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CHOICE AND CONSUMERISM

The ideology of postindustrial capitalisms heavily relies on the idea of choice and perceives the subject as a consumer who can rationally decide the path of his or her life. The underside of this ideology has been an increase in people's feelings of anxiety, inadequacy and guilt for not making it in today's world. People's identification with the ideology of choice and constant self-critique are preventing them from perceiving choice outside the spectrum of individualism and as something that might incite social changes. The chapter takes the example of the choice of dress and analyzes new types of anxieties that are on the rise with the idea that one can dress oneself for success. Psychoanalysis can be of great help to political theory in understanding the idea of choice, since it shows how people's choices are influenced by their unconscious desires and drives, as well as by what other people are choosing and by the larger social setting, the so-called big Other. Making a critique of the ideology of choice does not mean embracing the idea that people do not make choices, but rather that choices are far less rational than they appear.

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Historically, the idea of freedom of choice has often been debated in the context of the demands for democratization of the political space. In the developed post-industrial world, choice, however, also became a theme that is primarily linked to consumerism. In times when it appears that people have very limited possibilities to have an impact on social and political

developments and forces around them, ideology convinces them that they have all the power to create their private lives in the way they desire if only they make the right choice.¹ A simple look at advertising on the streets shows that nowadays people are encouraged to choose their identity. One is constantly bombarded with slogans like, 'It is your choice', 'Become what you want to be', 'You hold the key to happiness, it's your choice to open the door' or 'Life. Book now.' These slogans give the impression that one is capable of achieving happiness and find enjoyment in life by making the right choice. The individual is also perceived as some kind of self-creator. Yet, in this highly individualized society which gives priority to the individual's self-fulfilment over submission to group causes, people face anxiety provoking dilemmas related to questions like: 'Who am I for myself,' 'What shall I choose,' and 'How will the others regard me with regard to my choices?'

In particular, people appear to be anxious for two reasons: first, it seems that no one is in charge in society as such, and, second, the freedom of choice actually does not give more power to consumers, but rather to corporations which are trying to sell their products. A person shopping around on the Internet for the best price of a product, for example, gives corporations a chance to collect valuable data about his desires and spending habits. What is then anxiety provoking for people is both that no one seems to be in control, and that someone (the corporations) is, in fact, in charge in a hidden way. When people are struggling over their choices they often search for an authority who might appease their anxiety. With the demise of traditional authorities, all kinds of new authorities (from couches to trend setters in the social media) are becoming points of reference and identification and one can even observe new therapists who specialize in anxieties related to both consumer and life choices. This chapter will look at the nature of the anxiety related to consumer choices as well as to the troubling remedies people are offered to appease it. It will also ask what the difference

between choice and chance is and question how rational people's choices actually are. In this line of argumentation, the importance of psychoanalysis will be central.

Anxiety, Choice and the Big Other

When people feel the anxiety that no one is ultimately supposed to be in charge within society at large or that someone (for example, corporations) is already 'choosing' in advance what they supposedly need, they are prone to question the status of what Lacanian psychoanalysis calls the Big Other—a symbolic order that we are born into and which consists not only of institutions and culture, but primarily of the language that shapes our social sphere (Lacan 1991). It is, of course, Lacanian common sense that the Big Other does not exist, which means that the symbolic order we live in is not coherent, but rather marked by lacks, i.e., inconsistent. In addition to stating that the Big Other does not exist, Lacan stressed the importance of people's belief that it does. That is why Lacan ominously concluded that although the Big Other does not exist, it nonetheless functions, i.e., people's belief in it is essential for their self-perception.

A few years ago, US LifeTV conducted a survey on people's anxieties. Participants were asked to make a list of the five most important anxieties that hold them back from living their life to the full. One would have expected the list to include terrorists, viruses, natural catastrophes and economic crisis, but instead, we learned that people are most anxious over the following things:

1. There isn't enough (money, love etc.);
2. They won't like me anymore (i.e. fear of rejection);

3. It is too good to last;
4. I will be found out (i.e. others will see that I am just faking it);
5. My life doesn't matter (i.e. how can I create a legacy for myself).

To calm these fears, people were given advice from a self-help guru which listed everything from the need to be more generous and less centred on their own wealth; to reveal one's real self, even flaws; to tack 'I deserve happiness' above a desk or mirror; to create a folder of Positive Enforcements with all the compliments one receives; to enrich bonds with friends and families etc. Both the list of anxieties and the advice given to overcome them, show that the primal concern for the subject is for his or her place in the world and in his or her interaction with others. As Lacan points out, it is the Other (both in the meaning of the symbolic order and of other people) that is 'anxiety-genic' for the subject, since it constantly forces him or her to question 'Who am I?' and especially, 'Who am I for the Other?'

These questions got more complicated within neo-liberal societies, when the subject became perceived as a self-inventor and as someone who appears freer from the constraints of other people than our predecessors have been. So, if on the one hand, the subject is still concerned about the question regarding the desire of the Other (i.e. how do others regard him or her and how is he or she regarded in society as a whole), on the other hand, the subject is under pressure to make a choice about his or her life independently of social constraints. This pressure, however, has a detrimental effect on many people. Psychoanalysts are often encountering patients who come to analysis with the demand 'I need to decide what I want out of my life'. It is no longer the case that a person is struggling with her parents who prevent her to do something in life, now the person struggles with the burden of making herself into a persona that she might find likable. Paradoxically, freedom of choice increases the feeling of anxiety and guilt that people are suffering from in today's society.

The act of choosing is so traumatic precisely because there is no Big Other: making a choice is always a leap of faith where there are no guarantees. When we try to create self-binding mechanisms which will help us feel content with our choices and eventually help us to be less obsessed with choice, we are not doing anything but ‘choosing’ a Big Other, i.e., inventing a symbolic structure which we presuppose will alleviate our anxiety in front of the abyss of choice. The problem, however, is that the very existence of the Big Other is always our ‘choice’—we create a fantasy of its consistency. In recent years there has been growing debate whether something changed in our perception of the Big Other. Did the symbolic structure within late capitalism change? Or was the subject’s belief in the Big Other altered already when traditional authorities, which were often perceived as the embodiment of the Big Other (like state, church, nation, etc.), lost their power?

French psychoanalyst, Charles Melman (Melman 2005), sees the change in the subject’s perception of the Big Other as being related to the overwhelming assumption that the world is rationally organized. This assumption is also behind the idea of rational choice. The domain of the Big Other seems to be overflowed with information which is supposed to help people make choices in their lives, however this expansion of information paradoxically increases people’s dissatisfaction. If we take the example of new scientific developments we can observe that they opened many questions, while there seem to be no authorities on which one can rely for answers, which is why we create various temporary, ad hoc structures (like committees). The latter are supposed to help us in dealing with the inconsistency of the Big Other, but they, of course, always fail in providing the certainty we search for.

French philosopher, Dany-Robert Dufour (Dufour 2008), presents his own pessimistic perspective on the demise of our symbolic structures. Dufour departs from Freud’s presupposition that each culture, in its own way, forms the subjects who then try to discern the always-specific footprints leading to their origin. For Dufour, this is why one paints the

Other, sings it, one gives it a form, a voice, stages it and gives it representations. The Other supports for us what we cannot support—thus providing the ground which founds us. This is why our history is always a history of the Other. Dufour further points out that the subject is always the subject of the Other, which in the past has taken many forms of some kind of big Subject—from Physis, God, to King, the people, etc. Throughout history, the distance between the subject and this big Subject was eventually reduced. With modernity, however, there emerged a plurality of big Subjects, which is linked to the decline of the power of the church and the vast expanse of scientific progress. In today's culture, the subject is permanently decentred, however, also the symbolic place around him or her appears more and more anomic and diffused. Discussions of post-modernity have thus focused on the fact that there are no grand narratives anymore, that there are no strong authorities with whom the subject can identify, and that individualism seems to have been pushed to its limit, so that the subject more and more perceives him- or herself as a dynamic self-creator.

The Anxious Consumer

In the early seventies, at a lecture in Milano, Lacan made the observation that, in a developed capitalist system, the subject's relationship to the social field can be observed to form a particular discourse. In this 'Discourse of Capitalism,' the subject relates to the social field in such a way that he or she takes him or her-self as a master. The subject is not only perceived to be totally in charge of him or her-self, it also appears to have the power to recuperate the loss of *jouissance* [enjoyment]. In late capitalism, the subject is thus perceived as an agent who has enormous power. What does it really mean that the subject is placed in the position of such an agent? First, it looks as if this subject is free from subjection to his history and

genealogy and thus free from all signifying inscriptions. This seems to be the subject who is free to choose not only objects that supposedly bring him satisfaction, but even more the direction of his life, i.e., the subject chooses himself.

The subject who is presumably free to make numerous choices, however, often searches for identification with some kind of new master – from gurus, religious leaders, political extremists to self-help authors – and by following their advice, paradoxically often limits her/his choices. Let me exemplify this with dilemmas that many women experience when they need to decide what to wear.ⁱⁱ For some women, one of the most anxiety-provoking moments with regard to dress choice is before their wedding (Broekhuizen and Evans 2004). Marriage, which is often referred to as ‘tying the knot’, changes one’s symbolic status by untying family knots while legally binding one partner to another. The creation of this new knot in the traditional way involves dressing up.

Paradoxically, today with the changes in the relationship to authorities, the Internet is becoming a new symbolic space, which often functions as an ad-hoc therapy space. On many online forums devoted to wedding issues, one can thus read about the dilemmas women face when they are choosing the dress for this important event. One woman writes: ‘I’m getting married this September, and just bought my dress a couple of days ago. However, since then I’ve been having major dress anxiety! I don’t know if this is normal, if other brides have gone through this, or if anyone has any ideas to help with my jitters!’ (lostsock 2015). The woman then explains that she is rather picky. When searching for the perfect dress, she went through 35 different dress fittings before she found the one. The problem, however, was that her mother could not be with her at the time when she made the choice. When she showed the dress to her mother, the latter liked another dress better. The woman regrets that she did not consult her mother before making the purchase and then ponders how to proceed:

I had an emotional reaction to the dress I ended up choosing, so I made the purchase after I tried the dress on for the second time on the same day (which, again, was probably a mistake). But now I've made a down payment, and there's no turning back. I'm pretty sure I made the right choice, but can't help feeling there's something wrong with the dress, or should have gone with the one my mom liked (lostsock 2015).

From the responses this woman received to her anxious post, we can learn that many other brides-to-be have been in a similar situation. They give advice to each other, along the lines of, 'as long as the dress looks and feels good on you, then it is the "right" dress!' Women also urge each other to question whether they love the dress, whether they feel good in it, whether the dress makes them happy and so on.

Many women on the forum complain that they made their choice in light of what others perceived as the right choice. One woman even says: 'I think I chose a beautiful dress, but I'm still wrestling with what-could-have-beens.' (lostsock 2015). From discussions like this, one easily gets the impression that the dress is just a stand-in for all the other anxieties that the bride is going through before her wedding. It might very well be that while pondering whether she has chosen the right dress, she is unconsciously questioning whether she chose the right husband, and that the 'what-could-have-beens' are related to the decision to marry, or to marry this particular man.

The mother's criticism of her daughter's dress can also be understood in the broader context of mother–daughter relationships. It might very well be that the mother's disapproval of the dress is masking her disapproval of the marriage, or that she is envious of her daughter taking centre stage at the wedding, or that she is unwilling to separate from her, or that she is playing out her own past wedding dilemmas. If women struggle first with the question of what others (especially their mothers) want, they also struggle with the question of how their

choices relate to the fantasy image of how their wedding should look. When choosing the dress, many women have the problem of bringing the reality of their wedding close to the image that they have created in their heads. One woman thus says: ‘I went to 14 bridal stores until I finally picked one. I had a vision and couldn’t get that out of my head. I wanted to fulfil my wedding dress vision, but still find a dress that was flattering’ (lostsock 2015). This woman finally calmed down when others on the forum began saying to her: ‘Your wedding look is more than just the dress. It is the hair, make up, veil or no veil, jewellery and you.’ (lostsock 2015).

However, those women who cannot easily be calmed by the advice they get from other women on the Internet can turn to new authorities that professionally specialize in curing dress anxiety. An institution called Calm Clinic claims that among the many anxiety treatments they offer there is one that especially caters to women who have problems with their wedding dresses. In its online advertisement, the Clinic states that the type of dress one wears affects one’s stress levels and that one can actually be ‘dressed for stress’ (Calm Clinic no date). An anxiety test is offered, to help people determine if they are anxious because they dress for others (controlling friends, spouses, parents) or if they are sabotaging their own well-being with ‘I don’t care couture’. People might also be stressed because they are ‘dressing up their own low self-esteem’ – they might dress to ‘fit in’ or get attention from others.

From the advice on the Calm Clinic website, we also learn how to dress for success. The idea is that one needs to dress for oneself and no one else, think carefully about what one wears, show off one’s positive qualities, and especially avoid dressing in what hurts. The idea that one needs to dress for oneself might appear calming; however, it goes very much against the reality that dress *per se* has a social component. One is never dressing for oneself alone. Everything about dress involves others and society at large, i.e. the Big Other. The fabrics we

use, the styles we choose always involve a particular symbolic setting in which dress plays a particular role. Even if we were to have produced the fabric by ourselves, sewn the dress at home and chosen the cut of the dress, the very fact that we are going to cover our body in a particular way and that our dressing up will be reflected in the eyes of others shows that dress is essentially a social construct (Arnold 2001). In times of abundance of choice, this social dimension of dress invokes dress anxiety in two ways: on the one hand, we have the old dilemmas related to the question of fitting in (i.e. following social codes within particular situations); on the other hand, the pressure to ‘be yourself’ and to take oneself as an object of self-creation.

Ignorance, Chance and Choice

In the midst of feelings of guilt and anxiety related to choices, the issue of social inequality is often pushed aside and the fact that people’s choices are highly determined by their economic status is also often ignored. The success of the ideology of late capitalism has been that it created the fantasy of possibility even in the midst of obvious impossibilities. Even the very poor, who have fewer and fewer choices, would passionately support the idea of choice. Dan Ariely and Michael Norton (Norton and Ariely 2011) conducted a study on how people perceive social inequality. They asked participants of a survey how much of the U.S. wealth is in the hands of the richest twenty per-cent of people and what would be a just distribution of wealth. People guessed that the richest 20% probably have about 60% of all of the wealth, but that the just distribution would be for them to have about 30%. In reality, however, the top 20% have more than 80% of the wealth.

Why do people not rebel against what they actually perceive as an unjust distribution of wealth? Why do they not, for example, more enthusiastically support larger taxes on the rich and universal health care? When presenting the results of the Ariely and Norton study, *The New York Times* (2011) asked different commentators to explain the lack of people's reactions against wealth inequality, especially since the majority of people imagine that in an ideal world the inequality would be much smaller than it is. If we make a brief overview of the responses, the explanations touch on the following:

1. The U.S. is driven by lottery mentality, which means that people think that maybe they can still make it in the future.
2. Those who are pessimistic about their own future might nonetheless harbour the belief that their kids might make it, which is why they do not want to impose high taxes on them. Here the identification with various successful people from Silicon Valley is particularly strong.
3. People more strongly identify with those who are similar to them—like their colleagues or neighbours, which is why they also envy these people more than the super-rich. The latter are so out of reach that people do not even compare themselves with them or envy their life style.
4. Many people have the feeling of guilt that they have overspent and that they are actually individually guilty for their financial troubles.
5. Many middle class people have the impression that they are actually not doing so badly since they are in possession of many gadgets and their lives are actually better than the lives of their parents.
6. At times of crisis, there is not as much desire to have as there is desire to keep.

To the list of these responses, one needs to add an explanation of how the belief in choice has been underpinned by the idea of chance. While chance offers everyone the possibility to make it, it also presents a traumatic, uncontrollable moment that goes against the perception of rational subjectivity on which the ideology of choice relies. If we look at the negative part of chance, we are quickly reminded that the most random moment in our lives is the moment of death. The ritual of Russian roulette illustrates well the fact that death is always something related to chance and choice at the same time. When Jean Paul Sartre was talking about anxiety being related to freedom, he was thinking precisely about the fact that we are always free to take our own life. Albert Camus' saying that he was often pondering if he should have another cup of coffee or he should kill himself goes to the core of this choice. In Russian roulette we, however, make a choice and do not make it fully at the same time. We allow randomness to decide for us. We thus give mastery over our choice to something else. Randomness then becomes a new master.

Often, throwing the dice at first looks like an opening to pure chance. Dice however, soon, takes over and itself becomes a mechanism of power. Let me exemplify this with an event that I witnessed in my home. My son once had one extra ticket to a very desirable concert and two friends who very much wanted that extra ticket. The boys also wanted my son to make the decision regarding who could have the ticket while each boy offered an explanation why he deserved the ticket more than the other one. In the midst of this drama, the boys searched for criteria that might help in making the decision—like who is the oldest friend, who is the most supportive friend, who first said that he wants to go to the concert, etc. My son, however, refused to be the master since he knew that whichever criteria he used, he would lose the friendship of the boy who would not get the ticket. The solution came when my father intervened and proposed to the boys to let dice decide. The boys agreed. At that moment, the dice became the new master. To make everything even more fair, the idea was

that the dice would be thrown by my father and not by one of the boys. When the dice decided, the boys took that as a fair result. The boy who lost was reminded that dice is often used in sports and that he needed to take loss with dignity as a proper sportsman would.

A comparison can be made here with the idea of the market. The belief in the power of the market at first appears like the belief grounded in the idea of randomness. The possibility of possibility is Soren Kierkegaard's definition of anxiety (Kierkegaard 1986 [1843]), which can also apply to the idea of the market. However, we deal with this anxiety by erecting choice to the pedestal of mastery. Randomness suddenly becomes something that needs to be controlled and figured out, and its potentially damaging effects (its closeness with death and annihilation) need to be prevented—which is why we have endless market analysis and risk aversion studies.

Forced Choice

Choice operates on a different level from that in which rational choice theory perceives it. Books which promote positive thinking as a way one can change one's life and all the self-help advice which encourages people to choose various directions in their lives do not pay attention to the fact that quite a number of choices we make in our lives fall into the so-called category of 'forced choice'. An example of forced choice is the following: The Yugoslav army had a particular ritual for the conscripts starting their military service. The army created a ceremony in which the young soldiers had to take an oath and sign a statement that they freely chose to become members of the Yugoslav army. Occasionally it happened that a young soldier would take this choice seriously and refuse to sign the oath. Such acts of

disobedience were severely punished and the soldier would usually be put in jail. He would be released from jail only when he would 'freely' sign the oath.

A similar case of a forced choice was at work in the treatment of prisoners at the time of the Iraq war. After it was revealed that many prisoners were subject to torture by the US military, the latter introduced special questionnaires which prisoners who were about to be released from prison were supposed to fill out. The form enquired whether the prisoner underwent torture at the time of his detention. Men were often advised by their translators not to respond positively to this question since that might prevent them from exiting prison. Here, too, the choice to answer truly was offered and inadvertently denied at the same time.

Even in daily conversations we often offer the possibility of choice when we actually do not mean it. Examples are acts of politeness when a person offers something to another with the expectation that the offer will be rejected, since it was only a polite gesture. A case of forced choice is also when a person is faced by a robber saying: 'Your money or your life!' If the person chooses to keep the money, he will, of course, not be able to enjoy it.

The above examples show that in cases of forced choice the person is faced by the possibility of choice which is at the same time denied. The first impression one gets from such cases is that they should not be called choice at all. However, forced choice acts as an important part of the social bond. The very fact that we have forced choice attests to the fact that society envisions a person as being capable of freedom. Such mocked trials of choice also attest to the fact that society cannot simply reject this freedom. Even the most severe forms of totalitarian regime often resorted to acts of forced choice, which shows that for power to employ coercion, some kind of a fantasy of the individual's free submission to the regime needs to be preserved.

Psychoanalysis also finds importance in the idea of forced choice. Freud coined the notion *Neurosenwahl* – the choice of neurosis – which pointed out that the person suffering from neurotic symptoms was not a mere victim but also had some ‘authorship’ over his or her suffering. The fact that Freud perceived neurosis as something linked to a particular type of choice was a step which actually made psychoanalysis possible. Without this step, we would have to assume that the person becomes what she is solely due to her traumatic experiences. Freud acted against such determinism quite early when he rejected his theory of seduction and started perceiving traumatic experiences as something that does not necessarily have automatic results. The link between cause and effect became much more blurred. The fact that Freud and his successors took neurosis as a matter of choice opens up the question of responsibility of the individual for his or her psychological suffering. Psychological trauma thus always has an inscription of an individual’s ‘freedom’ in forming a symptom, which means that the individual is not simply bound by numerous external determining factors (family etc.).

Conclusion

One of the crucial reasons for choice being so traumatic is that every choice involves a loss. If we choose one path, we have lost the possibility to pursue another one. And finally - death is beyond choice. Because choice is so anxiety provoking, we often try to make everything to avoid it. A woman might, for example, think about leaving her partner, but then finds a variety of reasons not to make this move. She might reason that she can leave tomorrow; she might think that choosing another partner will at the end not bring such a change to her life; she might think that leaving will undermine her identity etc. But equally hard is dealing with

the loss of choice. A middle-aged woman might, for example, feel sad when she loses the choice to have children even if she actually does not want them.

The choices we make are often irrational. When we, for example, buy an expensive car, it might be very well because we hope to provoke envy from others and not because we have rationally come to the conclusion that we need this car. Provoking envy and desire for something that someone else has is very much part of today's marketing strategies. The new trend, however, is to introduce humiliation into the mix. In Japan a number of stores became very fashionable because they limit people's choices. A store that sells fashionable products is, for example, set at the outskirts of Tokyo and operates at random hours. Shoppers come there; wait in long lines; and when the shop finally opens they often cannot buy the products that they wish. When a particular shopper wants to have an object it might be that a sales assistant decides that this object is not going to be sold to him or her. One would guess that such 'torture' would push shoppers away. On the contrary, people became fascinated by a limitation of choices and are flocking to such stores in great numbers.

While some writers are nowadays trying to figure out how to teach people to develop strategies to limit their choices, people often form their own self-binding mechanisms, although they are not conscious ones. People limit their choices by themselves or they act as if someone else had imposed limits for them. A professor once decided to give students the chance before the exam to formulate the question they want to be asked in the exam. This freedom of choice was not at all liberating. At the time of the exam, students acted deeply shocked when they were asked the question (which they had formulated beforehand) and behaved as if they had been unfortunately asked one of the rare questions that they did not know much about. One student even complained that the question does not connect sufficiently to the material they had been dealing with in the course. So, although the person

makes his or her choice, he can easily act as if the choice has been imposed on him from someone else.

This desire for a limit we also find in little children. If there are too many possibilities to choose from, they often become agitated and uncertain and are often asking parents for guidance, even if later they choose exactly the opposite of what the parents suggested. The problem today is that choice is often solely taken as rational choice and that its understanding is underpinned by economic rationality and consumerism. In contrast, psychoanalysis insists that choice involves the individual's unconscious and that our choices involve our guessing about the desire of others, as well as the Big Other. For psychoanalysis, choice is linked with the possibility of change. Precisely because the individual is perceived as an 'author' of her suffering who has in an unconscious way 'chosen' his neurosis, there is also a possibility that symptoms might change and suffering might be alleviated. The idea of choice can open the possibility of change also at the level of society. However, this can happen only if it ceases to be perceived solely as an individual matter.

Neoliberalism with its hyped individualism and glorification of the idea of rational choice contributed to an increase of people's feeling of anxiety. The perception of the individual as a consumer who can choose the direction of his or her life has also contributed to the feeling of inadequacy, guilt and self-blame. Social dimensions and economic factors, which hugely influence people's lives, have become perceived as something a person can fight against by making the right choice. Political theory needs to engage in challenging this neo-liberal perception of choice. As we have seen, psychoanalysis, with its perception of the idea of choice which takes into account the power of the unconscious as well as the larger social setting, the big Other, can be of great help in offering a critique of the dominant idea of rational choice.

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Notes

ⁱ The neo-liberal ideology of choice has been further developed in Salecl 2011.

ⁱⁱ I have further developed the idea of dress anxiety in Salecl 2016.