-optation and how radical negativity is eroded, consolidated, or made to answer to the positive. Although I have relied on psychoanalysis in this article, future work may wish to employ the many other theories that are helpful for understanding anti-capitalist subjectivity (e.g. Rhizomatics, queer theory, posthumanism, intersectionality). Notions of utopia and futurity might also prove productive exploratory avenues for further study. There are many questions that have not been answered in this



article. What happens to the anti-capitalist subject under social conditions that are not identifiably capitalistic, as with neo-feudal or State socialist societies? What of people's potential unwillingness to abandon anti-capitalist subjectivity? How have anti-capitalist subjects from around the world engaged with positively defined emancipatory projects like democratic socialism? There are, in short, myriad pathways by which to understand, explore, and, I hope, argue for anti-capitalist subjectivity.

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