

Where there is capitalism, there shall be addiction

Ole Bjerg

For tæt på kapitalismen. Ludomani, narkomani og købemani. [Too close to capitalism. Ludomania, narcomania and shopoholism].

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The book *For tæt på kapitalismen. Ludomani, narkomani, købemani* [Too close to capitalism. Ludomania, narcomania, shopoholism] by Danish sociologist Ole Bjerg found a place in my bag for the whole of spring 2010. My initial intention was to read it and quickly write a brief announcement. However, the book turned out to demand and deserve more space and attention. Overall, I must say it is a nicely written philosophical piece, complementing texts by scholars such as Gerda Reith, Eve Sedwick Kosowsky and Bruce Alexander. While losing some of its 'sting' toward the end, Bjerg's style is mature and elegant with a straightforward and focused grip.

Bjerg takes his point of departure first and foremost in the Lacanian trinity of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. His core discussion concerns the ways in which real-life addiction problems are dependent on people's perceptions and how the imagery is fed by the capitalist order. The relevance of the imaginary and the symbolic in this equation may not sound revolutionary and new to Nordic addiction scholars, who may have encountered such research initiatives as those of the IMAGES consortium¹. It is now widely recognised that how we perceive, fantasise and build expectations around certain action will have implications on what we actually decide to do, how we understand our action

and how we see the possibilities of changing our behavioural patterns. Bjerg demonstrates how certain mechanisms in the capitalist system rely on people's distance to reality. In order for capitalism to work, we need to desire objects, people and lifestyles. We will do so as long as the illusion about their inherent values, benefits and attractiveness is kept alive. The addict has 'consumed away' this illusion and has consequently come too close to the truth.

A crucial aspect of the modern conception of addiction lies in the discrepancy between wanting to and having to ingest substances, or perform certain action. Bjerg describes the shift between the two states by comparing it to a Marxist circulation of objects. For addictions to emerge in the first place people should manage their desires with capitalist circulations of objects: money, bodies and goods. We are programmed to desire certain things in life, but when we come too close to the truth of these objects we slide into circulations of another nature, of a pathological kind, or mania. This displaced circulation of objects does something to humans and constitutes a (capitalist) precondition for addictions. The process of sliding into the displaced order can be exemplified by a gambler who feels that he is able to affect or predict the outcome of the game or that he is chosen by destiny to get the big win. This is crucial for his desire to game, even though his beliefs can easily be contradicted by the mathematical (un)likelihood of winning, or just by any common reasoning. Nevertheless, the gambler must buy into this illusion when he initiates the gaming, and – after a while – he may be propelled into the displaced addicted order, in which his hierarchy of needs and priorities have become different:

'It has been said that the bumble bee should, physiologically speaking, not be able to fly. However, the bee is unaware of this fact and will therefore fly around and be happy in its unawareness of this fact. The capitalist subject is, in the same manner, an impossible structure. When

capitalism functions well it is because we are not aware of its impossibility. The compulsive gambler is like the bumble bee that has suddenly admitted a truth regarding capitalism, which makes it impossible for him to function in the capitalistic society. He has come too close to the money' (Bjerg 2008, 39, translated by M.H.)

Bjerg allies with theorists who analyse the psychological through the social and vice versa. His reasoning on the birth of addictive behaviour is informed, for example, by Žižek's notion on the self as incomplete, reflecting itself in its social context and looking for completion. The self is an empty category to be filled by linguistic and social processes. This is of course very close to Giddens' discussion on the birth of addictions in modernity stemming from the myriad of choices that the individual has to make in her daily life while answering the question of 'How shall I live?' The illusion of the capitalist ideology is the satisfaction of desire, the 'filling' of the gap in the being of the self. Again, a precondition is that the subject's needs and desires are bred on the level of fantasy and are never to be actually realised. Addiction is the state when we have come too close to the objects, when the capitalist fantasy no longer is appealing, and when the self will channel its needs into other circulations. The self has come to be 'too close to capitalism', and the shortage seeks expression in an individual state of mania.

In narcomania, our relationship to the body crucially determines the sliding over to an addicted order. The comprehension of the self as a craving being is to a large extent equivalent to the comprehension of *the body* as demanding, desiring and enjoying. The drug addict is steered by the desire of drug-induced pleasure and is reduced to a mere organism. The reduction to an organism can be viewed as an elimination of the self through an extreme one-way process in a desire-economy:

'For the compulsive gambler money is only paper, and its function is reduced to

the admittance to more gambling. For the drug addict the body is reduced to body tissue, blood and nerve fibres, and its function is reduced to generating pleasure or pain' (ibid. 107)

The problem with the drug addict is that he knows too much. He knows that the body is a chemically manipulated entity and that the drugs can give him absolute pleasure – the bliss which he is in the capitalist society continuously encouraged to desire and chase. He knows that he can only get a diluted version of this state on the other (non-addicted) side, explains Bjerg. This 'too close' an insight into the body as an apparatus of chemical (brain) processes is displaced from the symbolic order, which is so crucial for upholding the capitalism system (creating needs and desires for commodities and for states of being). I would prefer to call it 'a consumerism order', but I can clearly see a parallel to many other phenomena, such as the symbolic order of love. An important assumption when we plan and build our lives is the premise that romantic emotions are something other than chemical processes in the brain. This is actually a crucial assumption in the symbolic and the imaginary of consumer society, perhaps one of *the* most crucial.

When it comes to shopaholism as a pathology, Bjerg gets closer to theories of modernity and their view on the self as in a constant self-reflexivity process of defining and construing itself. What I like very much is that Bjerg takes in Baudrillardian thought on the function of consumption as generating values on other levels. And it is also in this chapter that I experience Bjerg as a writer with a sense for the contemporary. Although he is leaning his theorisation on Marxist thought, he is well aware of today's society working in another manner than that which once engaged our parents' generation (on the back cover I notice that Bjerg is born in the same year as myself). Changes in society can today result from forces in the symbolic, which follow other logics than the classic

ones of the exploiter's and the oppressor's. I would not call it the 'death of ideology', as it is very much supported by a hedonistic and narcissistic – capitalist and consumerist – ideology. And I do agree with Bjerg that a capitalist society upholds and supports addiction problems in its logics of functioning. But I am nevertheless glad that Bjerg does not point out specific political projects, as this could perhaps have banalised the objectives of the book.

On the notion of consumerism as breeding shopaholism – which must sound self-evident for the reader – I want to recommend Anne Cronin's sharp treatise (2004) on commodities and compulsions, which describes kleptomania as a result of the creation of department stores in the nineteenth century. A chapter in a book on advertising myths, this piece may have passed unnoticed by scholars in the addiction field.

I imagine Bjerg's working process as stemming from a certain moment of insight or clarity as regards an understanding of the phenomenon of addiction in the light of Marxist, Lacanian and Žižekian thought. He is clearly fuelled by this intellectual adrenalin kick. In my own opinion, his track is one of the most interesting and important in theorising addiction today: What, and why is addiction in contemporary society? What function do these mania states have for us? No doubt, circulations of goods and the fulfilment of desires play a crucial role in the puzzle. Although not a completely new thought, the literature on the connection between the free-market society and addiction seems to be growing very slowly, but there are some interesting pieces around, such as Reith 2004, Cronin 2004, Alexander 2004, Alexander 2008. Writes Reith (2004, 283):

'the notion of "addiction" has particular valence in advanced liberal societies, where an unprecedented emphasis on the values of freedom, autonomy and choice not only encourage the conditions for its proliferation into ever wider areas of social life, but also reveal deep

tensions within the ideology of consumerism itself'.

In view of this I find Bjerg's book of special relevance also for apprehending society at large.

When it comes to the structure of the book, I find the philosophical introduction unnecessarily long, and the last chapter could have expressed an even louder crescendo. In his reasoning around the reality escape of the gambler Bjerg could have elaborated on the spatial and the temporal dimensions of addiction. It is here that we find exciting relations not only between the real and the imaginary and the symbolic, but also a connection to understandings of the problems which rises from contemporary societal trends such as globalisation or digitalisation. Moreover, the Baudrillardian track could here have taken an extra dimension. But then again, I may be projecting my own interests and work onto the book.

The spontaneous message that I would like to mediate after reading this book is that addiction scholars can go on forever and ever producing short research publications, offering glimpses into the phenomenon of addiction on a wide disciplinary scale from brain scans to cultural analysis of the theme in high culture. However, somebody has to do the sometimes lonely and demanding intellectual 'dirty work' of theorising a framework for the developments we are witnessing. Each initiative in this direction is to be saluted and cherished: Bjerg's book is a warmly welcomed addition in our field.

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NOTES

- 1) **Theories of Addiction and Images of Addictive Behaviours (IMAGES)**. See: <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/imagesofaddiction/>

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