

The Subject Lagging Behind the Acceleration of Neoliberal Capitalist Discourse

David Pavón-Cuéllar

Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Morelia, Michoacán, México

Abstract

The capitalist discourse, as formulated by Lacan, imposes a ceaseless movement, a continuous displacement without friction or obstacles, which is going faster and faster as we get into deep neoliberalism. Its acceleration is correlated with its freedom—the freedom of neoliberal capitalism, the free market and the free circulation of goods, including subjective commodities. People must follow the rhythm of production and consumption, a rhythm that, as Marx showed, consumes people as much as it consumes their environment, their planet and their conditions of existence, which are also those of capitalism itself. The capitalist discourse, according to Lacan, undermines itself by consuming its own foundation. The capital even consumes itself by its effectiveness. The efficiency of capital, which implies an unsustainable progressive acceleration, is what this paper will examine at the subjective level. It will show how the subject is radically excluded—forclosed—when there is no time for them to live, stop and exist, be unoccupied, look back, resignify their history and understand until the moment of conclusion. Without conclusion of anything, there is no interval to unfold the subject's existence. There is no point at which life can be anything other than labour and consumption, i.e., production and realization of capital.

Keywords: Capitalist discourse, Neoliberalism, Acceleration, Lacan, Marx

The Capitalist Discourse

Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, in a historical context highly politicized by the May Revolt of 1968 in France, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan addressed the issue of capitalism in lectures, writings and sessions of his seminar. Many of his ideas on this issue were developed within the framework of both his theory of the four discourses (of the Master, the University, the Hysteric, and the Analyst) and his late conception of the fifth discourse (of the Capitalist) (see Figure 1). These discourses are different forms of the social bond. More precisely, they are formalizations of transindividual discursive structures in

which the subject (\$) occupies the positions of truth (bottom left), the agent (top left), the other (top right), or the product (bottom right), when relating to the signifier (S1), language or knowledge (S2) and the object of desire (*a*) (see Bracher, 1988; Verhaeghe, 1995; Pauwels, 2019).

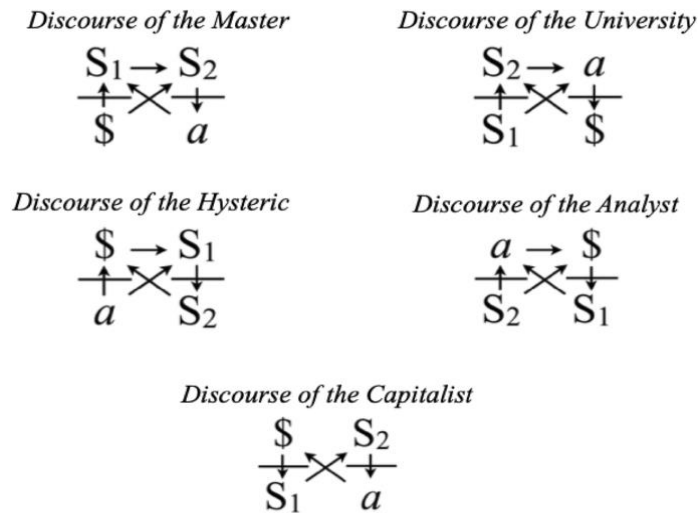


Figure 1. Lacan's discourses (Lacan, 1970/1991, 1972/1978; Pauwels, 2019)

First, between 1969 and 1971, Lacan formally described capitalism through his formulas of the master discourse and the university discourse (Lacan, 1970/1991, 1970/2001a, 1971/2007). Then, at his lecture at the University of Milan in 1972, he proposed ad hoc the capitalist discourse (Lacan, 1972/1978). This discourse is almost identical to that of the master, with three exceptions: (a) the direction of one of the arrows, (b) the lack of a bar between the subject (\$) and its object (*a*), and (c) the inversion between the positions of the master-signifier (S1) and the divided subject (\$). In a Lacanian perspective, these exceptions characterize the subjective structure of capitalism, especially in its advanced and refined neoliberal form, and they allow us to differentiate it from other configurations of domination.

The master's discourse—for Lacan, the discourse of the unconscious and of politics—represents an act of power with a beginning (i.e., the subject with their will) and an end (i.e., the always-existing limit of power, of the bar that blocks it and makes it go back). On the other hand, the capitalist discourse, as Lacan formulates it, lets us see a continuous movement, without interruptions, setbacks, blockages and beginning or end. This lack of an end explains the seemingly 'eternal' and 'closed circuit' operation of the capitalist system that was emphasized by Althusser (1966/1993, p. 93).

One of the reasons we cannot end capitalism is, precisely, its continuous movement that feeds itself and leaves no interval, no space for resistance, no pause to be stopped, questioned, responded to or objected to. For this reason and more, the capitalist discourse, as Lacan (1972/1978) says, is 'wildly clever' (*follement astucieux*) and 'cannot go better' (*ça ne peut pas marcher mieux*; pp. 48-49). Another indicator of its cleverness and excellent functioning is that it gives to the subject (\$) the privilege and satisfaction of leading the discourse, of acting as its agent, instead of operating like the master's discourse, which

imposes an external agent, a master signifier (S1) such as a cultural ideal or any other symbolic entity.

The master's discourse can still be effective with idealistic or credulous people who can work, struggle and even sacrifice themselves for their religion, nation, political flag or any other collective or individual cause (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2018). In other scenarios of advanced societies, however, subjects are only able to believe in themselves. They are no longer required, then, to mask or justify themselves with something different from themselves. In fact, they mock the masks and justifications of the master. This mocking may protect them against the master's discourses of fundamentalist, neo-fascist or populist leaders, but it also makes them the perfect victims of a capitalist discourse that is paradoxically justified and masked by the subjects themselves.

The Subject of Capitalist Discourse

The trick of capitalism is to use the subject to secretly satisfy the interests of capital. The trap of the master's discourse was the opposite: to use doctrines, creeds or ideals to secretly fulfil the subject's desire. Instead of someone (\$) justified and masked with something like Christianity, nationality or justice (S1), what we have in capitalist discourse is something, the capital (S1), justified and masked by someone—the subject (\$) who only believes in himself and who is enough to justify their existence, an existence whose truth, however, is that of capital (S1). This is the subject (\$): the voter or the client with their desires and their tastes and aspirations, which seem to govern capitalism logically dominated by capital (S1).

If capitalist domination is carried out with such efficiency, it is by operating not on the subjects and in spite of them, but with them and through them. It is an operation, as Marcuse (1964/2010) would say, of 'mimicry' or 'immediate identification' and not of simple 'adaptation' (p. 49). There is, thus, assimilation—not simple collaboration—between capitalism and subjectivity. It is not just that subjects help capital to dominate them. It is, rather, that they are absorbed by the capital that, thus, becomes them instead of confronting them from the outside.

Instead of straining and wearing itself out by oppressing subjects externally, capital uses the subjects' own strength by possessing them internally, by constituting their truth, by sliding behind their faces and transforming those faces into its masks, as showed by Lacan in the capitalist discourse. This discourse is that of the subjects inhabited by capital (\$S1), subjects who 'personify' capital and who give it their 'will' and their 'heart', as Marx (1867/2008, p. 109) said when referring to the capitalist. The subjects Marx was thinking about, however, are not today what they were in Marx's time. They are no longer just the capitalists, but any subject engendered by the main model of subjectification in advanced capitalism: the capitalist discourse.

Advanced capitalism does in a practical way what could only be theorized in the 19th century. It universally spreads the ideology of the ruling class and turns this ideology into the unrestrictedly dominant ideology. In this way, it universalises the subject that corresponds to 'the ideas of the ruling class', which 'are in every epoch the ruling ideas', according to the famous statement by Marx and Engels (1846/2014, p. 39).

It must be said that Marx and Engels had already glimpsed that all the subjects of the world were becoming bourgeois, shaped in the image and likeness of the bourgeoisie (i.e., the European capitalist class). Western bourgeoisie, according to Marx and Engels (1848/1980), 'creates a world after its own image' by compelling all nations, first through colonialism

and then through globalization, ‘to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois’ (p. 115). This embourgeoisement does not only happen in the ways of dressing, behaving and seeing the world. The transmutation of subjects into expressions of capital—their subsumption into capital—is more fundamental since it puts their forces at the service of the capitalist system and also prevents them from turning against capital, opposing it or resisting it (see Marx, 1866/2009; Veraza, 2008; Villacañas Berlanga, 2016).

Neutralizing the resistance and opposition of people, capitalism loses its worst enemies by the very gesture through which it wins its best allies. This is what allows it to work thanks to the subjects and no longer in spite of them, using their strength instead of trying to defeat them and propelling itself with them instead of being stopped by them.

Acceleration

Capitalist discourse works in such a way that subjects cease to be an obstacle, a restraint, and become an impulse of capital. This conversion logically contributes to the fact that the capital is going faster and faster. Its acceleration is caused also by the force of those who support it instead of oppose it.

It is well known that capitalism is also accelerated by technological development, whereby the production of ‘relative surplus value’ increases exponentially while economic processes are intensified and speeded up (see Marx, 1867/2008, pp. 425-433). However, in addition to considering this objective determination by technology—against which it is so difficult to defend oneself—we must remember the subjective double determination that I have already mentioned, which underlies technological development and against which we can always fight. We must not forget, then, that the acceleration of capitalism also results from the push of those who support it and from the absence, insufficiency or inefficacy of what might hinder it (e.g. forms of aversion, disinterest, distrust or hostility towards the market, regulations and other government interventions, strikes, protests, boycotts and other collective actions).

Despite what Žižek (2007) thinks, with his usual disdain toward anticapitalist movements, subjects can become a hindrance to capital by not obeying it, representing it or personifying it. In the logic of capitalism, it is precisely because this hindrance that subjects become is real, slowing down and even stopping capitalist production, that this hindrance must be assimilated to capital. This assimilation is necessary, but not necessarily possible.

Žižek is partly right: Sometimes assimilation is possible. To take just one striking example, it is true that capitalism has been ‘transformed and legitimized as an egalitarian project: accentuating auto-poetic interaction and spontaneous self-organization, it has even usurped the far Left’s rhetoric of workers’ self-management, turning it from an anti-capitalist slogan into a capitalist one’ (Žižek, 2009, p. 52). Capitalism thus tries to recover everything that resists it; yet, history offers too many examples of unassimilable resistance, and when resistance cannot be absorbed, it must be suppressed or excluded.

Liberation

The imperative of our time is the absorption, exclusion or suppression of all those who stand in the way of capital (e.g. participants in street protests, defenders of the environment or of cultural legacies, small producers, native peoples, poor inhabitants, senior and retired citizens, mentally ill persons or beings who are simply too sensitive to let the overwhelming capitalist advance). Capital also eliminates the other obstacles it encounters (e.g. natural

environments, cultural traditions, national laws and regulations). No thing or person has the right to hamper capital.

Capital must be free and move freely. Its freedom, as we know, is the obscene ideal of neoliberal capitalism. At issue here, as Duménil and Lévy (2004) call to our attention, is not ‘the restoration of the rule of markets and a dwindling role of the states’, but rather ‘the stricter subjection of these institutions to capital’; that is to say, on the one hand, ‘the freedom of capital to act in line with its own interests, and with little consideration for salaried workers and the large masses of the world population’ and, on the other hand, ‘a state dedicated to the enforcement of this new social order and the confrontation with other states’ (p. 1).

The freedom of capital is what has guided and governed the history of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007). It is what underlies the free market, the free circulation of goods and the free competition of business. In all cases, capital is freed, whether deployed in the market, materialized in circulating commodities or personified by competitors.

Subjects can only be free in neoliberalism by being alienated, by not being themselves, by being capital and by exercising the freedom of capital (see Brown, 2015; Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017). This freedom is the freedom of those who have their place in the capitalist discourse—those who freely invest, sell, buy, compete and speculate. They are the same as those who cross borders with the same freedom as their fortunes and their commodities, while Central Americans die of thirst in the desert, and Africans drown in the Mediterranean (see Nevins, 2001; Varsanyi & Nevins, 2007).

Unlike human beings who have no freedom to cross borders or even to survive, there are people and things who have been freed in neoliberalism and who swarm happily in airports and malls. Their freedom is evident, but the freedom is that of capital. It is as capital avatars, as capital personifications, that they are increasingly free, moving with increasing freedom and, therefore, at an increasing speed.

Production and Consumption

It must be well understood that what is going faster and faster is everything assimilated to capital. It is the capitalist system that works ever more quickly. What accelerates are the operations of capitalism: sales, imports and exports, investments and financial transactions, capital movements, money-making inventions, lucrative technological advances, new fashions and new designs of commodities, and executive or tourist journeys. The general acceleration also drags the subjects along. We cannot go slowly if we do not want to be left behind or thrown to the side of the road (see Hartmut, Dörre & Lessenich, 2016).

People must keep up with the things that follow the rhythm of capital. This accelerating pace is primarily the rhythm at which commodities are produced—commodities with which the surplus value is produced and, thus, the capital is produced. The rhythm of production, however, is also the rhythm of consumption—not only consumption of products but also consumption for production. As Marx explains in the *Grundrisse*, it is not possible to produce without consuming something (e.g. the existence of the producer and the raw materials that enter the product composition). On the one hand, ‘the individual not only develops his abilities in production, but also expends them, uses them up in the act of production, just as natural procreation is a consumption of life forces’ (Marx, 1858/2010, p. 10). On the other hand, there is ‘consumption of the means of production, which become

worn out through use, and are partly (e.g. in combustion) dissolved into their elements again' (p. 10).

Only by consuming the world and its people at full speed is it possible to produce capital at the same speed that everything else is produced. The increasingly rapid capitalist production implies the faster destructive consumption of the cultural, human, animal, plant and mineral resources of the Earth. It is as if everything was consumed into capitalist combustion and eventually vanished while emitting increasing greenhouse gases and causing progressive climate warming.

It is as if all that is solid melted into air, according to the words of Marx and Engels (1848/1980) that gave its title to the famous book by Marshall Berman (1983). The fact is that the destruction rate of our world and of ourselves, correlated with capital's production rate, is accelerated both by the unstoppable development of technology and by not finding enough obstacles or resistances. Technological and neoliberal capitalism thus describes a kind of free fall, which, if not stopped, will surely end up impacting the bottom line.

The free fall can also be conceived, in the spirit of Lacan, as a short circuit. It is a 'straight line', the direct motion of the death drive, without the useless 'detours' constituting culture and offered by the life drive (Lacan, 1955/2001b, pp. 317-319). Without giving us the chance to live, capital proceeds strategically, economically, by saving our time and leading us on the shortest path to death. It shortens the authentic existence of each person and of humanity. In any case, everything will have to end someday, of course, but capitalism cannot wait, and it hastens everything to make the catastrophe occur as soon as possible.

Self Destruction

Perhaps the imminent end of the world could be avoided if capitalism, by overworking without time to recover, ends up undermining its own conditions of possibility. The way in which this can occur has been elucidated by Marx (1867/2008) through the laws of capitalist accumulation and the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. These laws show us how technological development can only increase productivity by decreasing profitability, threatening the economic process and depleting sources of wealth.

The recent crisis has confirmed Marx's forecasts by showing us that capital is so destructive that it destroys itself. Let us say that capitalism itself is devoured by its own insatiable voracity. Its expedited movement ends it. It goes so fast that it 'consumes itself', as Lacan (1972/1978, pp. 48-49) says about capitalist discourse. This discourse performs its destructive functioning so effectively that it ends up being self-destructive.

Capitalism is poisoned, literally, with its increasing chemical exhalations but also, metaphorically, with its increasing financial emissions. Its interior becomes unbreathable and suffocates itself while it suffocates us. This is why capital must constantly escape from itself and get out of what it is: overflow. This, however, causes capitalism to invade and destroy everything, to spread throughout the world and in all the recesses of our lives, and to make it increasingly difficult to find an 'outside' where it can breathe (i.e., which allows it to produce the capital to be realized inside).

Expansion of Capital

The urgent need for an 'outside' is one of the forces that drive capitalism to move more rapidly forward. In addition, as Marx (1867/2008), Rosa Luxemburg (1913/2015), Bieler et

al. (2016), Lenin (1916/1999) and others (e.g. Frank, 1967; Brewer, 2002) have shown, the same need provokes effects such as colonialism and neo-colonialism, imperialist wars, the Third World, the Third World's dependency and current globalization. These effects correlate with others in the subjective sphere (e.g. the unstoppable colonization of subjectivity, of intimacy and especially of sexuality), with the resulting conversion of a growing fraction of our desire and of our invaluable life into labour force and eagerness for consumption, both with a use value to be exploited and turned into more and more capital with no value other than that of exchange.

Capital invades more and more spaces in which our life was previously developed (Pavón-Cuéllar and Lara-Junior, 2016). This life is exhausted by being transmuted—firstly into labour and consumption and, secondly, into the capital produced by working and realized by consuming (Marx, 1866/2009). Capital, according to Marx's (1867/2008) eloquent metaphor, is like a 'vampire' that 'sucks' our life (p. 179). Everything alive in us is metabolized and metamorphosed into more and more dead money (Dussel, 1988).

Metamorphosis into money implies, first, an oversimplification and desymbolization of the world's symbolic complexity, and then, the homogenization and quantification of all its qualitative diversity (Marcuse, 1964/2010; Echeverría, 1998; Moore & Robinson, 2016). What is quantified can be counted and calculated. Calculation of people and not just things tends to become automatic and quicker. Data is processed at an incomparably higher rate than knowledge. While a subject may need a lifetime to penetrate one piece of knowledge, capitalism's computers can process millions of packages of data in a fraction of a second.

The capitalist system knows more and more—and knows it faster and faster—than do people. Although we must keep up with capital, capital is always one step ahead. Capitalism gains ground on people and appropriates their cognitive faculties, but it also sucks their blood and steals their time. This theft of time is another direct cause of capitalist acceleration (Maldonado, 2015). If everything goes faster, it is also because there is less time.

Foreclosure of the Subject

We have decreasing time to live—to live merely for living—without working or consuming. We increasingly spend our lives in offices or other workplaces, and in places of consumption (e.g. bars, cafes, restaurants, shops, malls, sport clubs, tourist complexes, casinos, television, internet, social networks). We have less time to stop running to make money for the system, and instead simply 'exist to exist'—to feel our existence, enjoy it or suffer it, not distract from it, but think about it and remember it. We have shorter periods to look back and try to signify or resignify our stories, give them meaning, understand them and understand to the point of concluding, finishing paths and closing stages (see Føessel, 2010).

There is no time to understand the countless unrelated daily news stories of the world. How would we understand something in our lives? Additionally, if there is no time to understand, there is no time to conclude anything (Lacan, 1945/1999).

The lack of conclusion is also very clear in the Lacanian formulation of the capitalist discourse. Its movement is continuous ($a > \$ > S1 - S2 > a$). There is no way to break the vicious circle of capitalism. Production (a) leads to disappointing consumption that excites desire ($\$$), which makes us work ($S1 > S2$) and produce (a), and then consume, desire, work, and so on. We cannot stop. We can only run faster to beat others, but this is impossible. Nobody wins. The rat race cannot be won. Capital cannot stop. Goods need to circulate.

Nothing can be interrupted even for a moment. We cannot be disconnected from the internet. The silence cannot be sustained. The smartphone must be always on. Calls and messages cannot be put on hold or left unanswered.

There can be no interstice for us. We have no time to exist. Our existence is a luxury that advanced capitalism cannot afford.

Everything is going so fast that there is no time for deep feelings, full experiences, elaborated ideas, meditated words or mature conclusions. Our subjective manifestations are avoided as they would certainly delay the accelerating objective processes of the capitalist system. These processes must be the absolute realm of technology and of science, i.e., of a pure objectivity in which there is no place for subjectivity. The subject is radically excluded—*forclosed*—to maintain the rhythm of the system (see Lacan, 1956/1981; Indart, 2012).

Between Lag and Possession

Those who follow the rhythm are no longer merely the subjects with their lives and their desires; rather, they are labourers and consumers with their labour force and their eagerness for consumption, with their lives and their desires reduced to these drives of capital. They are converted into capital—into an incarnation or personification of capital, into the variable fraction of capital (Marx, 1867/2008). Of course, these characters who play their part in the system are still somehow subjects, but they are possessed, inhabited, displaced and alienated by the capital. They are no longer who they were.

Capital, as we have seen in the Lacanian formulation of capitalist discourse, is the constitutive truth of the subject in capitalism ($\$S1$). As for the subjects, they are the agents that only serve to mask the capital, to justify it and also to serve it, so that it can satisfy its interests through the citizens with their rights, through the voters with their electoral power, through the tireless workers with their energy, through the insatiable consumers with their credit cards, and through the entrepreneur of the self with themselves.

Only subjects possessed by capital can follow its quickening pace; however, by following this pace, they turn their back on themselves and leave themselves behind. They give up their subjectivity. They lose themselves, forget their desires and go mad for the interest of capital. They suffer from depression, stress, burnout, oniomania, bulimia, anorexia and other disorders (see De Gaulejac & Hanique, 2015; Prins et al., 2015).

New symptoms are incomprehensible if we abstract capitalism and the way in which it leaves behind the same subjects possessed by it (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2015). Each one of us is divided between our lagging condition and our possessed condition. Both conditions may cause our suffering. For instance, by leaving us behind, capital can arouse our depression, but by possessing us and increasing our pace, it is able to stress us, develop our disorders and rush us to burnout.

Each pathological experience is unique, of course, but capital seems to be always there, involved in the experience, provoking it and making sick those who are not made to be capital. Properly conceiving our illness may force us to think about the capitalist system. Our treatment may require us to fight against capital.

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About the author

David Pavón-Cuéllar is Professor of Psychology and Philosophy at the State University of Michoacán (*Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo*, Morelia, Mexico). He holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Rouen (France) and a Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain). He is the author of the books *Virus del Capital* (Buenos Aires, Docta Ignorancia, 2021); *Más allá de la psicología indígena: concepciones mesoamericanas de la subjetividad* (Mexico City, Porrúa, 2021), *Zapatismo y subjetividad: más allá de la psicología* (Bogotá and Morelia, Cátedra Libre and UMSNH, 2020); *Psicología crítica: definición, antecedentes, historia y actualidad* (Mexico City, Itaca, 2019); *Psicanálise e Marxismo: As Violências Em Tempos De Capitalismo* (with Nadir Lara, Curitiba, Appris, 2018); *Marxism and Psychoanalysis: In or Against Psychology?* (London, Routledge, 2017); *Marxismo, psicología y psicoanálisis*

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Contact: State University of Michoacán. Email: davidpavoncuellar@gmail.com