Chapter 12
Excessive Value Creation: Under the Tyranny of a New Imaginary

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ABSTRACT

This chapter demonstrates how contemporary imaginary structures, which urge us to move up in life by making the most of the possibilities we are faced with, may operate in an industrial setting where users are involved in the production of heavy duty vehicles. Opening up new domains for value creation, devoid of established norms and regulations, this appeal to elevate ourselves arguably provides little guidance for how to do so. Demanding ever more from those subjected to its call, this appealing power, the chapter suggests, follows the logic of the Lacanian superego, which according to Salecl (2004, p. 51) “commands the subject to enjoy yet at the same time mockingly predicts that he or she will fail in this pursuit of enjoyment.” As such, it makes out a central component in a creative force that feeds excessive outgrowths, which perpetually contribute to pervert, displace, and fragment established grounds for value creating activities within this industrial domain.

INTRODUCTION: THE TYRANNY OF THE NEW IMAGINARY

In response to Ivan Karamazov’s famous contention, that if the human soul is not immortal and if there are no absolute virtues—if God is indeed dead—then everything is permitted, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan willfully maintains the opposite: “if God doesn’t exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer” (Lacan, 1988, p. 128).

At a first glance, this dictate certainly seems quite counter-intuitive. What Lacan appears to be suggesting here, however, is that in a secularized time, when religious beliefs no longer regulate our conduct and the ways in which we may strive to enjoy ourselves, new socio-symbolic orders are soon established in their place. Often, these orders are far more demanding than religious doctrines ever were, calling for significant degrees of subjection, discipline, and self-sacrifice. In addition, to Lacan, their emergence is to be understood as
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a consequence of our unwillingness to confront the fact that the freedom granted us in a secular age is in fact it—that which we always dreamt of. They stem, to put it somewhat differently, from an inextricable incapacity to truly enjoy the freedom entailed by the withdrawal of God’s authority. They stem from a structural inability to revel in all the possibilities laid bare in the absence of an afterlife, and in the absence of specific virtues to which we had better devote ourselves to ever get a taste of the pure pleasures of paradise. It is simply easier on us to establish external orders that block our access to immediate pleasures than to confront our inability to fully embrace what they have to offer. It is easier to let ourselves be stolen of the enjoyment that we are striving for, than to confront its unbearable presence. “Neurotics prove that to us every day,” declares Lacan (1988, p. 128), as he draws on his experience from psychoanalytic practice to support the claims concerning self-imposed regulations and prohibitions.

The scope of Lacan’s observations reaches far beyond neurotic obsessions and the clinical setting, however. As for instance Renata Salecl (2010; see also Salecl, 2004) has pointed out, they have never been more apposite than in today’s neoliberal, free-market capitalism—which is characterized by an abundance of choice and a strong emphasis on self-realization. As kids, we are for instance faced with breakfast cereals often outnumbering the accumulated age of our parents. On our way to becoming full-grown citizens we are—provided that we have the grades—supposedly free to choose the education and the career path of our liking. As dating and mating material, and consumers of various romantic utopias, we are confronted with countless matching services, and innumerable potential partners (Illouz, 1997). As socially responsible grown-up residents we may, on a more mundane note, choose the provider of yet another most basic commodity such as electricity, to name but a minuscule of the everyday choices that determine how we realize ourselves.

Taken together, these many possibilities set the stage for a Lacanian analysis of our era.

In Salecl’s (2004) analysis, this stage has, moreover, been draped in a “new imaginary” that has come to reign late capitalist dynamics. Shaped by the socio-symbolic order we are embedded in, this new imaginary is one that urges us to elevate ourselves and move up in life: to choose a breakfast cereal like Alpha-Bits, which not only stills our hunger and provides energy, but also makes us spell-bound; to surpass the social standing of our parents; to find a man or woman more well-heeled, good-looking, intelligent, and charming than we ever thought we deserved; and to find a greener and cheaper energy provider. We are, in short, encouraged to make the most of the choices offered to us; use them so as to better tailor our lives and become better versions of ourselves.

As part and parcel of this kind of imaginary, past decades have witnessed an excessive procreation of enticing manuals and how-to handbooks in areas ranging from dating advice to energy savings. Typically, such manuals promote a number of prohibitive rules and principles to which we need to subject in order to elevate ourselves and our way of life; rise above quotidian hardships and everyday struggles, to reach a state of harmony and fulfillment. A most notable example is the best-selling The Rules Series from the mid 90s—a catchy, but also very strict and indeed quite oppressive disciplinary program that presents itself as dating and mating advice for women in search of Mr. Right (see, e.g., Salecl, 1998, 2004, 2010; Žižek, 1999).

In our undecided times, Salecl suggests that we have become used to getting a bit of support from symbolic rules of this kind—something to refer to, and hold on to, in place of religious dogmas, for instance. However, she observes a change with respect to how the symbolic universe as of late has come to manifest itself—and with it, the new imaginary. The strategies promoted to attain the promises nurtured by this nexus of symbolic