
Perversion
and
the
Social Relation

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editors

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**Perversion
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Molly Anne Rothenberg
and Dennis Foster

Introduction.

Beneath the Skin:

Perversion and

Social Analysis

We conceived of this volume as a way of asking some fundamental questions from a psychoanalytic perspective about how the social relation functions, how it is that we can live together. Admittedly, we don't always live together well. In fact, considering the many ways we humans have found to despise each other and to act on that feeling, it is surprising that we find any pleasure or comfort at all in the company of others, particularly of strangers. It seems likely that if Freud were writing his analyses of group psychology today, he would find more reason than ever to imagine we had grown out of a primal horde, seeing how ready we are to return to some similar social organization, closed within an ethnic identity, ruled by tyrants. His story of a primal father whose terrible governance was replaced by a gentler, if more pervasive, law has functioned with great persistence to explain our ability to repress our more destructive impulses and to sublimate them into socially productive activities. However, such a model is inadequate to describe varieties of social relations in post-Freudian communities, perhaps as neurosis has ceased to explain the ills or health of our contemporaries. That is, the Oedipal subordination of instinct to law may not be the only way of managing instinctual impulses in socially productive ways, and the resistance to law might not be the only way of going wrong.

In 1980, Hans Loewald wrote a striking essay entitled "The Waning of the Oedipus Complex" in which he attempted to preserve traditional Freudian interpretations even as he lamented their failures to address the

passions of his era. Discussing what he seemed to imagine were simpler times, he argued that the Oedipus complex was resolved when one came to terms with patricide, the killing of the father in order to take up one's own desires in the world. But the evident tone of nostalgia in the essay reveals less that each of us must get over the guilt we experience for betraying the father than that there is no father left worth killing. The Oedipus complex wanes because it no longer functions when the law has faded. In this essay's echo of *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, we hear Johan Huizinga's longing for a time he imagines before the Enlightenment, before the Renaissance, just before, when feelings were more immediate and people, ruled by men of violence, lived with a passionate intensity. In both writers, the wish for a father's law reveals its absence as well as the emergence of an analysis based on something before the law. Many have called such a wish the perverse.

The emergence of perversion as a description of behaviors and desires, as discursive constructs, as fundamental psychic structures, and as political positions has been accompanied by an increasing valorization of the perverse for its analytic possibilities as well as for its revolutionary potential. For most earlier writers, there was little question but that the perverse belonged to a class of ills to be avoided or cured. The Kantian pervert acts, to the detriment of all, on inclination and pleasure rather than the stricter dictates of duty, soul's reason. The Freudian pervert fails to leave behind the polymorphous pleasures of infancy for the narrower utility of reproductive genital sexuality. While the normal neurotic wrestles with the inability to find true satisfactions within the boundaries of lawful encounters, the pervert remains in a world left frighteningly open by the father's failure either to close the door on early pleasures or to promise a future to compensate for the awful discoveries of childhood—of mutilation, loss, and death. And yet the resistance (or perhaps even subversion) that perversion offers to the father, to the law, seems for others to promise freedom. This ambivalence surrounding the category of the perverse suggests both the richness and dangers of using the term.

The Perverse Foundation

The story that psychoanalytic theories tell of psychic development indicates that certain capacities for social life derive ultimately from the

necessary passage through a perverse stage, which installs structures and tendencies that persist in the mature psyche. From within a Freudian frame, the polymorphous character of infantile perversion suggests the openness of the child to multiple avenues of cathexis. That is, the category of the polymorphously perverse suggests that we are highly motivated to have varying forms of satisfaction and attachment to objects, including both human and nonhuman object relations. The stage during which the child has to find a way to separate himself as an independent entity from the engulfing, if secure and pleasurable, universe of the dyad sets up the basic forms of the adult's social ties, the satisfactions he will seek, the sufferings he will undergo and in turn inflict. Whether the absolute bonding between the child and mother actually occurs, or whether it is a retroactive construction by the child, or, again, whether it is fantasized by mother and child, and therefore lived as real, at the heart of perversion is the disavowal of the knowledge that separation is permanent, that mother lacks, and has always lacked, the power to make the world whole—again. Disavowing, as the pervert does, the knowledge of limitation, of castration, makes it possible to act on and enjoy the candidness of a polymorphously perverse body and mind. Normal neurotic pleasure is attenuated for good reasons, and if you can live within these limits, you are lucky. But that doesn't mean perverse pleasures are necessarily unavailable to the normal adult: as a stage of development, the pleasures of the polymorphously perverse remain embedded in the transformations we undergo to get civilized. The delight many of us feel (and the disgust and disapproval some others feel) in bodily movement, in song and rhythm, in the patterning of words, in looking, in eating, and in other activities learned prior to the Oedipal period and outside of social meaning suggests how the perverse persists in normative behavior. We might even ask if the meaningful activities of social life would be possible without their perverse foundations.

For the ordinary neurotic, *jouissance* must remain unconscious lest the experience recall too disruptively the lawlessness of polymorphous perversity with its suspicion that in fact there is no law. We encounter, however, a negative reflection of that *jouissance* in the contempt we so often hear in complaints about the disgusting pleasures of others: their horrible, smelly food; their loud and disorderly music; their irresponsible sexual extravagance; their profligate rates of reproduction. Perversity seems to saturate the social relations of others. Michel Foucault and

Jonathan Dollimore argue that perversity is actually a discursive construct generated to define normative life. But the purpose of this construct may be less to implant an arbitrarily generated perversity than to provide cover for the specific pleasures that sustain and threaten the law. That is, I can continue to believe that my world is orderly and enjoy the covert pleasures of that world so long as I denounce the perversity that so obviously dominates the lives of others. At the level of skin, I can allow myself pleasure within the intimate society of a shared fantasy; that same skin, however, marks the limits of the social relations and, as it functions in politics, becomes the ground for racism, homophobia, and other expressions of disgust at others' enjoyment. Our observations here suggest that the perverse is implicit in at least some aspects of normal neurotic social life and that there is some advantage in accounting for its presence in attempting to understand social relations. But for those individuals or communities more fully structured by the perverse, the negative implications are more serious. In effect, perversion allows one to continue to live in a world suffused with enjoyment after the point when the Oedipal law of restraint should have taken effect.

The Perverse Predicament and the Imaginary Law

By addressing perversion as a psychic structure—a specific relation to the paternal function—rather than as a description of behaviors, we avoid the traditional stigmatizing of perversion, which has served to obscure its significance for all “normal” psychic development. In order to assess the way in which the perverse functions within most of us as part of the motivation for and dynamics of the social tie, we need to understand the pervert's predicament, the enjoyments and the sufferings of the perverse position. As Bruce Fink argues in his chapter on perversion that we reprint here, those who do not undergo the Oedipal compromise remain bound to the horror, as well as the pleasure, of living within the mother's domain of *jouissance*, never free to enter the ordinary world of more temperate, symbolic desires and disappointments.

The precise problem of the mOther's *jouissance* is that it threatens to pull the subject back, not into wholeness and unproblematic enjoyment, but to the presymbolic world in which the self is engulfed by the mOther's demands, where *jouissance* circulates at the expense of sub-

jectivity, where encounters with the real are traumatic. What we call the perverse structure marks the developmental moment when some notion of a law beyond the idiosyncratic, unsymbolized world of the mOther is glimpsed: there is a place for the law in perversion, unlike in psychosis. But the Law of the Father has not been articulated, and therefore it cannot articulate the subject with other subjects: it can furnish neither the space within which subjectivity can come to be as separation nor the channeling of enjoyment that moves the subject to seek objects for its own pleasure without negating them in the process. Absent the intervention of the paternal function qua function, the only law that the pervert can bring into being is a set of rules and fantasy scenarios about limiting jouissance. The law as imagined in the realm of the perverse is thus imaginary.

We can think of the difference between the perverse law and the Law of the Father as follows. The law imagined by the pervert, the law he thinks he can bring into being through his probing transgressions, is fantasized as being completely regulative, covering the entire field of relations and parceling out “goods.” Like Blake’s Urizen, it divides the world up into positive categories, possessions, and entitlements. Regimes of such laws can indeed be challenged through transgression, but when I violate the law through some illicit act of violence or pleasure, the punishment I endure reveals, unnervingly, the fictitiousness and impotence of the law. In its limitation, it cannot liberate me from the demand to enjoy. By contrast, the law as Name of the Father exists as a mere function—a crucial function, to be sure—that does nothing more than open, by means of negation—the father’s “No!”—a crack in the smothering universe of the mOther’s demand. To the child, the addition of this negation means that some other space exists, some other order or law (potentially) governs the mOther as well as the child. A child may get trapped at this stage if the Law of the Father is not articulated. Desperate to find limits to the mOther’s jouissance, perverts try to bring this Law of the Father into being through “transgressive acts” and disavowal. They simply do not realize that the *Non/Nom du Père* they seek cannot be brought into being in this way.

From this vantage, the pervert’s disavowal should be conceived not simply as a defense against castration, against the realization that the mother has no penis, but also as the means by which the pervert attempts

to open a hole in the world of the mOther. That world is “full” in the sense that there is no perceptible lack in it and, therefore, no space for the child as separate from the mOther, nothing missing that can mobilize desire. As Fink puts it, “One never sees or perceives the lack of anything: one sees what is there to be seen, not what is absent . . . there is no lack at the perceptual level—there the world is full.”¹ So the fetish does not just fill in for the missing penis in the same way as a plug fills a hole. On the contrary, the fetish is the pervert’s way of *making* a hole, of making visible the fact of a lack (the lack that the Oedipalized adult has had to accept). Although the fetish cannot actually add anything to the Real, since it already exists *as itself* (a shoe, a pair of panties, a piece of fur), at the same time, it does supplement the Real: in its role as stand-in for the missing penis, it negates the fullness of the world of mere phenomena.² That is, we could say that it adds the concept of lack, that its negation functions in a positive way. When the pervert says, “I know well that my mother has no penis” but persists with his fetish, he is making it possible to see that his mother has *no* penis, that his mother lacks, rather than simply seeing what mother does have, in positive terms. In this way, the pervert tries to use disavowal as a substitute for the father’s “No!” to open a space, one that will function to set limits to jouissance and allow him to emerge as a subject among subjects.

This tactic lashes the individual more tightly to the circuit of jouissance; it cannot provide the limits to the mOther’s jouissance. Still, it testifies to the orientation of the pervert *toward* some law. This is why it is possible to say that, even if the pervert never moves beyond this stage of the Imaginary law, nonetheless he is constantly gesturing beyond it, seeking to bring the Law of the Father into being. This glimpse of the necessity of the paternal function is the pervert’s link to the social, while the lack of its articulation is what keeps the pervert enmeshed in the jouissance of the mOther. But we are not trying to suggest that the social relation involves the elision of jouissance. On the contrary, without jouissance the subject has neither the motive for connection nor the means for disconnection. For this reason, we consider it worthwhile to keep our eye on the pervert, at this moment of nascent sociality, to see what energies, what barriers, and what enjoyments accompany the propulsion toward the social relation.

The Potential of Perversion

Given the violence that is so often a part of societies structured by the Oedipal dynamics of repression and the ethics of a band of brothers, many writers have promoted some non-Oedipal, perhaps pre-Oedipal, or perverse structure as an alternative basis for social arrangements. The forces that might enable such a society could include, for example, the intimacy established through the semiotic chora Julia Kristeva theorizes—a bodily sense of connections instilled in the rhythms of the voices we share. Or we might think of the polymorphous perverse as a rich source of interconnection opening a sexualized body to a larger community than that which follows the genital reduction of the Oedipalized body. We might imagine here that in some ideal world, the law would lay a light hand on us while we lived within a harmony of like voices and bodies. The dream of a perfect community, maybe in Utah, as the Coen brothers suggest in *Raising Arizona*, seems to be founded on an idea of sameness, of a shared spirit, history, aspirations, and values—an archaic, unified community. But not even in some golden past did such communities exist, and the totalitarian implications of such imaginings should make everyone leery of seeking them. What, then, are the pre-Oedipal, or perverse implications for social relations?

It is not always easy, after all, to tell on which side of an argument the perverse lies. The beauty of Kant's formulations concerning virtue and duty is that one can find the good without reference to one's pleasure. The more romantic injunction to "follow your heart," or any other leading body part, betrays "reason, God's viceroy in us," and hence is by its very inclination perverse. The categorical imperative derived from Kant's commitment to reason and duty provides the basis for all social relations, uniting all under a golden rule where all would choose the same action: act as you would have all others act in the same situation. The clarity is stunning, its utility less so. Lacan has pointed clearly to the secret enjoyment hidden in the Kantian formula.³ Even so non-psychoanalytically inclined a critic as Richard Rorty sees "sado-masochism" in those who are committed to a Kantian need for absolutes.⁴ It is impossible to dismiss enjoyment or to contain it in the duties we owe to society and reproduction. In denying those pleasures, we risk becoming the sort of monsters who are convinced that the thrill that runs through them as they enforce their discipline upon others is the suffering

of righteousness, approved by the father. And yet we would not want to discount the possible virtues of a community structured by perversion.

Here we want to distinguish between two realms of interaction, the *social* and the *political*. The crucial distinction between these two realms concerns the function of fantasy. What we call political interaction is prompted and shaped by a fantasy of wholeness, omnipotence, linear causality, and/or the recovery of lost essence. Each individual participates in this fantasy in his own way, to the extent that he is involved in the political action. Each “hooks” into the fantasy using his or her own personal psychodynamics, which means, in effect, that the political fantasy looks quite different from the vantage of any given individual: I may join an anti-war march because I imagine myself as being part of a powerful movement that will change the world, or I may participate because I enjoy confrontation. In political action, the symbolic space becomes a field in which, under an Imaginary vision, the defenses and jouissance of individual psyches can be activated. In other words, each individual will stage his or her enjoyment differently by means of the political fantasy. The successful political action is what enables the participants to believe that they share the *same* fantasy, that is, have the same interests, agree on the same reasons for joining, and seek the same means and ends *when they don't*, when their access to jouissance derives from strikingly different sources. In this way, the political fantasy allows individuals to experience themselves as maximally particularized and narcissistically omnipotent (“*This is my destiny, my power, my vision of the world*”) under the sign of commonality. Of course, the core political fantasy may represent some other group as abject or abhorrent, but this representation serves, as we well know, to reinforce the identificatory processes within the political group and, more importantly, to mobilize what Žižek calls “obscene enjoyment.” At bottom, however, the political fantasy orchestrates narcissism by way of a structure wherein the individual imagines that his compatriots are like himself, enjoying in the same way.

The social realm does not function by way of this fantasy. Individuals do not have to be lured into believing they share the same fantasy, the same enjoyment, in order for the social relation to obtain. The social relation transpires in a symbolic space, but no overarching fantasy of group identifications and exclusions is in play. Fantasies abound; in

fact, they are necessary to provide the motivation for innumerable transient and variable points of contact as well as to mobilize the equally important forces that delink individuals, that keep individuals sufficiently separate to function as subjects. So, the individual enters the social realm when he finds that a space exists for him in linkage with others. But this space emerges only when the Law of the Father enables a psychic separation from the mOther, with whom the subject has been locked in an interplay of jouissance.

From this perspective, the fantasy of wholeness/sameness implicit in all political, as opposed to social, dreams emerges as a regressive fantasy, one that promises a return to the mOther and enjoyment without the loss of separateness, autonomy, and self that actually subsists in the presymbolic realm. The fantasy behind all calls to political action promises maximum jouissance to each individual and at the same time denies that the jouissance of others is a problem for the subject. In other words, the political fantasy, by disavowing what we know very well in our daily social lives, falsifies the experience—both the dangers and the rewards—of the developmental stage we know as the perverse. This fantasy claims that in politics, the Law of the Father is suspended in the name of a unifying cause.⁵ It is for this reason that this volume explores the contributions of perversion to the social relation prior to assaying claims for its political valence.

The Perverse At Work

As we have said, when the Law of the Father is articulated, it articulates the subject, providing the means for both connection and disconnection. The motive for these manifold linkings and delinkings is supplied by jouissance, but such jouissance must be channeled by social forces. Unchanneled jouissance, as Dennis Foster's essay on Burroughs's *Cities of the Red Night* argues, far from serving as a reliable political tool, dissolves the social ties on which political action depends. Where many contemporary historicist accounts stake their claims to political relevance on a reductive conception of the power of presymbolic enjoyment to undo the normative strictures of ideological interpellation, Foster's properly political analysis exposes as fantasy the idea that access to unmediated drives—to untrammelled enjoyment—releases us from ideo-

logical repression. As he shows, Burroughs fatally undermines the political dream of the subversive potential of perversion by interweaving that fantasy with evidence that, in the West, the staging of enjoyment itself serves as a primary means of social control.

Social systems themselves operate through a form of belief that has the same structure as the fetishist's disavowal, as Octave Mannoni's essay "I Know Well, but All the Same . . ." argues.⁶ This deceptively simple association provides a first step to understanding the limits of the politically subversive potential of perversion as well as perversion's constitutive functions at the limits of the social, for, as Mannoni points out, disavowal is not repression. The demystification of ideology or authority can serve to reinforce, at a next step, the split structure of disavowal: "I see now that X was not true, but all the same, it is true in a way." In effect, the demystification can serve as the springboard to consolidate the status quo: As Mannoni puts it, "Belief, shedding its imaginary form, is symbolized sufficiently to lead on to faith, that is, to a commitment," a commitment precisely to the ideological sociocultural world.

This connection between perversion and the "normal" world of social order transpires overtly in the realm of religious belief, as in Mannoni's example of the Hopi Katsina rituals. Nina Schwartz's essay, "Exotic Rituals and Family Values in *Exotica*," gives us a deeper look into the everyday staging of perverse rituals as a means of recovering from traumatic loss and reconstituting familial relations. In a brilliant reading of Atom Egoyan's film, Schwartz shows how the film's promise of a payoff in *jouissance* lures the viewer into accepting an Imaginary version of the law—the same version that emerges in the political register. At the same time, the film obscures the actual devastation *jouissance* wreaks on social ties by emphasizing the characters' static ritualized repetitions, which makes the symbolic realm appear to be untouchable by the drive. In effect, at the level of diegesis the film presents perversion as a reparative repetition compulsion—that is, as a neurosis—while at the level of enunciation, it instantiates a perverse relation to the law.

This imbrication of perversion and neurosis does not stem from a flaw in the conception of this film but inheres in the relation between drive and desire at the level of the subject. The losses that the individual undergoes in order to emerge as a social subject never "disappear" but continue to function as propulsions toward satisfactions, propulsions that

operate in both desire and in drive, understood in Lacanian terms. For the child enmeshed in the jouissance of the mOther has undergone some subjectivation (what Lacan calls separation) even if he has not become a subject of desire. In that first approach to subjectivation, the child's jouissance is directed toward ends established through the relation to the mOther. The child does not have unmediated access to jouissance: the drives are "cooked," as Miller puts it.⁷ His drive satisfactions are not "his own": there is something in him "more than him." Like Burroughs's viruses, the drive persists alien to the self and, in essence, as a kind of defense against desire. In his essay on David Fincher's *Fight Club*, Slavoj Žižek explores the persistence of this "subjectless partial organ without a body" in order to unravel the dynamics of masochism in its social dimension and the political possibilities it offers. In Žižek's view, the assumption of a degraded subject position with full acknowledgment of the obscene pleasure in such degradation affords "genuine contact" with the "suffering other." This "politics of masochism," therefore, depends upon conceiving the pervert's access to jouissance as an access to something or someone other, not one's own.

Ironically, a similar strategy is adopted by that most infamous of perverts, the fifteenth-century French nobleman, Gilles de Rais—"sodomite,' pederast, infanticidal criminal, and enthusiast of the black arts," as James Penney denominates him. Tried by the church for his lifelong habits of torturing and sexually molesting young boys, Gilles confessed in spectacular detail the horrific crimes he had committed. Even more spectacular, however, is the bond of sympathy that he forged between himself and the community whose children he had murdered. In his searching critique, Penney demonstrates how a historicist interpretation of Gilles, such as Georges Bataille's, fails to take into account the force of the social ties Gilles established with his victims' families. These "honest" villagers willingly turned over their children to serve as pages in Gilles's manor year after year, despite their knowledge of the disappearance of other children, a willingness that not only marks their complicity but also signals the disavowal underpinning their belief in religious and aristocratic authority. Gilles's theatrical recounting of his crimes works like Burroughs's staging of enjoyment to reinscribe the normative social order (represented in this case by the church), thereby allowing the pervert to present himself as the "object-cause of redemption" for the com-

munity as a whole while offering obscene enjoyment to the crowd. The pervert's standing in for *objet a*, the object-cause of the Other's desire, becomes the means by which an entire community, constituted through hysterical identification, mis-recognizes itself and Gilles de Rais as recuperable within the law when they are simply recuperable by the law of church authority.

The essay's implication of perversion with the law is consonant with the Lacanian reading of Kant's categorical imperative, but it leaves open the question as to whether perversion contaminates the law or is already part and parcel of its Imaginary status. If one retains the standard stigmatized connotation of perversion, then it might seem as though there could be forms of the law that evade jouissance, precisely the fantasy described above as "political." E. L. McCallum offers another suggestion for thinking about perversion and its import for sociality: take seriously perversion's "preference" for parts, dissemination, and detachment. From our point of view, this proposal helps lay due stress on the duality of the drive, both as *Trieb*, or propulsion, and as force for dissolution. The social relation requires both, for the social subject must seek connection with its objects (even if only as instruments of enjoyment) in order for any relation to obtain, but at the same time the links thus forged must be susceptible of delinkage in order for the subject to retain any separate identity. The tendency to emphasize the first at the expense of the second leads to a nostalgic utopianism, as Michael Bibler's discussion of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* makes clear. Taking to task Leo Bersani's model of homo-relationality, Bibler shows that, in the context of the homosexual and pedophilic characters of Styron's novel, the vision of community that Styron predicates on "homo-ness" participates in fascistic fantasies of social control precisely to the extent that it underestimates the disruptiveness and ungovernability of jouissance.

McCallum's essay takes the opposite tack. Offering readings of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Christa Wolf's *Accident: A Day's News*, she focuses on the types of social relations made possible by the diremptive properties of perversion, the self-separation into "particles," repetitions that do not consolidate but disperse. McCallum argues that this dispersal or "particle-ization" of the self runs counter to the "particularity" of individuals, and so can motivate a social relation not based on

the individual or, by implication, on the capitalist mode of (self) possession. While this dissolution of individuality does not constitute a political position, it offers a possible alternative to the utopianism of a Bersani or a Kristeva, while respecting the forces of *jouissance*.

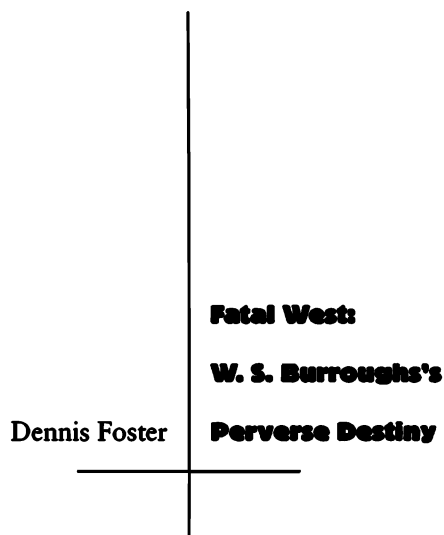
In his critique of the impulse toward communal, unified communities, Jean-Luc Nancy describes what he calls the “inoperative,” “unworking,” *désœuvrée* in community: “that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension.”⁸ In this model, we live together of necessity, but there remains something separate in each mortal body that is resistant to the dissolving of differences. Nancy refers to skin, the organ by which we touch, as the marker of our otherness: “A singular being *appears*, as finitude itself: at the end (or at the beginning), with the contact of the skin (or the heart) of another singular being, at the confines of the *same* singularity that is, as such, always *other*, always shared, always exposed.”⁹ Skin divides us, and we are finally alone, despite any illusions that might be generated by the symbolic systems we share. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, we too are skeptical about any political movement that claims or aspires to overcome the distance that separates us as individuals, whether that movement, in the name of a greater cause, exploits the perverse structure of its followers as a means of social control, or whether it seeks to subvert the Law of the Father through stagings of perverse enjoyment. In the realm of the political, the uses of perversion are almost always profoundly conservative, bound to repetition in their fixation on a lost past.

In social relations, however, where what is singular about each of us is “always shared, always exposed,” it may be no bad thing to admit to the perverse fantasies that allow us to disavow separation. No matter that the psychic history determining the precise nature of each one’s fantasy is different: in the polymorphous opening to enjoyment we expose how deeply we share a bodily origin, nursed into life by someone whose skin touched ours. This is, of course, no panacea for social or sexual relations, for one can no more live permanently within that disavowal than one can live happily within the primal circuit of the mother’s demand. But in failing to recognize that the perverse retains its power to sustain

social relations, we not only risk missing the *jouissance* that binds us to others, but we also risk falling prey to the far more dangerous political injunction that we lose ourselves in the cause.

Notes

- 1 Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 168.
- 2 This double existence of the fetish, as positivity and as negation, is related to Freud's notion of the splitting of the ego in *Verleugnung*; see Bruce Fink, "Perversion," in this volume.
- 3 Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade," trans. James B. Swenson Jr., *October* 51 (1989): 55–104.
- 4 Richard Rorty, "Ethics without Principles," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin, 1999), 75.
- 5 Even the most "radical" political theorists in contemporary cultural studies make this error, but it is particularly common among the utopian theorists of the "subversion" of gender and sexuality, such as Butler, Bersani, and Dean.
- 6 As Foster points out in his essay, Peter Sloterdijk has used this formulation to analyze the functioning of cynical reasoning, and Slavoj Žižek's work is well-known for its elaboration of the proposition.
- 7 Jacques-Alain Miller, "On Perversion," in *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 310.
- 8 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 31.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 28.



Shortly before the suicide of Kurt Cobain, lead singer for the group Nirvana, I heard a cultural commentator say that if you find a kid who listens to Cobain and reads W. S. Burroughs, chances are he also uses heroin. A recent television advertisement for workout shoes featured Burroughs extolling the virtues of technology, his familiar image (black suit and hat, gaunt face) on a micro TV that lies like junk in a wet alley while a high tech-shod urban youth runs past. In the film *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), Burroughs appears briefly as the priest-turned-junky who had introduced the protagonist (Matt Dillon) to drugs and who unrepentantly explains that only squares do not understand that the pleasures of drugs are necessary in a world devoid of delight. Burroughs has become an icon that illuminates the obsessions of American culture where the hopes for ageless bodies and technological fixes are inseparable from the self-destructive fixes of drugs and despair. Whatever Burroughs's conscious critique of the Western world might be, his position as a switchpoint between fixations of perverse longing and healthy aspiration provides a way of examining the currents that underlie the westward path, the American destiny.

Burroughs's writing, with its mockery and disparagement of almost all Western values, looks as if it aims at some subversion of those values, perhaps even at some alternative vision. We might, that is, see him as a political writer aspiring to produce social change, an aspiration like those that animate much post-structuralist writing. But if we do, we are

certain to find his critique to be at best secretly conservative, at worst suicidal, which would make him no worse than most ostensible subversives.¹ The failure of subversion seems to be built into most modern political critiques. Baudrillard, for example, shows that Marx's categories of exchange and use value imply his already accepting a capitalist understanding of value (1975: 22–25), freeing Baudrillard himself to pursue a love affair with the very mechanisms of consumption he critiques. Roberto Calasso hears "Marx's secret heart beating" with a pervert's excitement over the possibilities of the "total dominion" of his ideas over the world (227). Kristeva brilliantly demonstrates the ways in which patriarchal forces create a structural cage for women, but is unable to articulate a non-paradoxical alternative to the psychosis that comes with any rejection of the symbolic law.² Foucault thoroughly explores the institutional forces that constitute the individual within every social context, a critique that has the disadvantage of being unable to suggest methods of resistance beyond the "micro" (1980: 95–96). Butler in *Gender Trouble* attempts to provide a subversive alternative to complement her Foucauldian analysis of gender and produces an ethic of "drag," something unlikely either to worry the repressive forces of gender or to console those most deeply troubled by gender; meanwhile, drag becomes fashion (137). These examples stand for a theme in critical discourses, both of "subversives" who fail to subvert, and of critics who point these failures out.

The reason for failure, however, remains constant throughout the range of texts. Frederick Dolan, arguing Burroughs's entanglement with the culture he attacks, puts Burroughs's argument this way: Burroughs's "central quarrel with Western civilization" is the inaccuracy of the "Aristotelian construct":

"Reality" just *is* synchronous and unpredictable, whereas the declarative sentence moving ahead determinably through time makes it appear as if one event follows another in an orderly manner. Burroughs might attempt to write in ways that undermine the Aristotelian construct, but not without declaring *something*, and finally, as we have seen, not without becoming inveigled in this construct's seductive images of lucidity, order, control, and a plenitude beyond mere writing as fiction. (549)

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