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Title

Book Review: Pure Excess: Capitalism and the Commodity , by Todd McGowan Pure Excess: Capitalism and the Commodity, by McGowanTodd. Columbia University Press, 2024, 270 pp.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/57q6c237>

Journal

Political Theory

ISSN

0090-5917

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Publication Date

2025

DOI

10.1177/00905917251359302

Peer reviewed

Book Review: *Pure Excess: Capitalism and the Commodity* by Todd McGowan (Columbia University Press, 2024). 270 pages.

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Based on: *Pure Excess: Capitalism and the Commodity* by McGowan, Todd. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. 270 pp.

Todd McGowan's new book explores capitalism as an economic system and a psychic structure of modern life oriented toward pure excess. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist critique, McGowan argues that capitalism distinguishes itself from all previous social formations by elevating useless excess as the source of value. Where traditional societies organized themselves around various conceptions of "the good," capitalism's radical break is to make the production and enjoyment of surplus the organizing principle of social relations. Through analysis of phenomena ranging from product packaging to film and literature, McGowan attempts to show how capitalism systematically disavows the lack that makes excess and enjoyment meaningful.

McGowan's theoretical framework rests on an analysis of the commodity form's psychic work that departs decisively from most attempts to bring Marxism and psychoanalysis into dialogue. He begins with the postulate that uselessness is the source of all value in capitalist economies. He then explores how commodities promise "pure excess"—the fantasy of experiencing surplus without sacrifice, accumulation without loss,

enjoyment without the constitutive lack that structures human desire—at the expense of (and in denial of) human subjectivity, which (following Lacan) he understands in terms of its defining lack. He argues that the promise of pure excess is capitalism's primary ideological mechanism, obscuring the essential relationship between excess and lack that governs all genuine enjoyment.

McGowan goes on to synthesize Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism with Freud's concept of fetishistic disavowal, revealing how capitalism operates through overlapping economic and psychological mechanisms. He contends that commodity fetishism functions through fetishistic disavowal of the universal lack that affects all subjects. This dual process, he argues, conceals both the labor exploitation that brings about economic value and the constitutive lack that enables psychic enjoyment, creating capitalism's characteristic fusion of material and libidinal dynamics. Rather than locating capitalism's politics in class exploitation, he identifies it in the psychological impossibility of delivering the pure excess it promises. This brings about psychic conditions—paranoia, the guilt that comes with debt, disappointment in commodities—that destabilize capitalist subjectivity across class boundaries.

McGowan's analysis of debt aims to illuminate these psychic operations. He argues that superego injunction to "Enjoy!" (as Lacan formulates it) emerges specifically within capitalist modernity, when "enjoyment rather than the good becomes society's organizing principle." This represents what he sees as a fundamental shift from traditional societies that subordinated enjoyment to collective goods toward a social formation that mandates individual pleasure while making it systematically unattainable. In his account, debt

functions as the primary mechanism through which this contradictory imperative operates, creating subjects who are simultaneously commanded to enjoy and prevented from genuine satisfaction through the endless deferral that indebtedness requires.

This framework enables McGowan's reading of contemporary political phenomena, particularly his interpretation of Trump as representing not the id but the superego of American politics. Through Trump's simultaneous demand that subjects enjoy American prosperity and his emphasis on national indebtedness as a failure requiring rectification at any cost, McGowan argues that Trump embodies the superego's characteristic fusion of commanded pleasure and punitive guilt. This analysis aims to reveal how authoritarian figures exploit rather than oppose capitalism's psychological contradictions, channeling the anxiety generated by impossible enjoyment imperatives into reactionary political formations.

McGowan's analysis thus touches on the ongoing debates about the crisis of liberal democracy. Advancing a Lacanian account for the emergence of authoritarianism, he argues that capitalism's structural promise of pure excess inevitably generates paranoid subjectivity because "the market" offers no identifiable agent to blame for subjects' inevitable disappointment, a condition authoritarian movements exploit by setting up an authoritarian figure who identifies the "others" (trading partners, experts) who block subjects' enjoyment. Yet given McGowan's illuminating work elsewhere on racism as a central organizing fantasy in American life, one might expect a more complex account here of how racial and economic fantasies interact in generating authoritarian subjectivity.

McGowan's work speaks to contemporary discussions about post-capitalist futures through his distinction between capitalism and modernity, suggesting possibilities for social organization that maintain modernity's democratic insights while abandoning capitalism's fantasy of limitless accumulation. His positive vision centers on artistic creation as the paradigmatic alternative to capitalist accumulation, a model relevant to current debates about the political potential of aesthetic experience and cultural practice. Where capitalism promises excess through eliminating constraints, art allegedly demonstrates how self-imposed limitations generate creative surplus. The artist's devotion to formal constraints—poetic meter, narrative structure, aesthetic boundaries—produces genuine transcendence through rather than despite limitation. This model suggests broader possibilities for social relations organized around productive constraint rather than limitless expansion, while his conception of democratic equality as shared recognition of constitutive lack offers a perspective that moves beyond purely redistributive frameworks.

Despite its theoretical ambitions, McGowan's analysis suffers from some limitations. First, the argument assumes a reader already conversant with and persuaded by Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. McGowan's central claims about lack, desire, and enjoyment rest on foundations that many readers, including those sympathetic to psychoanalysis and critiques of capitalism, might not be familiar with or accept. By taking these Lacanian premises as given rather than establishing them through explanation or argument, McGowan risks preaching only to the converted. Meanwhile, McGowan leaves untouched the wide literature—including figures like Lee Edelman and José Esteban Muñoz—that has advanced Lacanian thought by revealing and working through its normative assumptions

about embodiment, temporality, and desire. Their work might have helped McGowan develop a more nuanced understanding of how different subjects relate to lack and excess, which he instead treats as universal and floating free of socio-historical context.

The argument is also limited as a work of critical political economy. McGowan's characterization of mainstream economics as focusing on utility as the source of value misrepresents contemporary economic theory, which has largely abandoned the search for a singular "substance" of value. Ironically, identifying his own single, unified source of value in uselessness or excess, McGowan employs a framework more aligned with classical political economy than contemporary critical approaches emphasizing complexity, contingency, and multiplicity. His monistic approach is driven by transposing Lacan's distinction between need and desire into economic terrain, but the distinction between need and excess in that context proves far more vaporous than McGowan's theory demands.

As a result, his interpretations (while often clever) seem forced by the framework rather than emerging from the evidence. Consider his example of dust jackets on collectable copies of hardcover books, which he claims "impede reading but dramatically increase value" precisely because the jacket (an excess) "is a barrier to reading the book. It constantly gets in the way, slips partially off, or rips" (41). A skeptical reader may say that *because* dust jackets are easily damaged or discarded, intact copies are rare and thus more valuable, regardless of any barrier to reading they might create. A compelling competing explanation is not engaged but ignored or maybe even unnoticed. McGowan's framework doesn't encounter the world: it overrides it.

This interpretive problem extends to McGowan's broader selection of examples that are more often amusing or outlandish than convincing, at times suggesting a book more intended to entertain than to inform. Soft drinks that are enjoyable because they are "worse than useless" (rather than for slaking thirst they are engineered to provoke), cookies and mobile phones whose entire value and enjoyment arises from the barrier the packaging creates to using them (but then why would one ever?)—time and again McGowan's examples fail to deliver the argument to even a mild skeptic. Ultimately, the distinction between necessary and excessive consumption appears no more certain than it has for a century, which is to say, not at all. The attributes of most commodities serve multiple functions for different people in different contexts that resist easy categorization as purely useful or wasteful. Now, McGowan might qualify by saying that uselessness is the source of all value *insofar as we are capitalist subjects*. However, the skeptic could then conclude that McGowan inadvertently proves how slightly we are constituted by capitalist logic.

Similar problems appear in his selection of interlocutors and targets. McGowan often takes up critical readings of figures who no longer have significant contemporary relevance, such as Erich Fromm, while neglecting more current theorists, such as the work of Samo Tomšič on the capitalist unconscious. Overall, McGowan's strategy—taking up outdated interlocutors while avoiding contemporary counterarguments, selecting convenient examples while sidestepping challenging ones, and ignoring competing explanations—results in an argument hermetically sealed within a narrow theoretical universe, insulated from genuine engagement with alternative frameworks.

The book's political prescriptions also reveal limitations. McGowan's analysis of aesthetic self-limitation as an alternative to capitalist accumulation is intriguing, but I doubt his assertion that modernist artistic production is outside the capitalist commodity form. As he acknowledges, this prescription raises fundamental questions about the political efficacy of individual aesthetic practices. The move from individual artistic constraint to post-capitalist modernity remains theoretically underdeveloped, leaving readers without clear pathways from critique to practice.

Engaging some of this book's shortcomings, however, alongside his theoretically intriguing distinction between modernity and capitalism, suggests a way forward. McGowan locates modernity's democratic potential in what he terms the "democratizing of excess"—the historical moment when "excess comes down to the level of ordinary people" rather than remaining confined to traditional elites (14). This represents a profound shift from pre-modern social formations where "society aims at the good" and will "confine excess to those in the ruling class or try to eliminate it altogether" (22-23). Modernity's breakthrough lies in revealing that excess "isn't the product of birth or social station but is available to everyone," creating what McGowan calls "the potential democratic distribution of excess" (14).

Yet capitalism betrays this democratic possibility. While "capitalism democratizes excessiveness by allowing everyone to take part in it," McGowan argues that "it can never take this democratizing far enough to become genuinely democratic" (23) even though "there is enough for everyone to be lacking together" (24). This striking formulation suggests equality grounded not in identical material possession but in shared recognition

of the structural conditions—social arrangements that acknowledge rather than disavow the constitutive role of limitation in generating genuine excess—that make enjoyment possible. This democratic vision appears to privilege epistemological transformation—shared acknowledgment of lack's constitutive role—over practices for collective decision-making.

While his emphasis on "everyone" being able to access excess suggests universal inclusion, the practical image he presents of this possibility is profoundly individual and private: "a subject creating a sublime transcendence for itself through the power of aesthetic form," highlighting "the subject's own power" (184). This subject is the artist, who demonstrates how formal constraints—poetic meter, narrative structure, aesthetic boundaries—produce rather than inhibit creative freedom. McGowan turns to the literary achievement of Virginia Woolf as an exemplar of this possibility, both in her novelistic style and in the aesthetic freedom her heroines forge out of bourgeois patriarchal constraint, revealing freedom achieved through rather than against limitation. (One wonders what McGowan makes of interpretations of Woolf's oeuvre as feminist and socialist.) The modernist, he says, "uses the limit of artistic form as the means for the expression of excess. Excess here," unlike its presentation in the commodity form, "is indissociable from the formal constraint that generates lack" (16).

This very image, however, presents what McGowan himself acknowledges is a fundamental problem: "individual anticapitalist living is not really effectively anticapitalist. This project requires an investment in collective struggle" (197). I wager that the democratic promise to be realized here requires taking up exactly the question foreclosed

by McGowan's transposition of Lacan's distinction between need and desire to the terrain of political economy, and engaging the instability and contestability of the boundary between need and excess. The stakes in our collective answer to this question are not in restricting people to what they need, but instead in ensuring that everyone's needs (as we determine them) are met. McGowan's work suggests that democratic excess and enjoyment might be found precisely through the limits we place upon ourselves through our collective engagement in that task.