

Chapter One

FROM PROHIBITION TO ENJOYMENT

PROHIBITION AS FOUNDATION

If today, in the midst of a full-fledged consumer culture, we are surrounded everywhere by the demand that we maximize our enjoyment, this represents a significant departure from the way in which society has traditionally been organized. Prohibition has always functioned as the key to social organization as such, demanding that subjects sacrifice enjoyment for the sake of work, community, and progress. Hence, in order to grasp the significance of the emergence of the society of commanded enjoyment, we must first explore the role that prohibition has played in allowing society to function by investigating thematically the structure of the traditional society of prohibition. In exploring the central role of prohibition in social organization, I will look to three related lines of thought that together will help to shed light on the way that it functions. By laying out these theoretical explanations of prohibition, I hope to provide a foundation for understanding what has changed. The importance of prohibition's structuring role in society becomes evident in Claude Lévi-Strauss's discussions of incest, Freud's speculations about the primal horde and the origins of society, and Lacan's conception of the symbolic order. Each of these three lines of inquiry emphasizes that prohibition is the *sine qua non* of a coherent social order, though prohibition's foundational status becomes most evident in the work of Lévi-Strauss.

In *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss notices the presence of prohibition—specifically the prohibition of incest—in every social order. He

claims that the prohibition of incest, though a thoroughly cultural phenomenon, has the universality of something natural. It appears across cultural barriers, as the necessary feature of culture itself. Though the definition of incest is plastic, changing from society to society, there is no society, according to Lévi-Strauss, that does not in some way prohibit it. In asserting the universality of the incest prohibition, Lévi-Strauss is really articulating something even more fundamental about the structure of any social order: every social order depends on a shared sacrifice, something that must be given up by those who enter into it, a societal "entry fee." As Lévi-Strauss himself puts it, "Considered in its purely formal aspect, the prohibition of incest is thus only the group's assertion that where relationships between the sexes are concerned, *a person can not do just what he pleases*. The positive aspect of the prohibition is to initiate organization."¹ The shared sacrifice embodied by the incest prohibition—and not some positive characteristic held in common among all the members of a society—brings unity and coherence to a loosely organized group. If a society were based on only a common positive characteristic (the same language, for instance), this characteristic would not in any way act as a control on people's behavior. It would not stop them, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, from doing just what they please, in the way that prohibition, and specifically the incest prohibition, does.

The incest prohibition creates societal coherence through directing people's interest away from what is closest to them (the family) and toward the social organization itself. As a result, for instance, rather than continuing to desire the mother, the subject must desire someone from another family, from the social order at large. This directing of interest away from the family and to the society at large is the most important function of the incest prohibition. Without this redirection of interest, nothing would propel the child out of the family, out of a concern for only her/his immediate environment. As psychoanalysis makes clear, there is no want of passion on the part of the child for her/his fellow family members, no initial revulsion at the familial (or familiar) love object.² The incest prohibition, then, not only creates a desire for something beyond the immediate scope of the child, but it also produces a feeling of disgust with the idea of taking someone immediately present (a family member) as a love object. In this way, the prohibition opens us up to the social world, freeing us from the narrow focus of our initial interest through a complete redirection of it.

This redirection of interest is not simply an even exchange, however. One does not give up one equally enjoyable object (the family member) for another (the member of society at large). Instead, one gives up enjoyment itself for a socially directed or mediated pleasure that pales in comparison. The prohibition of incest is the prohibition of enjoyment. Incest is identical with enjoyment insofar as incest implies actually enjoying one's love object itself rather

than a fantasmatic replica. Incest would be the perfect sexual encounter—perfect enjoyment—because it would involve an impossible object, an object that is completely forbidden. Though the social order always seems to hold out the promise of its own compensatory enjoyment to its initiates, this is a promise that it cannot but break. The social order can't keep its promise of compensatory enjoyment—enjoyment that might come close to the enjoyment that the incest prohibition bars—because such unrestrained enjoyment necessarily threatens the self-perpetuation of the social order itself. Whereas the self-perpetuation of the social order depends on conservation of resources, calculation of possibilities, and allowances for the future, enjoyment occurs without any consideration of how it will be sustained, without any fear of using itself up. Enjoyment also shatters barriers; it overcomes differences, distinctions, and hierarchies (including those of social class). Most importantly, however, those who are enjoying themselves are not, at the moment of enjoyment at least, “productive members of society.”³ Freud's description of a prototypical experience of enjoyment reveals just how enjoyment produces a subject unconcerned with society and productivity. He points out that the “prototype of the expression of sexual satisfaction in later life” is the image of “a baby sinking back satiated from the breast and falling asleep with flushed cheeks and a blissful smile.”⁴ This image of enjoyment suggests the extent to which enjoyment stands as a barrier to good citizenship: while someone is enjoying, she/he is not contributing to the good of the social order. Because of all these inherently antisocial features, enjoyment represents a danger to the very logic upon which every social order constitutes itself, and the social order must try to ward off this danger.

However, even though enjoyment represents a threat to the social order and its stability, every social order must use enjoyment in order to perpetuate itself. In fact, Lacan even goes so far as to say that the founding signifier of the social order (what he calls “the One”)—and, by extension, the social order itself—“far from arising out of the universe, arises out of enjoyment.”⁵ Consequently, despite the prohibition against enjoyment, enjoyment still makes itself felt within society. Religions, for instance, often promise an afterlife of unrestrained enjoyment in exchange for the sacrifice of enjoyment in the here and now. But enjoyment appears within society in even more direct and socially useful ways. Societies are able to perpetuate themselves because subjects derive enjoyment from its sacrifice, because the sacrifice of enjoyment itself produces enjoyment. Social coherence depends on the enjoyment that subjects derive from the sacrifice of their private enjoyment for the greater good of the society. It is this type of enjoyment that sustains soldiers through the horrors of war or workers through the drudgery of their labor. It is akin to the enjoyment that people experience when identifying with the society as a whole—such as when Americans enjoyed the gold medal of the 1980 U.S.

Olympic Hockey team. And finally, there is the enjoyment that derives from those minor transgressions permitted by the social authority (drinking to excess, playing the lottery, etc.). In all of these ways, the social order allows—and relies on—some degree of enjoyment. However, in each case, the enjoyment remains constrained and confined within clear limitations. These are moments of clearly demarcated and limited enjoyment, enjoyment that occurs within socially defined limits. Despite the use the social order makes of enjoyment, unrestrained and uncontrolled enjoyment—which is to say, enjoyment as such—still constitutes a mortal threat to that order, as the universality of the incest prohibition makes clear. It is, as Lévi-Strauss says, the founding moment of society, and it is so insofar as it marks the moment at which a society demands the renunciation of enjoyment.

Here we see the unequaled role that the prohibition of enjoyment plays in the construction of a social order. It provides the foundation on which all the structures of society necessarily rest. Prohibition performs this function because it eliminates the threat that unrestrained enjoyment poses to society as a whole. Without prohibition, enjoyment would constantly threaten the stability and security of the social order. The antisocial danger represented by enjoyment finds perhaps its most poetic expression in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), in the figure of Hannibal Lecter. The film demonstrates, quite clearly, that Lecter derives his enjoyment from eating people: he doesn't eat people because he bears them ill-will, but simply because he enjoys it. Rather than facilitating harmonious intersubjective contact, as the example of Lecter indicates, enjoyment threatens the big Other, insofar as it disregards the desire of the Other altogether.⁶ Though Lecter's mode of procuring enjoyment is undoubtedly extreme, it is nonetheless exemplary, because all enjoyment involves seeing the Other as nothing more than a tool and *not* showing "consideration" for the Other. As Serge André points out, to enjoy something "is to be able to use it to the point of abusing it—the abuse being precisely that which the law seeks to delimit."⁷ In the act of barring this unrestrained enjoyment from the social order, prohibition produces habitable space in which we can coexist without directly confronting the horror of the Other's enjoyment, which is why Lévi-Strauss sees prohibition at the root of everything social.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud illustrates in another way the foundational role of prohibition in structuring the social order. He offers his own mythic account of the origin of social organization, an account in which he envisions a group not bound by the prohibition, a primal horde. In the horde, enjoyment is not readily available to everyone. It is confined to the strongest, the primal Father, who hoards all enjoyment (i.e., all women) for himself. This Father enjoys without restraint, but only until such time as the sons, jealous of his enjoyment, conspire to murder him. According to Freud, this murder of the primal Father is the first social act, and the prohibition of incest—or, of enjoyment—follows

directly on its heels. In establishing a social order in the wake of the primal Father's murder, the sons recognize that, if they are to live together in relative peace, they must agree to a collective renunciation of enjoyment. Without this collective renunciation, no one can have any feeling of security, because there is nothing to mediate a life-and-death struggle for enjoyment. Force itself—and force alone—prevails: the strongest can enjoy himself, and all the weaker ones will not survive. The sons, however, had already opted out of this life-and-death struggle at the moment they conspired to murder the primal Father. In this first moment of collective action, the renunciation that would ultimately become the incest prohibition has its genesis. After this point, the enjoyment embodied by the primal Father becomes only a memory, the object of fantasy for all those who have agreed to give it up. That is, the murder of the primal Father has the effect of triggering fantasies about the enjoyment that he experienced prior to his death. These fantasies sustain those who have sacrificed their own enjoyment in the collective renunciation that made the murder possible, and they provide the reassurance that, if enjoyment is inaccessible now, at least it once was accessible for someone.

It is important to remember, however, that the prehistory of society that Freud recounts in *Totem and Taboo* is a mythic reconstruction. Freud's account is necessarily mythic because once we have entered into the social order, the origins of that order always become wholly obscured. This is why Lacan points out in *Seminar XVII* that “no one has ever seen the least trace of the father of the human horde.”⁸ It becomes impossible to look at the origins of the social order—or prior to them—except through the reflection of that order itself. Hence, when we look back, we don't see “natural humanity” in its pure form, unmediated by the social order, but the order's own fundamental ideological presuppositions.⁹ The onset of the social order constitutes an absolute barrier and beyond it we see only our own reflection. That is to say, any conception of the state of nature is a conception of *our* state of nature, the state of nature belonging to our specific social order. Even the idea of primal humanity engaged in a “life-and-death struggle” is itself but a reflection of a prominent presupposition concerning what constitutes “human nature.” Prior to the onset of the social order and the system of meaning that it constitutes, there is no meaning and, therefore, no enjoyment that holds meaning in abeyance. Before the social order, there are no distinctions at all—neither enjoyment nor the lack of it. The introduction of the symbolic order effects a radical change in our relationship to enjoyment.

At this point, we can see the importance of Lacan's conception of the symbolic order, which lies in his grasp of the extent to which the symbolic order and its prohibition of enjoyment actually introduces the possibility of enjoyment. In the act of prohibiting enjoyment, the symbolic order erects a barrier relative to which enjoyment can constitute itself. It is this that Lacan grasps

when he rewrites Dostoyevsky's "without God, everything is permitted" to "without God, nothing is permitted." That is, without God, without some Law that demands renunciation, one cannot have any enjoyment. This is why the introduction of the Law is an obscene act, an act producing the possibility of the enjoyment it prohibits. Enjoyment requires the barrier to it that the Law provides. This means that we must qualify the idea that entrance into society requires the renunciation of enjoyment: one must indeed renounce one's enjoyment, but this enjoyment is something that *does not exist prior to its renunciation*.¹⁰ In giving it up, in other words, we in effect retroactively create, through our presupposing of it, an enjoyment that we never had. Here, we can again see why incest is but another name for enjoyment: just as prehistorical enjoyment does not exist, neither does incest prior to its prohibition. When one is free to sleep with one's mother, she's not *the* mother, in the sense of being *the* privileged object of desire. It is only at the point at which the mother becomes off-limits that she takes on the role of "mother," because it is the fact of being off-limits that elevates an object to being the privileged object of desire.

Though this prehistorical enjoyment did not exist, the idea of it nonetheless continues to have a power over the subjects of the social order. Having given up a part of themselves—albeit a part that did not exist until they gave it up—these subjects, insofar as they remain within the social order, are incomplete or lacking. Bound by this lack, they imagine or fantasize an object that exists in the gap left by their sacrifice. This object is what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*. The *objet a* constitutes the subject as desiring; it provides the lure that acts as an engine for the desire of the subject and also directs that desire in its circuit. In fact, Lacan notes repeatedly that "the *petit a* is the cause of the subject."¹¹ It causes the subject to emerge as a desiring subject, as the subject of desire. Desire is, in this sense, part of what one gets in exchange for the sacrifice of one's enjoyment. While this may seem, on the surface, to be a bargain for the subject (considering that she or he never had the enjoyment she or he gave up in the first place), desire is inevitably a poor substitute for enjoyment. Enjoyment satisfies the subject, but when a subject desires, she or he perpetually lacks her *objet a* and hence remains perpetually dissatisfied.¹² Desire lays down a path that has no exit and leaves the subject, despite her/his constant longing for something more, a prisoner of the social order that desire itself is a reaction against. The only end of desire is more desire. We desire because we don't find the sacrifice of our enjoyment entirely satisfying, but desire, unfortunately, does nothing to overcome that dissatisfaction. In fact, desire is sustained dissatisfaction.¹³ This state of sustained dissatisfaction is the normal state for subjects within a society of prohibition. Prohibition produces dissatisfied, desiring subjects, subjects who remain securely within the confines of the social order.

Desire is consonant with the social order because of its reliance on absence rather than presence. When I desire an object, its absence is often

helpful in building up my desire: the longer the desired object remains away, the stronger the hold of desire over me. All of our clichés about desire—like “absence makes the heart grow fonder”—affirm this fundamental truth of desire. By the same token, when the object becomes a constant presence, my desire tends to wane. And if I gain too much proximity to the object of desire, the object suddenly disappears or loses its desirability. This aspect of desire is correlative to the functioning of the social order, which is itself a symbolic entity. It allows subjects to relate to each other through the mediation of a symbolic order, which means through absence rather than presence. The symbolic order is, as Lacan puts it, the absence of things, and this absence is crucial for the possibility of mediation, because it serves to eliminate rivalry. If one subject doesn’t have a thing, at least another doesn’t have it either, which provides some degree of consolation for lost enjoyment.¹⁴ This is why prohibition is so important for holding society together: if I see that no one else is able to enjoy, I feel as if we are partners in loss rather than rivals in enjoyment.

The symbolic order is the basis for any social order because it provides a layer of mediation connecting subjects together. Within it, no one has direct access to enjoyment. As Lacan puts it, “jouissance is prohibited to whomever speaks, as such—or, to put it differently, it can only be said between the lines by whomever is a subject of the Law, since the Law is founded on that very prohibition.”¹⁵ This shared sacrifice of enjoyment—embodied in the incest prohibition—establishes the basis of the social bond. Because subjects experience themselves as lacking, as not fully enjoying themselves, they look to the Other for what they are missing, for the piece that would allow for complete enjoyment. It is subjects’ inability to enjoy completely—to have an experience of total enjoyment—that directs them to the Other, that creates a desire for what the social order seems to have hidden within its recesses. In contrast, the enjoying subject does not look to the Other for what it lacks, but rather sustains an attitude of indifference toward the Other. As a result, enjoyment as such is not conducive to social relations and the functioning of the symbolic order. The symbolic order thrives on the deprivation of the subjects belonging to it: it creates a bond of lack. In this way, prohibition works to create coherence within society. The prohibition of enjoyment holds the social order together through the shared dissatisfaction it produces. This sense of shared dissatisfaction is the salient feature of the society of prohibition, and it represents a direct point of contrast with the society of commanded enjoyment.

IMAGINARY INTERLUDES

In order to make clear the structure of the society of prohibition as it contrasts with that of the society of commanded enjoyment, it is not enough to

emphasize the bond created by the sacrifice of enjoyment. Though the society of prohibition functions primarily through the dissatisfaction of its subjects, it also must provide some way of alleviating the sense of lack without endangering the social structure. Recognition of the social bond and of one's own lack allows one to relate in a mediated way to other subjects. It allows one to view other subjects not just as rivals in struggle, but with some degree of lateral identification. But this is clearly not adequate compensation for the dissatisfaction that prohibition produces. Because recognizing one's lack—one's failure to enjoy—is not pleasant, we often avoid doing so, preferring instead to imagine that we haven't made the initial sacrifice of enjoyment or that we are able to overcome this sacrifice and enjoy within the social order. For those who have acceded to life within the symbolic order, there remains one easy avenue of procuring enjoyment: the imaginary. For Lacan, the imaginary is the domain of images, a register of experience that allows the subject to visualize the enjoyment it lacks. Thus, grasping the importance of the imaginary is vital for understanding what sustains the society of prohibition.

Because prohibition denies the subject the ultimate enjoyment, it inevitably produces dissatisfaction and potential rebellion. The imaginary is the repository for that potential rebellion insofar as it provides an illusory enjoyment in the midst of its prohibition by the social order. One can imagine an enjoyment that the social order prohibits, and as a result, society's confines do not seem absolute, even for those committed to remaining within those confines.¹⁶ For example, the spouse devoted to the ideal of marital fidelity can imagine the steamy affair that she/he would never accede to in reality. This imagined affair—this event enacted on the imaginary level—allows the subject to enjoy transgressing a prohibition without actually doing so. The imaginary thus plays a crucial supplementary role in the society of prohibition, offering an imaginary enjoyment for those who suffer from the prohibition of enjoyment in the Real. Because of our ability to imagine an enjoyment that the symbolic order prohibits, the imaginary offers us a separate register of experience, distinct from the symbolic order. In Lacan's triadic division of experience, the symbolic order constitutes our social reality, the imaginary provides an avenue for the illusory transgression of that reality, and the Real marks the point at which the symbolic order fails—the gap that always haunts it. Though the imaginary assists prohibition by providing a safe outlet for enjoyment, it also represents a danger to the society of prohibition. The imaginary thus has an ambiguous status within the society of prohibition, and we must examine both its role in supplementing the power of prohibition and the threat that it poses.

Insofar as it offers us an image of enjoyment, the imaginary disguises our status within the symbolic order (which requires a sacrifice of enjoyment). Whereas in the symbolic we experience the power of the social order over us,

in the imaginary, which is the domain of the ego (our bodily image), we feel isolated within the shell that the ego seems to provide. Within this imaginary isolation, one seems not to have to sacrifice the object. One is able to enjoy it, but with the restriction that one can only enjoy *the image of the object*, not the object itself. The *objet petit a*, the object insofar as it offers enjoyment, is precisely what the subject misses in the image; this object is, according to Lacan, “what is lacking, is non-specular, it is not graspable in the image.”¹⁷ Because the image lacks the *objet petit a*, imaginary enjoyment is illusory. Only outside the limits of both the symbolic and the imaginary—only in the Real—are we actually able to enjoy because the Real does not require a sacrifice of enjoyment. The status of enjoyment, in fact, provides an easy way of grasping Lacan’s symbolic-imaginary-Real triad: in the Real, we can enjoy; in the imaginary, we imagine that we enjoy; and in the symbolic, the symbol enjoys in our stead. Even though it only provides an imagined enjoyment, the imaginary nonetheless seems to provide enjoyment as such, while the symbolic order only offers desire. This is why one cannot think the society of prohibition without the imaginary housing the image of the denied enjoyment. This image is what allows subjects in the society of prohibition to sustain themselves in the midst of their dissatisfaction.

The imaginary, however, does not exist outside of or prior to the symbolic. It is the Real that marks the limit point—the failure—of the symbolic order, not the imaginary. The imaginary is simply a perspective within the symbolic, a way of seeing that fails to grasp its own symbolic determination.¹⁸ In other words, when I engage with images (the imaginary), the symbolic order always determines the form of that engagement; the symbolic order determines the place from which I see the image. In *Seminar II*, Lacan explains this relationship:

The symbolic relation is constituted as early as possible, even prior to the fixation of the self image of the subject, prior to the structuring image of the ego, introducing the dimension of the subject into the world, a dimension capable of creating a reality other than that experienced as brute reality, as the encounter of two masses, the collision of two balls. The imaginary experience is inscribed in the register of the symbolic as early on as you can think it.¹⁹

Here, Lacan minimizes the distinction between imaginary and symbolic, claiming that the former necessarily takes place within the confines of the latter. This means that imaginary experience never actually breaks from the structure of the symbolic order. Our imaginary enjoyment remains a confined and policed enjoyment, an enjoyment relatively amenable to symbolic authority.

But within the society of prohibition the imaginary is also a site of potential disruption. Subjects immersed in the imaginary remain within the confines

of the symbolic order, but they do not recognize these confines. As a result, despite this inscription of the imaginary within the symbolic, our experience within the imaginary *seems* as if it occurs before or outside of the intervention of the symbol. This is why our first experiences, though the symbolic order provides the context for them, are imaginary ones.²⁰ Prior to the act of grasping their integration into the world of the symbol and thus their “humanization,” subjects constitute themselves on the level of the imaginary, and on this level, they are able to enjoy—which is to say, they are able to see themselves as whole, not as lacking. In the mirror stage, the prototypical imaginary experience, the child looks in the mirror and sees her/his body as a coherent whole over which she/he has mastery. Though this sense of wholeness and mastery is illusory or imaginary, it nonetheless obscures the child’s lack and hence disguises subjection to the symbolic order. In the imaginary, the subject seems isolated and independent of the symbolic order—self-sufficient.

It is for this reason that imaginary experience represents a danger to the social order even though it is integral to it and remains firmly within it: subjects lodged in the imaginary believe themselves to be independent and fail to see their symbolic bond with other subjects. Thus, they see other subjects purely as rivals, rather than as partners in sacrifice. The lack of distance in the imaginary further exacerbates this sense of rivalry. Images, unlike symbolic structures, seem directly present to us. As Richard Boothby notes,

The difference between the imaginary and symbolic functions aligns itself with a distinction between the perceptual and nonperceptual. Unlike the imaginary, which distinguishes figure and ground within a perceptual field, the symbolic is always conditioned by its relation to a network of signifiers that is not and in fact *cannot* be made an object of perception. We perceive speech and writing but not the symbol system that makes them possible.²¹

We can readily grasp the image in a way that we are constitutively unable to grasp the symbolic function. As a result, enjoyment permeates the imaginary realm because here there is no distance between the subject and the image.

This lack of distance—or lack of mediation that the symbol would provide—means that from the perspective of the imaginary, every relationship is necessarily a violent relationship, a life and death struggle for enjoyment: in the imaginary, there is no possibility for compromise or sharing because of the nature of imaginary enjoyment itself. Here, enjoyment has an either/or quality to it: either I am enjoying or you are—not both of us and not “first I’ll enjoy a little and then you can.” It is in such either/or terms that Lacan always describes life in the imaginary order. Here, without language, one cannot come to any agreement or compromise. On the level of the imaginary, in other words, there is no such thing as peaceful coexistence, no possibility for a pact governing the rationing of enjoyment. In *Seminar I*, Lacan argues that “Each

time the subject apprehends himself as form and as ego [i.e., on an imaginary level . . .], his desire is projected outside. From whence arises the impossibility of all human co-existence.”²² This dimension of the imaginary—the hostility that it produces toward the Other—proves a barrier to the functioning of the society of prohibition.

SYMBOLIC RESPITE

Even though the society of prohibition relies on the imaginary to offset the dissatisfaction it produces in subjects, it nonetheless aims at policing both Real and imaginary enjoyment. As we will see later, this is one of the crucial differences between the society of prohibition and the society of commanded enjoyment. Whereas the society of enjoyment actively promotes imaginary enjoyment, the society of prohibition restrains it. Prohibition doesn't do this in order to eliminate enjoyment. Instead, the function of the symbolic order is the leveling out of enjoyment. As Lacan puts it, “That is clearly the essence of the law—to divide up, distribute, or reattribute everything that counts as *jouissance*.”²³ The law prohibits enjoyment in effort to extend the life of enjoyment; it is the symbolic order that makes possible a sense of permanence, which is why subjects are willing to accept the prohibition of enjoyment that the symbolic order demands. However, enjoyment—and this is part of what puts it at odds with the social order—occurs without any reference to perpetuating itself. It is purely momentary, and when one enjoys, one does so lost in the moment, without any thoughts of the future or of future possibilities for enjoyment. Once one begins to calculate about enjoyment, to attempt to divide it up and ration it, one has already left enjoyment behind. Speech attempts to conserve enjoyment for tomorrow, to arrest enjoyment's own inherent self-wastefulness. We can see this most clearly in the case of the obsessional who continues to talk in order to preserve the enjoyment that he fears will be “used up” when the talking ends. In addition to conserving enjoyment, the obsessional's talking also has the effect—as does speech in general—of holding off enjoyment. He talks so that there will be no opening for a sudden outbreak of enjoyment.

The initial importance of words lies not in conversation, but in conservation. By replacing the object itself with a symbol, speech extends our ability to enjoy the object, allowing us to enjoy the object not simply in the immediacy of its presence, but in its absence. The symbol allows our experience—our enjoyment—of the object to endure, even after the object has disappeared. Without the symbol, all of the subject's relationships—and every object—can only appear as evanescent. The symbol allows the object to endure over time; it arrests the temporality of the object as it catches the object within a symbolic

web. It gives the object an identity, making it identical with itself, which is the key to perpetuating it. At the same time—because it gives the object subsistence over time—the word allows for a mutuality in relation to the object that remains impossible on the purely imaginary level; the word indicates the existence of a pact, an agreement between subjects. It is on the basis of the recognition of this pact, implicit in every symbol, that a life-and-death struggle is avoided. The symbolic order, which has its basis in prohibition, constitutes a pact of mutuality, which is why prohibition has such importance for any social organization. The social pact attempts to safeguard enjoyment, to ensure that no one will enjoy extravagantly.

From the moment that the symbol arrives, it changes everything in human relations and makes human coexistence possible. The symbol provides the possibility of coexistence because it transforms the subjects it interpellates at the same time that it mediates the relationship between them. In *Seminar I*, Lacan claims, “the symbol introduces a third party, an element of mediation, which brings the two actors into each other’s presence, leads them on to another plane, and changes them” (155). That is to say, the symbolic order adds a distance between subject and object and between subject and subject, eliminating the direct relationship between them that we find in the imaginary. Though we tend to think that we need intimacy or proximity for harmonious intersubjective relations, proximity actually represents a barrier to such relations. This is why, in conversations, we take pains to avoid invading the “personal space” of our interlocutors. We feel uncomfortable, unable to speak, with someone in close proximity directly in front of us. When we are too close, confronted directly with the presence of an other in her/his enjoyment, the enjoyment is suffocating. The symbolic order and the prohibition that constitutes it provide distance from enjoyment, a distance in which it is possible to relate to the other. In the distance that it provides, we can see the importance of prohibition in producing a social order in which subjects can interact smoothly.

One needs some degree of distance, however small, to separate oneself from the Real dimension of the other. The distance created by the symbol, however, has nothing to do with actual distance. The symbolic dimension of human existence allows me to be in the midst of a huge crowd and still feel properly distanced from everyone. Because the symbol has the effect of eliminating enjoyment and carving out a neutral space in which subjects can interact, I do not experience the other’s enjoyment encroaching on me, as I would if I didn’t have an experience of the symbolic pact governing the interaction. Insofar as it eliminates or muffles enjoyment, the symbolic order creates distance. But as the power of the symbolic order in our experience breaks down—as the society of prohibition transforms into the society of enjoyment—this proper distance begins to evaporate. Rather than being able to feel

comfortably alone in a crowd, we feel surrounded and trapped, even with only a few people around. This creates a feeling of claustrophobia, and we seek actual distance from the other in an effort to compensate for this failure of symbolic distance. That is to say, the very desire for more elbow room stems from an inadequate symbolic experience. We think, for instance, that by moving farther and farther from the city we can finally reproduce the distance that the symbolic order provided. Flight to the suburbs has its origin in the turn to a society of enjoyment, a society in which we no longer feel the effects of symbolic mediation. But no distance out on Long Island is ever enough—not because we always encounter other people fleeing along with us, but because no amount of actual distance can provide the breathing space that the tiniest amount of symbolic distance can. The attempted compensation always fails.²⁴

We can see a precursor of this kind of compensation in Henry David Thoreau. Though *Walden* is ostensibly about the importance of self-isolation, Thoreau does give some consideration to intersubjectivity and to the need for distance in making that intersubjectivity possible. Thoreau accurately recognizes that intersubjective intimacy is only possible on the basis of distance: when we are too close, the Real *presence* of the other has a suffocating effect. When we are confronted with presence in this way, we are flooded with enjoyment, threatened with being swallowed up in it. This onslaught of enjoyment is not at all conducive to intersubjectivity, as Thoreau himself points out. We need distance for a conversation with the other to actually take place. However, Thoreau can conceive of distance only as actual physical distance, not as the product of the symbol. Hence, he finds that he can't really converse with another person in his small cabin because the lack of distance is stifling. True intersubjective communication, for Thoreau, requires speaking to his interlocutor across the diameter of Walden Pond. In this image of intersubjectivity, Thoreau attempts to conceive of Walden Pond itself as a kind of pseudo-symbolic order that works to provide distance and mediate the relationship between two subjects. The problem here is that physical distance—even the distance across Walden Pond—is never enough. It can't provide the respite from the other's presence that the symbol can, though we remain convinced—today even more so than in Thoreau's age—that it can. Thus, we try to move farther and farther apart in an effort to gain the respite from the other's enjoyment that only the experience of the symbolic structure could actually provide.²⁵

Actual physical distance fails because the Real, unlike the symbolic order, gives us nowhere to hide. As Lacan claims in *Seminar II*, “only in the dimension of truth [opened up by the symbol] can something be hidden. In the real, the very idea of a hidden place is insane—however deep into the bowels of the earth someone may go bearing something, it isn't hidden there, since if he went there, so can you” (201–22). Lacan's point here is that the symbol creates

the possibility of a secret, of something hidden, which is impossible in the Real itself. The symbolic structure—the order of the signifier—begins with the act of concealment, and this concealment remains essential to its very logic. In *Seminar V*, Lacan uses the example of Robinson Crusoe's encounter with Friday to elucidate this dimension of the signifier. He says, "Friday's footprint that Robinson discovers in the course of his walk on the island is not a signifier. On the other hand, if we suppose that he, Robinson, for some reason or other, erases this mark, there clearly is introduced the dimension of the signifier."²⁶ We introduce the signifier and the symbolic order when we conceal something, and this concealment has clear benefits for the subject.

Life in the symbolic order requires a sacrifice of enjoyment, but in return the symbolic provides a place of respite from the other—a kind of hiding place for the subject. Only the symbolic order allows us to hide, and it does this by replacing the object with a symbol, a symbol whose presence indicates the absence of the object. The symbol introduces absence itself as a presence, proclaiming, in effect, that this word (which is here) conveys this thing (which is not here). And insofar as it does this, it allows us to hide even when we are in the midst of the public eye. With the advent of the symbol, we can put on a public persona that holds something private in reserve, hidden beneath the symbol. In this way, the symbolic order opens us a private space, a respite from its own intrusive operations.²⁷ In the symbolic order, one can, for instance, shave one's head in order to disguise baldness; in other words, even when a subject tells the truth using a symbol, the very use of a symbol suggests that something is concealed, thereby, in effect, hiding the truth that the subject has candidly admitted to. But just as it creates a hiding place where none was before, the introduction of the symbolic order also changes our relationship to objects and to enjoyment.

ABUNDANT RECOMPENSE

In describing the society of prohibition and contrasting it with the society of commanded enjoyment, we must pay attention to the transformation that prohibition effects as it constitutes the symbolic order. In order to safeguard the social order from enjoyment, prohibition replaces our direct relationship to objects with a symbolic relationship. Hence, after the onset of the symbolic order, the importance of objects declines while that of symbols increases. What we do with the symbol of the object becomes far more important than what we do with the object itself—or the former comes to determine the latter. As Lacan says in his first seminar, what we do with the symbol "elephant" ends up determining what will happen to real elephants. In the same way, my name—and what people think of it—becomes far more important to me than

my being—and what is done to it. I would rather endure physical injury than have someone slander my “good name.” I would, for instance, rather be an immobile Christopher Reeve while having his respected name than a healthy O. J. Simpson, whose name has become infamous. The ruin of Simpson’s name has made his life far more unbearable than Reeve’s physical disability has made his. This kind of valuation results from the shift in importance that the symbolic order effects—its instituting the symbol as the indicator of value. Through just this process—and as a part of this transformation—symbolic recognition comes to substitute for enjoyment. Recognition allows us to enjoy in a socially mediated way: we enjoy the recognition that the symbolic order confers on us. Though we can’t attain unlimited enjoyment within the symbolic order, we can obtain recognition, and this substitution helps to facilitate coexistence. Unlike unlimited enjoyment, recognition concerns itself with the Other and doesn’t exclude the possibility of mutuality. Recognition is socially acceptable enjoyment—conserved enjoyment, or enjoyment in its conservative form—precisely because it involves enjoying one’s symbolic status or allowing the symbol to enjoy in one’s stead.

With the onset of the symbol—the inception of the prohibition of enjoyment—recognition gains a paramount importance. Once this occurs, all of the things for which people strive are important not for the immediate enjoyment that they might provide, but for recognition that they can confer upon those who have obtained them. Money is perhaps archetypal in this sense. Its value doesn’t lie so much in the enjoyment that it can purchase as in symbolic recognition it produces. This is why the very wealthy are eager to give some of their money away—to forsake any enjoyment of it—in exchange for having their names associated with what they have funded. As a character in E. L. Doctorow’s novel *Loon Lake* puts it, “wealth is accumulated so that it can be given away thus bringing honor to the giver.”²⁸ Money buys a place of public prominence for one’s name. The great advantage of being wealthy involves garnering the recognition that someone with less money can’t come by. Being wealthy means, ipso facto, that the Other recognizes me and my importance. In American society, cars have historically functioned in precisely the same way. A nice car implies a certain status, that one has obtained a certain degree of recognition within the social order. The things that one does with one’s car—such as having it washed and waxed—suggest that the car’s primary importance rests upon the recognition it can provide rather than in enjoyment. One purchases a luxury car not simply to enjoy the luxury it provides but to be *recognized* as one who can afford such luxury. Owning a luxury car enables a subject to enjoy the recognition that accompanies this ownership rather than to enjoy directly. This distinction is entirely a product of the functioning of the symbolic order. The predominance of recognition over enjoyment within the symbolic order is evinced not only—or even primarily—in

money and consumer culture, but also in every decision to take up a public position within a society: to run for public office, to go to war, or even to become a television celebrity. In all of these efforts to gain recognition, there is the implicit assumption that I will recognize the Other who recognizes me—a potential mutuality. The society of prohibition depends on and constantly reinforces this sense of mutuality through its stress on recognition.

When I seek recognition, I invest myself in what the Other thinks of me, rather than cutting myself off from the Other or trying to destroy the Other. I fantasize about how the Other sees me; I set up the Other as my ego ideal, the point from which I want to be seen. Every seeking after recognition tacitly recognizes the other as well, as Lacan's example in *Seminar III* makes clear: "In saying to someone, *You are my woman*, you are implicitly saying to her, *I am your man*, but you are saying to her first, *You are my woman*, that is, you are establishing her in the position of being recognized by you, by means of which she will be able to recognize you."²⁹ In other words, the effort to gain recognition acknowledges my own dependence on the Other insofar as it is always the Other that does the recognizing. This is what the master discovers, much to his chagrin, in Hegel's master/slave dialectic. By enslaving the slave and establishing himself in the position of the one recognized, the master assumes that she/he thereby frees her/himself from a position of dependence on the other (the slave in this case). However, as Hegel points out, the master soon discovers that the exact opposite is true. As a master, she/he is totally dependent on the slave, because the slave provides the recognition that makes her/him a master; the slave *authorizes* the master's mastery.³⁰ Similarly, the recognition that the wealthy person achieves places her/him in a position of dependence, as far as recognition is concerned, on the poor, or at least on the not-so-wealthy. This kind of dialectical reversal illustrates that recognition, in contrast to enjoyment, is necessarily intersubjective. Like the shared sacrifice of enjoyment, the valuing of recognition in the society of prohibition works to create a social bond among subjects within this society.

The onset of the symbolic order and the recognition it makes possible comes, however, with a rather steep price. It has the effect of alienating the subject from her/himself, introducing negativity and even death. The symbol brings death and alienation into the world because it brings absence—or, more properly, presence in absence. Because the symbol allows us to experience the presence of absence, it allows us also to become conscious of death without actually dying. The symbol thus makes it possible for us to obtain a kind of being-towards-death.³¹ Though the symbol enslaves the subject to death—what Hegel calls the absolute master—at the same time it makes coexistence possible. Hence, it is only on the basis of our relationship to death that we can have a relationship with each other. Without suffering the loss associated with death and its anticipation, we can't relate to the other through

the mediation of the symbol—which is to say, we can't relate to each other at all, except in the form of a violent collision.

In addition to enslaving the subject to death, the introduction of the symbolic order also submits the subject to the sway of what Lacan calls the big Other. The big Other—not one specific other but the generalized and anonymous Other that represents the interests of the social order as a whole—is the source of recognition. When we act in order to obtain recognition, we have the big Other in mind. The ultimate foundation for the big Other is the Law, insofar as all recognition occurs with reference to the Law, and the Law returns us to the prohibition of enjoyment, the point at which we began. The Law of any social order commands a sacrifice of enjoyment, as we have seen, and one gains recognition to the extent that one obeys this Law. Hence, those who receive the most recognition within the social order have made the greatest sacrifice of enjoyment, having traded enjoyment for recognition. In this sense, recognition signifies repression: the more recognition one receives, the more one has given up to repression. We can see a perfect example in the case of Bill Clinton—not, however, as one might expect, in his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, but rather in his relationship with McDonald's hamburgers. As a look at the early years of his presidency reveals, Clinton derives great enjoyment from McDonald's hamburgers. His visits to the fast-food restaurant were famous. However, these visits also had the effect of detracting from his role as a symbolic authority. A president, in order to receive the recognition that his symbolic position commands, must sacrifice such displays of enjoyment, which Clinton did as his time in office progressed. Perhaps Clinton continued to enjoy his favorite food in private; nonetheless, this still represented a repression: he could no longer freely have a McDonald's hamburger whenever the urge came over him. As Clinton shows us, social recognition comes with a heavy price—the sacrifice of an enjoyment that one can experience without consideration of the consequences.³²

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud illustrates this relationship in reference to the trajectory of jokes across class boundaries. Among the lower classes (those who do not receive a great deal of recognition in the social order), the true sexual or smutty nature of jokes can be openly revealed. One can tell a dirty joke in the most direct fashion. As one rises in class status, however, the joke, in order to remain acceptable (and funny!), must undergo more and more deformation and repression, so that its original sexual dimension appears only obliquely or indirectly. In both cases, we enjoy the same thing, but in the latter our path to enjoyment must be more circuitous. As Freud points out, "When we laugh at a refined obscene joke, we are laughing at the same thing that makes a peasant laugh at a coarse piece of smut. In both cases the pleasure springs from the same source. We, however, could never bring ourselves to laugh at the coarse smut; we should feel ashamed or

it would seem to us disgusting. We can only laugh when a joke has come to our help.”³³ Because the upper classes receive more social recognition than the lower classes, they have made more of a sacrifice of enjoyment, and hence cannot publicly experience the joke in its original, smutty form. Respectability—what one does to obtain recognition—involves forgoing enjoyment and living according to the dictates of the Law that commands its sacrifice.

This Law is embodied in the Name of the Father, the name that symbolizes, in Freud’s myth, the murdered primal Father. “The Name of the Father,” according to Lacan, “founds the fact that there is law [. . .] It is, in the interior of the Other, an essential signifier.”³⁴ This name—or primordial signifier—indicates the absence of the unrestrained enjoyment of the primal Father, and it serves to bar anyone entering the symbolic order from enjoyment. On the basis of this evacuation of enjoyment, the symbolic order constitutes itself and thus demands that subjects seek recognition through the Law in lieu of enjoyment outside of it. The Law itself, however, is not entirely free from enjoyment. Enjoyment lives on in the Law in the form of the superego, which is, of course, the Law insofar as the subject has internalized it. Whereas the Law proper—as the Name of the Father—marks the absence or death of the primal Father and his horrific enjoyment, the superego, the internal representative of the Law, is the remnant of this Father that continues to make its presence felt. Overflowing with the primal Father’s enjoyment, the superego, as the underside of the Law, makes evident the obscenity in the Law itself. The obscene superego represents the limit of the society of prohibition; it is the point at which enjoyment infects the prohibition itself. Thus, it should not be at all surprising that it is around the figure of the superego that we can witness the emergence of the society of enjoyment.

THE WILL TO ENJOY

Understanding the role of the superego is one of the keys to analyzing the emergence of the society of enjoyment because the presence of the superego indicates that enjoyment continues to persist in the symbolic order despite the Law’s ban on it. However, when we think of Freud’s account of the superego, this association of the superego with obscene enjoyment appears counterintuitive. As Freud describes it, the superego is the agency of morality rather than enjoyment, the agency that restricts the amoral id. Thus, it seems to police—and not embody—enjoyment. Nonetheless, in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud makes clear the association of the superego with obscene enjoyment, as he notes that “the super-ego is always close to the id and can act as its representative *vis-a-vis* the ego. It reaches deep down into the id and for that reason is farther from consciousness than the ego is.”³⁵ The superego receives its

energy from the id, the seat of the subject's enjoyment, and this provides the superego with its ability to be excessively cruel. Freud adds that this connection between the superego and the id allows the former to be "super-moral and then become as cruel as only the id can be."³⁶ The obscene dimension of the superego manifests itself in the very form that the superego takes—that is, as a relentless injunction that never leaves the subject alone.

The superego always takes the form of an unconditional injunction, and this form completely betrays the enjoyment-free, neutral guise of the Law itself. If the superego had the neutrality of the public Law, it would not endlessly probe every dark corner of the psyche, seeking out the presence of interdicted enjoyment. Despite its moral appearance, the superego, even as Freud conceives it, is an obscene agency. As a pure injunction, the superego is the form of the Law without any content. It thus embodies the cruelest and most destructive aspects of the Law, the violence of its founding gesture. Even though the Law itself adopts a guise of neutrality, it has a pathological, violent genesis. As Walter Benjamin notes, "at the moment of instatement [the Law] does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence but one necessarily and intimately bound to it."³⁷ This link between the Law and violence lives on in the incessant demands that the superego makes on the subject, demands that center around enjoyment.

As we have seen, before the advent of the Law, there is neither enjoyment nor the lack of it. Hence, the introduction of the Law creates the possibility of enjoyment. The Law as such emerges out of a desire for enjoyment, not out of a desire for restraint. But even this very opposition is false. The desire to restrain enjoyment is fundamentally akin to the desire to enjoy. One always derives enjoyment from the act of restraint, as a brief glance at any fundamentalist minister will confirm. In this sense, there is no Law that simply restrains enjoyment. The Law cannot escape the enjoyment that drives it—the enjoyment manifested in the form of the legal imperative—and this aspect of the Law is located in the superego. The superego is the repository for all of the violence and obscenity implicit in the founding gesture of the Law.

As a result, the superego has an ambiguous relation to the Law proper: on the one hand, it supports the Law and encourages obedience, and on the other, it fosters enjoyment, which threatens to undermine the Law. As Lacan says in *Seminar I*, "The super-ego has a relation to the law, and is at the same time a senseless law, going so far as to become a failure to recognize law" (102). The "senselessness" of the superego stems from the enjoyment that it embodies, and this senseless dimension of the Law, while being crucial to the Law sustaining itself, also threatens the destruction of the Law, insofar as the Law is a law of sense that works to make things meaningful. Lacan makes clear the contrast between superego and Law:

The super-ego is at one and the same time the law and its destruction. As such, it is speech itself, the commandment of law, in so far as nothing more than its root remains. The law is entirely reduced to something, which cannot even be expressed, like the *You must*, which is speech deprived of all its meaning. It is in this sense that the super-ego ends up by being identified with only what is most devastating, most fascinating, in the primitive experience of the subject. It ends up being identified with what I call *the ferocious figure*, with the figures which we can link to primitive traumas the child has suffered, whatever these are. (102, Lacan's emphasis)

Whereas the Law provides all sorts of meaningful reasons to obey, the super-ego commands obedience for its own sake, and it is in this pure commandment that the residual enjoyment of the primal Father makes itself felt.

Because the superego is a locus of both Law and enjoyment—two kinds of experience seemingly at odds with each other—we have the ability to enjoy our obedience. It is in this sense that fascism represents the culmination of the logic of the superego. Fascism is not simply a case of mass obedience; on the contrary, its strength resides in its ability to allow those who are doing their duty to—at the same time—enjoy, imagining themselves as the height of transgression. Fascism brings together perfectly the feeling of doing one's duty and the feeling of transgressing moral norms (i.e., enjoying). The increasing predominance of the superego—and its correlate, the emergence of the command to enjoy—produces the terrain on which fascism grows. In fact, the historical burgeoning of fascism and fascistic ideology is unthinkable outside of this emerging reign of the superego.

Thus, we can see that the relationship between the Law and the superego is not only dialectical, but also historical. That is to say, over the course of the twentieth century, the power of the superego has arisen as the power of the public Law has lessened. In one sense, the rise of the superego is the fulfillment of the Law, but in another, it represents the seeming destruction of the Law, the end of its prohibition on enjoyment. Unlike the public Law, which prohibits enjoyment, the superego commands it. According to Lacan, "Nothing forces anyone to enjoy except the superego. The superego is the imperative of jouissance—Enjoy!"³⁸ The rise of the superego and its demand for enjoyment is correlative to the transformation from a society of prohibition to a society of enjoyment.

This transformation, though not tied to the onset of capitalism, is not entirely alien to capitalism's development. Capitalism, in its latest manifestations, has played a crucial role in working to de-emphasize prohibition or Law in the social order. The "commodification of everyday life"—the *sine qua non* of late capitalism—has the effect of, at once, undermining figures of authority and stressing the importance of enjoying oneself. With the proliferation of advertisements (all promising immediate and incredible enjoyment) into even