



# Empty satisfaction—a social phenomenology of late modern enjoyment

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Accepted: 5 March 2023 / Published online: 26 April 2023  
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## Abstract

Phenomenological analyses of enjoyment are relatively rare; also, the few known attempts (e.g. Levinas) are elaborated in a transcendental fashion, without reflecting on the socio-historical constituents. The article aims at filling this gap by elaborating a social phenomenology of late modern enjoyment. Firstly, the experience is analysed with the help of general phenomenological descriptions: the visceral, existential and ethical constituents are mapped. The second section explores the structural transformations affecting these constituents, based on various critical theories of modernization: the impact of the reified control over the visceral; social disintegration; persistent inequalities; over-burdening of intimacy is analysed. In the concluding section, a diagnosis of times is elaborated: the cost of controlling enjoyment on the visceral level is the giving up of its existential and ethical constituents. To break this paradoxical cycle, the “actor-networks” (Latour) of visceral stimulation need to be “hacked” by including existential and ethical dimensions as well.

**Keywords** Enjoyment · Late modernity · Phenomenology · Levinas · Addiction · Technology

Despite its undeniable existential importance, enjoyment has been somewhat neglected by the phenomenological tradition.<sup>1</sup> To avoid reductionist approaches, it needs to be understood as a universal and historically embedded phenomenon at the same time. On the one hand, enjoyment is rooted in the domain of the “visceral”:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Summa (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Leder (1990).

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It is inseparable from the experience of being embedded in the world (that is the feeling of being alive). On the other hand, it is narratively constructed: To recognize and control joy, it needs to be embedded in the epistemic and temporal horizon of memories and expectations.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the “other” also plays a constitutive role by revealing the ethical aspects of enjoyment.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, a general phenomenology of enjoyment must take into consideration both the visceral, narrative and ethical aspects. These dimensions outline the space of possibility of enjoyment. While the visceral satisfaction is a necessary component (it is responsible for the elementary experience of being embedded, that is “being at home” in the world), the narrative and ethical dimensions are not necessary components. However, their contingency does not make them irrelevant: Without appropriate narratives and the ethical horizon, satisfaction becomes meaningless and unstable, which ultimately undermines enjoyment, while threatening with the emergence of addiction.

Beside these universalistic considerations, enjoyment is also socially and historically situated: its empirical patterns vary along these three dimensions. The available praxes of visceral satisfaction, the narratives of approved and disapproved technologies and sources of joy, the ethical principles of sharing and excluding, outline various substantive patterns. Besides these patterns, the historical analyses of joy can also explore the reductions of the space of possibility itself: The obstacles of narrating or ethically embedding joy indicate the normative stakes of the empirical analyses. In what follows, the contemporary era is analyzed from this perspective: the emerging biopolitical discourses, individualization, the globalization of inequalities, enhanced reflectivity, the technological mediation of experiencing—these are just few of the most decisive transformations reconfiguring the space of enjoyment. The possibilities and ambivalences of the visceral, narrative and ethical aspects of late modern enjoyment can be analyzed from the perspective of these structural transformations.

Besides expanding the horizon of philosophical phenomenology, the analysis of enjoyment has relevance for the critical theories as well. Late modernity is the era of global, irreversible risks originating from structural paradoxes.<sup>5</sup> The contemporary patterns of enjoyment are interrelated with these structures: They constitute a consistent phenomenological texture, which reinforces behavior patterns reproducing the structural distortions.<sup>6</sup> Thus, to provide emancipatory horizons, the existing patterns of enjoyment should be contrasted with utopic ones.<sup>7</sup> By outlining alternative praxes of enjoyment, the latent expectations and behavioral automatisms reproducing the distortions of the social, economic and political systems can be gradually changed.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Staehler and Kozin (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Lévinas (1969).

<sup>5</sup> Beck (1992).

<sup>6</sup> Bauman (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Horkheimer (1976).

<sup>8</sup> Most critical theories are preoccupied with “social suffering” (see Adorno (1973, p. 17). They argue that the collective experience of suffering (e.g. racial discrimination) have the mobilizing force by grounding transformative collective action (see Honneth (1996). This article aims at complementing this bias by focusing on the emancipatory potential of enjoyment as a critical praxis.

In what follows, an attempt is made to elaborate a social phenomenology of late modern enjoyment, while having these normative stakes at mind. From a methodological perspective the article aims at combining phenomenological analysis with the critical theories of late modernity: The former serves as the method of opening the “black box” of enjoyment (that is the reconstruction of its space of possibility); the latter enables the screening of each component (that is the analysis of the empirical patterns within the space of possibility); so that the a comprehensive diagnosis of times could be elaborated. Firstly, the experience itself is analyzed: With the help of general phenomenological descriptions, the key constituents of enjoyment are identified. The second section explores the social transformations affecting these constituents: Based on critical theories of modernization, the transforming structural space of enjoyment is explored. In the concluding section, a diagnosis of times is elaborated: Beside describing the structural distortions of enjoyment, an attempt is made to analyze the possibility of countering these effects and highlighting emancipatory praxes.

## 1 A social phenomenology of embodied enjoyment

Joyful experiences are fundamentally characterized by a sense of “completeness”: the subjects do not long for anything else besides what is given, their being in the world is complete as it is, not requiring any further modifications. Enjoyment is focused on the present in a pre-intentional fashion: as the subject dissolves in the moment of completeness, both the temporal horizon of the past and the future are suspended. Yet, enjoyment is not reducible to the pre-intentional moments of completeness: the pleasures of the past motivate the subjects to intentionally strive towards the objects and situations promising joy in the future. Therefore, enjoyment follows a “centripetal” dynamic combining pre-intentionality and intentionality: the subjects seek it actively, while also letting it happen passively.<sup>9</sup> Although actors may develop strategies of intentionally pursuing such moments, they can never acquire full control: the success depends on the coexistence of internal and external factors.<sup>10</sup>

### 1.1 The visceral level of satisfaction

The intertwining of the subject and the world was described by Merleau-Ponty as “chiasm”—a concept introduced to prevent both materialistic and idealistic reductionism. The living body, the “flesh” functions as a mediator: the embodied subject reaches out to the world, while the world inscribes itself in the body simultaneously.

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<sup>9</sup> According to Husserl, phenomenology is preoccupied with the intentionality of consciousness and the intentional contents (see Drummond (2003). This “intellectualism” has been rejected by phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, who emphasized the bodily aspects of experiencing and the pre-intentional sources of meaning construction. The pre-intentional relation to the world is characterised by the passivity of the consciousness, which implies that both the cognitive coherence and the narrative elaboration remains limited (see Libertson (1979). In case of the phenomenology of enjoyment this implies that the core of the experience is anchored on the bodily level of experiencing, which is potentially complemented with conscious interpretative processes as well.

<sup>10</sup> Summa (2020).

The embodied subject and the world mutually hold each other, while constituting an irreducible texture.<sup>11</sup> Enjoyment can be described by referring to the domain of flesh: it is a modality of chiasm characterized by a sense of completeness.

Leder develops the notion of the “visceral” as a refinement of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the flesh. The domain of the visceral is fundamentally hidden from perception: the operation of our organs is usually beyond our senses; it follows its own automated logic independently from our intentionality.<sup>12</sup> The visceral is the domain of “private language games”: because of the impossibility of sharing visceral experiences, these remain unelaborated on narrative and conceptual level. Consequently, visceral experiences are qualitatively reduced, spatially and temporally ambivalent, incoherent and fragmented. However, to be hidden from perception and intentional control has a special functionality: the visceral domain is responsible for homeostasis, that is the reproduction of the living body in a way, which is compatible with the environment. Such adjustment requires continuous operation, which cannot be secured by any intentional activity (any decision-based action is inevitably contingent), only by pre-intentional automatism.<sup>13</sup>

By maintaining a state, which is compatible with the environment, the pre-intentional mechanisms of the visceral integrate the embodied subject into the world. As a mediatory domain, the visceral equally belongs to the subject and the world: it is familiar and alien at the same time; it is part of the self (as it grounds and frames existence), but also beyond the self (as not being controlled by the subject).<sup>14</sup> This liminality becomes the most obvious in times of the dysfunctions of the visceral, which appear as suffering. The experiences of pain or disease reframe the subject’s relation to the world and to themselves: the living body (Leib) ensuring the inhabiting of the world is transformed into an object-body (Körper) hindering existence. When the familiar and hospitable world (characterized by potentials) is replaced by an unfamiliar and hostile one (characterized by obstacles), the visceral domain appears as the source of a disembedded existence.<sup>15</sup> Pain and illnesses interrupt our taken for granted embeddedness in the world: existence suddenly becomes disintegrated and fragmented, while control is suspended.

The moments of suffering imply reflection on the temporal order of loss: as the subjects in pain find themselves in a helpless position, they recognize their agency as a bygone potential. They experience their own visceral as the medium of an “inverse chiasm”: it becomes the source of a negative experience of disembeddedness, a reminiscent of a missing, inaccessible unity. As the reason of disembedding is their own flesh, the alienation from the world includes self-alienation as well. Suffering reveals a fundamentally impossible existence, a chiasm where the flesh and the environment constitutes an incompatible texture.<sup>16</sup> In these moments a need for existential reflection and narration is born: the elementary disintegration of being in the world

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 266).

<sup>12</sup> Leder (1990, p. 39).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* (pp. 48–49).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 60).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 70).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 75).

raises the question of “theodicy.”<sup>17</sup> Only the ending of suffering resolves this existential crisis (which could equally happen by overcoming or reassuringly narrating the pain)—thus the sufferer is pressured to change their condition.

On a fundamental level enjoyment can be understood by reversing this visceral phenomenology of pain. Satisfaction is not simply the lack of pain, rather it can be described according to its reversed temporal order: while in case of suffering, the natural attitude of being at home in the world gives its place to (self-)alienation, in case of visceral satisfaction, an existential transformation involving the re-inhabiting of the world occurs. Inhaling after the shortness of breath, eating and drinking while being hungry and thirsty, being caressed while missing company, seeing beauty while being bored—these are just few of the most typical examples of satisfaction as re-entering the world on the level of the visceral domain. In these moments, discomfort (that is suffering) or a sense of hiatus (that is either a conscious or tacit longing) is replaced by the experience of being in accordance with the world on a pre-intentional level once again.

During such primordial experience of satisfaction, the subjects transcend the limitations of their individual existence: by letting their visceral to take control, they give up agency and surrender themselves, while passively blending into the world as an integrated unity. In this sense, enjoyment includes the element of giving up intentionality and letting a pre-intentional relation to the world prevail. That explains, why enjoyment can never be controlled completely: one cannot be forced to feel joy (either by others or by themselves); satisfaction may occur only by being open and letting it happen through the visceral domain.

## 1.2 The existential and ontological narratives of enjoyment

Being embedded in the world through the visceral domain is the primary constituent of enjoyment, yet it is not the only one. It implies a pre-intentional sensation of satisfaction, which can be complemented by further layers. These additional constituents can be explored with the help of Levinas’ analyses.<sup>18</sup> According to him, the most elementary form of relating to the world is living from its elements, that is satisfaction. Existence is fundamentally the love of the elements: the affective and pre-intentional embeddedness in the world of satisfaction precedes the intentional-narrative structures of the ontological.<sup>19</sup> Satisfaction is not one among the many psychological states, but a fundamental one, as it orients the self. The subjects thrive upon the joyful consuming of the elements, as that is the most fundamental proof of being alive.<sup>20</sup> Satisfaction is self-evidently desired, which explains why its—occasionally inevitable—lack is a decisive experience. The longing motivates the subjects to explore its context, so that it could be secured and controlled. At this point, narratives of enjoyment are born, aiming to explain its possibility and meaning.

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<sup>17</sup> Dahl (2017).

<sup>18</sup> Dubost (2015).

<sup>19</sup> Levinas (1969, p. 112).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 114)

Similarly to suffering, enjoyment also refers to an existential transformation potentially implying various narrative framings. However, in this case, the chiasm is not experienced as an existential crisis, but as a re-found potential: the subjects rejoice for having a place in a world, which hosts them instead of rejection. Enjoyment is a “rebirth”: as the subjects connect to the world on a visceral level, they experience themselves as being part of a greater unity. A genuine sense of ontological security is born: the worries of existence are replaced by a general trust. Such unity is experienced as existential completeness. It can be narrated either in a naturalizing manner (the subjects feel to be part of the natural order), a religious way (being part of a godly Providence) or in social terms (being part of a relationship or collective group). Besides the narratives of embeddedness, satisfaction is also interpreted in an instrumental manner. The ontological relation to the world is born, along with the logic of “possession and labor” as the means of ensuring future enjoyment.<sup>21</sup> These existential and ontological narratives outline the intentional layer of enjoyment: by framing the pre-intentional experience of visceral satisfaction they create a cultural context of seeking and cultivating joy.

This layer is particularly important for the long-term stabilizing of enjoyment: not only the securing of its preconditions depend on it, but also a temporal order of joy. Differentiating between phases of “working towards the object of desire” and “enjoying the fruits of the efforts” is crucial for regulating satisfaction itself. Without such distinction, the visceral drive for satisfaction cannot be structured, which potentially results in taking over the whole lifeworld. In this sense, the existential narratives stabilize enjoyment by keeping the urge of satisfaction within limits: they establish a place for joy by outlining the space of complementary experiences (i.e. making efforts).

### 1.3 Sharing and intersubjectivity: the ethical aspects of enjoyment

Beside the existential and ontological narratives, enjoyment is also framed by an ethical context. In situations, where the “face” is revealed, the joy (or suffering) is reframed: what used to be an evidently good (or in case of suffering, bad) subjective experience suddenly becomes an open question. The appearance of the face evokes the ethical perspective of responsibility, while creating a rupture in the previously monological relation to the world.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, the face highlights a domain, which is not freely usable for satisfying desire: even though certain intersubjective joys are inseparable from the other (e.g. “caress”<sup>23</sup>), these are necessarily implying ethical decisions. Joys related to the other involve the element of an agreement: in case the interaction is consensual, the consequent enjoyment expresses moral rec-

<sup>21</sup> Ibid (p. 158).

<sup>22</sup> The other does not necessarily appear as a face: this is only a potential of interactions. However, once such potential is actualised, it has inescapable consequences: a meaning is born, which reveals the imperative of sharing both the symbolic and material dimensions of the world (see Lévinas (1998, p. 48). This ethical experience is cathartic, often emotionally burdensome: the subjects feel an “absolute responsibility” originating from the potential of “substitution”; they become a “hostage” to the other, not existing anymore for themselves, but for the other as well (see Ibid., p. 153).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. (p. 257).

ognition; in case the interaction is one-sided, a face is reduced into a thing (that is violence and ultimately “murder”). On the other hand, the face reframes the monological claim for enjoyment as well: the other questions the subjects’—originally unquestioned—right of consuming the joyful elements of world alone.<sup>24</sup>

By meeting another subject entitled to enjoyment, a rupture is born on the previously carefree horizon of living from the elements. Joy ceases to exist as an evidently given characteristic of the world—it is transformed into a contingency. Perceiving the other as a potentially alternative subject of enjoyment, an ethical question is born: why is the self entitled to satisfaction instead of the other; is it the self’s responsibility to share, or even to completely give up joy for the other?<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, enjoyment is contextualized not only by the existential and ontological narratives, but also by the ethical logic of responsibility. Even if these questions are not necessarily raised on an intentional level, the way enjoyment is achieved gives a negative or positive answer to them. These answers are also potential constituents of enjoyment: the quality of visceral satisfaction is inseparable from the—latent or manifest—ethical context.

Beside the visceral sensations, the possibility of sharing also represents a special source of joy. By entering proximity and contributing to the enjoyment of the other, a special type of joy is experienced: feeling satisfaction through causing joy to the other. In this sense, the ethical extension of enjoyment has the possibility of stabilizing and enriching the whole experience: by adding another target of satisfaction besides the self, a new platform and a new sensation becomes accessible at the same time.

#### **1.4 The reduction of enjoyment: from the exclusivity of visceral satisfaction to addiction**

By combining the visceral, narrative and ethical aspects of enjoyment, a comprehensive phenomenological description may be outlined, which has the potential of orienting diagnoses of times. At the core of the experience, a pre-intentional component is found: the satisfaction caused by re-connecting to the world through the visceral. This elementary sensation is the fundamental constituent of enjoyment: just as the subject in pain is always aware of a burdensome existence (because of the visceral disembedding), the subject in joy is also aware of her embeddedness in a hospitable environment (because of the visceral integration). Due to the pre-intentionality of visceral enjoyment, this core experience does not consist of conscious reflections or narratives: it is a self-evident sense of satisfaction requiring no further justifications, while being capable of orienting everyday action.

Such primordial sensation is potentially—but not necessarily—complemented by the existentialist narratives of belongingness and the ontological narratives of labor and possession. While the visceral sensation of satisfaction can be pursued in an unconscious manner, there is also a possibility of reflecting on its context. In this latter case, an intentional relation to enjoyment is born, which enables the related routinized praxes. The third layer emerges in social interactions: if the other appears as a

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. (p. 197).

<sup>25</sup> Staehler and Kozin (2021).

face, it has ethical implications for enjoyment. The other is not necessarily perceived through the lens of responsibility, but if the face is revealed, then the monological meanings attached to enjoyment are complemented with ethical ones. The unquestionability of consuming the elements of the world is replaced by the moral economies of sharing and deserving. Even if the existential and ethical layers of enjoyment are not necessary components, they still play a crucial role: they are responsible for securing, stabilizing and enriching visceral satisfaction, which would be contingent and empty without them.

Although a pattern of visceral satisfaction completely lacking intentional or ethical components is empirically improbable, it is still a theoretical possibility. As the example of addiction shows, the subject might be lost in a “passive synthesis with an object.”<sup>26</sup> In this case, the whole world reconfigures around the vicious circle of getting “high” by the object or “craving” for it.<sup>27</sup> At the core of addiction an extremely reduced form of visceral satisfaction is found. In the addicted lifeworld, the originally joyful experiences are pursued in a decontextualized manner: as the bodily urges become irresistible, the intentional layers of belongingness or responsibility are suspended.<sup>28</sup> A horizon of enjoyment lacking any existential or ethical references has a normative connotation: the reduction of joy into visceral satisfaction results not only in meaninglessness or immorality, but more importantly in the ruining of joy itself. As the extreme condition of clinical addiction proves it, an exclusively pre-intentional, meaningless, atomized form of satisfaction ultimately distorts enjoyment. The uncontrollable urges devour the complexity of the lifeworld, as the addict dissolves in the prospectless pursuit of visceral satisfaction.<sup>29</sup> In case of addiction, the episodes of visceral satisfaction become shorter and shorter, while the episodes of craving become longer and longer. In this sense, the satisfaction itself is gradually overshadowed. Without the existential and ethical components, the quality of visceral satisfaction drops, and the experience ultimately becomes uncertain.

Accordingly, the visceral, narrative and ethical layers of enjoyment constitute an interrelated structure: while the experience of satisfaction is an indispensable constituent, the existential, ontological and ethical components are not necessary, but still important for stabilizing enjoyment. From a purely phenomenological perspective, it is possible that enjoyment is “emptied,” that is being reduced to visceral satisfaction, without having an existential or ethical constituent—as it is exemplified by the case of addiction. In this sense, the phenomenology of enjoyment has several normative implications. Among the external ones, the sharing of joy raises ethical questions (concerning norms and values); the meaningfulness of joy raises existential questions (concerning authenticity and identity); the praxes around joy raise instrumental questions (concerning efficiency and sustainability). Beside these more obvious ones, the phenomenology of enjoyment also grounds an “immanent critique”: if being reduced to mere visceral satisfaction, joy might be emptied and destabilized. In other words:

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<sup>26</sup> Copoeru (2014).

<sup>27</sup> Di Petta (2018).

<sup>28</sup> Duyndam (2009).

<sup>29</sup> Kemp (2009).



by turning into addiction, visceral satisfaction implies suffering as well, hence the reduction of enjoyment has a normative stake.

Whether this possibility occurs is an empirical question, which can be answered by analyzing the social structures grounding each phenomenological constituent. In the next section, such analysis is conducted. With the help of various critical theories, an attempt is made to answer the following questions: how can the contemporary relation to the visceral be described; how are the existential narratives of belongingness affected by structural transformations; how are the moral economy of enjoyment and intersubjective joy constituted in late modernity?

## 2 The structural components of late modern enjoyment

A detailed answer to these questions, based on the vast literature of late modern diagnoses of times, is certainly an overwhelming task. The section below has a humbler ambition: an attempt is made to highlight “ideal typical” structural transformations affecting the space of enjoyment.<sup>30</sup> While empirical patterns of joy vary greatly, the most impactful common limitations may be revealed with the help of critical theories. Even if these structural constraints do not predetermine the space of enjoyment, they still indicate the most probable obstacles and traps. Critical theories have traditionally connected Freudian or Lacanian interpretation of joy to the negative externalities of capitalism.<sup>31</sup> While these diagnoses reveal important paradoxes, most of them is embedded in an overly narrow theoretical framework: on the one hand, they tend to identify enjoyment with the instinctual drives of satisfaction (i.e. the equivalent of visceral satisfaction); on the other hand, by focusing on capitalism, they tend to neglect the complementary structural transformations of modernization. The following analysis aims at overcoming these shortcomings: the phenomenology of enjoyment not only differentiates between the visceral, existential and intersubjective dimensions, but also reveals the interrelatedness of these layers. Based on such differentiation, the structural transformations related to each layer can be analyzed separately. This way, not only the emergence of capitalism, but also those complementary processes can be included in the analysis, which play a decisive role in the reconfiguring of the space of enjoyment.

To each layer of enjoyment various subfields of modernization theory is assigned. The transforming relation to the visceral is overviewed from the perspective of the shifting discursive context of embodiment. The contemporary existential layer of joy is described from the perspective of the transformation of social integration and the dissolving of classic modern institutions. The moral economy of late modern enjoyment is reinterpreted from the perspective of field struggles and the expansion of global capitalism. The ambivalently transforming space of intimacy is analyzed as a chance for “pure relationship” and also as being threatened by biopolitics, risk society and consumerism. While these diagnoses do not cover every aspect of the key trans-

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<sup>30</sup> Weber (1949).

<sup>31</sup> see Marcuse (1991), Fromm (1941) or Žižek (2008).

formations, they grasp the major latent paradoxes of modernization. By combining these diagnoses, the structural constituents of late modern enjoyment are revealed.

## 2.1 Reified control over the visceral

In his famous analysis on the “birth of clinic” Foucault describes a fundamental phenomenological transformation: while the pre-modern relation to the visceral is characterized by a metaphorical language (based on ontologies full of non-perceivable entities), within the biomedical praxes a rational discourse on the object-body (Körper) is born (based on positivist, clinical observation). As the legitimate knowledge became the biomedical analysis of the pathological Körper, a new power structure was born.<sup>32</sup> The subjects became naïve and inevitably inaccurate interpreters of their own visceral processes, while the experts claimed a monopoly of accurate knowledge. First-person experiences were considered to have secondary importance, which contributed to their exile into esoteric, superficial discourses or complete silencing. The neglected or discredited, lay “illness narratives” indicate not only what is lost for the patients, but also the general consequences of a hegemonic biomedical discourse.<sup>33</sup>

Expert medical discourses play a constitutive role not just within but also outside of the clinical sphere by creating definitions of “normalcy”.<sup>34</sup> By pre-defining certain forms of embodiment as “normal” (according to the latent biopolitical interest), the hegemonic biomedical discourses have a self-alienating impact. The subjects are downgraded into secondary observers of their own visceral domain: instead of getting familiar with their own bodily processes, learning how to inhabit their own flesh, getting to know how to cultivate it in a dialogic way by responding to the visceral signs, they became “lay users” of their own body. Due to such phenomenological rupture, they start to apply those technologies, which are provided by the biomedical authorities in the hope of gaining control over their own visceral domain.<sup>35</sup> Thus, late modern subjects are characterized by an ambivalence: despite the separation from their most profound visceral processes, they are granted previously unknown technologies of controlling the visceral. A paradox relation to the self is born including the element of giving up autonomy for the biomedical gaze and the exaggerating expectation of total technological control (promised by the biomedical discourse).

Late modern enjoyment is constituted within these frames reconfiguring the relation to the visceral in several points. As the biomedical discourse reduces the body into Körper, the space of private visceral experiences is narrowed. The subjective, personal knowledge is overshadowed by the objective, expert insight, which outline the “normal functioning of the body.” The primordial relation to the elements as the sources of enjoyment is now embedded in the context of physiological and psychological appropriateness: a new “technology of the self” emerges evaluating everyday praxes aiming at enjoyment from the perspective of the imperatives of healthiness.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Foucault (1979).

<sup>33</sup> Kleinman and Kleinman (1991).

<sup>34</sup> Rose (1999).

<sup>35</sup> Stepnisky (2007).

<sup>36</sup> Foucault (1979).

As the pursuing of a healthy lifestyle itself becomes a naturalized normative basis, a hybrid form of asceticism emerges. It is based on self-disciplining the body for the sake of health and longevity, while also incorporating elements of satisfaction and joy.<sup>37</sup>

The promise of extended lifespan in exchange of self-restriction is also complemented with the promise of accessing “joy on demand.” Specific industries of enjoyment experiment with more and more enhanced versions of joyful experiences. The food industry and “haut cuisine” equally rely on research optimizing taste experience; the entertainment and the virtual reality industry rely on psychological research optimizing excitement; the—legal and illegal—drug industry relies on neuro-pharmacy research optimizing the direct stimuli of joyful brain processes. Based on these scientifically elaborated technologies, the late modern actors have a previously unseen chance of controlling their own visceral satisfaction. However, even if the technologies of satisfaction provide material means of inducing pleasant stimuli, they cannot control the whole phenomenological process: whether the existential and ethical layers of enjoyment complement the technologies of satisfaction or not, depends on parallel structural transformations.

## 2.2 The existential consequences of social disintegration

The existential need for belongingness refers to the reassuring feeling of being part of a greater unity, wherein the world appears as a meaningful horizon and the subject feels at home. Existential narratives of belongingness are always embedded in the structures of social integration and the related discourses. In classic modernity the dominant framework of these experiences is not a religious, but a secular one: wholeness is not understood anymore as a transcendental order, rather as a functional “division of labor.” As everyone contributes to the others’ necessities with their specific skillset, while profiting from others productivity, a man-made social order is experienced, wherein belongingness depends on one’s social role or vocation.<sup>38</sup> These existential narratives of belongingness are not born in collective rites, instead in the various functional “social systems” structuring existence.<sup>39</sup> However, unlike religious narratives, the secular system semantics have only a limited potential of grounding a sense of belongingness: even if one identifies with their vocation, that is not the same experience as being integrated into a transcendental-cosmological order. Especially as the “colonizing” system integration itself endangers the mechanisms of narrative identity formation.<sup>40</sup>

This existentially already limited classic modern structural setting is further eroded by contemporary transformations, such as the emergence of “disorganized capitalism” (dissolving institutions due to the increased need for flexibility; the expansion of global network-capitalism; or the birth of “liquid” institutions.<sup>41</sup> Within this set-

<sup>37</sup> Karlsen and Villadsen (2016).

<sup>38</sup> Durkheim (1997).

<sup>39</sup> Luhmann (1995).

<sup>40</sup> Habermas (1987).

<sup>41</sup> see Lash and Urry (1987); Castells (1996); Bauman (2000).

ting, the reminiscent of a socially constructed existential horizon of belongingness also evaporates. A “post-traditional” order is born, wherein the subjects are left on their own: as collective rituals are not present anymore, they are forced to constitute individual identity patterns from the available discursive components (such as expert, cultural or political semantics).<sup>42</sup>

The existential aspect of late modern enjoyment can be understood from the perspective of these diagnoses. The experience of being integrated into a greater meaningful unity is not only made improbable by secularization and functional differentiation, but made even more difficult by the dissolving of those social structures, which used to provide “system integration.” This means that belonging to a greater unity in late modernity becomes an ultimately contingent experience. In the absence of collective frameworks of belongingness, the actors have no choice but to elaborate individual substitute narratives and private substitute rituals (e.g. spiritualism).<sup>43</sup> However, there is no guarantee that such efforts are successful: the failure of finding private meanings may imply meaninglessness (in extreme cases depression); the failure of private rituals threatens with obsession.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, experiencing narratively grounded enjoyment becomes a paradox task: in a structural constellation characterized by disintegration, the actors have no alternative but to imitate rituals of integration in solitude, while identifying with patchwork narratives about a functional unity. They must continuously make efforts to be in the right place and time, in a world lacking the horizon of home; to become part of a functional order, in a world lacking the horizon of wholeness.

### **2.3 The lost horizon of the ethical: inequalities of joy and the overburdening of intimacy**

Satisfaction being dependent on the expertise and technologies provided by social systems is inevitably affected by the system inequalities. The mechanisms structuring the access to resources (including local and global forms of competition and redistribution) also structure the space of enjoyment. The transformations affecting late modern “moral economies” can be grasped from this perspective: they are inseparable from the differentiation of “fields” revolving around various symbolic and material capitals. Social hierarchies emerge in the competition for these capitals: they outline a set of goals, define the rules of acquisition and construct hierarchies of prestige and merit.<sup>45</sup> These general mechanisms organize social fields and also affect the redistribution of resources. Enjoyment is structured by these processes both on substantive (certain types of joy are available only in certain positions) and formal level (certain positions do not have access to certain resources required for securing enjoyment).

In late modernity, the local inequalities of enjoyment become more and more dependent on global structures. The deregulation of markets, the technological devel-

<sup>42</sup> Giddens (1991).

<sup>43</sup> Watts (2022).

<sup>44</sup> Ratcliffe (2015).

<sup>45</sup> Bourdieu (1984).

opment of production, transportation and information processing together lead to the birth of global “network capitalism”.<sup>46</sup> Within its frames, even those obstacles diminish, which previously slowed down the reproduction and growth of inequalities: the nation states lose their potential of regulating the markets; the precarious employees lose their ability of representing their interest.<sup>47</sup> In global capitalism the expendable, denizen masses of unemployed are left on their own, especially in the “dead zones” of transnational networks.<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, late modern satisfaction is not only hard to access for those who unsuccessfully compete in the field struggles: rather, it is outright inaccessible to certain subjects marginalized by global markets. Consequently, many people in subordinated structural positions are systematically deprived from the fundamental, visceral level of enjoyment: as the global crises of starvation, pollution or water shortage indicate, in the dead zones of global capitalism, even those elementary forms of joy become inaccessible, which constitute the basic existential level of living from the elements of the world.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, such possibility of being deprived from joy affects not only those who are in subordinated positions: the complete deprivation, the consequent exclusion and ignorance overshadows late modern existence by revealing the ultimate threat of economic failure.

The moral economy of late modern enjoyment can be described according to these diagnoses. Being embedded in field struggles, it is affected by the tensions and conflicts related to the latent reproduction of inequalities. As enjoyment depends on resources being targeted by rival actors, one’s joy (secured by the acquisition of certain capital) implies the other’s deprivation (caused by the failure of accumulating certain capital). In case of losing the field competitions, the chance for satisfaction is reduced; in case of winning, the joy is tainted by—manifest or latent—guilt. The enjoyment being born in a competition is unshareable by definition: on the elementary ethical level, it implies the neglecting of the face of the other. The moral cost of late modern enjoyment is the privatization of joy: it is accessible only by turning away from the others and not viewing them as legitimate recipients of joy. In this hostile context, securing one’s enjoyment implies a suspicious, distrusting relation to the others—in this sense, late modern joy is tainted by fear, envy and paranoia. These tendencies are further amplified by the globalization of field struggles. Winning or losing depends mostly on global dynamics, which are perceived as unchangeable. Thus, the joy, which was previously framed as a “hard-won” reward becomes a morally unjustifiable experience in late modernity: not only because it involves defeating the others in a cruel competition, rather because those moral orders, which could justify success, are not available anymore. Without a clear framework of moral economy, the acts of solidarity also lose their ground: the other’s lack of enjoyment is perceived only occasionally and countered with momentary acts of charity lacking the prospect of ethical commitment.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Castells (1996).

<sup>47</sup> Standing (2011).

<sup>48</sup> Bourdieu et al. (1999).

<sup>49</sup> Christiansen and Jensen (2019).

<sup>50</sup> Eyre (2021).

In this constellation, enjoyment is not only tainted by guilt and fear (originating from its competitive aspects), but also affected by a moral vacuum. It becomes an atomized experience being completely detached from the realm of the ethical: taking responsibility for the other's joy is not on the horizon anymore, everyone is responsible solely for themselves. Such hyper-individualized form of enjoyment implies a paradox: the denial of the ethical aspect of enjoyment does not make the ethical disappear; instead, the negligence creates an inner tension within the experience. The negative sentiments attached to enjoyment (such as guilt, fear or nihilism) not only degrade the quality of joy, rather they have the potential of completely nullifying it. In this sense, the growing structural inequalities in late modernity threaten not just those, who are deprived from the means of enjoyment, but everyone else as well.

As the macro structures eliminate the moral order of joy, the importance of those intersubjective ties grows, which hold the potential of detachment from the distorted constraints. In late modernity, intimate relationships have such potential. In the post-traditional societies lacking existential narratives of belongingness, "pure relationships" become the primary platforms of establishing a meaningful existence (besides consumption). They enable communication (needed for the reinterpretation of lifeworld); a space of disclosure (needed for the grounding of identity); the source of elementary moral experiences (needed for experiencing freedom and responsibility). Within late modern pure relationships, intersubjective enjoyment has previously unseen potential: hence, intimacy is widely viewed as the last refuge of enjoyment in a constellation systematically undermining its preconditions.<sup>51</sup>

Despite its undeniable importance, intimacy also faces several challenges of its own: the structural distortions described above leave their mark on it as well. Just as the biomedical discourses outline the normalcy of a healthy lifestyle, the booming field of psy-discourses defines the criteria of a "normal intimacy." Similarly to the biomedical gaze reducing to body into a Körper, the replacement of the "ars erotica" by the "scientia sexualis" results in the objectification of intimacy: its normal functionality is clinically defined, while its "pathologies" are to be corrected with therapeutic interventions.<sup>52</sup> Just as the disintegration of institutional structures eliminates the existential narratives of belongingness, the over-stretched individualization also hinders the mutual adjustments required for sharing a lifeworld.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, late modern intimacy is threatened by an increased level of contingency: while the post-traditional constellation enables experimenting, it also makes relationships unstable and uncertain, which prevents them functioning as a supplementary basis of belongingness. Lastly, love is not free from the impact of the growing inequalities either: as it has been intertwined with consumerism (e.g. "dating culture"), it requires the specific symbolic and material resources of its own.<sup>54</sup> Accordingly, only those have realistic access to the benefits of late modern intimacy, who can invest in the related rituals of symbolic and material consumption.

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<sup>51</sup> Giddens (1992).

<sup>52</sup> Foucault (1979).

<sup>53</sup> Beck-Gernsheim and Beck (1995).

<sup>54</sup> Illouz (1997).

All in all, late modern intersubjective enjoyment is characterized by ambivalent tendencies. It is supposed to be a private shelter against the macro structures distorting the space of enjoyment, yet it cannot be completely free from the same negative impacts. The consequence of this ambivalence is the increase of anxiety related to intimacy: as it is viewed by many as a last chance of escaping a reified existence, its stakes are too high; however, as it becomes uncertain in a post-traditional constellation, it also proves to be unreliable. Even if the subjects successfully avert the general distortions of enjoyment through intimacy, they are still threatened by anxiety surrounding it. Consequently, interpersonal joy can neither function in a carefree manner, it requires continuous cognitive and material effort to be maintained and secured.

### 3 Hacking the reified actor-networks of satisfaction

After overviewing the structural transformations affecting the phenomenological constituents of enjoyment, an attempt can be made to outline a diagnosis of times. Late modern joy is stressed by several ambivalences: on the visceral level, it relies on self-objectifying control mechanisms; on existential level, the chance of failing at establishing a sense of belongingness is high due to the disintegration of institutions and the fragmentation of collective identities; on the ethical level, the unequal and unjustified distribution of the resources undermines moral economies related to enjoyment; also its intimate forms become overburdened, and undermined by structural distortions. These paradoxes could easily add up and result in a consistently distorted pattern of enjoyment. Late modern actors may gain control over the stimulating of the visceral (at least those who can afford it), but there is a high chance that they are deprived from the further phenomenological constituents of joy including the sense of belongingness or a reassuring moral order. The ideal typical pattern of enjoyment as an experience of being reintegrated to the world through the visceral is replaced by a reified—often obsessively, remorsefully, anxiously chased—version of satisfaction enabled by the biomedical technologies of self and intimacy.

In this sense, the cost of controlling enjoyment is the giving up some of its main constituents. Although the stimulation of the visceral implies sensual satisfaction, without the integrative and moral constituents of joy, these impulses remain decontextualized and ultimately unstable. As they cannot be embedded in a narrative order, they function as emptied automatisms lacking any subjective or intersubjective reflection. They depend solely on the availability of the technologies and the resources, while being vulnerable to addiction and surfeit. In late modernity, mostly the visceral layer of joy is accessible, without the prospect of developing the technologically controlled satisfaction into a sense of belongingness or responsibility. Despite the seeming advantages of a controllable visceral satisfaction, such atomized pattern of enjoyment is stretched by paradoxes. The obsession replacing belongingness, the guilt and fear replacing generosity, the anxiety replacing trust and responsibility do not simply degrade the quality of joy, but rather threaten with completely ruining it. In the extreme cases represented by addiction, even the chance for visceral satisfac-

tion is eliminated.<sup>55</sup> This means that the reduced late modern version of enjoyment exists in the shadow of complete joylessness.

Such reified version of enjoyment is intertwined with the major structural transformations characterizing late modernity. On the one hand, the late modern structural constellation contributes to the emergence of reified visceral satisfaction, as it provides discourses and technologies of control, while also preventing the constitution of the complementary intentional and ethical layers. On the other hand, the paradigm of reified satisfaction contributes to the reproduction of the distortive structures as a motivational basis of related everyday routines and instrumental action. The need for visceral satisfaction motivates actors to approve biomedical authority; to pursue and use the technologies of joy, while participating in the competition for capital accumulation; to naturalize and adapt to a social environment characterized by disintegration; and also to over-burden intimate relationships. In this sense, the paradox structures of late modernity are not only reducing enjoyment into reified satisfaction, but they are also relying on such reduced paradigm of joy. Although, such self-reinforcing dynamic may seem to imply a consistent functional order, in fact, it is burdened with self-destructive tendencies. As the technologies of reified satisfaction empty joy, their expansive usage increases the related mental burdens (manifesting in extreme cases as depression, anxiety or addiction), which ultimately undermines the motivational basis for operating the distortive late modern social systems.<sup>56</sup>

In this sense, late modernity is characterized by a structural trap: as enjoyment is systematically reduced to visceral satisfaction, the inherent potentials related to its existential and ethical aspects become blocked. As these aspects are responsible for stabilizing and enriching joy, in their absence the threat of a meaningless and ultimately addictive satisfaction grows high. To break this paradox dynamic, an alternative paradigm of enjoyment needs to be highlighted: one which is consistent with the contemporary structural constellation, while acting against its reifying tendencies. Such paradigm could be envisaged neither as a mere giving up of technologically controlled visceral satisfaction (the refusal of distorted joy does not imply a new form of enjoyment), nor as an individual escape from the distortive structures (the sporadic escaping from the distortive structures does not decrease their overall impact).<sup>57</sup> Instead, an emancipatory paradigm of late modern enjoyment can be described as the inclusion of the missing intentional and ethical layers into the existing visceral praxes of satisfaction, while navigating within the frames of the given structural constraints.

The technologies of visceral satisfaction are based on a tacit presumption: they relate to enjoyment as a necessarily monological experience. As these technologies target the individual object-body, the level of belongingness (presupposing a greater unity surrounding the subject), morality and intersubjectivity (presupposing the oth-

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<sup>55</sup> Schalow (2017).

<sup>56</sup> Sik (2021).

<sup>57</sup> The most typical counterstrategies of reified enjoyment (e.g. spiritualism) represent individualistic attempts of escaping the distortive structures. Despite they might provide temporary and local solutions, still they cannot counter the structural pressure in the long run: they can operate as substitute technologies of the self only within specific circumstances (e.g. sufficient material resources, adequate discursive framing). While the actors work on maintaining these circumstances, they cannot avoid being involved more and more in those systems, which are responsible for reification in the first place.



er's perspective) equally remain outside of their horizon. To counter such bias, the existing technologies should be reconfigured based on intersubjective enjoyment. Shifting the emphasis from monological to intersubjective joy has the potential of rediscovering a sense of belongingness (through the other); re-establishing a moral ground for acquiring and sharing joy (by relating to the other); while disencumbering intimacy (by relying on a wider range of relationships). Such transformation does not necessarily affect the material infrastructure of the technologies; it can also be imagined as the reconfiguration of the intersubjective and "inter-objective" context of their application. At this point, Latour's actor-network theory could serve as a source of inspiration, especially if complemented by the critical theory of technology elaborated by Feenberg.

While most social theories tend to over-emphasize the immaterial forces establishing normative order in an essentializing manner, Latour proposes an alternative approach. He describes social constellations as fundamentally material networks of human and non-human components (e.g. technologies), equally contributing to the overall operation of the "assemblage." There is no inherently dominant component: in any actor-networks only the given configuration determines which human and non-human components function as "mediators" (i.e. the initiators of causal mechanisms) or "intermediators" (i.e. the means used by mediators). By adding new "actants" to the networks or constituting new ties, the previous intermediators can be turned into mediators and vice versa.<sup>58</sup> Based on this model, the actor-networks organized around technologies of visceral satisfaction can also be understood in a non-deterministic way. Despite affecting the body on material level, the consumed technologies are not necessarily the only components affecting enjoyment; despite the structural constraints favoring visceral stimulation, while eliminating the additional constituents of joy, subjects are not necessarily helpless intermediators. By adding new actants to the assemblage, or reconfiguring the existing ties, subjects may transform the technologies of joy from the inside, while becoming mediators.

Most technologies stimulating the visceral are designed as operationally closed actor-networks, wherein the product and the consumer relates to each other in a pre-defined way (i.e. following a "manual" without reflection). However, this alone does not turn the technological actor-networks of enjoyment into pre-determined configurations: there is always a chance of deviating from the automatized script of monological satisfaction. Complementary technologies—such as "nudges"—may be added to the networks, so that monological satisfaction is reconfigured. By linking another—actual or virtual—subject to the actor-network of satisfaction, who also desires the same source of joy, the process is recontextualized.<sup>59</sup> At this point the project of "democratizing technology" may be connected to the emancipatory actor-networks of enjoyment. According to Feenberg, technological development is never exclusively determined by the expansion of control or the increase of efficiency: there is always chance to channel the perspective of users while refining technology. This creates space for democratizing on the material level of actor-networks: emancipation of technology can be viewed as a process of creating settings providing

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<sup>58</sup> Latour (2005).

<sup>59</sup> Thaler and Sunstein (2008).

agency to the reified subjects.<sup>60</sup> In case of enjoyment this means the rehabilitation of the existential and ethical layers. The subjects in joy might be targeted by an intensive face-experience (in Levinasian sense) through the already operational technologies: if succeeding, the subjects might find themselves in a constellation, where not only their object of desire is present, but also a face sharing their passion.

Of course, there is no guarantee that the subjects respond to the ethical call of the face by taking responsibility. However, if the technologies of enjoyment include such mechanisms by design, the probability increases. Besides generating an incentive of taking responsibility, such complementary technologies could also provide a chance for sharing the joyful experience. Taking into consideration the continuously expanding technological horizon of commercial solutions, designing such complementary mechanisms is not unimaginable at all.<sup>61</sup> As an example, one could refer to “peer to peer” (p2p) informational technological applications linking prospective consumers of certain goods with people longing for the same goods in vain.<sup>62</sup> In case of every purchase, the option of covering the expenses of another ‘person in need’ could be made available. Furthermore, in case of accepting the option, the consumer and the supported subject could be granted the opportunity of interacting, thus the consumption becomes an intersubjective process. This way not only the moral justification of enjoyment can be resolved, but also a new sense of—technologically mediated, yet intersubjective—belongingness may be born within a particular other and the broader network (constituted of similar interactions). By designing actor-networks in a way that they evoke intersubjectivity in the moments of technologically mediated satisfaction, the horizon of fulfilling enjoyment once again becomes possible.<sup>63</sup> The emerging interactions and communities could enable the elaboration of existential narratives of integration and ground new moral economies.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Feenberg (1999).

<sup>61</sup> Feenberg and Friesen (2012).

<sup>62</sup> The most typical examples from the early years of p2p technologies (such as file sharing systems) were gradually pushed out due to the expansion of internet-based markets. These explorative forms of solidarity-technologies may be characterised as “consumer gift systems,” wherein the common interest in joyful products (e.g. music mp3 files) was complemented with a sense of community, maintained through the rituals of literally “sharing” the source of joy (see Giesler (2006)).

<sup>63</sup> The emphasis is on the establishing of new intersubjectivities through the technologies of network communication. The anthropology of philanthropy has revealed that the already existing marketing methods combining consumption with charity are not capable of transcending the same capitalist logic of domination, which they aim to counter (see Eyre (2021)). Accordingly, they do not hold the potential of providing an alternative to reduced visceral satisfaction. For this purpose, inventions are needed, which can establish intersubjectivities without relying on the motivation or approval of the actors themselves (as these are already distorted by the hyper-individualistic structural constraints of global capitalism). The re-designing of communication technologies related to consumption according to the emancipatory logic of democratizing actor-networks, promises just that: instead of a simple act of charity, they potentially reveal the face of the other in the technologically supported interactions, while potentially establish new networks of solidarity.

<sup>64</sup> It is important to emphasize that these attempts of hacking satisfaction differ fundamentally from the individual escape strategies such as spiritualism. While the latter attempts remain within the monological paradigm of joy (thus remain burdened with the paradoxes originating from individually handling intersubjective problems), the former aims at replacing the monological framework with an intersubjective one.

Similar solutions represent the possibility of “hacking” actor-networks of visceral satisfaction. In a metaphorical sense hacking refers not only to an instrumental action, but also a cultural praxis, which relies on using otherwise hegemonic technologies in a subversive way. Even if hackers may be motivated by various reasons, some form of moral justification frequently appears on their horizon.<sup>65</sup> These praxes are particularly important, when it comes to transforming those technological systems, which have massive impact on late modern subjects (thus being almost indispensable), while implying moral and existential paradoxes (thus being unsustainable). Widespread technologies of visceral satisfaction meet these criteria: along with the late modern structures of capitalism and biopolitics, they constitute a universal technological complex, which moves on a paradox, self-destructive trajectory. In order to gradually transform such extended actor-network, without risking its collapse, the distortive technologies of satisfaction need to be hacked by reconfiguring their operation. By using the technologies of visceral satisfaction in a way holding the potential of replacing the monological paradigm of enjoyment with an intersubjective one, an emancipatory horizon opens. Adding hacking technologies to the existing actor-networks of satisfaction does not require a drastic suspending of widespread praxes, instead it provides a chance for gradual transformation by bringing back the experience of intersubjective joy to the otherwise reduced late modern horizon.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by Eötvös Loránd University. The research was supported by OTKA-K135629 (NKFI). The research was supported by Bolyai Ösztöndíj (MTA).

**Statement** The paper entitled “Empty satisfaction - a social phenomenology of late modern enjoyment” is (a) my original work and has not been published in whole or in part elsewhere and, (b) is not simultaneously being considered for publication elsewhere.

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<sup>65</sup> Coleman and Gloub (2008).

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