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An ordeal of the Real: shame and the superego

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This essay argues that the renovation of a discourse of shame in late capitalist society requires revisiting the conventional Freudian literature on shame from a Lacanian point of view. The argument holds that shame is a subjective manifestation of a complex dialectics between the ego-ideal and the superego. The essay extends the Lacanian notion that shame is felt in relation to an “Other prior to the Other”. Under the dialectical pressure of the ego-ideal, the superego, it is argued, plays a paradoxical but ineliminable role in the production of shame. In the concluding parts of the essay, I tease out the radical socio-political consequences of a renovated Lacanian discourse of shame. Correlated to the death drive, shame offers an escape from the capitalist symbolic order’s predeterminations and pre-assigned identifications. As such, shame is designated not only as the *telos* of psychoanalysis, but also as the original and originary ethical relation.

Keywords: shame, superego, ego-ideal, death drive

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to contribute – from a Lacanian point of view – to the renovation of a discourse of shame which, in our capitalist societies, has been in significant decline. “[T]here is no longer any shame”, Lacan (2007: 182) remarked in closing Seminar XVII in the atmosphere of May 1968. This decline of shame is often attributed to the distinction between guilt and shame, which would have it that modernity inaugurates a culture of guilt, whereas shame remains reserved for societies that have not yet emerged out of pre-modernity. According to this distinction, as Joan Copjec (2007: 61) has written, guilt is an affect of advanced cultures that have developed “an internal principle of morality”, whereas shame belongs to a “primitive culture” which is forced to rely “on the approving or disapproving gaze of other people to monitor morality”.

Copjec contests the way in which the affects of shame and guilt are used to distinguish between cultures, because, as she writes, these affects define “a subject’s relation to her culture”, not the cultures themselves. Copjec is of the view that the division of the world between shame cultures and guilt cultures is a “thoroughly discredited sociological division” (2007: 61). June Price Tangney adds that the “anthropological distinction” between shame and guilt “has not fared well in empirical investigations” (1994: 3). She refers to a study in which both adult and child respondents reported that both shame and guilt “were each most likely to be experienced in the presence of others” (1994: 3).

As supported by the observations of Tangney, Copjec then seems to suggest that shame is not in decline because we have progressed to an advanced stage of guilt culture that has left shame cultures behind. Rather, it appears that the reasons for the decline of shame in our cultures should be sought in the subject’s relation to her culture(s). From a Lacanian point of view, this invariably suggests that the appropriate analytic for shame should be the relationship of the subject to the Other, since it is the Other which is at stake in any relationship of the subject to culture. Indeed, ever since Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (2003), shame has been inseparable from the subject’s relationship to the Other. As Sartre wrote: “I am ashamed of myself as I *appear* to the Other [...] Shame is shame *of oneself before the Other*; these two structures are inseparable” (2003: 222).

However, under conditions of advanced late capitalism, in which everything is not only permitted but indeed mandated to conform to an ineluctable injunction to enjoy, the subject’s relation to her culture becomes one that is, similarly, an *enjoined* relation of shamelessness. For if everything is permitted and *must* be enjoyed, there is no longer a place for the conditions of possibility of shame in the subject’s relation to her culture. Indeed, under these cultural conditions – in which pathological narcissistic subjectivity has become socially mandatory –

the role of an Other in whose eyes one can be (a)shamed, is diminished to the point of a near liquidation: the Other wanes while the Same waxes to the point of surfeit. This is not the place to definitively diagnose such a demise of the Other in the terms of cultural psychosis, although that is ultimately the point at and with which this article concludes.

I argue that, for a discourse of shame to be renovated, we need to return with Lacan to the notion of the Other and thoroughly excavate which dimensions of the Other are at stake in shame. Specifically, I am interested in the relationship between shame and two aspects of the Other, two ways in which the Other can appear to the subject in Lacanian psychoanalysis. These are the (big) Other as ego-ideal and the Other as superego. The discretely Lacanian orientation, which I follow, dictates that the two agencies are, while inseparable, in fact opposed.

I will argue that shame is a relation of tension with what Jacques-Alain Miller (2006: 13) has called “an Other prior to the Other”. However, my contention is that we have to understand this Other in an incisive way, namely as the Other of the Law which is dialectically split between ego-ideal and superego. In other words, I will be arguing that in addition to the role of the ego-ideal in shame, there is an essential role also for the superego in the production of shame. In this strand of the argument, I am in agreement with the Freudian literature which I will set out below. Yet every reader of Lacan will realise that to attribute an essential role to the superego in the production of shame cannot be a straightforward exercise, since the superego for Lacan is *the* agency of mandatory enjoyment. Thus, I will propose that the Lacanian superego plays a paradoxical role in the production of shame and that this paradox arises as a result of the dialectical pressure of the ego-ideal in relation to which the superego is made to function when shame is at stake. In shame, I contend, it is as if the superego short-circuits its own command to enjoy. As such, shame becomes a critical intra-psychic bulwark against the indelible force of a limitless superego enjoyment.

Furthermore, while this argument agrees with the Freudian literature that there is an essential role for the superego in shame, the radical social and political consequences of tethering shame to the superego have not been borne out in the Freudian literature. For this reason, it becomes necessary to spell out these implications and consequences for the social order in the concluding section of the article. These are implications and consequences that only come into view once the production of shame is understood in relation to the paradoxical role of the Lacanian superego in shame. In short, my sense is that shame, understood according to the Lacanian analytic, can be a powerful mode of critique vis-à-vis advanced late capitalism’s culture of enjoyment, a culture that so profoundly occludes an Other in whose eyes we can be (a)shamed. It is, however, necessary

to situate the renovation of a discourse of shame within the context of the Freudian field more generally, not only because Lacan is, when all is said and done, a reader of Freud, but also in order to throw into relief the differential aspects of the Lacanian version of shame. Accordingly, I briefly review below, as a point of departure, the history of shame in the Freudian field.

Shame, the ego-ideal and the superego

The Freudian field has, since inception, designated a relationship between shame, the ego-ideal and the superego, but the literature is historically divided as regards the question of whether shame is an effect of the superego or whether it is more appropriately designated as a function of the ego-ideal. For instance, Helen B Lewis (1971: 423) hypothesised that both shame and guilt are superego functions. Lewis then argued that, as corollaries of “the superego construct”, shame and guilt are “identification phenomena”. In this regard, Lewis mentions that one route of identification is anaclitic and accordingly “involves the incorporation of an ego ideal” (1971: 423). The other route of identification that she mentions involves the incorporation of the castration threat and she terms this “defensive” identification.

In describing the anaclitic identification phenomenon as incorporating an ego-ideal, Lewis clearly conflates the superego and the ego-ideal in her analysis of shame so that the ego ideal is regarded as merely one “identificatory” aspect of the superego. Lewis’s analytic thus remains clearly within a Freudian framework in which the ego-ideal and the superego can still be used interchangeably, as Freud used it in *The Ego and the Id*. From a Lacanian point of view, it bears mentioning at this early stage of the discussion that the two forms of identification that Lewis describes can easily be mapped on to the *opposition* of ego-ideal and superego in Lacan’s work, such that defensive identification could be regarded as a properly superegoic form of identification and anaclitic identification as the identification properly aligned to the ego-ideal, as Lewis suggests. But the point is that Lewis’s Freudian orientation prevents her from clearly distinguishing between the superego and the ego-ideal. The defensibility of the assertion, that defensive identification is properly superegoic and anaclitic identification is reserved for the ego-ideal, will hopefully become more apparent once we venture into how Lacanian psychoanalysis distinguishes between superego and ego-ideal.

On the other hand, Gerhart Piers (1953: 25-30) argued, from within a Neo-Freudian perspective, that shame is exclusively a tension that arises between the ego and the ego-ideal, whereas guilt is a relationship of the ego to the superego. Relying on Lewis, and in direct opposition to Piers, Tangney (1994) endorsed the idea that shame is a discrete superego emotion. Curiously, Tangney refers in her

chapter to Piers's reliance on the discrete ego-ideal as the instigator of shame, but dismisses it as being out of step with recent analytic literature (1994: 7). Of late, the conventional analytic literature seems to have settled on the idea that shame is a result of tension between the superego and the ego (see, for instance, Rothstein (1994)). The earlier notion, that shame should be reserved for the ego-ideal, thus seems to have been left behind in Freudian work. Indeed, Piers's Neo-Freudian distinction between the ego-ideal and the superego in the context of shame and guilt has not survived.

As is well known, Lacan followed an entirely different conceptualisation of the relationship between ego-ideal and superego such that the two cannot be conflated or used interchangeably as in the Freudian consensus. Already in his encyclopaedia article on the family, Lacan (1938: 37) separated the ego-ideal from the superego by arguing that the agency which represses sexual tendencies in the infant is the superego and the agency which sublimates the parental image is the ego-ideal. From the beginning, Lacan associates the superego with a punitive effect and the ego-ideal with ideal projections. This early distinction formed the basis of later pronouncements in which the superego and ego-ideal were even further distinguished from each other.

Following Lacan, I contest in the next section the reliance in the Freudian literature on either a conflation of the ego-ideal with the superego (Lewis 1971) or the assignation of shame exclusively to the ego-ideal (Piers 1953), or the recent consensus that shame is exclusively a superego emotion (Tangney 1994), by arguing that in the Lacanian analytic, shame should be understood as an ordeal of the Real which critically relies on a *dialectics* between ego-ideal and superego. Stated differently, my argument will be that the contemporary consensus in the Freudian literature is both accurate and inaccurate in depicting shame as a superego affect. It is accurate in linking shame to the superego, but it is inaccurate on two scores: first, it is inaccurate in neglecting or dismissing outright the ego-ideal's role in shame; secondly, it is inaccurate insofar as it fails to tease out the radical implications of identifying shame with the superego.

I shall particularly contest, in the concluding part of this article, the assertion in Lewis that shame functions as a "drive control" (1971: 423). On the contrary, I will suggest that shame can unleash the drive, if it is understood according to the Lacanian model, and that this can have a curative effect, bearing in mind Lacan's teaching that the analysis is accomplished when the subject achieves the shift from desire to drive. As we shall see in the next section, the Lacanian superego plays a very different role in the analytic understanding of shame — one that can by no means be equated with the role of the superego in the Freudian literature on shame. Furthermore, as I shall also illustrate in the next section, there remains, in

a specific post-Freudian sense, a lot to be said for Piers's identification of shame with the ego-ideal, because Lacanian psychoanalysis assigns a primary role to the ego-ideal in shame.

An “Other prior to the Other”

My starting point in the Lacanian explication of shame is Jacques-Alain Miller's assertion that shame is felt in relation to “an Other prior to the Other” (2006: 13). In his reflections on shame in the context of Lacan's Seminar XVII, Miller argues that shame is a “primary affect in relation to the Other” (2006: 13). Miller makes a distinction between shame and guilt from which is precipitated “an Other that is prior to the Other” in whose gaze I am shamed but not (yet) guilty. This Other prior to the Other is an Other who does not (yet) judge me as guilty. Rather, it is the Other before whose gaze I am exposed without that Other necessarily making a judgment in relation to my guilt. But this does not mean that Miller suggests that there is no transgression in shame. The point is simply that the Other prior to the Other does not judge the subject as *guilty* of transgression.

A cursory reading of Miller would suggest that with his precipitation of an Other prior to the Other and the distinction between guilt and shame that underlies it, Miller risks reinstating the very cultural prejudice to which Copjec and Tangney object. However, because Miller identifies shame as a *primary* affect in relation to *the Other*, it is clear that he immediately situates his discourse in the context of the subject's relation to culture, for to say that shame is a primary affect in relation to the Other is to say, echoing Sartre, that it is for the subject primary in relation to her culture. Miller accordingly does not reinstate the objectionable empirically and sociologically discredited distinction between shame culture and guilt culture. Rather, Miller is at pains to distinguish between two distinct psychic agencies – an Other that sees and an Other that judges.

According to Juliet Rogers (2017: 169), “shame comes from a sense of being seen, or exposed before an idealised other”. This idealised other is, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the ego-ideal. Thus, when Miller speaks of an Other prior to the Other in whose gaze I am shamed, it seems that he is exclusively referring to the ego-ideal as a manifestation of the big Other. The ego-ideal is that part of our psychic agency which most closely adheres to the sense of Law as enabling our co-existence and thus it is the psychic counterpart of the Kantian sense of Law as the realm of external freedom. In short, the ego-ideal represents our symbolic mandate – our dignity as subjects. As Slavoj Žižek (2006: 80) has put it: “Ego-Ideal is the agency whose *gaze* I try to impress with my ego image, the big Other who *watches* over me and impels me to give my best, the ideal I try to follow and actualize” (emphasis added). For Rogers and Miller, shame is triggered by

exposure before this agency's "gaze". As Tsung-huei Huang (2009: 106) thus points out, quoting Leys, "shame is an emotion that is *routed through the eyes*" and "the logic of shame is a scene of exposure" (emphasis added). What is critical in shame, then, is the sanctioning gaze of the big Other as ego-ideal. As Rogers writes: "Shame is *felt* in the gaze of the one who is able to *see all*" (2017: 174 (emphasis added)).

Crucially, Rogers points out that "shame appears where the subject *thinks he is being seen* by another in a *compromising* position; when he is exposed" (2017: 171 (emphasis added)). Thus, for a subject to think that he is being seen by another in a compromising position, to be shamed, this Other before whom the subject is exposed must, of course, be perceived or fantasised by the subject as regarding the subject in a compromising position. In other words, the subject must perceive the gaze of the Other, of the ego-ideal, as regarding the exposed behaviour as shameful and as something that embarrasses the subject. Logically, this touches on the fact that there is always a transgression involved in shame. Shame then, arises as Piers (1953: 11) pointedly argued, out of a tension between the ego and the ego-ideal, which in the Lacanian terminology is designated by Miller as "an Other prior to the Other". Yet, as I will suggest below, this does not paint the Lacanian picture of shame fully, since the role of the Lacanian superego in shame is neglected in this account.

Rogers continues to argue that shame "is felt at the point of the subject's orientation to an unknown" (2017: 171). As Rogers writes: "The unknown is crucially experienced at the point of a belief in the having of knowledge and in the face of the Other seeing that this 'having' is not the case" (2017: 171). Along these lines in terms of which shame is conceived as a lack of knowledge in relation to the Other, Elspeth Probyn (2005: 3) cites Piers's psychoanalysis of shame, which holds that "behind the feeling of shame stands not the fear of hatred but the fear of *contempt* which, on an *even deeper level of the unconscious*, spells fear of *abandonment*" (emphasis added). In response to Piers, Probyn writes that "[s]hame brings the fear of abandonment by society, of being left to starve outside the boundaries of humankind" (2005: 3). In highlighting the relationship between fear and shame, Probyn mines that aspect of shame according to which it is critically related to a lack of knowledge. Indeed one can say that the fear of abandonment has its mainspring in the fact that the subject in shame does not know what/who she is for the Other.

Crucial to note, then, is that Probyn's emphasis on fear is not at odds with Rogers and Miller once one understands that in Probyn, Rogers's "unknown" and "idealised" Other (Miller's Other prior to the Other) merely takes the names of "society" and "humankind". The fact that the idealised Other takes these

names in Probyn does not take away from the fact that it is, as “society” and as “humankind”, nonetheless unknown and idealised as an Other prior to the Other that judges. None of us can have only a relationship of knowledge in relation to “society” and “humankind”, otherwise the doubt on which the fear of contempt and abandonment is premised would be altogether erased. In such cases we would not fear contempt and abandonment – we would either know it or not. For shame to occur, the subject cannot think, must not be thinking, that she knows in advance what she is for the Other.

What is (also) at stake, then, in regard to this Other prior to the Other is not the capacity to judge, but, in addition to its capacity to see, its capacity to enjoy fear. Here, Probyn touches on the properly superegoic basis of the subject’s experience of shame, for it is above all the superego that is responsible for the enjoyment of the fear of abandonment in the subject. This is the case in great part because, in Lacan (1938: 45), the archaic superego has its origins in the maternal, linked as it is to the castration phantasy. With reference to the assertion in the Freudian literature that superego identification is properly designated as defensive identification, Lewis is, then, in a sense correct that fear of the “castration threat” forms the nucleus of this form of identification. However, because Lewis works with an analytically reduced version of the superego, she is not able to tease out the radical implications of the correlation of shame with the superego. I will elaborate on these implications in the next section.

Shame as an ordeal of the Real

While it is clear that the ego-ideal plays a critical role in the manifestation of shame, because it is a relation of tension with the gaze of the big Other, it is necessary to involve Lacan’s concept of the superego in order to understand the experiential quality of shame more fully. My sense is that the Other in its guise as the ego-ideal is not exclusively, as Piers asserted and as Miller seems to intimate, the agency which is responsible for feelings of shame for the subject. In this sense alone, the contemporary consensus in Freudian and Neo-Freudian circles that shame is a function of the superego, is correct – but not in the way that it thinks. The reason why Lacanian shame cannot be limited to the ego-ideal is because the “primordial Other” prior to the Other that judges, operates in close proximity to the superego. As Probyn notes in the quote above, shame touches on the deepest level of the unconscious. My argument holds that Miller’s Other prior to the Other is dialectically split between the ego-ideal and the superego. In Lacan’s work, the ego-ideal is, in fact, always accompanied by the darker psychic agency of the superego to which it is opposed. As Ragland (1995: 62) has put it, “the superego

Lacan described [is] a secondary introjection *in relation* to the function of the ego ideal” (emphasis added).

For the Freud of *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1961: 123), the superego is the internalisation of a “harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon other extraneous individuals”. Internalisation of this aggressiveness means that instead of turning it on other individuals, the subject turns this aggressiveness upon herself. This turning of aggressiveness upon oneself is the essential function of the Freudian superego. For this reason, Freud argues that, relative to the ego, superego is the sadistic agency which is responsible for the ego’s conscience (1961: 123). Along these lines, Freud suggests that superego is the price we pay at the individual, instinctual level for the security and relative peace that civilisation affords us.

The Lacanian psychoanalysis of the superego, however, takes its cue from that part of Freud’s writing in which it is argued that the superego is always close to the agency of the primitive id – the intra-psychoic mechanism that is associated with the transgression of the laws of the ego-ideal (Piers 1953: 13). Taking his cue from this part of Freud, but in his characteristic Lacanian key, Žižek (2006: 80) thus argues that superego is the same agency as the ego-ideal, but in its “vengeful, sadistic, punishing aspect”. In this regard, Lacan argues that superego is “consonant with the register and idea of the law, that is to say with the totality of the system of language”, but that whereas the ego-ideal represents law in its emancipatory sense, superego represents law in its “pure imperativeness and simple tyranny” (1988: 102). Todd McGowan (2004: 30) reads superego in this sense as representing the law’s violence and it is in this sense that one can understand Lacan’s further argument that superego is “at the same time a senseless law”, “at the same time the law and its destruction” (1988: 102).

The sadism of the superego “relies on the *splitting* of the field of the law into law qua ego-ideal: a symbolic order which regulates social life and maintains social peace, and into its obscene, superegotistical inverse” (Žižek 1994: 926 (emphasis added)). What we should note, however, is that it is the “field of the law” that is split between ego-ideal and superego. So, if shame is a relation that depends on exposure before the Other, we should read this Other as the Other of the Law, which in turn is split between ego-ideal and superego. In other words, the superego in Lacan plays an indisputable role in the “totality of the system of language”. For Ragland (1995: 49), the inversion of the Law for which the superego is responsible, means that there is an equation between the superego and *jouissance*: she calls the superego “an agent of ferocious *jouissance*”.

Žižek takes this idea further, by arguing that the superego intrudes into “the field of ideology” which is his particular way of referring to the symbolic order:

“insofar as the superego designates the intrusion of enjoyment into the field of ideology, we can also say that the opposition of symbolic law and superego points towards the tension between ideological meaning and enjoyment: symbolic law guarantees meaning, whereas superego provides enjoyment which serves as the *unacknowledged support* of meaning” (1994: 925 (emphasis added)). In the next section, we will enquire into the ethical and political valence of the “kernel of enjoyment” that is encompassed in shame. I will be particularly interested in the notion that the superego “provides enjoyment which serves as the unacknowledged support of meaning”. Indeed, my argument will be that shame is a paradigmatic example of such a form of superego enjoyment which supports meaning.

For the moment, I want to follow the discussion to the psychic register which the superego supports. Žižek (2006: 80) and Ragland (1995: 42) argue that superego corresponds to the Real. Ragland remarks that “[t]he superego starts as an Ur-object of the real that constitutes the ego and the id insofar as the voice and the gaze of the primordial Other are the first agents of castration or judgment” (1995: 215). Žižek takes this link between the superego, castration and judgment to its logical conclusion:

superego is real, the cruel and insatiable agency that bombards me with impossible demands and then mocks my botched attempts to meet them, the agency in whose eyes I am all the more *guilty*, the more I try to suppress my ‘sinful’ strivings and meet its demands. (2006: 80) [emphasis added].

It seems, then, that the superego is associated with the Other who judges and in whose eyes I am, therefore, guilty. Žižek has repeatedly drawn attention to Lacan’s teaching that the essential command of the superego is Enjoy! This command to enjoy must, however, be understood to mean that the superego essentially commands enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle and thus beyond desire. What is at stake with the superego is precisely the traumatic form of enjoyment that Lacan called *jouissance*.

My wager here is that if I am “all the more *guilty*” in the gaze of the superego, there is nonetheless every reason to expect that there will be a role for the Lacanian superego also in the production of shame. For if the superego’s “essential” command is directed at enjoyment, then it means that there can be cases of superego “enjoyment” in which the superego remains confined within its essential function to produce *jouissance*, but does not advance to judgment. In other words, my argument below will be that if the ego-ideal and the superego are understood as dialectically related, then the ego-ideal can operate as a restraint on the superego’s advancement to judgment, but it cannot cancel out the

superego's essential function, the production of enjoyment. Shame, I believe, is precisely such a manifestation of the dialectics of the ego-ideal and the superego.

How, then, do we understand shame in relation to the Lacanian superego? A starting point here would be to note Rogers's observation that "shame usually appears in a visceral way" – it is experienced "in the flesh" in the form of blushing, cringing or a kind of desperate agony (2017: 172). As Sarah Ahmed has written, "shame can be described as an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body" (2004: 103). Second, it is critical to note that, for this reason, shame represents a moment during which the subject is overcome or even overtaken, not in charge nor in possession of herself – *disordered*, or, for a moment, de-constituted by the appearance of something that is "in me more than myself".

This suggests that shame is a form of *jouissance* – an ordeal of the Real (Lacan 1991: 180) and thus – as a matter of logic – that the superego forms part of the psychic "location from which *one's identity is sanctioned*" in this way (Rogers 2017: 172 (emphasis added)). Copjec (2007: 74) underscores the nature of shame as a form of *jouissance*, linked to the physical body, when she writes: "In shame one finds oneself attached inescapably to the *nonobjectifiable object* of one's own *jouissance* and thus to one's lived body" (emphasis added). Miller, in a sense, redoubles this intensity of shame as *jouissance* when, quoting Lacan, he insists that "shame is related to the *jouissance* that touches on [...] 'that which is *most intimate* in the subject'" (2006: 13 (emphasis added)).

While the above remarks suggest that there is a superegoic dimension to shame because it is a form of *jouissance*, it is nonetheless difficult to understand how the superego can sanction one's identity if its essential command is directed at enjoyment. My answer in this regard relies partly on Lacan's insistence that the superego, while being real, is nonetheless "essentially located within the symbolic plane of speech" (Lacan 1988: 102). Lacan's remark suggests that we need to understand the relationship between the ego-ideal and the superego in an incisively dialectical way. From Žižek's and Ragland's account of the superego we already know that it is not the case that the ego-ideal and the superego operate independently – they are dialectically related, the one "needs" or relies on the other, enjoyment "intrudes" in the "field of ideology", it is the "unacknowledged support" of meaning.

My sense is that the answer, as to how the superego sanctions in relation to shame, lies in the double meaning of the word *sanction* in Rogers's phrase above. To sanction can mean both to prohibit and to licence (Lexico). If shame represents a tension of the ego with the ego-ideal's gaze, if it is, at the same time, a result of the transgression of the Other's prohibitions, then it is possible to argue

that the superego under such circumstances *enjoins* (or “licences”) a *reaction to the jouissance of the subject’s transgression*. This paradoxical re-action is shame. The hypothesis is that the superego’s participation in the dialectic triggers a transformation of *jouissance* – the *jouissance* of transgression turns into or transforms into the *jouissance* of shame. Žižek (2005: 147) argues that in shame one *actively assumes* a passivity and in Lacanian terms this means that one finds or derives *jouissance* in the passive situation in which one is caught. What marks the active or, better, *re-active* assumption of the passivity, is the transformation in the *jouissance* that occurs.

In shame it is as if the superego’s command to Enjoy! in a sense short circuits itself – the active *jouissance* of transgression is permitted or licenced by the superego to turn into something altogether different: the re-active, passive *jouissance* of shame. The reason why the superego in a sense turns on itself in shame is because of the weight that the ego-ideal carries in the dialectic. The ego-ideal prevents the superego from advancing to judgment and punishment – in other words, to guilt – but it cannot prevent the superego from exercising its essential function, namely to licence *jouissance*. Under such dialectical conditions, the superego can only enjoin a different *jouissance*, the *jouissance* of shame. Shame can accordingly be understood as the “indivisible remainder” of a Hegelian synthesis of the ego-ideal and the superego (Žižek 1996: 52).¹ In shame, then, the subject is split between the Other of desire (ego-ideal) and the Other of *jouissance* (superego).

This superegotistical, “shameful” transformation of *jouissance* would also explain why Lacan (1991: 189) argued that shame is “the hole from which the master signifier arises”. It means that, by dint of the superego’s location “within the symbolic plain of speech”, the *jouissance* of shame re-orientates the subject in the direction of that very “symbolic plane of speech”. And if shame is this hole, this Real, from which the master-signifier issues, then it means quite obviously, as Miller (2006: 23) puts it, that “[m]aking ashamed is an effort to reinstate the agency of the master signifier”. Indeed, as Sauvagnat (2018: 791) has pointed out,

1 Žižek (1996: 52) explains that the indivisible remainder is not some leftover of dialectical progression, some kind of “external kernel which idealization / symbolization is unable to ‘swallow’, to internalize”. Rather, it is the “‘irrationality’, the unaccountable madness, of the very founding gesture of idealization/symbolization”. Shame is the symbolic exposure of this “unaccountable madness”. Positing shame as an indivisible remainder of the dialectical operation of the ego-ideal and the superego, means that shame is a point in subjective experience where the Symbolic mediates between itself and the Real. The consequence of this is that shame functions as the *objet petit a* – an “inert [or passive] remainder of the real which resists [“resists”, not “precludes”] symbolization” (1996: 90). See further the discussion in the next section as regards the potential political consequences of such a mediation.

this means that for Lacan the true subject of discourse is the subject of shame and part of the reason why this is the case is because “shame puts an end to the desire to turn our *jouissance* into a weapon we can possess and wield against the social order” (Copjec 2007: 76). In the next section, I will show how the *jouissance* of shame can be used in the social order, not as a weapon, but precisely as the emergence of a discourse of the Other. The preliminary point I want to make here is that it should be clear that Lacanian psychoanalysis is in agreement that to shame constitutes an effort to reinstate the Law (of the signifier), the Law of discourse.

To summarise, shame is not a subjective manifestation for which the ego-ideal is exclusively responsible, albeit that the gaze of the ego-ideal is, as we have seen, critical in the occurrence of shame. The point is that the “sanctioning” aspect of the gaze of the Other prior to the Other is dialectically split between the ego-ideal’s prohibitive force and the superego’s “permissive”, *jouissance*-inductive energy and this is the reason why shame is, as Miller has put it, “a primary affect in relation to the Other” (2006: 13 (emphasis added)), why it touches on that which is “most intimate” in the subject. Shame, in other words, is primary in relation to the Other, because it draws on both the ego-ideal as well as the superego’s agency and energy.

Shame and the social order

In the context of the political concerns about shame that Miller, echoing Lacan, hints at in his disquisition on shame and that has, in a different key, recently been voiced by Carlo Ginzburg (2019: 44), it becomes necessary to account for the argument that shame concerns the “boundaries of the ego” and that “[s]hame embodies the relationship between the individual body and the political body” (2019: 40) – a point made earlier, in slightly different terms, also by Copjec (2007: 75). From the preceding discussion, it should be clear that at the individual psychoanalytic level, shame concerns the boundaries of the ego because it involves the ego in a tension with both the ego-ideal and the superego as its boundaries. But at the ethico-political level, shame involves the ego in a tension with its boundaries because it can also be “reintegrative” in the sense that it reintegrates the ego into an ethical responsibility towards society and its culture; in other words, the ego is “reintegrated” by shame into the domain of inter-subjectivity. This is the so-called “paradox of shame”, described by Copjec, the paradox that “[s]hame is a feeling of one’s isolation or uniqueness at the same time as it is an intensely social feeling” (2007: 75). But this, as I will suggest below, is only an initial version of the reintegrative potential of shame – in truth, shame as “reintegrative” can be much more subversive.

The Lacanian superimposition on Ginzburg's remarks would have it that shame concerns the boundaries of the ego because in shame the superego and the ego-ideal work to bring the Real of the physical body together with the Symbolic Order of the political body. In this sense, then, shame represents a point where the *jouissance* of the physical body becomes *politicised*. Shame is that point in the subject's experiential field where, to quote Lacan, she is ultimately able to "bear as jouissance the injustice that horrifies" (Copjec 2007: 67; Lacan 2015: 303)² and that horrifies not just anyone or the subject herself, but that horrifies or, at the very least, should horrify, the body politic as big Other. As Copjec writes:

Jouissance – roughly equivalent to Freud's libido – names our capacity to put ourselves forward and determine our destiny. Yet unlike libido, it characterizes this capacity as something we cannot possess and thus as horrifying: a monstrous otherness that is not at our disposal, but must rather be suffered (2007: 67).

As regards this "monstrous otherness that is not at our disposal, but must be suffered", Žižek (2005: 169) uses the example of the predicament of the Tramp in Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights*. The Tramp swallows a whistle by mistake and suffers an attack of hiccups. This leads to a comical effect: each time the Tramp has a hiccup, the whistle blows, causing a strange sound to emanate from the Tramp's body. Embarrassed, the Tramp tries to cover up these noises but is ultimately at a loss as to what to do. Žižek asks:

Does this scene not stage shame at its purest? I am ashamed when I am confronted with the excess in my body. It is significant that the source of shame in this scene is sound: a spectral sound emanating from within the Tramp's body, sound as an autonomous 'organ without body,' located in the very heart of his body and at the same time uncontrollable, like a kind of parasite, a foreign intruder—in short, what Lacan called the voice-object, one of the incarnations of *objet petit a*, of the agalma, that which is 'in me more than myself' (2005: 169).

According to Žižek (2005: 171), Lacan specified shame as "respect for castration, as an attitude of discreetly covering up the fact of being castrated". This specification, then, resonates perfectly with Lewis's Freudian idea that superego identification consists in the incorporation of the castration threat, termed as "defensive" identification. But Lewis and the Freudian heritage do not draw out the radical individual, ethical and political implications of this

2 The quotation is Copjec's English translation of the original French. In the 2015 English translation edition, the phrase is translated as "asked to assume responsibility for the very injustice she abhors as if it were a jouissance" (Lacan 2015: 303).

identification. Žižek, on the contrary, asks whether the undead “organ without body” as in the example above, is not precisely the thing that *escapes* castration. He explains that for a human being to be “dead while alive” is to be completely colonised by the symbolic order, while to be “alive while dead” is to give “body to the remainder of Life-Substance which has escaped the symbolic colonization” (2005: 172). What emerges is the split between the Other and *jouissance*, between the ego-ideal and the superego. For Žižek, the split means that both life and death have “a properly monstrous dimension”: life is the “undead” drive which persists beyond ordinary death, death is “the symbolic order itself”, the structure that colonises the living. Death drive inheres in the split within the opposition between life and death. Shame, Žižek (2005: 173) concludes, “thus appears to be precisely what overwhelms the subject when he or she is confronted with what, in him or her, remains noncastrated, with the embarrassing surplus appendage which continues to dangle out,” (or whistle, as in the example). This “embarrassing surplus appendage” is, as Žižek suggests above, one of the incarnations of the *objet petit a* – that which literally falls out as the surplus of the symbolic order’s discursive operation or, as Evans (1996: 129) puts it, “the remnant left behind by the introduction of the symbolic in the real”. This remnant has the status of a “surplus meaning and a surplus enjoyment” (1996: 129).

Copjec (2006: 103) has argued that Lacan’s orientation to ontology is markedly different from that of Levinas. Whereas Levinas attempted in his later work to go “‘behind’ being” with his ethics as first philosophy, Lacan offers an alternative strategy, namely that we transform our relationship to ontology. This is where Lacan’s notion of the “hontology”, announced at the end of Seminar XVII, becomes helpful. Copjec argues that shame (the French *la honte*) “offers not an escape from ontology *per se*, but an escape from ontology’s ‘pre-comprehension’ of the subject” (2006: 103). This ontological ‘pre-comprehension’ of the subject is precisely what Žižek aims at with his idea of the colonising symbolic order, the dead order. The noncastrated, “non-objectifiable object” of the *jouissance* of shame offers a way out of this ‘pre-comprehension’. Copjec puts the conclusion succinctly: “For Lacan, shame is the subject’s ethical relation towards being, his own and the other’s.” (2006: 103) Žižek’s proviso here would be that this ethical relation must be predicated upon the assumption of the death drive, for the death drive is that energy which (paradoxically) goes beyond the death or the deadness of the symbolic order. In the death drive, the subject is opened up – ex-posed – to his own and the other’s being in a way that allows her to assume responsibility for herself in relation to others, but in a way radically different from the ordinary, liberal account of responsibility for the One.

Shame, then, ex-poses this noncastrated part of my being before the Other and the implication is precisely that, despite the symbolic order’s colonisation /

castration, I still have, in shame, the capacity to put myself forward and determine my destiny and discourse, not in the self-assertive or identity-assertive fashion that has become so celebrated in late capitalism, but rather by dint of the fact that the death drive can push me beyond the dead symbolic order's determinations and identifications. This is why Lacan (1991: 189) remarked at the end of Seminar XVII that "if one wants to have anything to do with the *subversion*, or even just the rotation, of the master's discourse," one has to come close to shame. Thus, if one is interested in the politicisation of the master's discourse, in a hystericisation of the master, then such a politicisation / hystericisation must be approached from a position of shame. Thus, the ethical mandate would inhere in the "I am (a) shamed, therefore I am responsible".

It is also for the above reasons that Copjec (2006: 92) can draw the conclusion that "the final aim of psychoanalysis, it turns out, is the production of shame", because "shame marks not the social link as such, but that particular link which analysis is intent on forging" – the production of "another style" of the master signifier (as in Lacan's discourse of the analyst (1991: 176)). Bracher (1988: 47) remarks that the discourse of the analyst is the true revolutionary discourse; taking up the position of the *objet petit a* in relation to society accomplishes what "truly merits the title of revolution in relation to the discourse of the Master". Bracher writes: "By exposing the real which the system of signifiers, and particularly the master signifiers, fail to grasp, one can interpellate the subjects of society to an activation of their alienated condition, their non-identity with their master signifiers, and thus create an impetus for the production of new master signifiers" (1988: 48). Shame, as I have tried to show above, as a relation that is deeply imbricated with the agency of a paradoxical superego reaction, is what allows the entry point into the exposure of the real of which Bracher writes.

For these reasons, Zlatan Filipovic (2017: 100) is wrong in his assertion that psychoanalysis cannot account for the ethical material that shame introduces. Filipovic's mistake lies in his assumption that psychoanalysis "intends to gather the Ego back to its agency", for Lacan's lifelong battle against ego psychology (in Seminar I he calls the ego the "mental illness of man" (1988: 16)) served to demonstrate that, if anything, the ego's agency is precisely what gets in the way of the cure: identification with the symptom. Filipovic also makes a basic interpretive mistake when he deduces from Copjec's (not Žižek's as in his article) statement that the final aim of psychoanalysis is the production of shame, that this means that shame is "the very limit of psychoanalysis" (2017: 100). On the contrary, it is Copjec's and others' argument that the psychoanalyst must encourage shame, elicit shame, because shame offers a pathway to identification with the symptom that marks the end of analysis (2006: 91). Lacan himself remarked in his unique turn of phrase that "what psychoanalysis discovers" is

that “this vapid air of yours” runs up against “an outlandish shame of living” (1991: 182). To this, we could add Lewis’s conclusion that “unanalyzed shame in the patient-therapist relationship is a special contributor to the negative therapeutic reaction” (1971: 419).

“[S]hame is at the heart of the problem of self-assertion as the fundamental mode of political action”, writes Amanda Holmes (2015: 420). Shame, in fact, subverts self-assertion and reveals our capacity for another agency and another responsibility beyond the vicissitudes of the symbolic order that we are thrown into and beyond the attributions of responsibility by the ordinary, positive Law. One could call this an ethics of the Real, as Zupančič has done. The point is that Lacanian psychoanalysis, as Žižek (2005: 137) puts it, allows for a strong version of subjective autonomy: “insofar as the subject occupies the place of the lack in the Other (symbolic order), it can perform separation (the operation which is the opposite of alienation), and suspend the reign of the big Other, in other words, separate itself from it”. This version of autonomy reveals the ultimate ethical support as the death drive once we understand death drive as, at its most elementary, “the sabotaging of one’s own striving to be, to actualize one’s powers and potentials” (2005: 149).

The underlying psychoanalytic reason why shame has the “reintegrative” potential that therapeutic jurisprudence has repeatedly described, lies herein. The politicisation in shame can have the effect of reintegrating the (a)shamed body into the body politic, not as simply another homogenous part of it, but precisely as a “part of no part”, *because* the subject in shame has become able to bear as *jouissance* the injustice that should horrify the body politic. Take, for instance, the horrific photograph (published in the New York Times and elsewhere) of the bodies of Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, found in the Rio Grande in June 2019.³ It is a photograph that should put to shame every narcissistic subject of advanced capitalism’s murderous machinations in relation to the immigrant. But instead of such shame, the contemporary symbolic law allows us to experience the photograph simply through a shameless, indifferent, even blind, gaze, if not with an impotent sympathy by way of which we can separate ourselves and our privileges from the gaze of this image (Sontag 2003: 102). We cannot bear as *jouissance* the injustice that should horrify us in this picture. We cannot bear it because the symbolic order is increasingly in the service of the Imaginary to the extent that its role as mediator between itself and the Real is becoming eclipsed.

3 The photograph can be viewed at Ahmed and Semple (2019).

For there to be shame, we would have to bear this image of death as the part of no part of the dead symbolic order of advanced capitalism, it would have to give rise to a “nonobjectifiable object” within our collective psyche. In short, this image of death should be capable of triggering an outraged death drive within us vis-à-vis the symbolic order of capital. Žižek (2005: 182) writes that justice begins when I “remember the faceless many left in shadow” as a result of me privileging the One – “the primordial ethical obligation is toward this Third who is *not* here in the face-to-face relationship”. And death drive, as activated by the superego’s participation in shame, as outlined above, “threatens to subvert the social order [politically] by manifesting the excluded scandal of the real that subtends it” (2005: 32). It is when, in shame, I give my consideration to this Third or this “excluded scandal of the real” that subtends the symbolic order, that a *reparative shame* can be said to have been set on its course.

But it should also be noted that the consequences of politicisation are never known in advance and for this reason it is also the case that shame can lead to a humiliation through which the physical body is violently expelled from the symbolic body of the body politic. In such cases, as therapeutic jurisprudence has noted, no clear path is indicated for reparation. As Scheff (1998: 106) writes in the context of restorative criminal justice: “Humiliating the offender [...] makes it almost impossible for him both to accept responsibility and to help remove shame from the victim”. Humiliation thus, can, paradoxically, block the proper attribution of shame. In these cases, we have moved from shame to the pernicious effect of humiliation and there remains only a hole from which no master-signifier can arise. According to Guenther (2011: 2-3), humiliation occurs precisely when the “constitutive disjunction between life and language” is “split apart” and exploited. As Filipovic writes: “To humiliate in shame is self-affirmative. It makes me emerge as a social body in the community of shared prejudice by the very act of making you kneel outside it” (2017: 105).

Lacanian shame, on the one hand and humiliation, on the other, should thus be strictly distinguished from each other, because in making ashamed or in becoming ashamed one retains the agency of the signifier which mediates violence, whereas in humiliation such violence is exalted and my *jouissance* is used as a weapon against me. This is why one should support Guenther’s distinction, in the context of Agamben’s work on shame, according to which shame is a feeling of ethical responsibility whereas humiliation is an “instrument of political domination” (2011: 2). Guenther explains that humiliation is a different form of individuation – it “isolates someone from all the others, not as a subject with agency and voice but as an object of scrutiny, scorn and possible violence” (2011: 3). Shame individuates in a different way. It works not by singling out but “by intensifying the ambiguity of an indissoluble relation to others” (2011: 3).

Guenter concludes as follows: “Unlike humiliation, which simultaneously subjectifies and desubjectifies through an empty individuation which singles one out for annihilation, shame intersubjectifies; it attests to an irreducible relation to others in the midst of one’s own self-relation. However painful shame may be, it confirms this relationality of the subject, and could not arise without it” (2011: 4).

Moreover, it seems to me that one should remain vigilant of the fact that shame is by no means the only politicisation of the physical body in which the superego plays an important role – shame is an ordeal of the Real but it is not the only ordeal of the Real which politicises the physical body. There is, for instance, a kind of politicisation of the physical body which goes in the opposite direction than that of shame, namely in the direction of an exaltation of the *jouissance* of transgression. In these cases, there is no transformation in *jouissance* and the superego’s close proximity to the ego-ideal produces the disastrous combination of obedience and *jouissance* that one finds in Fascism (McGowan 2004: 30).

Conclusion

Following Miller’s statement that “we are in a system that produces impudence and not shame, that is, in a system that annuls the function of shame” (2006: 26), Holmes has proposed that to live under a system that demands the refusal of shame “suggests that the only thing left to shame is shame itself” (2015: 421). She suggests that one modality of a practice that stands outside of the system that produces impudence, “would entail taking up shame as a resource for refusing the distinctly capitalist impulse to assert oneself through a positive assertion of identity”. “Perhaps”, Holmes writes, shame is “the primary affect in politics” (2015: 421).

In this contribution, I have attempted to show that the radical (political) implications of designating shame as a function of the superego (as in the Freudian account) can only be drawn out once we adopt a thoroughly Lacanian reading of the superego. I have argued that while the ego-ideal plays an important initial role in shame, its role is not exclusive as Piers would have had it. Instead, I have proposed that “the Other prior to the Other” in shame should be understood as fundamentally split dialectically between ego-ideal and superego. Shame occurs not simply in the gaze of the ego-ideal, the Other who sees all, but rather when the superego paradoxically “sanctions” a transformation in *jouissance* in which the *jouissance* of transgression turns into / becomes the *jouissance* of shame. It is only once we understand this dialectical split in the Other that we can come to fully appreciate the responsibility that shame leaves us with.

This is a responsibility that goes beyond the niceties of our ordinary liberal responsibility to the One. It is a responsibility that assumes the negativity of the death drive against the “dead” symbolic order as the only properly ethical response, an ethical response that is necessarily and inescapably political. It is in this sense that shame can be, and is, the primary affect in politics. It is the primary affect in politics, precisely because it is the primary affect in relation to the Other.

Miller writes that in late capitalism’s “prohibition on prohibiting” we have entered a phase in which “the look that one solicits today by turning reality into a spectacle [...] is a gaze castrated of its power to shame” (2006: 15). For Miller, the disappearance of shame “means that the subject ceases to be represented by a signifier that matters” (2006: 18). This “signifier that matters” is, of course, the master signifier, the signifier that “marks the subject with an ineffaceable singularity” (2006: 20). Thus, the disappearance of shame in our advanced late capitalist societies signifies, ultimately, a loss of our singularity as subjects. And when this singularity is lost, we also lose the plurality that is the *conditio sine qua non* and the *conditio per quam* of “all political life” (Arendt 1998: 7). The result is the post-political order in which we are now caught.

In such a society, psychoanalysis is one of the only bulwarks left that still has the ability, as Miller suggests, to point out that the “shameless are shameful” (2006: 26). In a world so thoroughly saturated by the superego’s shameless command to enjoy!, it becomes, as suggested in this contribution, all the more necessary to insist that the superego has an indispensable if paradoxical role to play in shame. In shame the superego in effect turns on itself by licensing the transformation of the *jouissance* of transgression into the *jouissance* of shame. Such a turn in the superego becomes all the more indispensable, for if it is true that the master signifier is lost with the disappearance of shame, it becomes clear, at least for Lacan’s readers, to discern that our world now borders on the edge of an all but terminal psychosis.

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