ABSTRACT: This paper is concerned with the way that obsessional neurosis, as described in psychoanalytic writing works and the way it is so functionally adaptive to the contemporary social order. I anchor this description in Lacan’s work by focusing on *Seminar VI*, the seminar in which he discusses Hamlet as an emblematic obsessional and locates this figure in a particular kind of social order. The paper first traces key elements of obsessional neurosis; satisfaction, mastery, privacy, compartmentalisation, a relation to death and masculinity. It then moves on to show how this clinical structure is bound up with adaptation before locating this clinical structure in the capitalist order and then in contemporary management practices. I trace how these concerns with obsessionality and order are configured in the formal structure proposed by later Lacanian writing – here, as a crucial tension between what is given by structure and what is to be found in the experience of the subject – and explore in concluding comments some consequences for psychoanalytic clinical work.

**Keywords:** Obsessional neurosis, psychoanalysis, adaptation, management, structure, Lacan, Miller
Introduction

Obsessional neurosis as described in psychoanalytic theory has implications for the way we might map the production of subjectivity under capitalism. This paper also shows how these issues bear on the management of subjectivity in its broadest sense, but also how relevant Lacan’s argument about the organization of desire is to understanding the desire for organization and its place in management practices which are often devoted to the adaptation of the subject to the social order. Today, psychoanalysis is one of the frames for experience, for our reflection on our subjectivity today and as such it operates as what we could term a historically-specific conceptual capsule of the subject (Parker, 2011). Psychoanalysis is also, at the very same moment, a clinical method by which we unravel that subjectivity, pit intervention against order so we can extract ourselves from that constellation of concepts and thereby, keep open the possibility of another world in which there are other ways of organizing ourselves, of interpreting and desiring.

Psychoanalytic work is a work of interpretation, but interpretation of a different kind to that which drives popular therapeutic discourse. It is by virtue of this difference in its mode of interpretation that psychoanalysis operates not merely as an expression of life under capitalism – the condensation in our subjective experience of its forms of organization – but also as critique. Psychoanalytic work is conditioned by the construction of frames which filter and sometimes prohibit and thus, by virtue of that very prohibition, invite, if not incite a desire to know what there is to say about desire and who says it. We cannot but engage in a process of reading and re-reading which frames and reframes what psychoanalysis is about. So, this paper moves from the general question of the place of psychoanalysis in contemporary management (Fotaki et al., 2012) to specific questions about the work

**Obsessional Neurosis**

The category of obsessional neurosis has its roots in psychiatric nosology and so psychoanalysis has to do some work to be able to work with the category while extracting it from medical psychiatry as such. This is important because there is always a risk in psychoanalysis that we fall back into psychiatric ways of comprehending disorders in the human subject, reducing these disorders to what is going on inside the individual and treating those disorders as arising from organic dysfunction or from dysfunctional development. A psychoanalyst working in the shadow of the psychiatric frame which presumes to know the good of the patient uses the term ‘obsessional neurotic’ to name those who are difficult to engage with, those who appear to resist the progress of the analytic work precisely because they are so compliant with the analyst. The naming of a type of individual, something we find in Freud, or a clinical structure, which we find in Lacan, can serve to reduce the complex operation of social processes to what is supposed to be going on inside the head of the patient.

A first general characteristic which applies to all neurotic subjects, whether obsessional or hysterical is that they gain satisfaction from their symptoms, and even also from speaking about them to a psychoanalyst. It is tempting sometimes just to
hear them agonizing and to forget that their agonizing and protracted choosing is deeply satisfying. The ‘obsessions’ are repetitive ideas manifested in a series of actions from which the subject seems unable to escape. Even though this eventually may result in suffering that is too much to bear, enough to bring someone to ask for help, it is still stubbornly tied to personal administrative strategies that contain an unbearable surplus of satisfaction – ‘jouissance’ is our name for this excess – within the domain of the ‘pleasure principle’. The obsessional neurotic seems able most of the time to reign in the drives and to stop them taking them over onto the other side of their enjoyment, ‘beyond the pleasure principle’, where the drives spill over from the realm of life into that of death. But they also want to go beyond, to let go and often complain about their inability to do so.

The compliance of the patient to the psychoanalyst cues us into a second characteristic of obsessional neurosis, a concern with mastery. Compliance may be a telling characteristic of this kind of patient, but their resistance may be covert and efficient enough to provoke the analyst to assume – ‘almost surreptitiously’ Lacan says – the position of master, a ‘moral master’ (Lacan, 1979: 407). There is a dialectical interrelationship between positions of master and slave, one constituting and inciting the other to resist what they are being pulled into. We need to bear that in mind because there is always a risk that psychoanalysis itself participates in an obsessionising practice.

A third distinctive characteristic of obsessional neurosis is privacy. Freud (1894) noted that there is often to be detected in the mind of the analytic patient charged with the task of following the fundamental technical rule of psychoanalysis – the rule of free association in which they attempt to say everything – a protected private space of thinking, an obsessional secretive enclosure which sabotages the work. The analysand in these cases holds close to themselves some thoughts and
derives some satisfaction from being able to keep the analyst out. When Freud (1894) first grouped together a series of symptoms into the category of ‘obsessional neurosis’, he was identifying a system of rituals that inhabit and imprison the mind of a particular kind of individual.

A fourth characteristic, alongside satisfaction and the concern with mastery and privacy, is separation. An obsessional will often surprise the analyst by speaking about aspects of their lives, often quite late on in the treatment that they have never mentioned before and this is partly because they are so adept at compartmentalizing. Those who suffer in obsessional mode under capitalism are subjects who buy into the separation of intellectual and manual labour, the separation of thinking from being. This is also why academic life tends to suit obsessional neurotic styles of relating to tasks and to others.

A fifth characteristic of obsessional neurosis is the way that the agonizing choices that beset the individual boil down to a question about death. Lacan argues that the question that haunts the obsessional neurotic concerns being, existence, their right to exist and whether they are alive or dead (Lacan, 1993: 178-180). Freud (1907) makes the case that religious rituals are obsessional strategies writ large, strategies to deal with the presence of death. Lacan also homes in on this connection between the individual and the social, but from a different angle when he explores the ‘individual myth’ of the neurotic. This exploration leads Lacan to shift our attention to the ‘quaternary’ nature of oedipal relations and to characterize what he calls ‘the early experience of the modern subject’ as one in which “the father is the representative, the incarnation, of a symbolic function” (Lacan 1979, p 422).

In his paper on the individual myth of the neurotic Lacan argues that the oedipal relation is ‘quaternary’ rather than triangular. There is a fourth element at work – alongside the triangle of subject, first love object and third term – which is
death (Lacan 1979, p. 424). Death figures for the obsessional neurotic in their own enclosed self-questioning about their right to exist, and also reappears in their relation to the figure of the master and the idea that it will not be possible for them to really live until their master dies. It is here that the subject also locks themselves into a temporal structure in which they procrastinate, and it is the moment when Hamlet – hesitating over an act that will define his right to exist – is reconfigured as a modern subject, subject to what it is only now – after psychoanalysis – right to call the Oedipus complex.

The sixth characteristic concerns masculinity. This is stereotypical masculinity that can be performed and experienced by a subject inhabiting a body of whatever sex. The modern subject divided between consciousness and the unconscious is therefore, always already obsessional and this is why it makes sense to describe the very structure of capitalism in this way. The stereotypically masculine nature of psychiatrically-framed psychoanalytic practice – one structured by the feudal preoccupation with mastery and then replicated in patriarchal family relationships in the encounter with the analysand who complies with the demands of the master to the point where they may sabotage the analysis – constitutes the too-patient patient as a problem to be solved, and tangles the analyst in a practice that is itself ‘obsessionalising’ of those they aim to treat.

So, in obsessional neurosis we find satisfaction, mastery, privacy, compartmentalization, death and masculinity. It is of course possible to trace the obsessional neurotic enclosure of thought, hesitation over the question of being and their futile wait for the master to die, to the way an individual is formed within a particular kind of nuclear family, engendered in the little feudal kingdoms of child-rearing crystallized under capitalism (Burman, 2016). We also need to notice how the figure of the master is reinstituted in the analytic relationship and how the individual
patient is configured as a kind of mirror-image of their analyst, an analyst who may be tempted to imagine that they really are a master. This is the predicament of the obsessional modern subject, or rather the obsessional mode in which the subject lives under capitalism, and a form of necessary false consciousness that is itself misapprehended as if it comprises individual cognitive errors; as Lacan puts it, there is “an extremely obvious discrepancy between the symbolic function and what is perceived by the subject in the sphere of experience” (Lacan, 1979, p. 423).

**Obsessional neurosis and adaptation**

I turn now to an aspect of obsessional neurosis that Lacan often concentrates on, one which demarcates his psychoanalysis from the IPA tradition, that is, the concern with adaptation. I am going to do this by focusing on the way Lacan locates the problem of adaptation and the problem of obsessional neurosis in contemporary society in his *Seminar VI* of 1958-1959. Lacan (1958-1959) shows us in *Seminar VI* both that there is something particular about the nature of contemporary society as ‘modern’ (as he puts it), and that desire itself is constructed for us to interpret it in a particular way today.

Lacan reminds us of the historical nature of the psychoanalytic phenomena that he is dealing with when, for example, he cites Freud’s (1900, p. 264) comment on “the whole difference in the mental life of [the] two widely separated epochs of civilization” that constitute Oedipus and Hamlet as human subjects (Lacan, 1958-1959: 4 March 1959). Lacan insists upon the structuring of desire, drawing attention, for example, to the crucial difference between describing ‘eruptions’ of it, as if it were always already there bubbling away beneath the surface of language, and what he

*Seminar VI* resumes Lacan’s attack on object relations theory which had been the focus of *Seminar IV: Object Relations and Freudian Structures* (Lacan, 1956-1957) and that had been a theory very much present as foil to his account in *Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious* (Lacan, 1957-1958). Here in this sixth seminar Lacan draws attention to the way that object relations was operating then, in the late 1950s as the dominant approach of what became known as the ‘British Tradition’ of psychoanalysis, and the way that it repeated, and even deepened the problems posed by US American ‘ego psychology’ (White, 2006). Nevertheless, he emphasises the contradictions and competing interpretations of what an ‘object relation’ is in an extended discussion of work by Ella Sharpe (1937), partly because she was at that time closer to the work of Melanie Klein (1986) than Anna Freud (1936). Recent psychoanalytic commentary in the tradition of work led by Jacques-Alain Miller has also been more sympathetic to Sharpe’s contribution for this reason (Guéguen, 2007).

The year of the seminar, 1958-1959, was at a time of heightened political-organisational tension as the French psychoanalytic groups pressed for a decision from the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) about their institutional membership, a process that began five years before and was not resolved until 1963 when the IPA investigation committees, which included prominent object relations analysts based in London, concluded their work (Marini, 1992; Roudinesco, 1990). Lacan is weighing up the contribution of object relations and Kleinian theory and assessing which aspects are compatible with his own reading of Freud.

There is no authorised English translation of these three seminars, and although the seven lectures on Hamlet, which Sharpe’s notes had cued Lacan into, appeared in Miller’s journal *Ornicar?* After Lacan’s death. An official French version
of Seminar VI was only recently published (Lacan, 2013). Three of the lectures on Hamlet were translated into English in a literary-theoretical rather than clinical-psychoanalytic frame, in Yale French Studies, and published much earlier (Lacan, 1977), but the theoretical apparatus of object relations theory as a problem and preoccupation for Lacan is not then as obvious to readers (Rabaté, 2001). There is a translation into English in the ‘private use’ translation by Cormac Gallagher in Dublin (with some small amendments to the translation where necessary), with referencing by the date of the session because the precise pagination shifts as the translation is periodically updated on Gallagher’s own website version (Lacan, 1958-1959).

In this Seminar VI, Lacan pits psychoanalysis against obsessionality, and there are some general issues that arise from this about the nature of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is a theory and practice of both order – that is where we find obsessionality – and intervention, our psychoanalytic work. But we have to take care when we pit those two, order and interpretation, against each other. When we approach the question of desire and its interpretation, we can map that pair, desire and interpretation, onto order and intervention, and in that way; desire maps onto order and interpretation maps onto intervention, and it is important that we map it like that. It is not that interpretation is conceived of as operating like some kind of grid which will then bring order to speech, or that desire is conceptualised as the motor of intervention. The danger is that we will turn psychoanalysis into a form of obsessional practice if we imagine that our interventions bring order. Rather, the emphasis in the Lacanian tradition of psychoanalysis is that desire is ordered and that interpretation is itself transformative (and there is a deliberate allusion in that formulation to Marxism, which Lacan comments upon at several points in the seminar).
It would be easy, and so easy because it would be in line with forms of psychoanalytically-inflected therapeutic commonsense, to assume that desire is something that pulses through each individual human being, and has always done so, and that interpretation is the more historically variable response to that desire. Such apparent meta-reflection on psychoanalysis, which is a mere reiteration of it as universally true if unconscious to us, fails to do justice to the historically contingent nature not only of psychoanalytic practice but also of the substance on which it operates. To say instead that it is the interpretation that is more, if not completely tactical and that it is the desire that is structured in particular ways for us now is, perhaps, to better grasp the import of the invention of the unconscious and thus of psychoanalysis itself. This is how I read Lacan saying, on the one hand, that “desire can only be conceived of, can only be situated with respect to fixed coordinates in subjectivity” (Lacan, 1958-1959: 15 April 1959), coordinates that are then fixed in a particular way for the modern subject, the subject of psychoanalysis, and I am reading that claim alongside his assertion that “before there was analysis or analysts, human beings asked the question, and ceaselessly posed it ... of where their true will was” (Lacan, 1958-1959: 18 March 1959).

We need to step back a moment from this opposition between desire and interpretation. It is actually the relationship between desire and interpretation, the separation and articulation of one from the other that is at issue here; the separation and articulation such that ‘interpretation’ comes to operate upon ‘desire’ as the historically significant mediating process structured by fantasy that we need to attend to. It is that separation and articulation that gives meaning to the way we configure our understanding of ourselves and the forms of alienation that characterise our political-economic system, capitalism, and the peculiarly obsessional scientific self-examination it harnesses to its own development,
alienation which provides the conditions of possibility for psychoanalytic discourse itself.

There are two points in Seminar VI where Lacan indicates this. Lacan argues toward the end of the seminar that “it is in so far as he [modern man] is in the cut of [Cartesian] discourse that he is to the supreme degree an ‘I am’” (Lacan, 1958-1959: 24 June 1959). The other point is where Lacan reminds us early in the seminar, in the first session, of his ‘metaphor of the factory’ by which we are able to appreciate that “certain conjunctions of the symbolic and the real are necessary for the notion of energy even to subsist” (Lacan, 1958-1959: 12 November 1958). That way of tracing the metaphor of the factory opens up a question about the place of the imaginary through which we account for those conjunctions of the symbolic and the real to ourselves and to others. We will see this question addressed in Lacan’s work, and in the work of Jacques-Alain Miller, through an attention to the tension between what is given by the ‘structure’ and what is to be found in the ‘experience’ of the subject.

I noted that Lacan is concerned with object relations in this seminar. Description slides into prescription very quickly in the object relations approach that, Lacan reminds us toward the end of the seminar, was coming to “dominate the whole conception that we have of progress in analysis” (Lacan, 1958-1959: 1 July, 1959). Here, we have an obsessional motif of time as something that is linear, ordered, as if it can be tracked by the good analyst and put into order by interpretation if it is a bit too messy. This ‘progress in analysis’ concerns not only the reigning conception of ‘progress’ in the analysis of an individual and how they are directed in the treatment, which is something Lacan (1958) had addressed prior to Seminar VI, but also the very conception of progress smuggled into psychoanalysis by those who claimed to know what reality was and should be like so that psychoanalysts could then help individuals to adjust to it. More than that, we should read this phrase ‘progress in
analysis’ as pertaining to the notion of progress itself in the social field such that psychoanalysis becomes harnessed to political projects and then may even come to function as a political project itself.

With respect to the clinical treatment, Lacan rails against analysis that appears to be pursued “along the lines of what one could call moralizing normativation” (Lacan, 1958-1959: 1 July 1959), and points out that when the psychoanalyst organizes their work with ‘reference to reality’ (ibid.) that they presume to have access to, and when they think they know how their analysands should arrange their relations with their objects, they are guided, and guide their analysands toward an ‘identificatory conclusion’ (ibid.). The difference between morality as a system of rules to which the subject should adhere to be good on the one hand and ethics on the other would, of course, be taken up by Lacan (1986) in the following seminar. The warning against ‘moralising normativation’ through which the analysand is pulled into line, normalised with respect to moral standards the analyst identifies with, applies not only, first, to a world in which the subject is conceived of as relating to their objects in a space that they share with their analysts, the apparently good world they are encouraged to join as they progress toward the end of analysis, but also, second, to a world in which the subject is conceived of as locked into a private realm organized as a constellation of internal objects, a bad world which they might only hope to survive. You see the motif of ‘privacy’ in obsessional neurosis being noted by Lacan here.

Lacan deals with that first psychoanalytic vision of the subject in the world – that is the idea that the outside world is potentially good – a vision which has now taken form in versions of relational and intersubjective psychoanalysis (Loewenthal and Samuels, 2014), and he discusses the second vision – the idea that the internal world is horrific – which at that time was articulated by erstwhile Kleinians such as
Edward Glover. That is where he tackles, for example, the paranoiac infantile universe in which Lacan draws our attention to a lovely quote from Glover. Glover notes that the fantasy of what is external ‘has represented a combination of a butcher’s shop, a public lavatory under shell-fire, and a post-mortem room’ (Glover, 1956, p. 222), and then he explores the different possible permutations of that universe; for example, ‘the drug addict’, Glover argues, “converts this into a more reassuring and fascinating chemist’s shop in which however the poison cupboard is left unlocked” (ibid.).

The point is that either way, whether the world is nicely ordered so that it would be madness not to adapt to it or whether it is so uncertain that each individual’s particular fantasies should be coordinated with the others so they do not tear everyone apart, we need, Lacan insists, to be wary of any wholesome unity, of society or the self. He is actually more sympathetic to the Kleinian vision of the perpetually divided subject, one which is sometimes mistakenly included in the object relations tradition as a whole, and so he pours most scorn on the already perfectly adaptive fantasy among some psychoanalysts that the infant was once perfectly coordinated with its mother; “the fact is”, he says, “that in the human being there is no possibility of acceding to this experience of totality” (Lacan, 1958-1959: 11 February 1959). Desire, Lacan argues, “is not put together in a sort of preformed harmony with the map of the world, as after all a harmonic, optimistic idea of human development might suppose” (Lacan, 1958-1959: 13 May 1959).

At the same time, Lacan does not lose sight of the fact that the other side of ‘moralising normativation’, the other side to the version that adapts the subject to future relations with objects that will be as harmonious as the one they first experienced with mother (that is, as supposed in object relations theory as such), is one which thinks that it knows that the infant is driven by fantasies of omnipotence
and must acknowledge these in order to complete the treatment. That would be the ideal-typical journey taken from the paranoid-schizoid position to depressive position in Klein’s work, and it is what underpins Ella Sharpe’s analysis of the man with the little cough that Lacan discusses. This is Sharpe’s patient who also gives a little cough on the stairs outside her consulting room door to signal that he is about to come into the room. A question she explores and interprets is what he, this patient, thinks he might be interrupting in her room, a parental scene for example. Lacan seizes on Sharpe’s comparison between psychoanalysis and a game of chess to make the point that this analysand guards his queen, that “it is on the side of the woman that omnipotence lies” (Lacan, 1958-1959: 11 February 1959), and this point is embedded in a broader argument about who has unspeakable power which must be spoken; ‘it is not the subject who is all powerful’ as the Kleinians seem to assume. Instead, Lacan argues, “What is all-powerful is the other” (ibid.).

Here, the theoretical stakes are high, as they are for any subject who refuses symbolic castration and who thus also tries to keep their queen in place, a subject who “refuses the castration of the other” (Lacan, 1958-1959: 4 March 1959). It is with this relation to the other, the attribution of omnipotence to the other, that Lacan describes the condition of the obsessional, for whom “his very desire is a defence” (Lacan, 1958-1959: 10 June 1959) and who spends his time ‘acquiring merit’ (ibid.); ‘Merit for what: for the reverence of the other with respect to his desires’ (ibid.). This is the subject who subsists in what Lacan refers to as ‘the servitude of his mastery’ (ibid.: 17 June 1959). The obsessional is the most obedient and adapted subject of capitalism if not the most prevalent, and so is an important element in any analysis of contemporary forms of organization.
Obsessional neurosis under capitalism

We can go further in this critique of obsessional neurotic adaptation to society by looking more closely at the nature of alienation under capitalism.

The rationality of capitalism as a political-economic system is underpinned by a scientistic view of social and personal enlightenment. The ideological armature of science under capitalism is then set against alternative systems which are derogated as pre-scientific, uncivilized and ‘irrational’, or may be romanticized as non-rational and intuitive, but usually in such a way as to prioritize the rationality assumed by each individual seeking further enlightenment from them and against them. Psychoanalysis itself, despite Freud’s own warnings, often adheres to a distinctive worldview which it assumes to be universally true and which is sometimes buoyed up by appeals to science, to scientific method or in claims to be underwriting the subject of science. These forms of truth are sometimes given a publicly-accountable frame as warrant for a psychological reduction of truth to what can be defined as correct. In that case there is an adherence to ‘evidence-based’ standards and explicit rationalism, and sometimes this mode of reasoning is given a hermetic cast in which case the internal logic is valued as specifically scientific and even more rigorous than that of mainstream science. Eric Laurent (2002: 100) argues, in contrast to this notion of evidence-based standards, that Lacanians “must expose any attempt to accuse us of being amongst those who promote and identify with the ideal of effectiveness.”

In this sense, the underlying rationality of capitalism is what psychoanalysts would characterise as being ‘obsessional’, and it is then no surprise that psychoanalytic biographies of key figures in the enforcement of labour discipline – Sudhir Kakar’s (1974) psychoanalytic study of Frederick Taylor and the concern with Taylor’s famous and influential time and motion studies of factory work, for example,
should reveal such a strong strain of obsessional neurosis. Perhaps it is because Kakar is working in India, subject to the immense efficient bureaucracy of the British Empire that he is able to notice this as something strange rather than as taken for granted.

A peculiarity of capitalism as far as subjectivity is concerned is that the human subject – the nature of their being in the world and their reflexively elaborated relation to others – is defined as being that of an isolated individual, with deep connections between Puritanism from early capitalism and what we now name ‘obsessional neurosis’ today (Dachy, 2005). On this separation of each subject from others, the individualism that marks the ground on which someone will conceive of themselves as electing different options, as if choosing commodities, the discipline of psychology thrives. The obsessional neurotic is actually the quintessential psychological subject. That notion of the human subject bears fruit in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (Loewenthal and House, 2010). The point is not that it is false, but that it works. This is why the representation of ‘false consciousness’ as some kind of mistaken view of reality on the part of individuals caught in the grip of ideology can then itself also come to function ideologically. It is important to bear in mind that under capitalism we are necessarily falsely conscious about the world and our place in it precisely because that consciousness of the world is actually a fairly accurate way of mapping and moving about the symbolic now. The argument that ‘false consciousness’ is an accurate consciousness of a false world was made by Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978), and the argument was then picked up and elaborated in the work of Slavoj Žižek (1989).

This concern of the obsessional to keep in place the forms of order to which he submits himself is complemented by once-influential structuralist’s accounts of capitalism that precisely draw upon Lacan to warrant them. The work of Marxist
theoretician Louis Althusser is centrally concerned with the question of adaptation, even if it is usually taken to be a critique of it. Althusser, who had encountered Lacan back in 1945 when he attended and was not impressed by a presentation of his logical time paper (Lacan, 1946) at the École Normale Supérieure, used Lacan’s work as a resource for describing the function of ideology. Not only is ideology and the unconscious viewed as eternal in that account, but Althusser (1970) seems uninterested in attempts to break the circuit of interpellation of subjects by Ideological State Apparatuses that then serve to reinforce and warrant those dominant forms of organization. This is why he was referred to by his critics on the left as a philosopher of order (Rancière, 1974).

There is another aspect of the place of psychoanalysis in processes of interpellation and adaptation of the subject that needs to be noted, and Althusser’s failure to separate description from prescription indicates the depth of the problem which occurs even in his own particular version of Marxism (which should instead fuse interpretation of the world with changing it). The problem is pinpointed in Robert Castel’s (1973) study of what he terms ‘le psychanalysme’ in which psychoanalytic discourse not only underpins the clinical contract but also provides the forms in which it will be described. This is critique of the way that psychoanalysis displaces psychiatry all the more effectively and insidiously to normalise individuals in line with a psychiatric agenda. In this way, Castel argues, psychoanalysis reinforces psychiatric practice, and it does this by “facilitating the identification of the operation of the institution with the magical prowess of the analyst/psychiatrist” and also, he says “by imposing as the exclusive means of interpreting the objective structures of the institution” as a ‘psychosociology’ which is configured in line with the ‘discourse of the unconscious’ (Gordon, 1977, p. 122). Incidentally, one can see perhaps why Castel would be attracted to Deleuze and Guattari (1977) as an apparent
critique of psychoanalysis, but we should also note that he worries that they actually redeem it, the argument here hinging on the privilege given to the Oedipus complex (Gordon, 1977, p. 126). Would that it were not so, but psychoanalytic discourse is also implicated in adaptation, which is precisely why Lacan takes such pains to show us how this discourse, including the privilege given to Oedipus, can and should also be unraveled.

Management of subjectivity

We can see from all this that obsessional neurosis is a function of a particular kind of political-economic system, capitalism, and we can view this particular form of subjectivity as being replicated ideologically. That is, what it is to be a good adapted subject has the form of obsessional neurosis. But it is also worth looking at the way this form of subjectivity is replicated materially, institutionally, and this is something that has been noticed in studies of contemporary management.

We need to set this account in context. Every academic disciplinary framework, including psychoanalysis when it is configured in that kind of way, risks endorsing what it pretends to discover, and nowhere more so than in the field of management studies which relies on what has been characterized as “the existence of a rational, asexual and sensible self, miraculously acting in accordance with its own individual intentions” (Cederström, 2009, p. 16). Against attempts to enforce such a model of the subject, disciplinary and individual, ‘Critical Management Studies’ (CMS) emerged and eventually took shape as a recognized sub-field in the early 1990s (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992), and it has been in the context of theoretical discussion within CMS of Marx, Weber and Foucault that a new sub-sub-field has
been accumulating in strength in business and management schools, that of the so-called ‘management Lacanians’.

Early papers in this sub-sub-field of CMS (e.g., Roberts, 2005; Harding, 2007) drew on Lacan’s (1949) description of the mirror stage to show how employees “by identifying themselves with an image of unity became more vulnerable to managerial control” (Cederström, 2009, p. 23) and then, more optimistically, how ‘the subject assumes different identities in different situations’ (ibid., p. 25). More recent, management Lacanian contributions have described processes of identification alongside theories of ideological hegemony and a multiplicity of discursive constructions which ensure the commitment of employees to their work (Contu and Willmott, 2006), showing how “fantasy renders identities more captivating and beautiful but also maintains the status quo, an experience of stability and sustainability” (Cederström, 2009, p. 27).

Current preoccupation, in which Lacan is often refracted through the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) and through that of SlavojŽižek (1989), has been with how an impossible kernel of enjoyment operates as the bewitching locus of identity (Jones and Spicer, 2005), and with how transgression is functional to management, licensing and harnessing jouissance, jouissance as something beyond the way that Lacan (1958-1959: 15 April 1959) glosses it in Seminar VI where it is as ‘the direct satisfaction of a need’. This theoretical development of ‘Lacan at work’ in CMS has facilitated a specification of fantasy which also deepens analysis of the hold of ideology on the subject. One influential account corresponds to the forms of discourse Lacan was elaborating in Seminar VI and argues that “the logic of a fantasmatic narrative is such that it structures the subject’s desire by presenting it with an ideal, an impediment to the realization of an ideal, as well as the enjoyment linked to the transgression of an ideal”
(Glynos, 2010, pp. 29-30).

This is clearly part of a broader project concerning the nature of ideology and fantasy in political economy (Glynos, 2001, 2012), one which relies on the premise that

“if political logics furnish us with the means to show how social practices come into being or are transformed, then fantasmatic logics disclose the way specific practices and regimes grip subjects ideologically” (Glynos, 2010, p. 31).

Within CMS, the critique of current conditions of work as such as alienating and destructive has extended the remit of traditional management studies (Cederström and Fleming, 2012).

A presentation at the 2013 ‘Re-working Lacan at Work International Conference’ in Paris gripped an audience of CMS management Lacanians and provided a measure of barely containable jouissance (Cederström and Hoedermaekers, 2013). The presentation and discussion revolved around a major study by Alexandra Michel (2011) which was titled ‘Transcending socialization: A nine-year ethnography of the body’s role in organizational control and knowledge worker transformation’ and published in a high-status mainstream management journal, Administrative Science Quarterly. The starting point of the paper was what is termed the ‘autonomy paradox’ (Mazmanian et al., 2011), which is that “knowledge workers perceive their effort as autonomous despite evidence that it is under organizational control” (Michel, 2011, p. 325). Note the way that she poses, in a different key, the question over the relationship between symbolic processes and individual experiences of them. Michel drew on an amazing amount of ethnographic and interview data from two Wall Street investment banks which she “triangulated to bolster validity” she says (ibid., p. 334) – 7,000 hours of observation, over 600
formal semi-structured interviews, over 200 informal interviews and analysis of company materials – and she ‘iteratively moved between data and emerging theory’ to show how “[l]ess visible embodied controls bypassed the mind to target the body” (ibid., p. 335).

The audience at the ‘Re-working Lacan at Work’ conference were transfixed and delighted by how the bankers used, abused and in many cases ended up destroying their bodies, moving from a regime of sleep deprivation to use of caffeine and prescription drugs to experiencing a variety of debilitating illnesses, burn out and breakdowns, a process that usually became noticeable about four years into the job. The bankers accounted for this by saying things like “I wouldn’t call it control; I am at war with my body” (p. 342), insisting that “I am not going to let my body ruin my life” (p. 345), and that I am “kicking my metabolism to do its fucking job” (p. 350). The paper is indeed in some ways gratifying reading for anyone in any way sympathetic to a critique of capitalism, though the presenters at the conference glossed over the way that Michel actually also provides a redemption narrative in which at least some of the bankers overcome their hostility to the self-help nostrums they previously despised, and then ‘the banks benefited from the banker’s transcending socialization and control’. The performance problems of those who treated their bodies as antagonists continued. But the performance of those who treated their “body as subject”, as Michel put it, improved, and they appeared to have transcended the antagonism; “they were creative because they had to reconcile the banks’ and the body’s demands” (Michel, 2011, p. 350).

Any account of the body as real, treated as an object to be managed and accounted for symbolically must, of course, for psychoanalytic researchers raise questions about fantasy and the staging of the subject in relation to their objects. Lacan in Seminar VI emphasizes the way bits of the body are mobilized within
discourse, but in a way that conceals its functions at the very same moment that it seems to provide transparent access to what is going on; “it is with our own members – this is what the imaginary is – that we compose the alphabet of this discourse which is unconscious” (Lacan, 1958-1959: 18 March 1959). This imaginary organization of bits of our body, of the real into a coherent narrative also applies to the symbolic itself. Referring to the bank’s provision of free car services, meals, health clubs, and dry cleaning, one participant in the study commented that “Feminists used to say that every woman could work if the wife takes care of chores. The bank is my wife’s wife.” (Michel, 2011, p. 339). It is tempting to read this statement in line alongside Lacan’s (Lacan, 1958-1959: 8 April 1959) ‘great secret’ in Seminar VI that ‘there is no Other of the Other’.

Incidentally, we can read the scale of Michel’s endeavor as itself a replication of the phenomenon it describes in the methodological process; academics in critical management studies as in other spheres of academic life usually have to warrant their claims by accumulating huge amounts of empirical data which has to be gathered and obsessively ordered. Of the many points of interest of the Michel paper, the one I want to note here is that of ‘method’ in relation to ‘theory’, and the way that certain academic institutional requirements are reiterated in the framing of the study for a mainstream management journal that usually publishes quantitative studies and which steers clear of theory, let alone any form of ‘critical’ theory. Michel manages the presentation of her method by referring to ‘triangulation’ of data which is designed to reassure readers about the validity of the study, and by subordinating the ‘theory’ that is necessary to give some sense to the material to the ‘method’ itself, and she does this in the claim that she is using what is called ‘grounded theory’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), a methodological approach which claims to build hypotheses from the data, and only the data. This move highlights but does not
resolve the paradox that ‘employees mistakenly experience autonomy’ (Michel, 2011, p. 329), and though Michel notes that ‘monotonous labor drains vitality and numbs the body such that the person does not feel it’ (Michel, 2011, p. 331), even referencing Marx (1867) and feminist work on emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) to warrant that theoretical framing, she effectively seals off the actual analysis from CMS or management Lacanian interpretation which then has to operate at one remove as if it is from within a meta-language.

**Structure**

These descriptions of contemporary management as part of capitalism enable us to see something about the deeper structure of capitalism, and I want to reflect for a moment on that notion of ‘structure’. The lesson here is not so much that there are aspects of ‘organizational control’ of their bodies in the real that employees only belatedly acknowledge, but that there is a necessary gap between the experiential, imaginary realm that Michel (2011) is accessing and then building her ‘grounded theory’ from and the symbolic processes that can only be grasped theoretically as manifestations of structure, as real. The notion of structure is explicated by Jacques-Alain Miller in one of the founding texts of one influential strand of Lacanian psychoanalysis. This account by Miller raises questions about the notion of ‘structure’ as such and the way we might treat this ‘structure’ as intimately bound up with the nature of capitalist society.

Lacan’s own interest in management and the perils of adaptation is apparent in the care he took to specify particular organizational structures for the École Freudienne de Paris founded in 1964, five years after *Seminar VI*. The ‘cartels’ as workgroups of limited duration which would be open to non-analysts and
disassembled and reassembled with different participants in order to prevent sedimentation of the kind of institutional hierarchy that characterized the IPA, spoke to this concern (Lacan, 1964). One of the first cartels, set up on Althusser’s prompting by students at the École Normale Supérieure, was led by Jacques-Alain Miller and was on the ‘Theory of Discourse’. One of the products of the cartel is Miller’s (1968) ‘Action of the Structure’ which provides ‘a systematic exposition’ (p. 69), he says, of psychoanalytic discourse and its articulation with that of Marxism such that they might, Miller (ibid., p. 80) suggests at the end of the paper, “reflect one another in a unitary theoretical discourse”. This paper is ground-breaking not only insofar as it systematizes Lacan’s work to date as a theoretical reflection on epistemology and ontology but also as an anticipation of a particular reading of Lacan’s own readings of Freud that would come to provide the conceptual architecture of the present-day École de la cause freudienne (e.g., Voruz and Wolf, 2007).

‘Action of the Structure’ is in three parts, dealing first with ‘structure’ and then with the ‘subject’ and then with ‘science’. Structure, for Miller (1968, p. 71), is “that which puts in place an experience for the subject that it includes”, but he is insistent that, at the same time, “an ineliminable subjectivity is situated in these experiences” (ibid.) which is something that crucially differentiates this notion of structure from that of caricatured mechanistic linguistic structuralism with which Lacanian psychoanalysis is sometimes assimilated. Psychoanalysis, which concerns the “relation that the subject entertains with its speech” (ibid.), is, of course, tracking the structuring of this subjectivity without confusing that subjectivity with the ‘imaginary function’ that gives continuity to reality “by means of the production of representations that respond to the absence in the structuring, and compensate for the production of lack” (ibid., p. 72).
It is precisely this imaginary quasi-structure that ‘constitutes itself in the real’, the ‘reduplication of the structural system’ that was ‘merely ideal at the outset’ (ibid., p. 72), that ethnographic and interview studies of the kind that Alexandra Michel’s (2011) paper on organizational control exemplifies. The ‘autonomy paradox’ that Michel is tackling cannot then be resolved within the operations of an “order that secretly adjusts what is offered to the gaze” (Miller, 1968, pp. 73-74) for there is a ‘miscognition’ of the subject’s place in the structure that is necessary to it and concealed by it as part of its own internal logic in which “[t]he outside passes into the inside” (ibid., p. 74). There is already a rehearsal here of Miller’s (1986) theoretical description of the extimacy of the objet petit a in this account of the overdetermination of structure which gives rise to an effect of ‘coherence or homogeneity’ but which revolves around ‘the utopic point’ of the structure which ‘always misleads the eye’ (Miller, 1968, p. 73).

The second part of the paper, on the subject, drives home the point that phenomenology is inadequate as an alternative to structuralism for “the invisible accommodates a structure that systematizes the visible that hides it” (ibid. p. 74), and so what is needed, Miller says, is “a truly radical archaeology of perceptions that are historical through and through, that are absolutely specified, that are structured like a discourse” (ibid., p. 75); here Foucault’s (1963) work, particularly The Birth of the Clinic, is explicitly signalled by Miller as a guide. This means that neither transparent intersubjectivity nor intrasubjective reflection of the subject upon themselves in any kind of ameliorative strategies of collective or individual self-help can be held out as a solution to ‘the lack’ that ‘persists inside the subject’; “alienation cannot be treated as that hell from which it should liberate itself so as to possess itself and enjoy its own activity” (p. 76). There is no immediate escape from the reign of what Miller (2005) will later come to term the quantified predicament of the ‘one-
all-alone’ in a more qualitative reflexive appreciation of that condition. This ‘one-all-alone’ is, in some sense, an existential predicament that is profoundly obsessional. Miller (2005, p. 11) refers to “the one-all-alone, all alone to fill out questionnaires in order to receive one’s evaluation, and the one-all-alone commanded by a surplus-jouissance that is presented under its most anxiety generating aspect”.

There is therefore, Miller argues, “[n]o relationship between a subject and another subject, or between a subject and an object” that will fill this lack “except by an imaginary formation that sutures it” (p. 76), and here, Miller gestures to his second key theoretical paper, on ‘suture’, one that complements ‘Action of the Structure’; that suture paper was first given at a session of Lacan’s Seminar XII (Miller, 1966). Miller points out, in a prescient critique of current fashion in governmental policies concerning mental health that “we must consider any notion of a politics of happiness, i.e. of adjustment, as the surest way of reinforcing the inadequation of the subject to the structure” (p.76). In other words, the happy compromise between the bankers and their bodies, and between the demands of the company and their own well-being, that Michel (2011) describes for those who have not completely destroyed their health will only be a mirage; the draining of vitality and numbing of the body that she bemoans are an integral and intimate component of the alienation of the subject in an organization under capitalism.

The third part of Miller’s paper brings us directly to Lacan’s concerns in Seminar VI. Miller differentiates between ‘the field of the statement’ as ‘the field where logic establishes itself’ on the one hand and ‘the field of speech’ which is ‘that of psychoanalysis’ on the other (p. 77). He then describes a ‘topological distribution’ that ‘disconnects the plane on which the subject is effectuated in the first person’ and ‘the place of the code to which he is rendered’ (p. 78); this ‘splitting’ within ‘the interior of language’ means that ‘the subject is capable of an unconscious’ (ibid.).
Interpretations in clinical treatment which are conceived as the giving of meaning to what is said are thus implicated in ‘the field of the statement’, always inverting speech and feeding the very distortions, torsions that make of it something unconscious to the subject. In Seminar VI, Lacan draws attention to the way that the elements of fantasy are constituted by way of a ‘cutting’ which also divides what will become subject from what will become object for it and then, as an alternative to feeding the unconscious with meaning, he argues in the final session that ‘the cut’ ‘is no doubt the most efficacious mode of analytic intervention and interpretation (Lacan 1958-1959: 1 July 1959).

This is where a rather surprising connection can be made between Seminar VI on the one hand and Deleuze and Guattari on the other, with the argument made by the latter that ‘the cut’ that Lacan describes can be equated with ‘difference-in-itself’. In this perspective Lacan’s cut, Mølbak (2007) argues, “divides the flow into two asymmetrical sides”; Mølbak goes on to say that on the one side “it leaves an effaced subject that has nothing but the nature of a trace of what was there before speech (past-in-itself)” and on the other side of the cut “it indicates an object beyond speech, which remains forever out of reach (future-in-itself)” (Mølbak, 2007, p. 482).

Miller claims that that very topological distribution also makes possible what he calls ‘a flat discourse, without an unconscious’ which is ‘scientific discourse’, one which ‘closes speech upon itself’ but which “should not be confused with the suture of non-scientific discourse” (p. 79). This is important to the possible discursive articulation between ‘the secondary selection from the primordial Other scene’ in psychoanalytic discourse and what Miller terms “other Other scenes, grafted upon the place of the code” (p. 78). For example, he says, and this is where the connection between psychoanalysis and Marxism in a possible ‘unitary theoretical discourse’ is anticipated, ‘the Other scene of the class struggle, whose combinatory deals with
“class-interests” is possible in a particular ‘specification of lacks’ (p. 78). However, just as this scientific discourse is ‘without unconscious’, so it ‘includes no utopic element’. Instead this ‘closed field’ of science operates as if limitless when viewed from the inside and as ‘a foreclosed space’ from outside; there is thus an intimation of the later proliferation of ‘generalised foreclosure’ and ‘ordinary psychosis’ in his work (Redmond, 2014). Miller argues here that “every science is structured like a psychosis” (p. 80).

Suspicion of old therapeutic strategies of feeding the unconscious is what Lacan and later Miller (2013) will make in the argument that ‘desire is its interpretation’, and what will later be found in Miller’s (1999) critique of the prevalence of interpretation in contemporary society, and the ‘cut’ as a clinical response.

Concluding comments: Obsessional neurosis in the clinic

There are a number of implications of this analysis of the nature of capitalism and the management of subjectivity for the way we treat obsessional neurosis in the clinic. So, I want to turn to the way our psychoanalytic work which aims to treat obsessional neurosis is itself bound up with it, implicated in it through our necessary participation in certain kinds of institutional structures.

The work of a psychoanalyst is defined by enough elaborate procedures of time and record-keeping to turn the practice into something obsessional. The intuitive interpersonal aspects of the work – the encounter with the analysand – are also rendered in the popular imagination into something stereotypically feminine even if the analyst does not want to subscribe to those characterizations of the relation that is formed in the clinic. Note the link here with one of the defining
characteristics of obsessional neurosis outlined at the beginning of this paper. And, around and against this feminine enclosed space even the most Lacanian of psychoanalysts, even when they operate with a theory of sexuation in place of gender, are caught in the minutiae of an apparatus of surveillance and control that is stereotypically masculine. Gender, then, already enters into the definition of what an obsessional dialect of neurosis is like; of what the obsessional is and what the analyst is who attempts to hystericise the subject so that they will start to speak to another instead of attempting to blot the existence of the other out.

So, we can see here some reasons why the analyst might come to adopt the position of the obsessional neurotic, but I am concerned here with why that analyst could then come to experience their analysand as being obsessional, why a therapeutic mutation of analysis would encourage the analyst to attribute that clinical structure to some of those they treat. The therapist who is faced with a client who does not emote as they have come to believe that subjects should, will not anticipate emotion as something that will be readily accessible, as they think it should be, but they will do their best, driven by the command to enable all others to be in contact with their feelings, to solicit emotion. In this process the therapist is drawn into rivalry with their client, a rivalry that intensifies the sense the therapist has that they are faced with ‘resistance’, defensiveness that can only indicate that they are faced with what they will come to call an obsessional neurotic.

There is often in feminised therapeutic practice a retreat to an ideological notion of deep gender, one in which stereotypical characteristics of masculinity and femininity are assumed to operate as universal, perhaps complementary ‘archetypal’ forms of being. When this notion is mobilized in the clinic the stereotypically masculine resistance to therapy comes to be mirrored in a just as intransigent insistence on the part of the therapist that this kind of subject should find their own
necessarily imperfect way of being in touch with their feelings (Parker, 2011). There is then also resistance on the side of the therapist, resistance which configures them as experiential site if not source of the clinical structure of obsessional neurosis.

Lacan’s mapping of desire in the field of the other revolves around the question of power, whether it is how Ella Sharpe’s man with a little cough inscribes himself in the field of an all-powerful other or whether Hamlet can summon the power to act against his rival. These figures subject to power are, at some moments in *Seminar VI*, treated as if they are indeed clinical cases, this even despite Lacan’s own warning that Hamlet should not be treated thus, but they are also *representations* of subjects, subject to identification by those who read about them, which is one of the issues that Lacan himself raises about Hamlet and which also applies to the other actual clinical cases.

Desire, Lacan (1958-1959: 1 July 1959) tells us in the final session of *Seminar VI*, “is a mapping out of the subject with respect to [the] sequence [of the signifying chain] in which it is reflected in the dimension of the other”. What is politics but the organization of power in the dimension of the other, both as the organization of the actually existing symbolic field and as the relation of the subject to that field in the frame of their own particular desire, even if that would be to accord omnipotence to the other and enjoy the servitude of their own mastery? In his meditation on the organization of desire and its implications for clinical work with individuals Lacan also shows us something about the way that power is configured in such a way that desire locks us into certain forms of organization. That desire today also includes desire for psychoanalysis as a mode of interpretation that will comfort the obsessional subject as they organize their existence in the time of the other and console themselves with fantasies that are timeless, perverse filmic ‘trailers’, as Lacan (Lacan, 1958-1959: 17 June 1959) puts it, ‘trailers’ for what will never actually come
into being. Lacan’s account of obsessional neurosis enables us to see how it is a mode of adaptation of the human subject to the rule of capital and to forms of management, and it opens the way to meditations on structure in psychoanalysis that prompt us to find a way of both using and cutting psychoanalytic discourse in the clinic and, perhaps, also outside it in political practice.

References


