

Racism and *jouissance*: Evaluating the ‘racism as (the theft of) enjoyment’ hypothesis

Derek Hook^{1, 2, *}

¹ Department of Psychology, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, USA

² Department of Psychology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

*Correspondence to: hookd@duq.edu

Abstract

This paper introduces and evaluates the Lacanian idea that racism can be conceptualized both as a mode of enjoyment (*jouissance*) and as a reaction to the perceived *theft of enjoyment*. Despite the distinct analytical advantages of this conceptualization – which grapples with racism not merely as discourse or socio-historical construction but in its affective, embodied, sensuous and fantasmatic dimensions – the ‘theft of enjoyment hypothesis’ can nonetheless be critiqued as: 1) guilty of a depoliticizing psychological reductionism; 2) conceptually under-differentiated and overly inclusive in its field of reference; 3) inattentive to *different modes* of enjoyment; and 4) conceptually decontextualized, cut off from the associated psychoanalytic concepts that necessarily accompany its proper application. Responding to these critiques, and by way of a defence of the analytic value of this hypothesis, this paper argues that: 1) *jouissance* is more a sociological than a psychological concept; 2) the notion of enjoyment must remain empty of definitive contents if it is to serve as an anti-essentialist variable of analysis; 3) three inter-connected modes of *jouissance* should be distinguished (bodily excitation, libidinal treasure and the surplus vitality of the other); 4) a series of psychoanalytic notions (drive, fantasy, *objet petit a*, superego) should necessarily accompany any rigorous analytical application of the notion of *jouissance* to the social field.

Keywords

Enjoyment; fantasy; *jouissance*; Lacan; superego

Introduction

In a 1973 interview, subsequently published as *Television* (1990), Jacques-Alain Miller asked Lacan why he was so confident in predicting a rise in racism in the years to come. Lacan responded, elliptically as ever, by remarking that:

With our *jouissance* going off the track, only the Other is able to mark its position, but only insofar as we are separated from this Other...Leaving this Other to his own mode of *jouissance*, that would only be possible by not imposing our own on him.... [There is also] the precariousness of our own mode, which from now on takes its bearings from the ideal of an over-coming [excess of coming/enjoying] [*plus-de-jouir*] (Lacan, 1990, pp. 32-33).

Six years earlier, in his *Proposition of 9 October 1967*, Lacan made a similar prediction, warning that Europe's "future as common markets will be balanced by an increasingly hard-line extension of the process of segregation" (Lacan, 1995, p. 12).

Given the current circumstances of Britain's exit from the European Union, and the evident rise of racism and xenophobia both in Europe and the US, it is hard not to read these comments as somewhat prescient. The nationalistic, exclusionary and often explicitly racist impulses apparent in Britain's Brexit vote and Donald Trump's US election victory appear to vindicate Lacan's predictions. An increasingly globalized and networked world, with historically unprecedented levels of immigration, has resulted not in increased tolerance, as one may have anticipated, but – so it seems – in a renewed passion for segregation.

What is it, from a Lacanian perspective that fuels such political passions and ignites racial and cultural hate? Žižek (2016) offers a ready response: the fact of different modes of libidinal enjoyment (*jouissance*), or, more specifically yet, the perception that my own precious mode of enjoyment has been stolen by cultural others who are in possession of illicit or malignant form of enjoyment. In what follows I explore this basic tenet of Lacanian social theory, namely that racism involves a series of relations to *jouissance*. The most popular version of this hypothesis – which I aim to rework and qualify here – is Slavoj Žižek's discussion of the idea of racism as

the theft of enjoyment (1992, 1993, 2005), a notion he derives from Jacques Alain-Miller (1994), who is himself clearly indebted to Lacan's (1990, 1995) own formulations in this regard. I want both to expand upon Žižek's argument, and to contextualize it with reference to a series of foregoing Lacanian conceptualizations of racism.

While my objectives here are largely expository, they are also critical. Despite the unique analytical pertinence of this multifaceted notion (racism as *jouissance*, as reaction to the perceived theft of enjoyment), there are a number of interlinked conceptual problems that undermine its use as an analytical instrument. The notion of racism as enjoyment as it is utilized in the literature can be critiqued as: 1) guilty of a depoliticizing form of psychological reductionism; 2) conceptually under-differentiated and overly inclusive, applying to a potentially endless array of behaviours and experiences; 3) being inattentive to *different modes* of enjoyment; 4) conceptually decontextualized, cut off from the associated psychoanalytic concepts that necessarily accompany its proper application.

After a brief illustrative introduction to the concept in Žižek's work, I list and then discuss these problems, making reference to the most important formulations regards racism and enjoyment in the Lacanian literature (George, 2014, 2016; Glynos, 2001; Stavrakakis, 1999, 2007). In both evaluating and, ultimately, arguing *for* the analytical value of the concept of *jouissance*, I will assert that certain of the above criticisms are more justified than others. I also argue that a series of distinctions and qualifications prove essential in applying the idea of racism as enjoyment with the analytical precision that it deserves.

The 'theft of enjoyment' hypothesis

In a recent (2016) text Žižek revisits a favourite theme, namely the role of *jouissance* in the politics of racial/cultural division:

What, then, is the factor that renders different cultures (or, rather, ways of life in the rich complexity of their daily practices) incompatible, what is the obstacle that prevents their fusion or, at least, their harmoniously indifferent co-existence? The psychoanalytic answer is *jouissance* (Lacan's term designating excessive pleasure coinciding with pain)... [D]ifferent modes of

jouissance are incongruous with each other, without a common measure... [In inter-cultural contact] the subject projects...its *jouissance* onto an Other, attributing to this Other full access to a consistent *jouissance*. Such a constellation cannot but give rise to jealousy: in jealousy, the subject creates or imagines a paradise (a utopia of full *jouissance*) from which he is excluded...one can call [this] political jealousy: from the anti-Semitic fantasies about the excessive enjoyment of the Jews to the Christian fundamentalists' fantasies about the weird sexual practices of gays and lesbians (2016, p. 75).

This brief account can be usefully juxtaposed with an extract from Jacques Alain-Miller's 1985-86 seminar, *Extimité* (and here I quote Miller at length):

Jouissance is precisely what grounds the alterity of the Other...It is in its relation to *jouissance* that the Other really is Other....Racism...is precisely a question of the relation to an Other as such, conceived in its difference... [R]acism calls into play a hatred that is directed...toward what grounds the Other's alterity...[their] *jouissance*....It is not simply a matter of an... aggressivity that...is directed at fellow beings. Racism is founded on what one imagines about the Other's *jouissance*; it is hatred of the particular way, of the Other's own way, of experiencing *jouissance*...what is really at stake is that he takes his *jouissance* in a way different from ours....the Other's proximity exacerbates racism: as soon as there is closeness, there is a confrontation of incompatible modes of *jouissance*... (Miller, 1994, pp. 79-80).

What is immediately striking in these extracts is the role played by affect, or more accurately yet, by the 'pained stimulation' of the aroused passions of enjoyment. What both authors highlight – and this speaks to the analytical value of the concept - is that forms of excess stimulation (the 'negative pleasure' of *jouissance*) underlie and propel symbolic and political constructions of otherness. Different cultural modes of enjoyment are, furthermore, fundamentally discordant. We have then not so much a 'Clash of Civilizations' – to cite the Samuel Huntington's (1997) thesis so frequently attacked by Žižek - as a *clash of enjoyments*.

Moreover, the difficulty that we have in realizing ‘full’ enjoyment – something that is impossible in Lacanian theory for ‘castrated’ speaking beings – is dealt with by imagining, *fixating upon*, the supposedly unimpaired and inevitably disturbing enjoyment possessed by cultural/racial/sexual others. In short: the fact that we cannot attain the *jouissance* we feel we deserve results in perceptions of an unhindered, illegitimate and undeserved enjoyment on the part of cultural others. As Sheldon George notes: “the other’s *jouissance*, or enjoyment, [is]...the very core around which...otherness articulates itself” (2016, p. 3). Political jealousy, as Žižek calls it, is thus (at least in part) the result of incompatibilities and more importantly yet, *perceived sacrifices* of *jouissance*. While admittedly abstract, and potentially ‘too psychological’, such an account nevertheless strikes one as an apt description of political patterns of racist affect.

***Jouissance*: Unserviceable tool of social/political analysis?**

Despite having offered only a very brief introduction to the above Lacanian ideas, we should pause here for a moment to voice a number of prospective methodological and conceptual problems implied by the racism as (theft of) enjoyment hypothesis. Doing so will help us focus the expository comments to follow, and indeed, to highlight the potential analytical advantages the hypothesis may have to offer.

The first critique, which applies to a wide historical range of psychoanalytic theories of racism (see Cohen, 2002; Frosh, 1989; Stavrakakis, 1999), is that of psychological reductionism. Simply put: the complexity of the various historical, discursive and socio-economic causes of racism are invariably de-prioritized and accorded a peripheral explanatory role once the domain of the psychological is privileged. Accounts of the psychological factors underlying various instances of racism are thus not only de-historicizing and hopelessly generalizing, they are also invariably de-politicizing.

We may pose a second critique my way of a question: is *jouissance* not a hopelessly open-ended concept? Virtually any cultural behaviour, bodily intensity or libidinal activity can be considered to be an instance of *jouissance*. In view of racism, for example, the other’s enjoyment can refer to everything from their incomprehensible cultural customs and/or

religious beliefs (epitomized, for example, in odd food and dress restrictions), to perceived aspects of their distinctive physicality/sensuality (their music, the way they dance, the sound of their music), to attributions of superabundant vitality (they are excessively promiscuous, religious, lazy, etc.). Surely such a range of meanings is simply too encompassing? The concept of *jouissance* seems thus to be both under-differentiated and overly inclusive, applying to a potentially endless array of behaviours and experiences. Without a clearer sense of how to differentiate *what qualifies* as enjoyment and *what does not*, the concept loses both definition and analytical value. In short: what qualifiers should we insist on if we are to rely upon this concept as an analytical tool?

A third line of critique: different modes of enjoyment are implied within the literature, without being properly differentiated. In Žižek's descriptions of racism and *jouissance*, for example, *jouissance* is used broadly to refer to: visceral or passionate modes of experience (the 'thrill of hate'); an array of enviable possessions (our 'libidinal treasures' such as our cultural rituals, sacrosanct objects, forms of historical legacy) perceived as under threat by cultural others; and a type of noxious 'surplus vitality' possessed by such others. We can stress this problem in a somewhat different way by asking: *whose* enjoyment are we most fundamentally concerned with in these notions of racism as *jouissance*? The other's presumably, inasmuch as – following Miller and Žižek at least - they are seen as enjoying illicitly, in an undeserved and deeply distressing way. Then again, the enjoyment is – or was – surely *ours*, for it is perceived precisely as stolen *from us*...? What is the relationship between these two types of *jouissance*? And there is also a third mode of enjoyment: the 'negative pleasure', the pained bodily intensities of making – experiencing - such troubling attributions in the first place? A variation on this problem: *jouissance* seems in much of the literature to be both verb and noun, to be both *mode of experience* and *type of psychological possession*. How might we differentiate between these cases? Conflations between different modes of enjoyment clearly compromise the analytical precision of the term.

Fourthly: there is ever-present problem of conceptual de-contextualization in 'shorthand' applications of the term. This leads to a situation in which enjoyment itself is treated as a causative force beyond adequate consideration of a series of accompanying concepts (the frame of fantasy, the operation of the signifier, the role of the law, the 'object a' as

cause of desire) that necessarily accompany its proper psychoanalytic application. We need thus to ask: what auxiliary terms must thus be utilised alongside the concept if it is to serve us as a viable analytical tool?

Critique 1: The notion of enjoyment as psychologically reductionist

There is a crucial passage that is repeated in a number of Žižek's earlier books (1992, 1993, 2005) and that serves as perhaps his most direct exposition of racism as the theft of enjoyment:

What is at stake in ethnic tensions is always [a kind of] possession: the "other" wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our "way of life") and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment. In short, what gets on our nerves, what really bothers us about the "other" is the peculiar way he organizes his enjoyment (the smell of his food, his "noisy" songs and dances, his strange manners, his attitudes to work – in the racist perspective, the "other" is either a workaholic stealing our jobs or an idler living on our labour)" (1992, p. 165).

While this seems, in many ways, a gripping account, from a sociologist or historian's perspective, the degree of reductionism here must appear staggering. The multiple complex sociological, economic and socio-historical variables underlying distinctive historical forms of racism are brushed aside in favour of a generalizing psychoanalytic formula.¹ Racism = reaction to perception that the (perversely enjoying) other has stolen *our* enjoyment. This reduction of racism to an affective equation is evident also in Žižek's precursor in this conceptual domain, Jacques-Alain Miller:

Why does the Other remain Other? What is the cause for our hatred of him, for our hatred of him in his very being? It is hatred of the enjoyment in the Other. This would be the most general formula for the modern racism we are witnessing today: a hatred of a particular way the Other enjoys... The question of tolerance or intolerance is... located on the level of tolerance or intolerance toward the enjoyment of the Other, the Other who essentially steals my own enjoyment (Miller, cited in Žižek, 1993, p. 203).

Not only does the above formula generalize across different socio-historical sites of racism, it also bundles together a variety of different forms of prejudice. Anti-Semitism, racism, (hetero)sexism, xenophobia, etc., come very close to being reduced to problems of (libidinal/political) *jealousy*. The de-politicization (indeed, the implicit *psychologization*) inherent in such a conceptual move is surprising inasmuch it is something that Žižek has proved critical of elsewhere.² In his contribution to Christopher Lane's (1998) *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, for example, Žižek outlines the charge of psychological reductionism against standard psychoanalytic explanations of racism, which offer

a way of explaining racism that ignore....not only racism's socioeconomic conditions but the sociosymbolic context of cultural values and identifications that generate reactions to the experience of ethnic otherness (1988, p. 154).

This is well said, but surely it applies also to the racism as theft of enjoyment formula outlined above? Explanations of racism as *jouissance* are surely prone to psychological reductionism inasmuch as they often appear to privilege a series of psychoanalytic assumptions (drive, fantasy, libido, projection, etc.) as existing prior to - or independently of - considerations of economic, historical, political and socio-symbolic context? Does this explanatory over-reliance on the psychological not amount to a retreat from the political, to precisely an attempt to explain social phenomena on the basis of psychological accounts? Moreover, one often has the impression, in looking at passages such as those cited above, of a given conceptual template (indeed, a *formula*) imposed on one after another historical context by way of an 'explanation' of racism, despite the huge variation in socio-historical and cultural factors. This one-size-fits-all type of explanation seems particularly ill-suited to Lacanian psychoanalysis which claims, after all, to be a *science of the particular* (Verhaege, 2002).

Critique 2: Enjoyment as an undifferentiated, overly-inclusive concept

How best to address the claim that *jouissance* is an overly inclusive or under-differentiated concept? Well, by insisting on a crucial Freudian

qualification, namely that *jouissance* is fundamentally *libidinal* (which is to say: *sexualized*). This itself demands further explanation. How are we to understand the breadth of what is implied by this nebulous term? In psychoanalytic terminology, libido is typically described as the sexual energy of the drive. Stepping aside from this technical language we may understand libido as what underlies a diverse variety of passionate attachments. It is the ‘bonding agent’ through which subjects, in both their own unique ways and via more conventionalized group forms, become affixed to particular practices, objects and/or experiences. Libido, as Leader & Corfield (2007) assert, may attach itself to virtually any aspect of our existence:

libido can be inferred in a wide range of individual and social activities: falling in love, sexual preferences, hobbies, drug addictions, sports enthusiasm, and all the drives and interests that make up our daily life....[Such attachments] allow us to channel and shape the experiences of excitation, unease, distress and passion that make up our...life (p. 203).

So, to concede a critical point made above: yes, *jouissance* can refer to virtually any object or activity - so long as it has taken on a libidinal value. The concept is in this sense open, and potentially over inclusive, yet for a good and anti-essentialist reason: any facet of human behaviour can, conceivably, take on an erotic charge.

It helps to add here that *jouissance* should not be conceptualized within the psychological parameters of affect and emotion, but rather in relation to the drive. Drive (*trieb*), as we know from Freud, is a ‘frontier concept’, one that can be reduced neither to biology nor culture. We can think of it as an impulse, a craving, which although bodily at an initial level, is transformed from the merely natural via the historical contingencies and experiences of the subject. The resultant level of demand – thoroughly modulated by culture (or, for Lacan: by the signifier) and unique to the subject – amounts to an insatiable psychical drive for stimulation.

We are able to appreciate then that the subject’s attempts at (sexual) gratification *jouissance* are not limited to merely instinctual, healthy or life-sustaining practices. *Jouissance* as the mode of arousal

sought by the *drive* as opposed to instincts occurs *beyond the pleasure principle*, as Samuels (2017) makes clear:

[H]umans can become addicted to almost anything because unlike animals, they are not dominated by pre-formed instincts that link an internal need to a specific object in the environment. Thus, one of the things that makes us human is that almost anything can be sexualized including pain and self-destruction (p. 8).

Jouissance results from the drive's relentless push for gratification; it is not as such an affect, a desire, or a mode of pleasure. It is, by contrast, a kind of suffering; it maintains a proximal relation to pain, to what is excessive, traumatic. More succinctly: *jouissance* is a type of painful arousal inflected with the death-drive, by the erotic appeal of overstepping a boundary (of health, pleasure, of moral or societal norms).

Not only is *jouissance* by its nature excessive, it is also inherently transgressive. The erotic appeal of excess, we might say, is matched only by the thrill of doing what we shouldn't. Enjoyment as such maintains a parasitic relation precisely upon the set of laws or moral/social norms that it transgresses. So, although *jouissance* is never fully encapsulated by the signifier (that is, the symbolic), it takes form relative to the symbolic coordinates defined by laws and societal ideals.

The foregoing qualifications prove useful in the context of our current discussion. They point to certain of the analytical and conceptual strengths of the notion of *jouissance*. Indeed, they enable us to grasp how the aggressiveness of racism can be sexualized, can become 'erotically' charged, even (perhaps *particularly*) in ostensibly tolerant societies where the voicing of such attitudes is explicitly prohibited. One understands also why such enjoyments become so habituated, so resistant to change – because of the libidinal rewards they give rise to. The yield of *jouissance* is a precious currency; thrilling, narcissistically gratifying, rooted in fantasy and 'morally' satisfying (as I will go on to argue), such modes of enjoyment are not easily surrendered.³

So, although the 'racism as theft of enjoyment' hypothesis initially strikes one as inattentive to socio-economic and historical detail, it now becomes evident that the formulaic nature of the hypothesis is, presumably, deliberate. This is a hallmark of Lacan's 'formalism': a given

formula must remain void of positive content if it is to accommodate the empirical texture of diverse subjects or contexts. The potentially 'over-inclusive' quality of the concept of *jouissance* is, as such, less an analytical shortcoming than a potential strength. Differently put: as an applied concept, a *variable* of social analysis, enjoyment must remain empty of any essential contents precisely because of the malleability of what different (groups of) people 'get off' on.

The theft of enjoyment hypothesis should not therefore be seen as a total explanation – presumably neither Miller nor Žižek would claim that this is the case (even if their descriptions often give the opposite impression). This hypothesis, by contrast, is - or should be - a *heuristic* device that focuses our attentions on those facets of the analytical field that have been disproportionately invested with enjoyment.

The above qualifications help us draw attention to a further and distinctive analytical strength of the notion of *jouissance*. A notable aspect of Žižek's above commentaries is that they involve more than *constructions*, *representations* or *discourses* of otherness. They entail an embodied and powerfully affective component, an emphasis exaggeration of sensual intensities. Cultural otherness here is not merely socially, textually, constructed but is an embodied experience, ascertained within the register of the senses. The dimension of a (typically *voluptuous*) physicality is foregrounded here in a way that contrasts sharply with standard social psychological accounts that portray racism as the result of attitudes, cognitive functioning, social representations and/or stereotypes. Within Žižek's Lacanian account, otherness comes to be marked with certain smells and sounds, with invasive and disturbing perceptions that not only 'prove' difference, but that enforce and amplify it at an immediate and visceral level of comprehension ("their" music, "their" food, "their" foreign cultural practices, etc.).

We need add an important caveat here. Having praised the racism as theft of enjoyment thesis for its attention to sensuality/physicality, we need now note that enjoyment is not to be reduced to such physical qualities. This is an important qualification because otherwise this account would steer itself into the domain of bodily/physical essentialism which is of course a reoccurring feature of racism itself. The sensualities of racism, the attribution of the other's surplus enjoyments, are always about more than the physicality of such features.

In a perceptive analysis, George (2016) makes the point that *jouissance* is not reducible to the bodily. In the U.S. today, George notes, “hatred directed at rap music as a source of enjoyment or *jouissance*...has come to be identified with African Americans more broadly...contemporary discourse...binds difference not to the body but to *jouissance*” (p. 4). Racism, in other words, does not spring merely from perceptions of physical difference, not only from bodies being differently discursively constructed. What is objectionable about the other is not simply the perception of *bodily difference* – which, of course, can be appealing, can even under certain circumstances engender desire - but impressions of the other as *possessing foreign, inassimilable forms of enjoyment*.

This represents an advance on social constructionist accounts of racial difference. How so? Well such accounts seem always to beg the question: what makes certain apparent (racial/cultural/sexual) differences *matter* in the first place? We know that such differences are socially constructed, but what ‘non-discursive’ element motivates and exacerbates such differential constructions? Reasons of socio-economic and material gain, clearly, play their part here but such rational reasons – of strategic advantage – are never in and of themselves entirely satisfactory. Or, taking a slightly different tack: why are *some* as opposed to other features of the foreigner experienced as particularly distasteful, objectionable? Why do intensities of affect coalesce around some cultural markers as opposed to others?

What, furthermore, fuels the process of derogatory social constructions? Presumably a social constructionist account at some point needs reference to something outside the domain of social constructions in order to avoid tautology. What is it that explains the affective dimension that underlies the very process of social construction? For all its prospective limitations, the notion of racism as theft of enjoyment does provide a (perhaps imperfect) response to the above dilemmas. Part of what powers the social construction of difference is something that is more than just discourse itself, namely: a libidinal intensity, anchored in attributions of excess enjoyment, that are in turn, most typically linked to the register of sensuality and/or vitality.

Critique 3: A conflation of different modes....?

We can now move onto the third of our critiques and ask: how are the various modes of enjoyment to be separated? As outlined above, there are at least three such modes of enjoyment in respect of racism. There is *jouissance* in the form of: 1) passionate, embodied mode of experience (the 'thrill of hate'); 2) a type of cultural possession (a 'libidinal treasure') that the subject perceives both as deservedly theirs and as constantly threatened by thieving/obstructing others; and 3) the noxious and offensive 'surplus vitality' possessed by others.

An example of racism as embodied mode of illicit/intense experience can be found in hate-speech. Here we intersect with a broader argument, one that I have broached elsewhere (Hook, 2017), namely: a rationalist account that does not consider racism *as itself a kind of passion (or enjoyment)*, will ultimately fail to grasp the force of racist hate-speech. This is a psychoanalytic argument that we can make against Steven Pinker (2007). In his examination of profanity Pinker (2007) considers several different theories regarding what makes profane speech offensive. The offensiveness of such words, he argues, is not primarily triggered by what they refer to, their connotations, or by the sound of the words in question. A series of associated theories reviewed by Pinker (2007), including evolutionary approaches, biological perspectives, and a focus on social and hygiene taboos, likewise fall short. Pinker seems closer to a breakthrough when he describes profanity – and by extension racist speech – as possessed of a *potent emotional charge*, as form of defensive aggression or mental assault. Psychoanalytically however, something crucial remains missing from such explanations.

Consider a derogatory term, not in the sanitized form of, say, a dictionary definition, but as it might be used in a verbal attack. There is something in delivery of such an insult that exceeds the purely symbolic function of the signifier. The signifier has become infused with an offensive charge of enjoyment. The word has ceased to function as a neutral signifier; it has come to exude a dirtying excess nicely captured in metaphors of dirty mouths, foul speech, etc. There is, moreover, a certain relish on the part of the speaker in the profane qualities of the words they are using. The deliberate transgression of polite social norms entails a kind of reflexive appreciation of its own offensiveness. This points to the subjective

component of the *jouissance* in question: the racist *enjoys* using this speech; it stimulates them, provides a *frisson* of hate.

This factor of libidinal enjoyment is something that the rationalist underpinning of Pinker's (2007) conceptualization misses. Without grasping the sexualized dimension of such speech – the libidinal rewards it involves – one fails to understand why such speech proves so enduring, so resistant to change. The factor of *jouissance* enables us to draw a distinction between the subject who has 'innocently' used a racially-charged signifier, and the subject who finds libidinal enjoyment in – and is thereby accountable for – for the use of such a signifier. As Žižek (2005) explains: “the author of a racist injury can always evoke the network of historical sedimentations in which their speech act is embedded” (p. 289). Nevertheless, this same subject remains responsible for “the little bit of enjoyment they find in their aggressive racist outburst” (2005, pp. 289-290).

This, incidentally, proves an instructive example of two distinctive analytical strengths of the Lacanian concept of enjoyment. Not only does it help isolate a potent component of racism – that of libidinal gratification, the 'pleasure of hating' (to cite the title of William Hazlitt's (2004) famous 1822 essay) – typically overlooked by standard social psychological and discourse analytic accounts. The concept of *jouissance* also stresses the *subjective component*, and indeed, the *accountability of the enunciating subject*, in a way that is largely overlooked by discourse analytic approaches that tend to focus on the *trans-individual* nature of discourse.⁴

Libidinal treasures...

Having provided an example of racism *as* enjoyment (the experiential intensity of the 'thrill of hate'), let us now discuss *jouissance* as type of property. This idea takes two different (although importantly interlinked) forms in the literature. On the one hand there is the narcissistic *libidinal treasure* that we believe defines us, that precious object or type of enjoyment that remains ours and *ours alone*, and that warrants zealous protection (significantly, in French '*jouissance*' connotes both orgasm and ownership). On the other there is the elusive *je ne sais quoi* quality of the other (that which “really gets under our skin”) and which seems to underline, to *distil* their essential difference. Let us tackle the idea of the

'lost' libidinal possession first, although, as will become clear, the two ideas are importantly related.

The factor of the libidinal possession is never difficult to identify within racist discourse. This libidinal object can thus take myriad forms, yet it is invariably afforded the highest value of desire or socio-historical or symbolic importance by the subject who, furthermore, asserts it as their distinctive, identifying attribute. It is apparent, for example, in appeals to: one's culture, one's livelihood, one's history and/or traditional values, one's children and their future, etc. This prized possession is ceaselessly valorized; it is equated with what is most life-giving and precious and yet, crucially, it exists under a constant state of threat. The best example that I can offer here comes from a memory of listening, some years ago, to the leader of the far right British National Party, Nick Griffin, as he enumerated the multiple perils that Islam – and Muslim immigrants – posed to Britain: the English language would gradually be lost, the historical and cultural achievements of Britain would be forgotten, only one in 3 school children would be white, Christian values would be hopelessly eroded, etc.

This libidinal treasure – whatever it may be – is never merely objective; it is defined by a degree of irrationality, at least in the sense that it has been elevated to the status of a fantasy object. Such libidinal objects are also deeply imbued with narcissistic value. They afford a great deal of pleasure – in this sense they entail a masturbatory dimension – and they inevitably contain an idealising component: they encapsulate what (we feel) is most special about us; they bolster our imaginary identities; they, more than anything else, set us apart, make us who we feel we essentially are. As such the libidinal object operates as a nodal point of symbolic identity and libidinal defensiveness alike. There is a wonderful moment in James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (2017) when he intuits the idea of such a fantasmatic libidinal treasure in respect of whiteness: "White Americans find it as difficult as white people elsewhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want" (p. 81).

This fantasmatic aspect perhaps goes some way to explaining why the libidinal treasures of other cultures so often strike us as inexplicable. Other nationalities or cultures have apparently disproportionate investments in certain objects or practices that we, as outsiders, struggle to comprehend. We could cite numerous examples of such investments: the right to bear

arms for America's National Rifle Association; the Christian beliefs underlying Pro-life anti-abortion discourse; the cultural value of fox-hunting for Britain's rural elite; the headscarf for certain Islamic societies; the value of notions of scientific rationality and secularism for many Western Liberals; etc.

While the intensity of such investments might strike us, as outsiders, as incongruous, we cannot deny how quickly they become volatile issues once threatened. Such libidinal treasures are, as already noted, highly precarious; the spectre of castration is always evident with such objects. So highly valued are such objects – both as a medium of enjoyment and as props of symbolic and narcissistic identity - that their anticipated loss cannot but be imagined as catastrophic, as a kind of extinction of being.

While such libidinal treasure are thus exemplary instances of Lacan's notion of the *object a* (the object-cause of desire), it nonetheless helps to stress that these objects are also importantly *phallic*, in multiple senses of the psychoanalytic concept.⁵ The notion of the phallus condenses much of what has just been noted, certainly so inasmuch as such libidinal possessions are: 1) an emblem of potency and value; 2) signifiers of desire and desirability; 3) a source of narcissistic pleasure (and masturbatory *jouissance*); and 4) in perpetual danger of being snatched away or defiled by others (in danger of castration).

...and the excessive feature(s) of the other

Let us turn now to the troubling *je ne sais quoi* feature of the other, the 'something in them more than them', that incurs our irritation, distaste or hatred. As we have seen, this feature is often manifest in distinctive forms of material practice that are seem never to be completely removed from the register of the physical, the bodily. The paradox underlying this libidinal property of the other is that it presents in a number of concrete behaviours and attributes - and yet it also proves impossible to definitively localize. This is something that can be verified at the level of everyday experience: what is irritating about someone we dislike seems simultaneously to be epitomized in certain discrete features (the way they slurp their coffee, the grating sound of their voice, etc.) and yet also to migrate from one feature to another, to eventually encompass everything about them.

We have seen how our own libidinal treasures are exemplary instances of Lacan's *object a*. The same holds for this troubling and excessive feature of the other, although rather than incurring a type of narcissistic phallic *jouissance*, this incarnation of *object a* inspires a far more overtly aggressive mode of enjoyment. Žižek offers an instructive passage where he describes the object a in respect of xenophobia and racism:

What does our 'intolerance' towards foreigners feed on?... Although we can usually enumerate a series of features about 'them' that annoy us...these features function as indicators of a more radical strangeness... One day, after a financial transaction with...[an] old Jewish woman, my mother said to me: 'What a nice lady, but did you notice the strange way she counted the money?' In my mother's eyes, this feature...functioned...like the mysterious feature from the science-fiction novels... which enable us to identify aliens who are otherwise indistinguishable from ourselves... Our relationship to this unfathomable traumatic element that 'bothers us' in the Other is structured in fantasies... [T]his paradoxical uncanny object that stands for what in the perceived positive, empirical object necessarily eludes my gaze and as such serves as the driving force of my desiring...[is] *objet petit a*, the object cause of desire. At its most radical level, violence is precisely an endeavour to strike a blow at this unbearable surplus-enjoyment contained in the Other (Žižek, 2005, pp. 290-291).

Why is it important to stress this facet of racist enjoyment (that is, the role of *object a*)? Well, once we have grasped the notion of the *object a*, we can no longer maintain the belief – as the racist subject does – that it is *the other* that is the cause of all our problems. The *object a* is not an object at all; it is what we might call 'the convexity of the subject's lack'. That is, *object a* is the subject's own lack as it is positivized, materialized in an external attribute or object *possessed by the other*. We can refer back to Miller and Žižek to stress that *object a* is fundamentally rooted in the *perceiving subject*:

We know, of course, that the fundamental status of the object is to be always already snatched away by the Other... [T]his theft of

enjoyment... is apparently unsolvable as the Other is the Other of my interior. The root of racism is thus hatred of my own enjoyment. There is no other enjoyment but my own. If the Other is in me, occupying the place of extimacy, then the hatred is also my own (Miller, cited in Žižek, 1993, p. 203).

This may, upon first reading, sound all too 'psychological', certainly so inasmuch as it invokes the idea of racism as projection, an idea that Žižek has criticized precisely as remaining too much within the locus of individual subjectivity.⁶ Then again, this assertion of *object a* as the subject's own lack given external – and typically excessive, even voluptuous – form in the figure of the other, can be given a different explanation. What is in question is perhaps less an instance of psychological projection than a structural incapacity/impasse that has been converted into an attribution of *the other's* inherent blameworthiness:

It is not only that different modes of *jouissance* are incongruous with each other, without a common measure; the other's *jouissance* is insupportable for us because (and insofar as) we cannot find a proper way to relate to our own *jouissance*, which forever remains an ex-timate intruder. It is to resolve this deadlock that the subject projects the core of its *jouissance* onto an Other, attributing to this Other full access to a consistent *jouissance*. Such a constellation cannot but give rise to jealousy (Žižek, 2016, p. 75).

Racism then, following Žižek's Lacanian critique, is not most fundamentally about psychological rivalries, or about the need to displace onto the other what one disavows about one's self. Racism is instead to be understood as a response to the 'real' of enjoyment – be it at an individual level (in respect of finding a way to relate to one's own "stolen" *jouissance*) or at the societal level (as an attempt to account for the multiple contingencies, conflicts and deadlocks of a given society). This Lacanian perspective thus ventures a reconceptualization of the familiar psychodynamic idea of racism-as-projection. In the Lacanian account, structural incapacity is transformed into the certainty that some troubling substance of enjoyment has been illicitly procured by the other.

Enjoyment then, recapping what we have learnt thus far, is a strange affect-laden libidinal currency that is: never reducible to the symbolic or socially-constructed; never willingly surrendered; not merely a product of rationality or reason but always mediated by fantasy; invariably linked to profound anxieties of what might be *taken away from us*; and often experienced in an oddly inverted way, in the *exaggerated attributions made of the enjoyments experienced by others*.

This helps us explain how racism can be understood both as an experience of *jouissance* ('the thrill of hate') and as type of possession (in the form of our libidinal treasures, or in the malignant, 'illegal' enjoyments of others). Upon reflection, it becomes apparent that these two aspects of enjoyment - 'our' libidinal treasures and what fundamentally embodies 'their' otherness - are two sides of the same coin, two inflections of the same fantasy. There is, on the one hand, the narcissistic *jouissance* of the appealing fantasy object that (we believe) makes us special and which encapsulates what is most precious about us. And then there is the vexing feature of the other – typically something super-abundant and exaggerated - which positivizes my own lack in a threatening feature *possessed by them*. This is why Lacan (1990) remarked (in the passage cited above) that “With our *jouissance* going off the track, only the Other is able to mark its position”, why he stressed “the precariousness of our own mode [of *jouissance*], which...now takes its bearings from the ideal of an over-coming [excess of coming/enjoying] [*plus-de-jouir*] (Lacan, 1990, pp. 32-33). Or, put more succinctly put: “the *objet petit a* – the surplus enjoyment [of the other] – arises at the very place of [one’s own] castration” (Žižek, 1997, p. 58).

Critique 4: A lack of adequate conceptual contextualization

We have by now introduced a series of psychoanalytic concepts (the drive, fantasy, libido, *object a*, the phallus) that should necessarily accompany any rigorous analytical application of the notion of *jouissance* to the social field. To an extent then we have already responded to the fourth of the critiques voiced above, the charge, that is, that shorthand applications of the concept of *jouissance* remain conceptually de-contextualized, and risk viewing enjoyment as itself a causative force. Nevertheless, there is one

further topic along with an associated psychoanalytic concept, that must be addressed at this point, namely: the law, and the superego.

For Lacanian psychoanalysis, the relationship between law and enjoyment is more complex – and more paradoxical - than it may at first appear. Law, simply put, relies upon *jouissance*. The law requires that enjoyment be constantly generated if it, the law, is to be successfully enforced. This seems counter-intuitive: *jouissance*, as I have suggested, invariably involves transgression as a condition of possibility – this is the perverse dimension of enjoyment. *Jouissance* thus seems necessarily antithetical to the symbolic order of law. Then again, we need to consider that the implementation of law invariably entails a libidinal reward, a type of ‘*jouissance* payment’, which amounts to a kind of subterranean support of the symbolic law. This point is worth stressing, inasmuch as it tells us something about the close relationship between enjoyment and social structure: *jouissance* invariably occurs in proximity to the law.

There is a reoccurring scene in *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi’s (2006) autobiographical account of growing up during the time of the Iranian Islamic revolution. The young Marjane – who had grown up attending a non-religious, ‘westernized’ French school – routinely finds herself in trouble with the religious authorities (most typically the ‘Guardians of the Revolution’) for falling afoul of new regime’s Islamic codes of dress and behaviour. In reading *Persepolis*, it is hard not to ask: how could so many Iranians who had lived significant periods of their life in pre-revolutionary, non-fundamentalist Iran become such fervent supporters of the new regime? One Lacanian answer to this dilemma is that any number of activities that enforce the new laws – scrutiny of dress codes, informing on one’s neighbour, participation in public spectacles of punishment, the hateful admonishment of the less than devout, etc. – all became loaded with *jouissance*. Playing the role of the over-zealous guardian of the revolution clearly generated enjoyment, be it in the sadistic thrills of persecuting former colleagues, the righteous indignation of constantly denouncing others, or the *frisson* of having the license to terrorize under the guise of Islamic law.⁷ In short: an excessive commitment to a given symbolic responsibility – the disciplinarian teacher who savours dishing out punishments, the over-zealous judge who revels in delivering harsh sentences – provides both a viable channel and justifying rationale for *jouissance*.

It is for this reason that the superego, for Lacan, must be seen as inducing, commanding *jouissance*. The superego can thus be seen as what effectively binds law and enjoyment. It ensures that the symbolic ego-ideals of a society - of the Other - are effectively implemented and taken up as passionate investments. A helpfully illustrative precursor to this Lacanian emphasis on the relationship between *jouissance* and superego can be found in a reading of Marcuse's (1964) notion of *repressive desublimation* which suggests that something of an unholy alliance can be set up between id impulses and superegoic warrants. The prospect of such a short-circuit means that the same act – typically the libidinally gratifying execution of symbolic (ego-) ideals – can serve the ends of both the id and given societal/political ideals.

Consider the disdain that so often accompanies reports of political corruption in Africa, particularly – until very recently - against Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe. The fact that such charges may well be justified in no way prevents such a speaking position from channelling racist *jouissance*. We might consider also the moral outrage that accompanies the many appalling new stories we are daily exposed to (reports of the hubris and greed of Wall Street, of mass-scale environmental pollution, the daily misdemeanours of Donald Trump, etc.). While there is much here rightly deserving of interrogation, which in fact calls for justice, it is also doubtlessly true what makes such stories newsworthy is their capacity to induce enjoyment. This, in many instances, is what stirs us into action: the *jouissance* invoked by such accounts, a *jouissance* that is often intricately combined with less honourable sentiments (rage, jealousy, hate, the desire to see perpetrators punished, etc.). The gratification of these potent affects often underlies our various cravings for justice.

This profound connection between enjoyment and ego-ideals, and, as importantly, the superego, makes it clear that *jouissance*, certainly as it occurs within the social field, is never merely a variable of subjectivity or a function of personal identity. The link between enjoyment and the superego also brings to light an aspect of racism that is frequently overlooked. Racism is not merely – as much psychological thinking may have it - a set of affective responses, a collection of inter-subjective relations, or a composite array of attitudes and prejudices. Racism pivots also on a series of ideological values which, crucially, involve a potent “moral” dimension. Such an idea is overlooked in popular impressions of

racism as ignorance, unfounded hate, or intolerance. While racism may indeed be all of these things, it is also a type of indignation; an impetus to blame and punish; it involves a sense of laws, societal (if racist) norms and ideals that have been violated.

This is something we can perhaps credit Adorno et al (1950) for intuiting this in their theory of the authoritarian personality: racism often takes the form of a distorted and *jouissance*-infused (or superegoic) type of “morality”. The other is seen as flaunting traditional or cultural values; as lacking in moral values; as aberrant; as criminal. Stressing the connection between enjoyment and the law helps remind us that in Lacanian terms, the law – perhaps society itself - needs *jouissance* to function. We can assert then that racist social structure depends upon the mobilization of *jouissance*. Racist enjoyment then, like other social modes of *jouissance*, is not merely contextualized or conditioned by given social structures. *Jouissance* extends, enforces, indeed, *drives* those very social structures which would not exist without it.

We have then a response to charge of psychological reductionism noted above: enjoyment is, in effect, a *sociological* rather than a fundamentally psychological notion inasmuch as it is always embedded within a social field. *Jouissance* is, by the same token, necessarily *historical*. Enjoyment is, indeed, located within very specific symbolic and historical co-ordinates given that it emerges alongside – or as the *apparent underside* of – social norms, moral values and symbolic ideals. *Jouissance* is an inherently symbolic concept in the qualified sense that any such intensity of libidinal experience will of necessity be tied to a historically determined representations, or, as Žižek (1997) puts - it in his own careful qualification of this point - caught, in an ideological domain. As we might put it in ‘Lacanesque’: enjoyment arises from the field of the signifier.

Conclusion

What then have we gained in our assessment of the analytical value of the racism as (the theft of) enjoyment hypothesis? Well, we have been able to offer a series of responses to the four basic critiques highlighted in the opening sections of this paper.

In respect of the first critique (of de-politicizing psychological reductionism), we have, I hope, taken a series of decisive steps away from

thinking *jouissance* within the domain of the psychological and thus also from the critique of psychological reductionism. I have asserted that in its varying social formations *jouissance* is – paradoxically enough – more a *sociological* than in any way a psychological concept. Indeed, once we grasp that enjoyment never floats free of socio-historical context, and that it is always grounded in a particular socio-symbolic matrix of laws and social ideals, then the idea of enjoyment as a decontextualized psychological dynamic of resentment that can be reductively imposed in variety of socio-historical locations must be reconsidered. Any viable analytical reference to the notion of *jouissance* must of necessity be tied to the symbolic domain from within which it has arisen.

True enough – and as I have conceded - the ‘racism as theft of enjoyment’ hypothesis often does occur in contexts (and this is typical of Žižek’s work) that are glaringly inattentive to socio-economic and historical detail. That being said, I have nevertheless suggested that the ‘formalist’ quality of this Lacanian hypothesis (stated, in other words, as a formula) may in fact be viewed an analytical asset. After all, as a variable of a social analysis, enjoyment must surely remain empty of essential contents precisely because of the malleability of what different (groups of) people ‘get off’ on?

This, indeed, was one of the responses to the second of the critiques offered above (enjoyment as conceptually under-differentiated, over-inclusive): yes, *jouissance* can refer to virtually any object or activity, *so long as it has taken on libidinal value as focus of the drive*. Moreover, precisely this inclusiveness proves a crucial *anti-essentialist* dimension of the concept of *jouissance*. We can say then that the racism as (theft of) enjoyment hypothesis should thus be used as an *empty* hypothesis – as a related set of algebraic terms, perhaps – that must of necessity be anchored in empirical detail. How else could we defend the Lacanian claim that psychoanalysis is a ‘science of the particular’?

So, rather than operating as an all-subsuming, ‘one size fits all’ trans-historical formula, the idea of racism as (the theft of) enjoyment should be treated precisely as *hypothetical*, as an exploratory device that focuses our attentions on specific facets of the analytical field. One prospective use of the hypothesis is precisely as a heuristic device, a provisional analytical frame that challenges the analyst of racism to identify the various interconnected components of a prospective libidinal economy (the

superegoic functioning of law, the narrative frame of ideological fantasy, various instantiations of *object petit a* such as the threatened libidinal treasure, the presumed 'thief of *jouissance*' , etc.).

True, a provisional and properly explorative use of these ideas is seldom if ever the case in the illustrative descriptions of the concept that appear in Žižek's work. This much I concede: such analyses should entail more by way of nuance and empirical texture. Analytical application should particularize these concepts, investigate how they might appear in highly distinctive fields of analysis, rather than summarily generalize across empirical contexts. The problem of inadequate attention being paid to the differences between xenophobia, racism, Anti-Semitism, homophobia, Islamophobia, racism, xenophobia, etc., is one that remains: the notion of *jouissance* cannot surely be a satisfactory analytical tool without being more attentive to the difference between these various distinct forms of social prejudice.

Moving on to the third of my critiques, I have distinguished between different modes of enjoyment (*jouissance* as bodily intensity, libidinal treasure, and surplus vitality of the other) and explained, via the concept of *object petit a*, how *jouissance* can at once refer to presumed narcissistic (and, indeed, phallic) *possession* and to a fantasy of dispossession by a thieving other.

Responding to the fourth critique noted above (that *jouissance* is often used in a conceptually decontextualized manner) I have linked the idea of *jouissance* to a set of related psychoanalytic concepts (the drive, fantasy, castration, the phallus, *object a*), placing it thus on a conceptual horizon that allows us to apply the term in a way that is more rigorous - and arguably more nuanced - than is often the case. A number of associated qualifications (such as that enjoyment must be conceived in relation to the law/superego, that *jouissance* arises from the signifier), have, furthermore, lent definition to the concept of *jouissance* as an analytical tool.

For many of course, analytical problems persist: even such an empty and ostensibly 'de-essentialized' exploratory hypothesis presumes too much. We can anticipate the argument: the pattern of libidinal dynamics implied by this hypothesis (the resented thief of *jouissance*, the precious stolen object, the robbed subject, etc.) inevitably impedes the work of a more textured sociological analysis. Such is the position of Engelken-Jorge (2010) who argues that Lacanian theories of enjoyment involve a recurring

“psychologistic bias that impoverishes the sociological imagination” (p. 69). While I have tried to show that this need not necessarily be the case, I nonetheless appreciate the point Engelken-Jorge is making. This line of critiques suggest that Lacanian theorizations of enjoyment may not suffice without additional methodological and theoretical resources, without greater socio-historical and empirical contextualization. True enough. Let me add just this: if it is the case that libidinal enjoyment is what most powerfully binds subjects to a given ideology (Dean, 2006; Stavrakakis, 2007; Žižek, 2002) - then to neglect this variable in favour of apparently more detailed and contextualized historical or socio-economic analyses is to make a serious error of omission.⁸ More bluntly put: to omit analytical attentions to *jouissance* is to risk not having understood the psychical and historical tenacity of racism.

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¹ The political theorist Edward Weisband (2017a, 2017b) insists that to understand how racism works within a given national culture, one needs to interpret racist dynamics across numerous national cultures. Such a historically and cultural specific set of comparative analyses is required, so Weisband argues, in order to sort out commonalities across racialized conditions, as well as to determine variations in patterns of racist culture and ideology. Such a comparative dimension, along with any attention to the multiple socio-historical differences of racism as it manifests at different cultural sites, can only be lost in devising a general psychoanalytic formula of racism.

² Consider Žižek's (2007) attack on the notion of tolerance as an ideological category, in which he argues that (in)tolerance is an depoliticizing, naturalizing – and by extrapolation *overly psychological* – notion which elides problems of inequality, exploitation and injustice.

³ This gives us a distinctive perspective on the historical ‘tenacity of prejudice’ (Lane, 1998). So valuable are the rewards of *jouissance* that racist ideational and affective patterns will often be maintained even when they are detrimental to the subject, decidedly *not* in their own material or symbolic best interests.

⁴ One ethical task of clinical psychoanalysis – which regrettably, I cannot further elaborate upon here - is to explore how the analysand might disavow their *jouissance* or to attribute it instead to someone else. Indeed, exploring how we are complicit in – and gratified by – precisely what we complain of is of fundamental importance in the clinic.

⁵ It is unsurprising that these concepts (*object a*, phallus) appear so similar. Sheldon George (2014) points out that “the fantasy *object a*...functions as a referent to the phallus”, before adding that it is “the *object a* that structures fantasies of race...the *object a* of whiteness...masquerade[s] as phallus, as signifier of being and *jouissance*” (p. 370).

⁶ It is during an extended discussion of racist fantasy that Žižek critiques the idea of racism as projection:

the standard theory of ‘projection’, according to which the anti-Semite ‘projects’ on to the figure of the Jew the disavowed part of himself, is not sufficient: the figure of the ‘conceptual Jew’ cannot be reduced to the to the externalization of my (anti-Semite’s) ‘inner conflict’; on the contrary, it bears witness to (and tries to cope with) the fact that I am originally decentred, part of an opaque network whose meaning and logic elude my control (1997, p. 9).

Anti-Semitism and racism alike are here understood as a response to the ‘real’ of society. They are, in other words, testimony to the inability - accept via fantasy - to impart a compelling narrative that is able to account for the multiple contingencies, conflicts and deadlocks of a given society. It is worth noting that Žižek does not completely reject this thesis, noting merely that it is not sufficient in and of itself.

⁷ A subject may enjoy all the more, attain a heightened degree of *jouissance*, precisely by taking refuge behind such symbolic laws and ideals. This is particularly true in claims that one is only ‘doing one’s duty’. Such an institutional alibi - the cover of neutrality, disinterestedness - effectively adds an additional layer of enjoyment (Žižek, 1997). Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’ for Žižek (1997) thus needs be supplemented with a sense of the subliminal gratifications achieved in the guise of merely following orders, performing an institutional role.

⁸ As Žižek stresses, if political change is to occur it is never enough simply to insist on a change of language, to prohibit certain terms of representations (although this can

admittedly be a crucial step in the right direction). What is more crucial to change is the modes of enjoyment anchoring and animating that ideology.