The Psychic Life of Neoliberalism:

Subject Formation and Psychic Suffering in a Culture of Competition

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ABSTRACT
Following Cynthia Enloe’s footsteps in *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, we argue that the psychic is personal and the personal is psychic. We do so in two steps. One: engaging with the literature on subject formation, through the relation between discourse and power, and norms and recognition. And two: engaging with the discussion around neoliberalism’s managerial discourse, not only forming the neoliberal subject and its pathologies, but providing neoliberalism with its cornerstone upon which it can be sustained and the contemporary psychopathologies with the vocabulary through which they can find meaning.

Introduction

In her making feminist sense of international politics, Cynthia Enloe urges us to ask “where are the women?” in our researches — a question that she shows to reveal how much more power than usually taken into account is necessary to keep international politics working as expected (ENLOE, 1996). Very much like Enloe, expecting to understand specific dynamics of power, we started this work by asking “where is suffering in international politics?”. In doing so, we found that though narratives of suffering are at the core of current understandings of International Relations, they are usually restricted to a single kind: they tend to only address wars, conflicts, humanitarian intervention, genocides, refugee camps, terrorism, and all sorts of ‘urgent’, bloody, messy, so-called real problems.

Furthermore, while the so-called expansion of the concerns of the discipline has led to the inclusion of other narratives of suffering, these have been shown to remain racialized and geographically bound (KUMARAKULASINGAM, 2014; MUPPIDI, 2012, MAMDANI, 2002; BOLTANSKI, 2004). Indeed, suffering comes to appear as a defining characteristic of

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3 Consider, for instance, the self-narrative of the emergence of the discipline of IR at the end of the Second World War as an endeavor to make sure its European horrors—notably large-scale warfare and the Holocaust—would “never again” take place. This principle remains enshrined in the preamble to the United Nations Charter. For a recent version of this narrative, revealing its enduring power, see Levine (2012).
places in the Third World, its subjects (always of ‘colored skin’) being objectified as bodies and faces expressing nothing but suffering and lack. And, as much as they may touch our hearts or even disgust us, they don’t stop us from turning off the TV and go about our normal lives – maybe after a small donation through the best advertised NGO phone number.

Facing this economy of Western sensibility to suffering, Kumarakulansingan (2014, p.75) invites us to interrogate “modern horror and its other side modern compassion (…) to glimpse the racialization of affect”. His project helps unravel our selectivity. For our part, understanding where suffering in international politics is – or, rather, where it is advertised and normalized as being — helped us unravel instances of where suffering in international politics is not – or, rather, where it is silenced and why. This has led us to look at ourselves: our everyday anxieties towards productivity; our paralyzing angst in front of computers; the disquieting effects of a regime of ‘publish or perish’; our bodies shivering, stomachs turning, hearts pounding, heads sinking or spinning. And when we looked at the imperatives of production in neoliberalism, we found we were not at all special – or specially damaged. We found a whole system that constitutes people’s anxieties, and that depends on these anxieties — and on the silence around them — to continue operating smoothly. In sum, we found that by asking ‘where is the suffering in international politics?’ and looking at the erasures and pathologization international politics produces around a specific type of suffering, we could better understand how specific aspects of international politics – here the neoliberal culture of competition – function.

Enloe’s question has led her to build upon the feminist adage that the personal is political to argue both that the personal is international and that the international is personal. In the first part of this palindrome – the personal is international – she argues that “ideas about what it means to be a ‘respectable’ woman or an ‘honorable’ man have been shaped by colonizing policies, international trade strategies, and military doctrines” (ENLOE, 2014, p.350). And for its inversion – the international is personal – she suggests that “governments depend on certain kinds of allegedly private relationships in order to conduct their foreign affairs” (ENLOE, 2014, p.351), such as the underpaid work of women in vast informal labor markets, the unpaid work of the wives of diplomats, the steady supply of female sexual services to assure male soldiers of their manliness, or the ideals of femininity and masculinity that authorize and/or deny women participation in specific domains of public and private life.
In this article, enacting Enloe’s movement, we will similarly argue that the psychic is international and the international is psychic. This will involve taking two departures from her statements. First, we substitute “the psychic” for “the personal”. While claims to “the personal” have allowed the questioning of the internal/external distinction constituting the spheres of the private and the public, thinking about “the psychic” allows us to question the internal/external distinction constituting the subject’s intimate sphere and the world outside her, that is, the spheres of the psychic and the social. In order to investigate this, we point to the relationship between subjectivation (assujetissement, the double process of subject-formation by being subjected) and the emergence of an internal domain of relation of the self to herself (BUTLER, 1997). Most notably, this will highlight how subjects are always intimately related — we will say, attached — to practices to/through which they are subjected (BROWN, 1995; BUTLER, 1997). As an intimate domain, the ‘psychic’ tends to be excluded from international politics and all suffering that is related to it tends to be erased of public spaces. Second, we will take a specific stance on “the international”, reading it in terms of a culture of competition (INAYATULLAH; BLANEY, 2004). Hence, at this point of our research, we will use the term interchangeably with the concept of neoliberalism — itself reconceptualized in terms that go beyond a socio-economic program and towards a complex set of practices and (psychic) processes constituting the world through competition.

Making the point that the psychic is international, we will argue that the creation of a space of interiority and self-relation through demands of performance and flexibility — and their correlate effects of fear and anxiety — takes place through practices of government articulated around the entrepreneurial logic and the staging of competitions, “[f]or, it is around the norm of competition between personal enterprises that the fusion of ‘psy’ discourse and economic discourse occurs, that individual aspirations and the enterprise’s aim to excel become identified — in short, that ‘microcosm’ and ‘macrocosm’ are harmonized.” (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2013. p. 317). This approach allows us to dive into the discussion concerning subject formation, arguing that rather than special snowflakes, we – ‘down’ to our psyche – are, as Naeem Inayatullah would say, shaped by the “particular bundle of mundane and ubiquitous cultural and historical forces that compose us”; or, rather, that excavating our selves we find not “ontologized and essentialized indulgence, but the differentiated dynamism of whole worlds” (2010. p. 8). Mirroring the first half of our movement, we go on to argue that the international is psychic, that is, that the (re)production of a world of competition relies on a subject with allegedly psychological characteristics, such as emotional intelligence, resilience,
disposition to risk taking, flexibility, self-assessment and improvement, and attachment to efficiency and the competitive process.

Our path to arguing that ‘down’ to our core resides not an essence, but rather world historical processes (INAYATULLAH, 2010. p. 8) will be divided in three steps: (i) one paved by Foucault’s discussion concerning subject formation and the role of discourse and power in this theme; a second one led by Butler’s discussion on how this subject formation happens in relation to norms; and (ii) a further step into subject formation in relation between discourse and power and norms with Benjamin’s discussion of Winnicott’s approach on recognition. Then we go all the way back along the palindrome, arguing that neoliberalism depends on this very subjectivity it manufactures. Our effort in this direction will be divided into four parts: (ii) one in which we will understand neoliberalism as an economic policy, since the Mont Pelerin Society until Thatcher and Reagan’s administrations – and pointing to how these economic policies invest the subjects in a relationship with their work; (ii) another one understanding these investments in a culture of competition in which the subject has her value revealed through a staging of competitions; (iii) a third one understanding neoliberalism as a governmentality, as these investments form a particular kind of subject: the homo oeconomicus; (iv) and, finally, one understanding the psychic investments of a managerial discourse in creating a particular neoliberal subjectivity in which our culture of competition lies. Following these steps, we hope to argue that both the psychic is international – in its psychic investment’s in the subjects’ desiring aspect – and the international is psychic – in that it is this very subjectivity that a neoliberal culture of competition depends on to function properly.

The Psychic is International

Foucault (1978) has famously associated the formation of the subject to the double meaning of subjectivation (assujetissement): on the one hand, subjectivation means the coming into being of the subject, with all the possibilities that are opened by this position-taking; on the other hand, subjectivation always take place through subjection (subordination) to forms of regulation, norms, power. Hence, subjectivation always involves the double movement of limitations and possibilities, being and becoming. We begin our journey as subjects being subjected into a preexistent system of shared codes such as culture, language, and social conventions. This placing upon of norms happens through a close relationship between discourse – understood here as a set of stable statements; the institutions these statements can
draw legitimacy from; and the practices enforcing them – and *power*. If the subject emerges through submission, a passionate attachment to power is an intrinsic part of subjectivity (BROWN, 1995; BUTLER, 1997). Following in the footsteps of Butler (2004b), we turn to the process through which subjects attach themselves to a norm – in our case, of competitiveness and self-fulfillment through work – along the very process of them becoming – social, political and psychic – subjects. What we wish to explore in doing so is how the psychic is international, that is, how the specific way in which we relate to ourselves and, more specifically, how we come to suffer in ways that seem so ‘intimate’, so particular to ourselves, is part and parcel of processes we can call international—in the specific sense of the staging of competition of neoliberalism.

*Discourse and Power*

This speaking into existence happens in an intricately woven fabric of power: a play of enunciations, institutions and practices working through procedures of exclusion, division and rejection, and opposition between true and false, working outside discourse; and through procedures of commentary, author and discipline, operating inside discourse. This first set of procedures function as mechanisms of societal control over discourse, as gatekeepers allowing and silencing certain subjects of enunciation and/or formulations. These subjects and formulations are allowed or denied participation in the order of discourse by virtue of their position on the historical structure of power – meaning: subjects already in a privileged position or formulations fostering these positions of power are allowed in the order of discourse, as power and discourse have an intimate relation (SILVA, 2004). The second set of procedures concerns the internal control of discourse. They work, respectively – commentary, author and discipline being the order they have been introduced – as: (i) general narratives – such as ‘hard work leads to success’, ‘find a job you love and you will never work another day’ – from which specific formulations can be articulated; (ii) authority from which formulations can derive legitimacy; and – opposing to the previous two – (iii) a system of truths from which entirely new formulations can be developed (FOUCAULT, 1981).

It is only then we realize working in the intersection between discourse and power – or rather, understanding discourse can only emerge through power – is a matter of asking in which conditions discourse emerges and which power structures it contributes to sustain, rather than
asking if it translates a ‘reality out there’. As Foucault puts it, to interpret the constitution of discourse through power

“[i]n one sense, therefore, it is to weigh the ‘value’ of statements. A value that is not defined by their truth, that is not gauged by the presence of a secret content; but which characterizes their place, their capacity for circulation and exchange, their possibility of transformation. not only in the economy of discourse, but, more generally, in the administration of scarce resources.” (FOUCAULT, 1972. p. 120)

This, of course, requires a whole new outlook on power: in its productive rather than restrictive character. It calls for us to a re-imagining of power. It requires us to re-imagine power not as a relation of subservience, subjugation or domination of one group in relation to another, of ruled in relation to rulers, of the state in relation to its citizens, but, rather, as a ‘multiplicity of force’, both supporting each other and working through ceaseless struggles and confrontations among each other, always local and unstable. Not as power which emerges from a central point, but “[p]ower [that] is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere”. (FOUCAULT, 1978. p. 93) Not as power that can be acquired and possessed, but as power – as well as resistance – exercised along multiple relations, immanent, not exterior to these relations. Thus, Foucault invites us to rethink

‘[p]ower,’ insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement. One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (FOUCAULT, 1978. p. 93)

With that in mind, we can begin to think subjects in relation to power, formed by it; to better understand neoliberalism, and how it works in relation to its subjects, the role it plays in their formation. We can begin to understand how the neoliberal discourse always references wider concepts such as liberty and autonomy; how neoliberalism’s double bind with these principles, as they are the ones to make up the neoliberal discourse and the ones neoliberalism draws its legitimacy from, with the principle of the commentary. We can begin to understand how the neoliberal discourse finds stability in its reference to the liberal canons as early as Smith and Ricardo or neoliberal canons as recent as Hayek, Nozick or Friedman, and how possible inconsistencies can be dismissed in the name of market regulation or instrumental rationality, with the principle of the author. We can begin to understand how neoliberal discourse and economic policies references to a body of theoretical work that dates back to 1930’s Society of Mont Pelerin, with the principle of the discipline (FOUCAULT, 1981; SILVA, 2004). We can begin to understand neoliberalism as a set of relations woven in our
everyday lives working through the ways we act, speak, desire and suffer, with the rule of immanence. We can begin to understand how the neoliberal subject’s formation works through demands of productivity, efficiency, total involvement with and fulfillment through work, with the rules of continual variations. We can begin to understand how neoliberalism’s belief in non-intervention and the free market relies and depends on a specific kind of subjectivity: instrumental rationality, with the rule of double conditioning. And, finally, we can begin to understand neoliberalism as a self-referential and self-reinforced discourse, reproducing itself through its own mechanisms, with the rule of the tactical polyvalence of discourses (FOUCAULT, 1978).

Norms and Recognition

If we wish understand the speaking into existence of subjects – as acting, speaking, desiring and suffering subjects – through an intricate entanglement of power, we ought to understand how this is a speaking into subject positions, into positions in relations to norms, and relations to norms through recognition. Exploring this relation to power through norms and recognition takes us one step further: it allows us to account for the subject’s investment in her formation through power; it allows us to begin – and only begin – to understand that this investment and this formation necessarily involves a psychic dimension: a dimension through which we can account for the subject’s relation to herself through the norms, her existence – not a physical or (only) social, but – as a psychic being.

This speaking into existence is a speaking into positions of subject, into a relation to power through norms. These norms work through a restriction associated with a regulating mechanism both recognizing certain practices and identities as legitimate (integrating function), and others as illegitimate, and suppressing and marginalizing them (marginalizing function) – and not even recognizing others, leaving them in a space of non-existence (BUTLER, 2004a). In our work with neoliberalism, we see these mechanisms working through a norm – or, rather, culture – of competition, in which the subject’s worth as a human being is measure through a meritocratic staging of competitions, in which subjects are individualized and detached from their social and political surroundings, and either celebrated for their own personal success, or blamed for their own individual failures – and pushed to ‘try harder’. Most important, power is productive here inasmuch as it gives the subject her identity – winner or loser –, as it enacts the relation between truth and power, proclaiming The Truth about the subject (SABOT, 2015;
Insofar as “norms, backed up by discourse, conduct (…) a policing of social life, through which they instantiate legitimate identities and practices – meaning, according to the standards of recognition invested by this very norm” (SABOT, 2015. p. 5), subjects depend on these norms to be have their identities recognized as legitimate, or even viable, identities in the world. Competition takes center stage in the neoliberal discourse by virtue of a belief in the self-regulation of free markets: *ceteris paribus*, the staging of competitions is a mechanism through which we can find the truth about the market, being it the natural prices of products or the governmental measures driving up or down these prices; a mechanism through which we can find the truth about the subject: was she prepared? is she talented? did she try hard enough? is she worth it?

The centrality recognition on this process is one of assuring the subject a socially, politically and psychic viable life: granting her status as individual human being able of participating in the democratic processes and accessing rights. This is not only an institutional process, as it takes a role in the way we live our everyday lives and navigate the possibilities open to living this life. It is a process shaped by the way we act and talk – desire and suffer –, i.e. the lives we are willing to portrait in the media and in the arts. Butler (2004a) deals with the problem of recognition through norms of gender and sexuality: depending on their genitals, people are expected to occupy different positions and have different behaviors in life – almost every mother and father expect their little girl to be sweet and caring, and their little boy to be curious and adventurous. These expectations shape these boys’ and girls’ imaginations and the roles they will be more or less willing to perform throughout their lives. Of course, none of us will fit perfectly into the boxes of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’, and, for that, we will suffer the consequences. These consequences are more visible to people whose non-compliance to these norms is more apparent: like ‘butch’ women or ‘femme’ men. These people will be the subjects of violent interventions, attempting to discipline them ‘back’ into the assigned roles: these violences range from name-calling – ‘dykes’ and ‘fags’ and a whole range of homophobic vocabulary – to all sorts of physical violence like beatings and murder. But, while boys and girls, men and women are constrained under the violence of gender roles and have their/our lives shaped by the experience of residing these particular bodies in our world, transgender, non-binary, gender-fluid and queer people live most aspects of their lives as though they did not exist. This is because the norms of gender and sexuality doesn't even begin to imagine their existence. Norms are somewhat fine being transgressed as long as you stay within their lines: ‘butch’ women and ‘femme’ men, ‘dykes’ and ‘fags’ are only a negative to the gender norms and,
while resisting them, also end up reifying them (FOUCAULT, 1978). But transgender, non-binary, gender-fluid and queer people are somewhat dislocated from these norms: they neither comply or deny it, they are simply outside these gender norms, and, by being outside them, they are not recognized by them as viable subjects. Thus, we can understand recognition as

(...) at once the norm toward which we invariably strive, the norm that ought to govern therapeutic practice, and the ideal form that communication takes when it becomes a transformative process. Recognition is, however, also the name given to the process that constantly risks destruction and which, I would submit, could not be recognition without a defining or constitutive risk of destruction (BUTLER, 2004b, p. 133).

Thinking recognition in these terms, as a process through which we risk destruction and perceive ourselves as subjects, gives us a glimpse of what is at stake in the subject’s psychic formation, what is at stake when Butler (2004b) says recognition is what makes a subject, ultimately, exist. The importance of the process of recognition lays in – having gone through it – the ability of the subject of perceiving an external world: external to itself and external to its control. The process of recognition is a process in which the subject makes an attempt at destroying the object – here embodied in the figure of her mother – and the object survives this destruction. This process is so important because, prior to that, the subject is one with her mother – as well as with her toys and the objects surrounding her –: whenever she cries, her mother comes to her rescue, whenever she kicks or pushes an object it responds by moving in one direction or another – a phenomenon Winnicott (1969) calls ‘cathexis’. At that point, the subject is one with the world around her. She cannot prove the world is nothing but herself, her own imagination, and, therefore, neither that she herself exists. “The subject says to the object: ‘I destroyed you’, and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: ‘Hullo object!’ ‘I destroyed you.’ ‘I love you.’ ‘You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.’ ‘While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in my (unconscious) fantasy’ (WINNICOTT, 1969, p. 120). After the attempt destruction of the object, and, most importantly, its survival, thwarting her demand, the subject can recognize the Other as a separate entity, separate from herself (BENJAMIN, 1994). This thwarting, “that response from the other (...) makes meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self. It allows the self to realize its agency and authorship in a tangible way” (BENJAMIN, 1988, p. 12). Thus, we can understand the subject’s relation to the norms not as completely voluntary, but as something her very existence as a subject depends.

This is how we understand the psychic as being international: insofar as we, as subjects, ‘deep’ in our desires and our most fundamental processes of subjection, are formed and shaped
by power. This is how we hope to understand how our desires and affects are constituted through world processes: through the relation between discourse and power and the speaking into existence of subjects; through the shaping of the world via this relation between discourse and power via norms; through the centrality of recognition and how much we as subject depend on this process to come into existence.

**The International is Psychic**

Just as we, as subjects, are spoken into existence in an intricate relation to power, so do the structures of power we come to being emerge from an intricate fabric of power. If we stick with Foucault’s (1978), understanding power as set of relations with its own self-enforcing mechanisms (rule of the tactical polyvalence of discourses), dependent on the products it creates, dependent, in our case, on the very neoliberal subjectivity it shapes (rule of double conditioning), we can make Cynthia Enloe’s palindrome work all the way back from the international to the psychic. We hope do so in two steps: (i) understanding neoliberalism as an economic policy and a culture of competition; (ii) understanding neoliberalism as a governmentality and a psychic investment. In this process, we hope that, Understanding how neoliberalism works through a managerial discourse to shape our desire into the enterprise’s, how we, as subjects, become invested in the neoliberal norms of high productivity and efficiency, we can better understand neoliberalism’s investment in the figure of the subject, a specific subject – competitive and self-fulfilling through work – so as to understand how this particular articulation of the international stands on a particular articulation of the psychic.

**Neoliberalism as an Economic Policy**

David Harvey (2005) introduces neoliberalism first as an intellectual movement in the 1940’s in consonance with the movements opposed to socialism in eastern Europe and contrary to the Keynesian policies taken as a result of the crash of 1929. The Mont Pelerin Society, led by Friedrich von Hayek, brought concepts from liberal classics such as the invisible hand and a free market back to the economic discussion at the time. These ideas only took place in the policy debate in the 1970’s, with a crisis of capital accumulation, ever rising unemployment and inflation – defined as stagflation –, and the consequent downfall of the Bretton Woods Institutions. The first set of neoliberal policies enforced was the Volcker Shock, when Paul
Volcker, then chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve raising federal funds rate in order to attract foreign investment to the U.S. once again. These neoliberal policies really took off under the Thatcher and Reagan administrations, in the 1980’s. They’ve made a point of withdrawing government control from economy, letting free market operate at its finest, meaning, mainly, budget cuts and privatizations – which worked as cutbacks on social welfare and increasing competitiveness among (ever more insecure) workers. The idea under these measures were to extenuate the social forces in the political debate which could upset the competition under free market, which led to a demobilization of the workers. Thus, neoliberalism

“attack[s] all forms of social solidarity that hindered competitive flexibility (such as those expressed through municipal governance, and including the power of many professionals and their associations), dismantling or rolling back the commitments of the welfare state, the privatization of public enterprises (including social housing), reducing taxes, encouraging entrepreneurial initiative, and creating a favourable business climate to induce a strong inflow of foreign investment (particularly from Japan). There was, she famously declared, ‘no such thing as society, only’ (HARVEY, 2005. p. 23)

These measures created instability around peoples’ outlooks on their professional lives and as well as their financial stability. This was not only product of the neoliberal measures put into action by Thatcher and Reagan, but also as response to the demands made by the protest on May 1968. The youth in these movements demanded entirely new work relations, relations they would not be merely punching cards from 9 to 5, but through which they could work towards something, through they could find meaning and fulfillment (SAFATLE, 2015). The psychic consequences of the flexibilization of labor that took place as a consequence of these demands will be the subject of our last section.

**Neoliberalism as a Culture of Competition**

These budget cuts, privatizations and flexibilization of labor carried out as measures of a new economic policy were spread out throughout the fabric of society as a culture of competition. This norm shapes the behavior and desires of the individuals subjected to it as it reveals ‘the truth’ about them as productive subjects, a subjectification that happens through a staging of competitions⁴: a mechanism which consists in pushing individuals to their “best” in

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⁴ Which we choose to interpret both as performance and leveling: the moment and conditions under which competition is performed; and the different hierarchies resulting of these competitions.
order to single them out for their abilities and potentials. Inayatullah and Blaney describe this *staging of competitions*

“as a “discovery procedure.” The staging of competitions both assumes and is a means of discovering individual differences; that is, competitions require that individuals adopt competitive strategies to mobilize and display their particular quality and quantity of ability, skill, and effort. Where a ranking is established in relation to individual efforts and achievements, the individual’s position in the hierarchy is taken as a sign of the self’s merit and value relative to others” (INAYATULLAH; BLANEY, 2004 p. 119)

The results of this staging of competitions will determine the place of each individual in the hierarchy of society. Let us not forget, tough, that meritocracy is a response to the allocation of resources according to the great chain of being, a revolutionary idea that people’s self-worth does not reside in the caste they were born into (KRAMLICK, 1981)\(^5\). The tension residing in this process is one between *formal equality* and *social hierarchy*: postulating participants in this “race for life” as equals — and, thus, as having equal opportunities in a fair race —, erasing all difference and hierarchy prior to the competition; while it depends on those very differences and hierarchies to identify the best. It is important that these differences and inequalities remain erased, so the race, the staging of competitions, may seem like a fair mechanism through which we can allocate resources and so the subjects can have a sense of entitlement/responsibility to her position in the race — which can go both ways as “I worked hard, I deserve the position of privilege I enjoy” and as “If I did not ‘win’ is because I did not try hard enough, or because I am not good enough or somehow worthy”. Here we can begin to understand the ways neoliberalism’s culture of competition relies on one specific subjectivity: it depends on a free, equal and rational to perform in this staging of competition subject; only a subject that enters willingly into the competition, has a fair chance — same as everyone else — at winning and is able to make the rational choices required to win can be used to justify this staging of competitions as a fair allocation of resources.

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\(^5\) We find Kramnick particularly elucidating in his discussion around (neo)liberalism as a race for life in this particular fragment: “Life, he [Adam Smith] wrote was a ‘race for wealth and honours and preferments’. What a revolution in this metaphor! Life is no longer a hierarchical ladder or chain of being. It is a race. And this race should be fair; each and every runner in it should have an equal opportunity to win. Each competitor will ‘run as hard as he can and strain every move and muscle in order to outstrip all his competitors. Interfering with other runners and seizing special advantages is a violation of ‘fair play’. But merit, talent, virtue and ability are, alas, are no sure indicators of success, because government is too involved in the race, according to Smith. By reserving offices, power, and authority for the privileged, it tilts the competition in favor of an idle aristocracy devoid of talent and virtue. (…) the race, the illusion that everyone can win, and the alleged pleasures of victory are all necessary and worthwhile deceptions 'It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind.” (KRAMLICK, 1981. p. 180)
Neoliberalism as a Governmentality

It, then, becomes the government’s task to preserve the inequalities necessary to the functioning of the staging of competitions. These constant interventions aim at preserving free market as a realm individuals can perform at the stage of competitions under an illusion of equality. Thus, as Foucault puts it

“neoliberals have always said, neoliberal governmental intervention is no less dense, frequent, active, and continuous than in any other system. But what is important is to see what the point of application of these governmental interventions is now. Since this is a liberal regime, it is understood that government must not intervene on effects of the market. Nor must neo-liberalism, or neo-liberal government, correct the destructive effects of the market on society, and it is this that differentiates it from, let's say, welfare or suchlike policies that we have seen [from the twenties to the sixties]. Government must not form a counterpoint or a screen, as it were, between society and economic processes. It has to intervene on society as such, in its fabric and depth. Basically, it has to intervene on society so that competitive mechanisms can play a regulatory role at every moment and every point in society and by intervening in this way its objective will become possible, that is to say, a general regulation of society by the market.” (FOUCAULT, 2008. p. 145)

Thus, a neoliberal government can never aim to achieve social equality, as they are the most crucial instrument of the staging of competitions. In fact, neoliberalism doesn’t account for any sort of social justice, being the subject’s own personal responsibility to work hard towards success and accept the possible outcomes as risk.

This particular articulation of the subject necessary to the staging of competitions – equal, free and rational – upon which neoliberalism stands takes form in Foucault’s discussion on The Birth of Biopolitics (2008) as the homo oeconomicus: a subject whose subjectivity functions exclusively in terms of instrumental rationality – which is defined as all rationality formally structured, but we will come to understand as maximization of returns, and extend, in our last section, as efficiency and a work ethics of self-fulfillment through your job –, generalizing the model of the enterprise to the whole of social relations – as well as relations of the subject to herself. Upon this particular kind of rationality stands what Foucault calls a double involuntary: a belief that selfishly pursing one’s own interest leads to a greater good, as the profits gained from these individual transactions add up to the economic growth of society as a whole. Thus, we can begin to understand the ways neoliberalism depends upon a particular rationality of the subject.
Neoliberalism as a Managerial Discourse

This investment in neoliberalism’s culture of competition, this production of a subject upon which neoliberalism depends happens through a managerial discourse that shapes subjects’ desire, their expectations, and their relationship to themselves. This involvement of desire and a sense of self in work were exactly the demands of the 1968 Paris protests: a work ethics that allowed these individuals to have an affective – and psychic – involvement with their jobs, instead of the boring meaningless mechanic work they saw themselves as doing. Neoliberalism responds to this demand operating a reconfiguration of the capitalist society down to its core and the consequent modification of its work ethics. Which attests for ‘capitalism’s ability to survive through a endogenization of critique’. Values such as security, stability, respect to hierarchy and specialization, that big companies from the 1950’s and 1960’s, such as IBM, brought from traditional organizations such as the army, gave place to new values from what was called the ‘artistic critique’ to capitalist work ethics and lifestyle. Among these values were the ability to take risks, flexibility, resilience, deterritorialization from endless re-engineering processes, all of which make up for today’s ideological core (SAFATLE, 2015. p. 263).

The subjection under this new work ethics is one in which the subject undergoes several and continuous interventions by management techniques and therapeutic intervention regimes in order to become a self-enterprise. This “generalization of the enterprise in society helped individuals to see themselves as ‘entrepreneurs of themselves’, behaving according to the logic of capital investment and returns, seeing their affects as objects of ‘emotional intelligence’, optimize through their emotional competencies. It rationalized the subject’s desire, submitting it to vigilance and control, self-evaluations through management criteria. This translation of inter and intrasubjective relations to an economic rationality based on the weighing of costs and benefits created a new relationship between government and individual with even deeper psychic roots” (SAFATLE, 2015. p. 199).

The techniques under which the neoliberal subject is manufactured – which include coaching, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and transactional analysis (TA) – are aimed at improving her emotional and communication skills (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2013). These techniques date back to the 1920’s factory manager trainings, in which these individuals were instructed to search for honesty, loyalty and trust in their employees, and diagnose potential difficulties they might be having and see them through them, a managerial style called ‘emotional competence’, encouraged and cultivated today in order to boost efficiency and productivity through ‘cooperation’ and ‘team work’ (ILLOUZ, 2008). This sort of management seeks to resolve conflict rationalizing them. By doing so, it assigns emotions to a private and rationality to a public sphere, splitting the subject and turning her against herself (EHRENBERG, 2010a). This
ethos of self-improvement requires the subject to “conform internally to this image by constant work on himself. He must constantly strive to be as efficient as possible, to appear to be totally involved in his work, to perfect himself by lifelong learning, and to accept the greater flexibility required by the incessant changes dictated by markets” (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2013. p. 292). The neoliberal subject, then, must be invested in the staging of competitions, striving to maximize her (human) capital and her efficiency and productivity. In order to do so, she must present herself as ‘open’, ‘synchronized’, ‘positive’, ‘empathetic’ and ‘cooperative’.

Neoliberalism requires from the subject complete and total investment. It requires a sort of inextricability from work, in which she must find her identity, self-fulfillment and life meaning. Indeed, it is through work that the neoliberal subject is expected to exercise her principles of authenticity, confidence, responsibility, social justice and sustainability (VRASTI, 2009; ROSE, 1990). Then, we can begin to understand how neoliberalism shapes, disciplines and psychically invests the subject into exactly the self-enterprise it depends on. We can see more clearly how the (psychic) attachment of the subject to the norm of productivity and competition takes place. This psychic attachment works, as we have discussed earlier, through the process of recognition.

We struggle to be recognized by an Other residing in our fantasies, watching us in a private panoptic, calling us on to assume a kind of relation to our desires, as the drive behind our ideal personality. Servitude is, then, replaced, when we internalize an imaginary authority figure, phantasmatically constructed and responsible for the organization of our psychological identity, for our ‘vocation’ (SAFATLE, 2015. p. 236).

This Other recognizes us through the predicate of success: as long as we are successful, we are worthy human beings. This success is attained through work. The subject must strive for and towards success. Again, as Kramnick (1981) has already shown us, this thought that success is something to be worked for instead of merely given at birth is in itself a revolution. The subject now has to earn her success: she has to prove every single time that she is worthy.

The mechanism through which she proves herself is the staging of competitions. That is why ‘winning’ matters so much in the neoliberal discourse: being a winner is, in fact, being a worthwhile human being. And being a winner, as Butler (2004b) taught us, is only possible against the possibility of being a loser too. The subject assumes as her own the risks of the staging of competitions and suffers the brutal consequences of the possibility of losing. Now, not only we can see how the neoliberal subject is formed through a psychic attachment to the norm of competition, but we can see how this inscribing into the norm happens also through its
negative: the patologization of unproductive subjects – in our case, through the discourse of mental illness, specifically, the constitute on of depression as a pathology. These losers that can’t seem to be able to meet the criteria of the success and happiness or who can’t seem to be able to handle the pressure of the staging of competitions are stigmatized, marginalized and medicalized. These subjects, then, have their demands for recognition frustrated, and end up putting in question their own worth as human beings. And since losing is a possibility that presents itself each time the subject performs in the staging of competitions, this fear of falling out of grace spreads through the whole of the fabric of society. This e a fear of not ever being good enough, not ever achieving which Safatle (2015) calls a ‘bad negative’, since it is “always haunted by an ever more which never materializes itself, a beyond itself which serves the function of deeming the subject inadequate with a bitter taste of ‘not quite there yet’” (SAFATLE, 2015, p. 205). This happens because the demands neoliberalism imposes on the subject are never measurable, never quantifiable. With that being, the subject is left with an impossible task of always outrun, outlast and overcome the best version of herself, a task impossible by its own definition (EHRENBERG, 2010a).

Here, the international is psychic, once we understand that a fuller grasp on neoliberalism’s culture of competition means taking seriously the way in which we suffer. Since, “ultimately, not only there is a particular way in which we work, desire or speak according to the socioeconomic model we are under. But we also are affected and suffer in an according to the logics of these models. Thus, we can speak of a historical construction of the ways we are inscribed into pathologies of suffering” (SAFATLE, 2016). In fact, not only Safatle (2016) but also Catani (2016) bring attention to the way in which depression has been constituted as a psychopathology at the same time the first neoliberal economic policies were being put into action and the demands for a new work ethics were being put forth. Depression, along with 265 pathologies, were described in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III). The DSM-III is seen as significantly different from the previous two editions as it presents mental disorders in two entirely different ways: (i) it singles out depression from the broader scope of neurosis it had previously been described under; and (ii) it sticks to more specific technical descriptions of pathologies, instead of broader, more socially contextualized ones it had previously presented. Depression, then, can only be understood through a neoliberal vocabulary of individualization and responsibilization, hence the international being psychic, as it is only through these particular subjectivities promoted by
neoliberalism’s culture of competition we are able to understand the way in which mental disorders have been described and dealt with in the last forty or fifty years.

In fact, just as R.B.J. Walker (2007; 2010) urges us to look at the limits and boundaries as the very sites of politics, the places in which we can have a better understanding of the politics playing out in the categories – in Walker’s case, of the international, the state or the subject –, Dardot and Laval (2013) argue that this distinction between ‘pathologic’ and ‘normal’ is the very site of operation of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism makes a clear cut – or at least tries to – distinction between winners – successful, productive, efficient, competent, emotionally intelligent – and losers – people who can’t meet deadlines, execute basic tasks, who have none or little control over their emotions, who are, in general, not-successful – sometimes pathologized in the labels of depression or anxiety. These losers must be brought back into the norm of productivity. That’s is where not only practices such as coaching, neuro-linguistic programming and transactional analysis, but also therapy and drugs such as antidepressants and anxiolytics come into play as a management of these pathologies or somewhat abnormalities.

Conclusion

Throughout these few pages, we’ve made an effort to, following Cynthia Enloe’s (2014) movement starting with ‘where are the women?’ – in our case: ‘where are the narratives of suffering?’ – and seeing that both the personal is political – and, thus, international – and the political is personal – in our case: both the psychic is international (neoliberal) and the international is psychic, find that looking at the erasures in international politics helps us to have a better understanding of how international politics works. Following Eloë’s palindrome, we looked closely at how the psychic is international with Foucault’s discussion around subject’s formation in a tight relationship of discourse and power and Butler’s discussion of the function of norms in this relationship. We took a step further into the psychic with Benjamin’s discussion around recognition, drawing from Winnicott. Then, we found that how the international is psychic following the specific aspects in which neoliberalism makes a psychic investment in the subject, manufacturing – not intentionally in some sort of evil plan, but following Foucault’s rule of the tactical polyvalence of discourses – the exact subject it depends on through a managerial discourse.
This work allowed us to better situate the desiring aspect of the subject in international politics, an aspect of the subject we have long been missing in international politics. We hope to continue this work with Lacan’s approach on the topic of the subject and its close relation to language. We hope to further explore how our whole concept of (inter)national politics are structured around a specific subject: rational, equal and free; and the ways in which this particular conception shapes and limits our political imagination, our possibility to imagine other worlds possible (WALKER, 2010). We also hope to continue following the ways in which mental illness is not a biological given, but a category that only happens and makes sense in a broader political, economic and social context (CATANI, 2016). With that, we hope to have contributed to the growing literature on affect in international politics, and the possible dialogue between our discipline of International Relations and study of psychoanalysis, not through an acritical appropriation of psychoanalytical concepts, but working from the problems both these disciplines put forth (WALKER; BIGO, 2007).

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6 We find FINK, Bruce. *O Sujeito Lacaniano: Entre a Linguagem e o Gozo*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor, 1998 might be a good start.

7 Another possible direction around the desiring – or injured – aspect of shaping our worlds we hope to further develop our research is the discussion around identity politics found in BROWN, Wendy. *States of Injury*: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995.
References


