

Politics of death drive: dis/identification, transgression, war

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In light of the multiple crises of global capitalism and the intensification of imperial wars, the workshop will discuss the current relevance of the psychoanalytic concept of the death drive. At the same time, the problems that have shaped the post-Marxist reception of this concept until today will be examined: social dis/identification, existential transgression, and the metamorphoses of war.

Freud had introduced the notion of death drive in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* under the impression of the First World War and the nightmares and flashbacks of persons traumatized by war. It is his most speculative, mad, and inconsistent concept with which he begins to unfold his final drive theory organized around life and death tendencies. Scarcely any other Freudian term is more contested; hardly any escalates scientific, ontological, and political speculations about the traumatization of life, the un/productivity of death, and the performativity of the drive in the context of modern power relations further than this one. In a word, the death drive is the conceptual *enfant terrible* of psycho- and schizoanalysis. From Critical Theory to queer theory, from Marxism to poststructuralism, from affect theory to trauma theory, this notion has fueled controversies that never stopped arguing anew and differently about a politics of the unconscious or the Real about a revolutionary production of desire or schizophrenia against the backdrop of modern power, state violence, or nihilistic desire for

submission. Intervening in these debates, the workshop searches for the elements or lines of flight of a politics of death drive and traces its im/possible scenarios.

Equipped with the concept of death drive, in 1920 Freud revised his assumption that the psychic apparatus is subject to a pleasure principle that aims at the satisfaction and reduction of drive excitations, so that a homeostatic economy of equilibrium is set in motion. The nightmares of persons traumatized by war provided Freud with a first hint of a »beyond« of such a pleasure principle, which would be determined by a surplus of unbound and unconscious forces and would have to be attributed to an uncanny aneconomy in which the unpleasurable incessantly returned. This traumatic neurosis prefigured a compulsion to repeat in which the horror of an event repeatedly breaks through and hammers away at the ego without being able to be translated, »bound«, or symbolized into a meaningful narrative. In the framework of evolutionary-biological considerations, Freud traced this compulsive return to an earlier violation back to the origin of cell membranes. As dead or »burned out« outside of simplest living beings they manifested that death conditions life and that life itself forms only a lacuna in the time of the inorganic. The death drive thus proves to be an ambivalent limit figure that oscillates between an excess of unbound energy and the zero point of the inorganic, between free-flowing excitement and the calcification of being. It becomes obvious at the end of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that Freud wants to reintegrate the death drive to an economy of detours and postponements. He tries to keep its deforming violence at a distance and to treat its aneconomy and principlessness as a negative or virtual limit that disturbs the economy as much as it supports it. In this way, even the death drive was put to »work« by taking over the task of supplying unbound energies through its repetitions to the binding. Freud's reflections on the death drive emerged in a text that was full of inquiring advances and reversals, denials and omissions. It was a fresco that reflected the violence of the questions raised and plunged psychoanalysis itself, together with its conservatisms, its heteronormative and familial fixations, into crisis.

The workshop will discuss poststructuralist and post-Marxist, deconstructive and Kleinian positions that critically confront this re-economization of the drive's excessiveness, but without advocating an ideal beyond, a total transgression, a positivist liberation of libido, or diminishing the radical alterity of the death drive. Attempting to map the complicated and extimate position of the drive between body and psyche, self and Other, production and anti-production, capitalism and schizophrenia, the workshop takes into account that debates about the topicality of the death drive are organized around a spectacular shift in perspective or a central divergence: on the one hand, these debates negotiate scenarios of a politics of the Real, of anti-oedipal desiring machines, queer (contra-)sexuality, or polymorphously perverse libido

that transgress any ego, any personal identity, any imagined community – including that of the political group or social movement – and invoke an acephalic, schizoid subject or assemblage. These considerations are in constant communication with the legacy of the avant-gardes, the unproductive expenditures as well as with the heritage of leftist and emancipatory projects of liberation. In unfaithful fidelity, these reflections confront the singularity of political departures against the ground of their abandonments, failures, reactionary turns in order to fail once again differently, to fail better. On the other hand, contemporary discussions of the death drive work toward a critique of the global geopolitics of trauma, state and post-state wars, and technologically potentiated killing that characterize colonial and capitalist modernity. This second strand of the debate asks what mechanisms of nationalist and racist hatred, patriarchal violence, exploitation of the poor, pleasure in subjugating others, and immunization from their mourning underlie these geopolitics.

The first case discusses the death instinct affirmatively and existentially, the second critically. The first elevates it to the performative model of all drives, marked by excess and surplus satisfaction, interruption, and disjunctive synthesis. Death here is a creative force of deformation, of transformation, of connection without bond. In some approaches it is conceived negatively or subtractively, in others positively or intensely. This first tendency's critical intervention is to ask whether and how the excessiveness of the drive can be separated from commodification and neoliberal self-stylization, from creative adaptation and repressive desublimation, but also how it can interrupt its own reactionary or authoritarian turns. How can another repetition be engendered within repetition? On the other hand, in the second strand of the debate, the death drive is identified with a content. Aggression, cruelty and destructiveness are elevated to its »representative« or »representation«. Such discussions debate the modern logics of exploitation, annihilation, and war at the nexus of reactionary identifications and abstract domination, social delirium and war. Concomitantly, these debates struggle with Freud's cultural pessimisms and negative anthropologies, his father-centric mythologizations of killing, and his impolitical ideas of an educational dictatorship that would exercise the reason of the few over the drives of the many.

The workshop attempts to think in the interstices of the different poststructuralist and post-Marxist death drive theories and to deliberate on their differences. In a zig-zag, it will look for the connections between approaches as diverse as those of an undead subject of the drive, schizophrenic connections of desire, destructive plasticity, the new international of the wounded, the beyond of cruelty, and warnings against the molecular and molar fascisms of today, in order to reconsider the politics of the death drive in a new and different way. This also

begs the question of how – with which thinking or in which acts of thinking – the death drive can be conceived at all, and how speaking and thinking will change in the process.

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Cultural Philosophy / Philosophy of Cultures. The Faculty of Social and Cultural Sciences.

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