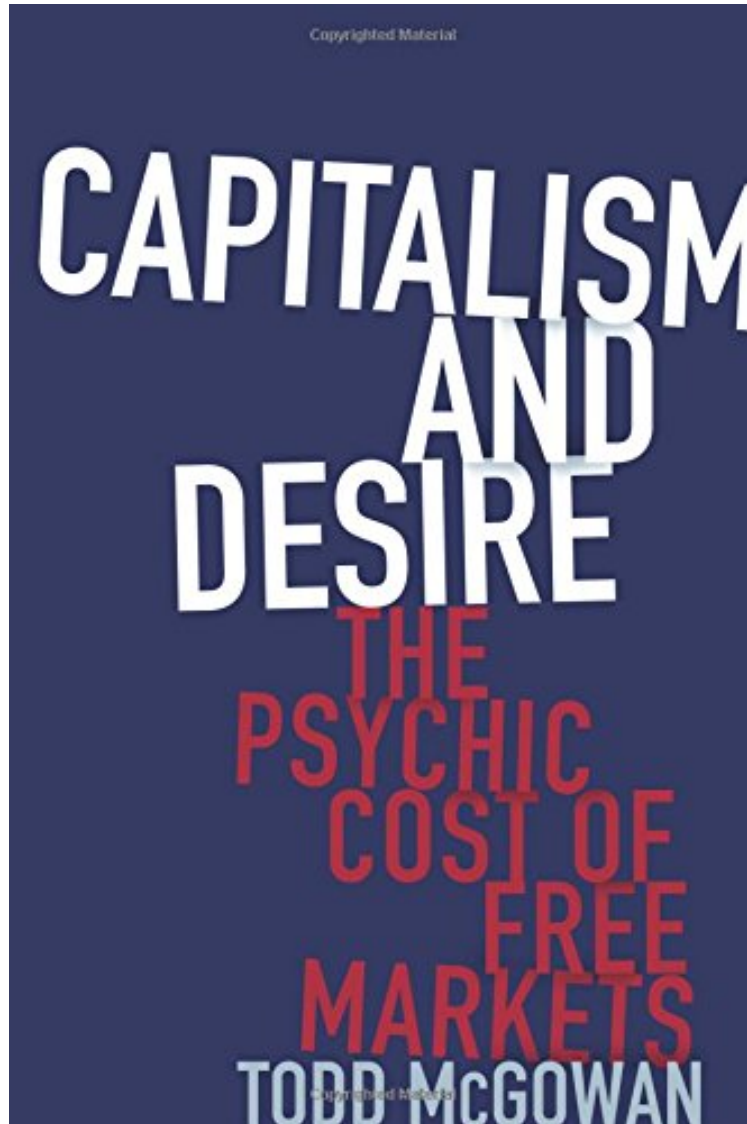


Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets

Todd McGowan

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Todd McGowan : Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets:

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy dug the kA very insightful analysis of how living in a capitalist society affects/shapes our psyche.3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. McGowan Shines a Light Into the DarknessBy schmiel #32This book is like psychoanalysis itself: it offers hope, but no guarantees, and understanding that it may or may not make one "better" or "improved" or more "conscious." I felt fortunate to have read it within the circumstances of our current life world, given as it is to promises that are not going to be kept and

sales techniques overtly intended to deceive. That huge analytic word, desire, and the even larger concept of satisfaction that circulates through advertising and consumer goods messages, are given a common currency in McGowan's estimation of the psychic costs of Capitalism at the personal level of consumption and wish-fulfillment. Because we never get what we believe we are looking for - the sublime - we keep pursuing it - through production and spending. The disappointment keeps us as individuals suspended in a state of disappointment and loss, the actual aim of Capitalism's strategic schemas, and keeps the Capital system expanding, with ever more promise of ever more impossible satisfactions. We are not left out in the rain in McGowan's thought. Indeed, two primary "solutions" (there may be a better word for what he offers) to the ongoing experience of loss and disappointment are given. The first involves being appreciative of labor, of the actual work of production, in the moment of its embodied fabrication. The means to ends becomes an ever-present means that is a constant end, and is in our hands. The second involves the challenge of finding the sublime in the ordinary, the faraway perfection of fantasy in the mundane and at hand of the human, and the corresponding arrival of ethical accomplishment in our current configuration of concerns, rather than some future fantasy of superior ethical becoming. We are human, and we do the best we can. That is or should be enough. And that consciousness and practice is the end of Capitalism as an ideology of dominance and signification. The psyche, as such, appropriates the moment and those with whom we share and value it. There is no better love, product, message, image, commodity or fetish over the horizon or just around the corner. You and I are enough, in any context. The de-contextualizations of our moment to moment lives, the disturbance of desire with the seductions of greater value, beauty, wealth, power or knowledge, become the acts of displacement and usurpation that they are; production is assumed by us, in the moment, and that where the story ends because that is where the only real and temporal satisfactions are to be enjoyed. Wrestling outside this framework of immanent human involvement and concern wounds and frustrates. Capital feeds on the resulting confusion and despair. Capitalism is stimulated by our suffering, frustration and unhappiness. And because Capitalism can reward and enrich, at least temporarily, that potential for wounded and even pathogenic suffering grows, too. McGowan gives us complete responsibility for changing this by inviting us, as would any competent analyst, to take responsibility for our frameworks of living and our orientation toward what is and is not enough. I, for one, found the struggle to read and understand this book amply rewarding. Its payoff involves the recognition that our dissatisfaction, and our apparent preference for it over satisfaction, is not a by-product of a defective nature but the consequence of an internalized ideology that attention and care to what is close, human and immanently at hand can begin to reverse. We don't overthrow capitalism with resistance and rebellion; we transmute our ongoing dissatisfaction with the ordinary into a renewed apprehension of the sublime, locating it in the seemingly mundane of the human in the moments at hand. This is an inside job. The simplest and most immediate of things and persons turn out to be the greatest gift for achieving this revolutionary aim. In the long run, it probably turns out to be good for business, too. 16 of 24 people found the following review helpful.

An Unpleasant and Unrewarding Read By Roger Fraser Todd McGowan's book is the latest in a long line of attempts from Reich through Fromm and Marcuse to Foucault and Deleuze to use psychoanalytic theory to deepen and enrich Marxist social theory. What McGowan thinks all these other thinkers missed and that he gets right is the real cause why consumers in a capitalist economy are addicted to consumption as a way to meet endless and bottomless desires for goods and services in order to feel whole and complete and fulfilled. Building on some opaque concepts from Jacques Lacan and the more accessible Melanie Klein, McGowan maintains that consumers seek to regain the Lost Object from their infancy in every purchase. This fantasy object doesn't exist and never did, and it pre-dates the Bad Mother's breast that is denied the baby. In fact, this mysterious Ur-Loss, says McGowan, is at the dawn of consciousness, is rendered unconscious, and becomes the very core of a person's being as well as being constitutive of his or her identity. But since the Lost Object is imaginary, the consumer is driven by repetition over and over---as Freud emphasized about neurotics in his metapsychology after 1920, of which McGowan approves---to derive satisfaction from purchase after purchase and is doomed to failure and frustration. You can never, according to McGowan, fill up the ontological hole at the center of your being. The author offers no attempt at a proof of his thesis and spends the next 200 pages drawing out the consequences of this insight for revolutionary theory, a theory of love vs. romance, how a Big Mac can be sublime, how the Lacanian "Gaze" helps constitute what we see in our visual field, the bad infinite (metaphorically pictured as an endless straight line somehow typical of capitalism) versus the true infinite (metaphorically a circle, something McGowan tells us Hegel celebrates). All of these topics are supposed to hang together and be extraordinarily illuminating and helpful. Yet I found McGowan's increasingly ex cathedra and oracular pronouncements and fondness for paradox and unsupported counter-intuitive claims (e.g., that humans were saddled with more scarcity in the Neolithic Revolution than on the savannah when hunting and gathering) irritating and self-promotional. It's a frustrating read for anyone who likes arguments tight, concepts well-defined, and prose that unpacks difficult and abstruse ideas with genuine respect for the reader. Indeed, McGowan is at his rare best when he uses film examples to highlight his meaning. His prose comes alive and he's often clear and insightful and a joy to read. These film examples---especially his exegesis of "Citizen Kane" in terms of the Ur-Loss---are the best and most accessible part of his book. Yes, McGowan is a better film critic than he is, say, an interpreter of Marx. Consider what he says about Marx's concept of accumulation. Forgetting or never knowing that Marx uses it in a technical sense to

mean that capitalists qua capitalists accumulate capital to reinvest in their enterprises at the peril of being undercut by lower prices and losing market share to competitors, McGowan uses the term in its every-day sense to mean collection of commodities by both workers and capitalists. This is just sloppy. Is it any wonder that, at one point far into the book when the reader is well past caring, McGowan makes the bizarre claim that Hegel was a better critic of capitalism than Marx.

Despite creating vast inequalities and propping up reactionary world regimes, capitalism has many passionate defenders but not because of what it withholds from some and gives to others. Capitalism dominates, Todd McGowan argues, because it mimics the structure of our desire while hiding the trauma that the system inflicts upon it. People from all backgrounds enjoy what capitalism provides, but at the same time are told more and better is yet to come. Capitalism traps us through an incomplete satisfaction that compels us after the new, the better, and the more. Capitalism's parasitic relationship to our desires gives it the illusion of corresponding to our natural impulses, which is how capitalism's defenders characterize it. By understanding this psychic strategy, McGowan hopes to divest us of our addiction to capitalist enrichment and help us rediscover enjoyment as we actually experienced it. By locating it in the present, McGowan frees us from our attachment to a better future and the belief that capitalism is an essential outgrowth of human nature. From this perspective, our economic, social, and political worlds open up to real political change. Eloquent and enlivened by examples from film, television, consumer culture, and everyday life, *Capitalism and Desire* brings a new, psychoanalytically grounded approach to political and social theory.

Capitalism and Desire turns around the predominant leftist whining about the devastating psychic consequences of global capitalism, about how it undermines elementary structures of psychic stability which enable individuals to lead a meaningful life. The focus of Todd McGowan's effort is, rather, the enigma of the success of capitalist ideology: how was it possible for such a destabilizing life practice to fully capture the libidinal lives of billions, how was it possible that continuous crises and states of exception only strengthened its hold? In short, how is it possible that capitalism again and again imposes itself as the cure for the crisis it brings about? In answering these difficult questions, McGowan has produced a classic. (Slavoj Žižek) McGowan's argument is positively brilliant almost every page brings a startling insight and every chapter compels an exciting reorientation of thought. Because of its paradigm-shifting originality, *Capitalism and Desire* places McGowan among the most prominent critical thinkers of his generation and competes admirably even with the very best work of the generation before him. (Mari Ruti, author of *The Call of Character: Living a Life Worth Living*) With *Capitalism and Desire*, McGowan provides an admirably accessible and intellectually sophisticated analysis of the real connections between capitalism and psychoanalysis. This is a wonderful book demonstrating immense intellectual vitality it is simply impossible to ignore. (Fabio Vighi, author of *Critical Theory and the Crisis of Contemporary Capitalism*) How many syntheses of Marx and Freud have been forged in an attempt to ground a critique of capitalism only in the end to fail? After tallying their individual failures, this smart book goes on to confront their underlying problem: a botched reading of Freud. Relying on Lacan's radical re-examination of Freud, McGowan offers brand-new ideas about the subject's ensnarement in the "freedoms" of capitalism and the possibilities of resistance to them. (Joan Copjec, author of *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*) The immense satisfaction of McGowan's latest and most ambitious book is achieved, appropriately enough, by putting capitalism to the test of a suitably profound (and paradoxical) conception of satisfaction. Astonishingly far-ranging in its references yet written in perfectly limpid prose, *Capitalism and Desire* sets a new high-water mark in contemporary social and political philosophy. A dazzling work of theory. (Richard Boothby, author of *Sex on the Couch: What Freud Still Has To Teach Us About Sex and Gender*) About the Author Todd McGowan is associate professor of film studies at the University of Vermont. He is the author of *Enjoying What We Don't Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis* (2013) and *The Impossible David Lynch* (Columbia, 2007), among other books.