A body without a head: Lacan’s understanding of body and its application

Ali Chavoshian and Sophia Park

Abstract

Along with the recent development of various theories of the body, Lacan’s body theory aligns with postmodern thinkers such as Michael Foucault and Maurice Merlot-Ponti, who consider body social not biological. Lacan emphasizes the body of the Real, the passive condition of the body in terms of formation, identity, and understanding. Then, this condition of body shapes further in the condition of bodies of women and laborers under patriarchy and capitalism, respectively. Lacan’s ‘not all’ position, which comes from the logical square, allows women to question patriarchy’s system and alternatives of sexual identities. Lacan’s approach to feminine sexuality can be applied to women’s spirituality, emphasizing multiple narratives of body and sexual identities, including gender roles. In the social discernment and analysis in the liberation theology, we can employ the capitalist discourse, which provides a tool to understand how people are manipulated by late capitalist society, not knowing it. Lacan’s theory of ‘a body without a head’ reflects the current condition of the human body, which manifests lack, yet including some possibilities for transforming society.

Keywords: Lacan’s body theory; the body of the Real; desire of the Other; the body of women and laborers; late capitalism; women’s sexual position; the capitalist discourse; social analysis; women’s multivalent identities; Surplus Jouissance

Affiliation

Ali Chavoshian: Wright Institute, Berkeley, CA, USA
email: achavoshian@wi.edu
Sophia Park: Holy Names University, Oakland, CA, USA
email: park@hnu.edu
Today, the question of the body poses a more critical discussion than ever. From clinical experiences, we encounter a wide range of somatoform disorders: from the anorexic condition which starves a person to death, to depersonalization disorder, which manifests as a terrifying fear of missing a body part. The neo-liberal economy has also created a global system that maximizes the exploitation of the body as the workforce. This system of exploitation further encapsulates the body in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. The neo-liberal economy complies with patriarchy, which has systematically controlled women’s bodies. Generally speaking, in a contemporary society surrounded by images of thin and so-called ‘perfect’ bodies, many women suffer from poor body image (Lelwica 2017:15), and recent studies suggest that men share the same concerns.

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan provides a framework for understanding the human body. The title of this article, ‘A body without a head,’ which comes from Jacques Lacan’s notion of a ‘headless body’ (1977a:130–3), implies that the human body does not operate in direct causal relation with its biology, but rather with its social construction. Thus, the body does not function as an active apparatus to give a subject a sense of agency; it remains a reservoir of written messages.

In this article, we provide a map of body discourse in which the discourses of Christian spirituality are located. We then explain Jacques Lacan’s notion of the body as ‘the Real of the body,’ following the body’s formation in its pre-ontological and ontological states, and emphasizing that its construction takes place from outside. We further demonstrate Lacan’s perspective on women’s bodies and the bodies of laborers under patriarchy and the neo-liberal economy. Finally, we investigate ways to apply Lacan’s notions of the body to the body discourse in Christian spirituality.

A map of recent body discourse

In the ‘post’ era (i.e. postcolonial, postmodern, posthuman), discourses on the body have thrived in the fields of cultural studies and gender studies, as well as in spirituality and religious studies. There has long been a struggle over the dualistic thinking that underlies a great deal of Western philosophy. For example, one of the most ground-breaking critiques of body discourse addresses the dualism between the body and spirit as perpetuated throughout Western philosophy, especially in Cartesian ideas. Within the dualistic way of thinking, and its value of transcendence and metaphysics, the body has been viewed as a medium to liberate the human soul; the medium through which a human subject explores its full potential for aesthetics and meaning (Johnson 2012:175).
However, the notion of dualism between the body and spirit is not always clear-cut, and now we see a new paradigm of the body emerging. Ignacio Götz, a scholar of religious education, argues that contemporary science blurs the boundary between visible and invisible, and presumably the notion of spirit and body (Götz 2001:1–15). The development of high-level optics changes the concept of visibility. We know that one single human body does not exist; rather, it consists of trillions of viruses, bacteria, and fungi. As a result, people have raised the question of the singularity of the body (Carlson 2016:61–2).

In neuroscience, researchers explain the operations of the human mind, spirit, will, and emotions as a central part of the human body and brain function (see, e.g. Burnett 2018; Damasio 2003; Hanson 2009). Very often, they list neurotransmitters or hormones when they explain the experiences of emotion and mind. In this view, the body and spirit are interrelated. Furthermore, in post-humanism, the body discourses investigate the connection between the human body and the non-human, including the body of artificial intelligence. (For the post-human body as hybrid and cyborg, see Haraway 1985:50–7.)

The contributions of feminist scholars are significant in critiques of the dualistic notion of the body. Feminist thinkers such as Julia Kristeva connect the body with the psyche and negate the dualistic understanding of the body (1997:30). Kristeva critiques the otherness of the feminine body in terms of ‘abject and material’ compared to the masculine body. Other feminist scholars such as Judith Butler focus on performativity beyond the gender role (1990:182), and the themes of women’s sexuality and women’s bodies have been central concerns in the feminist discourse of the body. (For one of the leading clinical scholars on women’s body image, see Orbach 2009.)

In the body discourse, various scholars have written about the body from a psychoanalytical, phenomenological, and socio-political perspective. Lacan’s view aligns with this group of discussions. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenologist philosopher, talks about the body as an expressive and intentional apparatus in perceiving and interacting with the world through the senses (Merleau-Ponty 1962:148). The body can also function as a tool to transcend its horizon through further social experience. Michael Foucault understands the body as the site of social control, explaining that power is a matter of subtle control of bodies (Foucault 1977:25). Both philosophers participated in Lacan’s seminars, and they seem to influence one another. Regarding the body discourse in late capitalism, Slavoj Žižek (a leading scholar on the discourse of the human body in capitalist society; see Žižek 2006), Alain Badiou (2013:1–20), and Gilles Deleuze (1994; Deleuze...
and Guattari 2003)\(^2\) utilize Lacan’s theory – both explicitly and implicitly – which focuses on the human body as the object of the Other’s desire.

Scholars of Christian spirituality, an interdisciplinary study to understand human experience in the Christian faith, emphasize the embodied experience of human beings and have positioned a holistic view of the body at the center of the body discourse. (For the development of body theory, see Turner 1991:1–35.) Christian spirituality extends the study’s scope into the global human experience and expects more body discourse to provide a framework to explain body experience. In this article, we will delve into Lacan’s theory of the body as the Real, including women’s bodies and laborers’ bodies as a framework to expand discourses around women’s spirituality and liberation theology in Christian spirituality.

**Lacan’s notion of the body as the Real**

One of the functions of the human body is to build boundaries between inside and outside (Douglas 1970:127), and based on it, a human being or a community develops a sense of identity. However, recent body discourse emphasizes that the boundary is porous, focusing on inter-connected human nature. So how can one shape an identity in these circumstances? Lacan uses the term ‘Real,’ which indicates a limit or lack, claiming that the subject’s identity is given by the Other. The phrase ‘body without a head’ emphasizes that body formation is a social construction, and that humans have a limited understanding of the truth that the body is shaped by the Other.

**Body and identity**

For Lacan, the body as the demarcating line between self and others is impossible because the image of the body and its sense of identity are given by the Other (O).\(^3\) In Lacan’s discourse, the Other is a locus of given rules or orders transmitted to an individual through language. After birth, an infant begins the development of identity through body formation, coerced by the Other. The Other can be primarily the m(O)ther, represented both by a biological mother and an environmental one such as a primary care giver. The environmental mother could represent a particular structure of a culture located within a specific point of time and space. It is worth noting that the Other who enforces particular images and pieces of body knowledge is never neutral and unbiased.

Lacan further develops the concept of the body, located in the Other, by discussing the body’s desire. According to Lacan, human desire is the desire of the Other (2005:212). The human subject is represented by ‘$,’ stressing
that the human being cannot own desire. The body’s desire remains ex-sistant (outside of being), indicating a void and an impossibility for the subject ($), who is limited in or barred from satisfying their desire fully.

Thus, one’s body is the body of the Other (O), which lodges within speech and language. A person claims their body as if it is their own, not knowing that the Other forms their body. Lacan opposed Noam Chomsky’s notion of language as an organ, which denotes a physical or biological reality (Chomsky 2010:174). For Chomsky, language is the organ or organ system composing a linguistic structure called the universal grammar that humans have acquired during our DNA’s evolutionary process. For Lacan, language as an organ means a tool to express one’s sense of identity, which is given by the Other (Lacan 1975–6).

Explaining the condition of the body, Lacan uses the Real to mean a limit to or lack of satisfaction. The restraints of the body extend to restrictions on enjoying pleasure. Beyond this limit is surplus pleasure, which includes pain. Lacan calls this particular pleasure the jouissance – the jouissance of the body/the jouissance of the Other.

In summary, the phrase ‘the body without a head’ addresses the identity established by the Other. How can we further understand the human body as a disposition of the Real? Lacan’s concept of the body concerns the pre-ontological and the ontological status of the body. For simplicity, we choose a discussion of the second concept first.

**Ontological status of the body**

The ontological condition of the body begins at the moment of birth and continues while the infant grows. A newborn baby possesses neither the image of a person, nor the sense of ‘I’ or ‘my body.’ The raw flesh is in a state of sheer anxiety, ‘nameless dread,’ to borrow from the British school of object relations (Bion 1959:308). The infant cannot organize and interpret external stimuli such as sound, light, and touch. In this stage, the body is in bits and pieces, fragmented, and ‘dis-membered’ with no identity (Lacan 1977b:11).

Between the ages of 6 and 18 months, the body formation begins, and Lacan calls this the ‘mirror stage.’ While looking at the mirror, a toddler adopts the image of the body, which appears cohesive and whole. This image of the body is not substantial, and, later, the mother reinforces it by pointing at the toddler in the mirror and saying ‘that is you.’

When the pre-verbal child becomes verbal, the child moves from the Imaginary world to the Symbolic one, which operates within speech and language. Before birth, the Symbolic world and its linguistic domain were
pre-existent. The toddler only proceeds to the pre-existent Symbolic world through an Imaginary point of view. Therefore, the whole process is referred to as moving from ‘imaginary symbolic’ to ‘symbolic imaginary’ from early development to later on.

The infant has a ‘primary identity,’ with the acquisition of a sense of ‘I’ in the form of ego. Here, the subject can view their image in the mirror and say, ‘this is me.’ However, this ‘primary identity’ results in the first alienation of the subject, and the ego lies as an imaginary organization.

In the formation of the ego, the subject never feels comfortable in their skin. By introjecting an image of togetherness from the mirror, known as the ‘ego-ideal,’ the infant defends itself against the fragmentation and decomposition of the body at this early stage. Moreover, in so doing, the baby defensively develops a sense of ‘ego,’ and the body image is then known as the ‘ideal ego.’ The characteristic of the body formation at this stage is hysterical and paranoiac because it contains a contradiction between integration and disintegration, and between the ego-ideal and the ideal ego.

The subject ($) remains barred from access to the body’s truth – the body suffers from a lack, but the subject is not aware of it. The void is covered up by language and speech. Lacan often describes this cover-up in different ways, such as ‘[the] subject is a grammatical subject,’ ‘[the] subject is the subject of signifiers,’ and ‘[the] subject is represented from one signifier to the other signifier’ (Lacan 1977a:207). The Real of the body, which represents its lack, is an impossibility and an impasse because whenever it attempts to express itself within language, it is denied and even distorted.

The formation of identity comes from the outside. Thus, one’s body is the other’s body, and one’s identity is body awareness with a sense of ‘I’ in which one experiences alienation. Why, then, does the body adopt an identity from the outside despite this alienation? We explore the answer in the next section.

**Pre-ontological state of the body**

The pre-ontological state of the body exists throughout one’s whole life as a sense of loss. The pre-ontological condition of the body means that at the moment of birth the infant experiences loss, linked to the first cut and separation from nature. In Genesis 3, the first cut is manifested as the exile from the Garden of Eden or the loss of Paradise, and the moment of tasting the fruit of knowledge signifies the process by which human beings become conscientious moral agents. In psychoanalysis, the first cut includes the cutting of the infant’s umbilical cord, referred to as the birth trauma.
The pre-ontological status of loss influences the physical body of the ontological state. To explain the loss or anxiety from the loss, Lacan uses the myth of the lamella. The lamella represents the monstrous undead and immortal leftover of the life energy, which is indestructible. It cannot be fully present within the Symbolic and the Imaginary. As in the case of Heidegger’s jug (1971:164), the body is created from the outside to hold something that contains ‘emptiness.’ Horror films such as zombie movies or Hitchcock movies feature the lamella, which manifests as a deep-seated fear or anxiety at the loss or lack in one’s psyche. Despite the effort to suppress it, the lamella persistently comes back, as described by Lacan in Écrits: ‘It is that which does not stop not being written …‘ (Lacan 1977b:57). The lamella signifies the Real of the body – a horror of facing the loss or the lack.

Two aspects can address the loss. First, this lack refers to the first cut or separation of human beings from nature. In the culture of civilization, humans can no longer go back to being part of nature. This cut also represents the infant being separated from the mother. From a Lacanian perspective, human beings are never part of nature; they are non-natural or non-biological.

Second, the lack represents the Name-of-the-Father, or the phallus. The early relationship between mother and child is symbiotic, and the Name-of-the-Father, or the phallus, disrupts this symbiosis. Lacan uses the term ‘father’ in three distinct ways.

1. The Symbolic father is the actual physical father.
2. The Imaginary father, or the Name-of-the-Father, represents the father in his absence and can have the same weight and power as the physical father.
3. The Real of the father signifies the absence of the father within the symbiosis of the mother. She is retaining a space for the father, in order to introduce the father’s arrival in the future.

Of course, this is a gradual process rather than a sudden event. How does one deal with the lack or loss if the body’s pre-ontological state manifests as a lack in the body as a result of the initial cut? We will answer this question by examining desire and the body in the following section.

Desire and the body

For Lacan, the body, with its pre-ontological and ontological conditions, becomes the site of expressing and perceiving the Other’s desire. So, how
do demand and desire, which are propelled by drive, operate within the body? The drive is the psychological equivalent to instinct, and the drive’s goal is pleasure and satisfaction, which is directed toward the objet petit a(utre) (O), the unattainable object of desire sought in the Other. The objet petit a is an object of reality and of illusion. On the one hand, it is real because it always chooses a temporary object from situation to situation.

On the other hand, it is illusory because the objet petit a is replacing the loss resulting from the separation from mother-nature. Further, objet petit a functions as a mediating object in the illusory desire to fill the lack (Lacan 1977a:76–7). The mediation happens through the processes of needs, demands, and desires – yearning for objet petit a.

As the energy force, the drive always remains a partial drive because the subject cannot achieve fullness in terms of body pleasure and satisfaction. Once again, drive and pleasure are connected. Drive remains partial to function as a motivational force behind the newborn baby’s developmental thrust. The partial drive is also the cause of frustration since it cannot fully achieve satisfaction.

In general, the drive starts registering and circulating in the body’s orifices (Lacan 1977a:103–4). First, it begins in the mouth. The oral need of the infant, such as the need for milk, is met by the primary care giver. After fulfilling this need, the next level of demand and desire will emerge.

Table 1 shows the four categories of partial drive affecting the body’s orifices, also known as erogenous zones, with their objects of choice.

The first two drives listed in Table 1 align with demand (D), whereas the second two drives pair with desire (d). The need of the child changes into a demand for love and a desire for reunion with the mother. Here, both the psychological domains of demand and desire are separated from the need, although demand and desire derive from the biological need of the child.

Language uses the surface of the body like a pad to write on. Language as the Symbolic register comes from the mOther during child-rearing practices. While the mOther directly organizes the child’s bodily function during child-rearing, the function of the Other in the form of cultural and societal norms is more influential on the child. In addition, the mOther

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becomes the smallest unit member of society that brings these norms into the family. Thus, we write ‘mOther’ with a capital O to imply this complicated process.

The mOther defines the child’s body, and the child receives meaning and awareness through interactions with the mOther. In another way, it is the mOther who puts a head on the body. Thus, the body receives a head, and the body becomes a montage body (Lacan 1977a:169), sustaining its life. The subject of the body therefore has to overcome two hurdles. One is the indefinite demand of partial drive for pleasure and satisfaction – the jouissance – and the other is the desire of the subject’s body for the reunion with the mOther. Both demand and desire signify lack. Importantly, both drive and desire always encounter impossibility through being denied or distorted.

For Lacan, castration is the break in the symbiosis between mOther and child. In a sense, a speaking being in the analysis is a castrated subject, since it can never fully finish and punctuate when describing and defining the body and body image. After the cut, the subject, identifying with the Name-of-the-Father, searches for a substitute. This process is called Sexuation, which emphasizes the gender difference. We discuss the notion of Sexuation concerning women’s bodies in the following section.

**Woman’s body, sexuality, and patriarchy**

Many feminist thinkers raise the following question: whose body is a woman’s body? Susan Bordo, in her seminal work *Unbearable Weight*, challenges the notion of the beautiful or desirable body, which often ignores women’s situations (1993:45). Lacan, in his work *The Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, states, ‘There is no sexual relationship’ (1982:42–7). He does not mean that there is no biological sex; what he implies is that the feminine position of sexuality is different from the masculine one. Applying Aristotle’s logic of syllogism with a twist, Lacan developed a formula of Sexuation and sexual differences, as set out in Figure 1.

At the left-hand side, we see the sexual position for men, which reads ‘All x [men] are submitted to the phallic function [castration/the Name-of-the-Father]’ except one (the mythical father of Freud). A man considers woman to be his other half (moiety) and his objet petit a (object of illusion) for his need for love and sexuality, in order to achieve a sense of completion. The position of man gives a fixed sexual identity.

The right-hand side indicates the Sexuation formula for women; it reads, ‘Not-all x [women] are submitted to the phallic function.’ While Aristotle’s universals are interactive with particulars and require particulars to exist,
Lacan tends to negate the notion of the universal, in order to safeguard particulars concerning the Sexuation of women and their sexual position toward men. The logic of ‘Not-all’ in the Sexuation formula for women allows them not to have these registered entirely through men. In doing so, women do not have to define themselves through men as the only basis for their identities. Even if a woman has to be the other half for a man due to the forces of patriarchy, she always keeps one eye open and one eye shut. In Lacan’s 1970–71 seminar, he famously declared that ‘there’s no such thing as Woman, woman with a capital W indicating the universal,’ a metaphysical concept with determinate and substantive content (Lacan 1982:43–50).

Lacan’s approach to women’s sexuality creates a perspective. Lacan argues that, unlike masculinity, feminine sexuality is not universally established on the basis of full phallic castration, so that a woman does not focus on totalization in her sexuality, as a man does. We can therefore assume that any fixed identity cannot be the only definition of womanhood. Women can have multiple identities in terms of sexual roles, gender roles, and social roles.

Further, Lacan views the Not-all position of women as the privilege to experience feminine jouissance; the jouissance of the body/the jouissance of the Other as indefinite is similar to mystical ecstasy. Any woman who does not know about the Not-all feminine sexual position responds to masculine sexuality, with a moiety and fixed identity. The woman supposedly repeats the given role as the objet petit a which stems from the man’s sexual position.
Since the discussion of women’s bodies within patriarchy significantly parallels the discussion of neo-liberalism, in the next section we focus on the condition of the body in the context of the neo-liberal economy.

The body in neo-liberalism: an entrapped body

According to the late Egyptian economist Samir Amin, one of the leading pioneers of World Systems Theory and Dependency Theory, neo-liberalism represents the highest level of capitalism or finance capitalism, which is operated forcefully by the United States over the rest of the world. The main characteristics of neo-liberalism are as follows.

1. Extraction of raw materials from developing countries with the unfulfilled promise of industrializing them while keeping them poor.
2. The global movement of capital for worldwide corporate investment while labor stays in developing countries.
3. The militarization of the economy (i.e. the military-industrial complex) and degradation of the environment (e.g. global warming).

These characteristics could lead to nuclear war as well as to the total collapse of our ecosystem (Amin 2013). Under this system, both humans and nature are exploited for profit. We have witnessed an unprecedented wealth disparity between the poor and the rich expressed in the Occupy Wall Street Movement slogan, ‘The 99 percent vs the 1 percent.’

Since neo-liberalism is inseparable from capitalism, we examine the Lacanian discourse on capitalism to demonstrate how the human body is under siege in this discourse. Lacan’s capitalist discourse originated from *Seminar XVII, L’Envers de la psychanalyse* (‘The other side of psychoanalysis’) (1969–70) and was developed in *Écrits* (1977b). Lacan initially provided four discourses: the master discourse; the university discourse; the hysteric discourse; and the discourse of the analyst; and he then added a fifth capitalist discourse. Labor, product, knowledge, jouissance, and the truth are characteristics of the body under capitalist culture. All five characteristics are manifested through various aspects of alienation that the subject experiences.

The capitalist discourse

The capitalist discourse formula from Lacan’s *Écrits* and its suggested interpretation are shown in Figure 2.
In the capitalist discourse, Lacan reveals the structure of the social order. In the first formula (Figure 2(a)), there are four variables (S, S1, S2, a). The top variables are barred, having access to the lower variables separated by two horizontal lines. The S indicates that the subject’s body is divided and incomplete under the capitalist mode of production. S2 represents the knowledge of the body, organized by ‘other’ (o), the capitalist class. S1 represents the agency, the dominant ordering of the ‘master’ signifier, the capitalist class that controls the rest of the society. Object a (the objet petit a, or surplus jouissance) is a surplus value (borrowed from Marx), which is the result of surplus labor. In his theory of psychoanalysis, objet petit a is the cause of desire, but is not attainable.

The second formula (Figure 2(b)) suggests a decoding system to interpret the first formula. The four positions in the second formula are: ‘agent’ in the upper left (the speaker of the discourse); ‘other’ in the upper right; ‘product’ in the lower right; and ‘truth’ in the lower left position.

The capitalist discourse demonstrates how the subject of the body ($) occupies the position of agency and addresses the self (S2) in terms of knowledge of body and sense of ‘I,’ not knowing that knowledge comes from the Other. The body’s subject does not have any access to the product (objet petit a, the jouissance of the body), because S1 takes the position of the truth in the lower left-hand corner, and the master controls the discourse.

In the capitalist mode of production, the body of the subject, the workers, can never be free and independent in discourse because they are deprived of the products of their labors, namely, surplus value and surplus jouissance. It also does not matter whether the capitalists are in the position of agency (visible) or not, because they still control the discourse, the social order.

In the master discourse, the workers are directly controlled by the capitalist class, where the capitalist class occupies the position of agency. Figure 3 shows the formula for the master discourse.
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Here, the capitalist-master (S1) takes the position of agency, claiming that the worker-slaves (S2) will enjoy products, knowledge, and happiness by providing them with the opportunity to work. In truth, the workers are deprived of the products (a) and are under siege concerning their subjectivity, body, and humanity. This discourse is about the oppression of the worker-slave by the capitalist-master. In this discourse, even the capitalist is not immune to alienation. The capitalist class, as a subject ($) by oppressing the worker, will also bar itself from the truth (see formula S1/$ in Figure 3). The capitalist class will lose its humanity by oppressing the working class. Thus, in this system, both classes lose their humanity.

Marx’s surplus value

While the classical political economists, including Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill, recognized the significance of workers’ contributions to the capitalist economy, Marx’s genius discovered the concept of surplus value/surplus profit. According to Marx, surplus value comes directly from the surplus labor of workers, not from capital. In his three volumes of Capital, Marx describes production, distribution, and consumption in the capitalist economy. In volume 1, he explains the concept of commodity, labor, and surplus value. There follows our summary of Marx’s views on surplus value.

1. A commodity lies for profit, and it differs distinctly from produce: commodity has an exchange value, while produce has use value. Contrary to commodity, produce is for immediate use and finalizes itself after use, while commodities can circulate in the market to extract a maximum profit. The capitalist mode of production is structured for the creation of commodities, not produce.

2. The formula for surplus value is: \( c + v = c + v + s \). In this formula, \( c \) (machinery + raw materials) is constant capital, \( v \) (workers’ wages) is variable capital, and \( s \) (surplus value) is the product plus the profit.

3. The capitalist is not purchasing the worker’s labor, but the worker’s labor power. Labor power is defined as the worker’s manual and mental forces, all of the worker’s potentiality and humanity that enters correctly into the workforce. The labor power indicates the

![Figure 3: Master discourse formula.](image-url)
worker’s interaction and encounters with nature and society to fulfill biological, aesthetic, and spiritual needs. For these reasons, work is not just defined as manual, but also mental; it covers a wide range of professional activities.

4. The antagonism between capital and labor is not only materialistic but, most importantly, also cultural and ideological. It includes a wide range of worldviews concerning community and living (Marx 2014:112–37).

We experience capitalists imposing their perspectives using media, advertisements, and cultural domination as propaganda (Žižek 2009:27). According to Marx, the workers would ultimately formulate their thinking and challenge capitalism through a revolutionary act.

**Surplus value and surplus jouissance**

Lacanians, rather than Lacan himself, often mention that surplus jouissance derives from Marx’s concept of surplus value, presupposing that they are similar concepts, but the two are not identical at all. Marx’s surplus value is material or substantial, produced from the real activities of life. In *The German Ideology*, Marx states, ‘it is not the consciousness of men that determines their beings, but on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness’ (1959:43–4). Marx’s philosophical approach to life is dialectical materialism, focusing on the real and concrete social conditions.

On the contrary, Lacan offers a formula that is a quasi-flirtation with materialism. According to Lacan, in a capitalist society, human identity functions as a semblance (‘as if’) (Vanheule 2016). Lacan locates his materialism in speech and language, known as the materiality of speech. The focus is the enjoyment of goods and products within the structure of the mind, as Lacan called it, the objet petit a. The objet petit a is the object of desire for the worker-slave and is not fully obtainable. What the worker obtains is a crumb: surplus enjoyment, surplus jouissance. According to Lacan, in all human discourses, one can never get rid of the agency’s position occupied by the master-capitalist, nor can one ever get rid of the master.

For Lacan, the revolutionary act is substituting one master for another master. The worker’s desire is manipulated within the capitalist’s discourse. Expressing one’s own desire only occurs within the discourse of analysis through speaking. Can this be true for workers who suffer from poverty? Perhaps Lacan’s idea could give them intellectual insight into their condition. Alternatively, perhaps, for the workers, formulating their desires
would indicate the demand for a more egalitarian society with checks and balances while the capitalist class maintains its presence. Instead, the contemporary use of capitalism with ‘a human face,’ which claims our own experience, could create a situation where the workers can express their desires.

For Marx, the full enjoyment of life is a possibility for the working class only if the workers destroy the capitalist mode of production and create a model for more humane and communal living. In that society, there would be neither workers nor capitalists. There would only be human beings.

Perhaps the common ground between Lacan and Marx is body formation, which is coerced or given to the workers. Both Lacan and Marx believe that the body exists without a head since it is formulated by the Other (O); they call this alienation.

For Marx, alienation is the exhaustion of the workforce and the alienation from the self, causing extreme social anxiety about survival. Further, Marx viewed the psychological symptoms of alienation as blocking human senses, and the emancipation of the senses is crucial (Marx 2007:98–114).6 For Lacan, although alienation is ontological, it occurs with the body’s demotion, where the body loses all its exterior and interior safety nets.

We recognize that the relationship between Lacan’s surplus jouissance and Marx’s surplus value is only analogical. To examine this relationship further, one has to deal with the parallax effect, since the two are irreconcilable positions. When it comes to the discussion of surplus jouissance and surplus value between Lacan and Marx, Lacan is more in need of Marx than Marx is in need of Lacan. In the field of spirituality and theology, mainly in the laborer’s body discourse, the difference between surplus jouissance and surplus value should be clear. In recognizing this, the possibility of rewriting our understanding of the human body in late capitalist society becomes more likely. Language uses the body’s surface like a pad to write on, while drives circle on the body’s surface, seeking satisfaction. So how can we apply Lacan’s body discourse in patriarchal society and late capitalism?

The application of the notion of the Real of the body

In comprehending the body’s condition as the Real, we highlight the subject’s passivity or impasse. In Lacan’s solution, the analytical discourse only provides comprehension of the pre-ontological and the ontological condition of the Real of the body (Schroeder 2008:111–13). This means that the subject realizes the body’s pleasure and the desire is formulated by the Other. This insight allows the subject to reclaim the body by taking a
position against the Other. With this recognition, the subject is then able to reformulate its desire.

The immediate practical question is how the desire is formulated within the system of patriarchy and capitalism. As Lacan views the deficit of the human body in terms of lack and loss, this deficit makes the body an even easier prey within both patriarchal systems and capitalism. In patriarchy, women are dispossessed as authors able to write their own desire and destinies.

In capitalism and the neo-liberal economy, the subject is besieged by the exhaustion of work and survival, thus losing critical faculties and becoming confused, submissive, and alienated. The human subject is unable to reclaim its body and formulate its desire. People hear that all their desires will be fulfilled under the capitalist mode of production or consumption. They are guaranteed that they will be provided with all the means to fulfill their desires, so they should not experience anxiety or feel any lack or loss. Under these conditions, the subject of the body loses all critical faculties and critical thinking. People go to shopping malls as the core of their lifestyle.

Lacanian insight can promote or help to further elaborate the body experience of both women and men who labor in the global capital system. Women's spirituality pays attention to women's embodied experience, and Lacan's explanation of feminine Sexuation can be adopted to enhance understanding of women's multivalent identities. For example, in order to comprehend the medieval mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg, who transgressed the rules of gender identity in terms of intimacy with God, the concept of Sexuation can be applied. In contemporary society, some women's and transgender people's spiritual lives transcend the universalized identity, and Lacan's approach can be used to further understand their identity.

The emancipatory forces of ‘Not-all’ – not being caught up in a forced gender – can empower women who suffer from not fitting in to the fixed gender system. In the field of women’s spirituality, including healing sessions and spiritual direction, Lacan’s notion of Not-all feminine sexuality is crucial for providing a space to raise multiple voices and examine identities that do not follow the given narratives. The Not-all position also allows women to question and challenge the system of patriarchy and sexism. The issue is how women can develop for themselves multiple narratives, which include transformative potential.

Should we limit the discourse around women’s bodies to being different, having half-freedoms and half-possibilities in comparison with men’s bodies, which have a fixed identity? We suggest extending the concept
for women’s bodies to all human bodies, including males, who also suffer under the patriarchy. The current enforced positions are an issue that goes against our humanity.

With regard to liberation theology, and with the focus on social change as a part of studying Christian spirituality, we acknowledge that the capitalist discourse is a handy tool to understand how the laboring body is controlled, manipulated, and exploited by the capitalists’ narrative. However, Lacan and Lacanians’ use of surplus value is potentially detrimental because it dilutes the importance of social change by emphasizing impossibility and the importance of analysis. Nevertheless, Lacan’s capitalist discourse is useful for social analysis, because it shows how capitalists control laborers, and how their desire for the ideal object cannot be achieved.

Liberation theology aims to change society through social analysis, discernment, action, and reflection. Especially in the area of social discernment, we analyze and examine social symptoms (Liebert 2015). It deals with power, authority, and social structure, rather than with the human condition in capitalist society, where many human beings now struggle. In social analysis practice, we can apply Lacan’s capitalist discourse, which shows that capitalists and laborers both lose their humanity. For constructing the Kingdom of God here and now, it is helpful to know that human beings all lose humanity, and to be aware of the human condition of being limited and manipulated. Perhaps Lacan’s capitalist discourse provides us with a way of creating the space for God, by recognizing impossibility amid the hard work for social change.

Conclusion

In the recent development of various theories of the body, Lacan’s body theory aligns with the research of postmodern thinkers such as Michael Foucault and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who approach the body as a social concept. Lacan emphasizes the body of the Real as the passive condition of the body in terms of formation, identity, and understanding.

This condition of the body then further shapes the condition of the body of women and laborers under patriarchy and capitalism, respectively. While men use women as a moiety to complete themselves, women provide the condition of the moiety. In other words, women take the Not-all position, a position that allows them to not fully merge into the relationship.

The Not-all position of women allows them to question the patriarchal system and other issues around women’s sexual identities. These women can further develop multiple narratives, which include transformative possibilities. Lacan’s approach to feminine sexuality can be applied to women’s
spirituality, emphasizing multiple narratives of the body and sexual identities, including diverse gender roles.

In capitalism, we have explored how, through the extraction of surplus value from surplus labor, the laborer’s body remains alienated. Through social discernment and analysis in liberation theology, we can employ the capitalist discourse to show how capitalists and workers all lose humanity. The capitalist discourse provides a tool to understand how people are manipulated by late capitalist society, without knowing it. Lacan’s theory of ‘a body without a head’ reflects the condition of the human body, which manifests as lack, and includes the possibilities for transforming society.

About the authors

Ali Chavoshian, PhD is a member and faculty of the San Francisco Lacanian School of Psychoanalysis and a clinical psychologist, practicing in Berkeley, California. Also, he is a clinical faculty at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, California, serving as a clinical supervisor for graduate students. He served as the Academic Dean and Professor in the Graduate School of Psychology at the New College of California in San Francisco. Since 1990, he has been a visiting professor at the Guilan School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, Rasht, Iran. His research is about Lacanian discourse from clinical and sociopolitical perspectives.

Sophia Park, SNJM, PhD is an associate professor in religious studies and philosophy at Holy Names University in California. Her academic interest is body discourse in interdisciplinary approach and research on interculturality, spirituality, and global experiences. She has published many books, including Dislocation as Experience, Border Crossing Spirituality, Interreligious Pedagogy, and Conversations at the Well: Emerging Religious Life in the 21st Century Global World. Also, she has published book chapters and articles, including ‘Listening Not in Spiritual Direction: A Lacanian Inkling’ in Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction with Dr. Ali Chavoshian.

Notes

1 There are many publications on the body and brain. They emphasize the role and the function of the brain concerning human emotions and the reaction to them.
3 This concept of the Other, often in the field of theology, is equated with God, but we do not agree with this simple equation. The Other can be the sum of countless others and confirms the impossibility of a demarcation between self and others.
4 Lacan assigned the position of women as God/beyond, i.e. mystical. For him, women’s possibly superior position requires insight beyond language.
5 Sexuation is a term explaining the nature of gender that is not biological. It often represents a temporary solution to the problem of lack.
According to Marx, the function of the senses with regard to alienation is as follows: ‘Just as only music awakens in man the sense of music, and just as the most beautiful music has no sense for the unmusical ear – is [no] object for it, because my object can only be the confirmation of one of my essential powers – it can therefore only exist for me insofar as my essential power exists for itself as a personal capacity; because the meaning of an object for me goes only so far as my sense goes (has only a meaning for a sense corresponding to that object) – for this reason, the senses of the social man differ from those of the non-social man. Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man’s essential being is the richness of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for the beauty of form – in short, senses capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of man) either cultivated or brought into being. For the five senses and the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, human sense, the human nature of the senses, come to be under its object and the humanized nature. The five senses consist of a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present. The sense caught up in crude practical need has only a restricted sense.

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