

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
Faculty of Social Sciences
Johann Skytte Institute of Political Sciences

Jens Jaanimägi

The Formation of Gender and Sexual Identities under Capitalist Realism

Putting Judith Butler and Mark Fisher into Dialogue

Bachelor's thesis

Supervisors: Heiko Pääbo, PhD & Siobhan Kattago, PhD

Tartu, 2024

I hereby declare that I have prepared the paper independently. I have cited all other authors' opinions and data from literary sources and elsewhere.

Word count: 11 418

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Jaanimägi', written in a cursive style.

Jens Jaanimägi, 15th April 2024

Abstract

The present thesis delves into the construction of gender and sexual identities within the framework of capitalist realism. Specifically, it investigates the influence of capitalism on our perceptions of gender and sexual identities, encompassing both self-identification and our recognition of others. Drawing primarily on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Mark Fisher's theory of capitalist realism, the thesis seeks to establish a dialogue between these authors.

By facilitating this dialogue, the thesis aims to bridge the theoretical gap between gender and queer theory and political philosophy. It seeks to enhance the political-philosophical dimension of Butler's theory while exploring the potential for analysing gender identities through Fisher's discourse on capitalist realism. Through this exploration, the thesis intends to illuminate the theoretical intersections between Butler's gender theory and Fisher's theory of capitalist realism, highlighting both areas of agreement and points of contention. Ultimately, it endeavours to achieve a dialectical resolution of these major points of disagreement.

In conclusion, this thesis contends that Fisher's theory of 'Capitalist realism' situates the political phenomenon of capitalism within a psychological context, enabling an exploration of the psychological underpinnings of our prevailing social order. Conversely, Butler places the primarily psychological constructs of gender and sexual identity within a broader socio-political framework. Intersecting the authors' theories allowed for an understanding of how capitalism perpetuates gender inequalities and vice versa.

Introduction and Methodology	3
The Formation of Gender and Sexual Identities	8
Capitalist Realism	13
Putting the Concepts into Dialogue: The Formation of Gender and Sexual Identities under Capitalist Realism	20
Conclusion	30
Bibliography	33

Introduction and Methodology

The thesis in hand examines the formation of gender and sexual identities under the concept of capitalist realism. More precisely, it examines to what extent and how capitalism forms our understanding of gender and sexual identities, relating both to our self-identification and to our identification of and with other subjects. This analysis is primarily based on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Mark Fisher's theory on capitalist realism, which I aim to put into dialogue.

Intersecting analyses of gender and capitalism is essential for various reasons. On one hand, an intersectional analysis of the concepts allows us to understand how capitalism perpetuates gender inequalities and how gender norms perpetuate economic inequalities. As capitalism both creates structural power dynamics and reinforces existing ones, this analysis helps not only to better understand existing social hierarchies with their intersecting root causes but also to challenge existing norms and stereotypes. Highlighting how capitalism influences and is influenced by gender norms allows for broader social and cultural shifts toward social and economic equality while analysing gender and capitalism within an intersectional framework provides a more nuanced understanding of how various forms of oppression intersect and compound, leading to different experiences of inequality.

'Capitalist realism' is a term coined by political and cultural theorist Mark Fisher (2009). It refers to the dominant socio-political framework of analysing capitalism and its effects as a form of social thought. Mark Fisher defines capitalist realism as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher, 2009, 2). Furthermore, he argues that capitalist realism is "like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (Fisher, 2009, 16). As for the concept of formative gender and sexual identities, this thesis draws from Judith Butler's (1990) concept of gender performance, which broadly argues that gender identities are not formed through biological realities but through a dynamic interplay between the subject and society, as the formative force behind sexual and gender identification – both psychological self-identification, as well as societal identification.

The backbone of this critique is Judith Butler's critique of twentieth-century feminism, 'Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity', which in scholarly circles is often regarded as the cornerstone of the third wave of feminism starting in the 1990s. Butler's work, in line with general trends of the third wave, was characterised by a commitment to intersectionality (1990), based on Kimberlé Crenshaw's and Angela Davis' earlier writings, thereby broadening the scope of the feminist movement to include minorities who were considered to be previously suppressed by patriarchal structures. (Crenshaw 1995; Davis 1982). Butler's idea of intersectionality thus allowed for the fusion of feminist theories and queer theory as a new area of socio-philosophical inquiry. Indeed, the intersection of feminism and queer theory is at the centre of Judith Butler's works and is expressed in the central question of *Gender Trouble*: who is the subject of feminism?

Broadly speaking, Butler argues that there is no universal category of women. First of all, identities are always constructed by multiple factors, and secondly, even those factors themselves rely on socially constructed notions of universality without a solid philosophical foundation. Gender, which is considered the central category for defining the subject of feminism, is, as Butler argues, merely constructed in a performative act, in which the subject in an unlimited series of mostly unknown acts, both influenced by their psychology, as well as by broader societal influences, dynamically constructs and maintains a gendered identity for themselves. Butler calls this concept 'gender performativity'. Butler acknowledges the role of societal structures behind the formation of the subject's gender and sexual identities yet offers little analysis of those societal structures, especially regarding the role of political-economical forces. Instead, Butler examines how human life is defined, criticises oppressive gender relations and advocates inclusion. Influenced by Foucault, Butler examines ways in which individuals are complicit in structures of power and state violence (Butler, 2009; Butler, 2010a).

On the other hand, in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Mark Fisher argues that the global capitalist system has changed our imaginative abilities more broadly, as far as how individuals in contemporary society seem unable to imagine social orders outside the governing capitalist systems. (2009). Fisher asserts that because capitalism governs our perceptions of reality and potentiality, it has evolved to become intrinsically linked to our self-identity and identification with other societal elements. He calls this concept of both the discursive and psychological dominance of neoliberal capitalism as 'capitalist realism'. Drawing from several philosophers and

critical theorists reaching back to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Fisher offers an original analysis of the essential role of governing social-economical systems, mainly capitalism, in the formative processes of a subject's identities. Influenced by Margaret Thatcher's economic policies, he argues for the lack of alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, thereby underlining the fundamental power capitalism exercises on our perception.

Considering this, we can analyse the two schools of thought characterised above as essentially parallel but lacking formulated intersections. Whilst Butler's gender and queer theory considers the dimension of state violence in the performative construction of gender, it lacks sufficient analysis of the psychological forces of capitalism (precisely: capitalist realism) that play a large part in the formation of gender identities, especially self-identification. On the other hand, whilst Fisher explores the psychological implications of capitalist realism on our identities and processes of identification in great depth, for example, regarding work, culture, and mental health, he fails to consider how those forces are related to gender identification specifically. Conclusively, I argue that whilst Fisher, with his theory on 'capitalist realism' puts the political concept of capitalism into a psychological framework, allowing us to examine the psychology behind our governing social order, Butler puts the primarily psychological concept of gender and sexual identity into a broader socio-political framework, allowing us to examine the socio-political structures governing both our collective and individual psyches.

Therefore, in this thesis, I aim to put both authors into dialogue to close the theoretical gap between gender theory and political philosophy by strengthening the political-philosophical dimension of Butler's theory, on the one hand, whilst exploring how gender identities could be analysed via Fisher's discourse on capitalist realism. As a result, I will highlight the theoretical connections between Butler's gender theory and Fisher's theory on capitalist realism as one of blindness and insight.

In addition to an introductory chapter in which I explain the aim of the thesis and introduce the methodology, I structure the thesis into three chapters. The first chapter will focus on the concept of gender. Beginning with a brief overview of the conceptual history of feminism and the intellectual discourse leading up to the third wave of feminism, I introduce Butler's theory on gender performativity and intersectionality. In particular, I critically analyse key concepts in their theory related to feminism, intersectionality, and queer theory.

The second chapter will focus on Mark Fisher's concept of capitalist realism. I will explore the formative processes of identity under capitalism, how capitalism governs our perception of identity and the values on which capitalist identity formation is based. (Fisher 2009, 2014). In addition, I will base my analysis on key writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' critique of capitalism with an emphasis on commodity fetishism and bourgeois values (1978).

The third chapter will synthesise the two chapters outlined above, in which I aim to close the theoretical gap between Butler's and Fisher's writings and present my findings as indicated in the research problem. To help this synthesis, I will bring in aspects from other theorists, such as Michel Foucault's historical-materialist analysis of the construction of sex (1984) and Heinz-Jürgen Voß and Alexander-Wolter Salih's historical analysis of the intersection of queer theory and anti-capitalism (2019), which have addressed economic policy and queer theory, without engaging with Fisher's theory of capitalist realism specifically.

Methodologically, the analysis is an ideology critique as outlined in Mats Lindberg's (2017) framework for the qualitative analysis of ideas and ideological content. Lindberg (2017, 97) states in his guide that "the main method of ideology critique is to reveal the 'hidden social function', or the 'real causes', behind the expressed ideas and seemingly natural 'common sense'. This is a method both Judith Butler and Mark Fisher employ in their analysis of gender performativity and capitalist realism, respectively. Both gender and capitalist realism present themselves as commonsensical to us, but in reality, they influence us on individual and societal levels in profound yet often concealed ways. Lindberg (2017, 97) states that the label ideology critique "is borrowed from the Marxist tradition with its specific concept of ideology, a pattern of thought and language use legitimating class power behind a facade of common sense." This definition of ideology seems to correlate with both Mark Fisher's and Judith Butler's understanding of ideology and the role of dominant political thought in society and its role in social construction. As outlined in the introduction, Mark Fisher's analysis of capitalist realism is based precisely on the observation of how the current political system presents itself to us as commonsensical and without any realistically thinkable alternative. Similarly, Butler's theory examines how gender performativity (a major aspect of which is gendered language) forms our perception of gender and sexuality as 'natural facts' of some sort, whilst really they are socially and psychologically constructed categories which lack any broader universality.

According to Lindberg, there are three central patterns of ideology critiques: power-oriented, psychological, and strategic. Broadly, the proposed analysis of this thesis addresses all of those patterns. On the one hand, it analyses the psychological processes behind both the formation of individual gender and sexual identities, as well as the psychological power exerted by capitalism on our sense of reality (capitalist realism). On the other hand, it analyses the political power structures governing the formation of gender and sexual identities, as well as the power structures stemming from hegemonic gender relations. Finally, the thesis is a strategic ideology critique in the sense that it analyses the causes of strategic action hidden from the actors themselves: for example, the individual unknowingly putting up a gender performance according to Butler's theory whilst also having their perception of reality conditioned by capitalist realism according to Fisher's theory.

The concepts of performative gender and sexual identity formation and the concept of capitalist realism will be analysed through the intersectional analytic framework of ideas and ideological content (Crenshaw 1995). An intersectional analytic framework considers different overlapping systems that govern the research object. In the case of the current study on the formation of gender and sexual identities, structures of power such as class, race, ethnicity, and culture will be considered. By intersecting Butler's and Fisher's concepts, I aim to put the two authors into dialogue and form an overarching analytic framework that encompasses both authors' theories by which the relationship between capitalist realism and the formation of gendered identities can be analysed. This framework enables me to answer the central questions of the thesis: 1) does capitalism form our understanding of gender and sexuality; 2) to what extent do capitalist socio-political systems influence the formation of gender and sexual identities; 3) what are the structures within the capitalist system that influence our perception of gender and sexuality; 4) in what specific ways does the capitalist system influence the formation of gender and sexual identities?

The Formation of Gender and Sexual Identities

In this chapter, I will focus on the concept of gender. Beginning with a brief overview of the conceptual history of feminism and the intellectual discourse leading up to the third wave of feminism, I introduce Butler's theory on gender performativity and intersectionality. In particular, I critically analyse key concepts in their theory related to feminism, intersectionality, and queer theory.

In their work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, theorist Judith Butler (2017) analyses what they coin a 'crisis of ontology' (2017, xi) regarding our understanding of sex and gender. Butler argues that whilst the ontology behind our understanding of gender and sexual identities has always stood on shaky legs, to say the least, those issues have become more acute with the spread and acceptance of non-normative sexual practices, such as transgenderism, alternative family models and new forms of sexual self-identification and the language created around those practices (2017, xi-xii).

With *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (2017) laid one of the cornerstones of the school of thought later deemed 'third-wave feminism'. Third-wave feminism is mainly characterised by a new approach to gender issues under the paradigm of 'intersectionality'. Kimberlé Crenshaw originally introduced this term and refers to the idea that subjects possess multiple and overlapping points of identity, wherefore identity-based discrimination needs to be analysed in a multi-layered way, which consequently led to a higher emphasis on a broader array of social justice issues (Evans, 2015, 22). Within the framework of the discourse around identity, Judith Butler, along with others, developed a post-structuralist approach to feminism, which not only accepted the multi-layeredness of identity but problematised the very notion of identity itself (Evans, 2015, 55). Hence, in line with post-structuralist tradition and heavily drawing from Michel Foucault's earlier works, Butler began to question the objectivity of the interpretive structures constituted by our surrounding systems of power. In the *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1984) argues that the architecture of our social institutions discipline, govern and police us – a concept he calls the 'power of discourse'. Influenced by Foucault, Butler (2017, 2-3) asserted that gender can only be understood as a socio-linguistical construction rather than an objective ontological reality.

Furthermore, Butler argues that the way we approach questions of gender and sexual identity has a socio-political dimension. In fact, Butler argues that the term 'woman' itself is a political term (Evans, 2015, 55). They go on to argue that "[u]nder normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality" (Butler, 2017, xii). In other words, the way we approach defining gender and sexuality either upholds or breaks with existing social and political structures and hierarchies. As Butler writes (2017, xii), "Sexual hierarchy produces and consolidates gender." This, though, is where the ontology of gender runs into its first problem, as Butler (2017, xiii) argues. The idea that gender hierarchy produces gender is tautological because the existence of gender presupposes the existence of a gender hierarchy, and a gender hierarchy presupposes the existence of gender itself. Now, we might analyse this phenomenon, instead of a tautology, as a circular debate, which cannot meaningfully establish whether subjects have a particular gender or are of a particular gender. Butler, though, proposes an alternative analysis based on Katherine Frank's legal theories: "The act of harassment may be one in which a person is made into a certain gender" (Butler, 2017, xiii). What this essentially denotes is that the power structures surrounding our conceptions and perceptions surrounding gender impose an external identity upon us. Butler, however, does not entirely subscribe to this analysis. In contrast, Butler argues that gender identity has both internal and external aspects.

This is where Butler's famous theory of gender performativity comes into play. According to Butler, the "internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylisation of the body" (Butler, 2017, xv). In other words, according to Butler, individual gender (and sexual) identities are formed through a dynamic process of both socio-political and psychological aspects. The subject possesses an internal gendered (and sexual) identity, which, through gendered performative acts, it reveals to the society surrounding it. Again, this produces a performative social reaction that exerts influence on the subject's internal identity. For example, if a child is born, society reacts by asserting the child's supposed gender, both through language and action. We might tell the child that "you are a boy" and at the same time raise the child according to our understanding of how 'boys' ought to be raised. Those performative acts are internalised by the child, who consequently will act in ways that society deems to align with the common understanding of the concept of 'boy'.

This dynamic performative relationship between the individual and society, with many performative actions in the realm of the subconscious, affirms and entrenches our governing understanding of

gender. As a result of this argument, Judith Butler rejects Simone de Beauvoir's famous assertion: "One is not born a woman, but becomes it" (Butler, 2017, 11), arguing instead that a gender (and sexual) identity is an unending line of temporally continuous performative acts, in which this sense of identity can only be upheld as long as both the individual, as well as society continue the performance of those gendered acts. In this performative relationship, Butler (1988, 519) argues that the subject is "an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts." In other words, Butler contends that those performative acts are not subjective because the very acts of gender performance constitute who we are and, therefore, subjectivity itself.

By this, Butler somewhat refutes the line of argumentation of existentialist feminists, such as de Beauvoir, who, in line with the central existential doctrine "existence precedes essence", argued that a subject's existence precedes its identity and, therefore, its gender. In contrast, in *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler (1993, 225-226) argues that "social recognition precedes and conditions the formation of the subject". Therefore, according to Butler (1993, 34), society does not recognise a subject but forms it in that gender itself is "constituting the identity it is purported to be". Therefore, there is no identity in the classical meaning of the word. There is no identity behind the concept of performative gender because gender performance constitutes the very identity that it is supposed to be the result of (Butler, 1993, 34).

Moreover, with their queer theory, Judith Butler casts doubt upon the dichotomy between sex and gender. On the one hand, Butler questions whether the materiality of the body is entirely constructed (2017, xvi), whilst, on the other hand, they argue that the concept of performativity can be transposed onto the concept of 'sex' the same way that it is applied to gender. Butler (2017, 9-10) questions whether defining 'sex' as representing an independent ontological reality – a biological fact, is even conceptually possible. The way we apply the concept of sex is essentially just an interpretation of bodily facts through socio-political prisms. A body might have a phenotype, chromosomal or hormonal characteristics or specific physical functions. Still, our interpretation of those bodily facts is as strongly governed by cultural norms as our understanding of gender. Based on this, Butler (1993, 9) argues that the "ostensibly natural facts of sex [are] discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests." Following the conclusion that sex is essentially constructed the same way that gender is constructed, Butler rejects the idea that gender is merely a cultural interpretation of sex because sex, according to the argument outlined above, is itself a gendered category. Therefore, it is impossible to draw a conceptual

distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'; wherefore the dichotomy explained at the beginning of the paragraph can be ruled out (Butler, 2017, 9-10). Butler (2017, xxi) argues that those discourses, either seeking to naturalise gender or juxtaposing a denaturalised concept of gender with a supposedly natural concept of sex, create ideal morphologies for normative violence, as well as discourses naturally presuming heterosexuality.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1984, 266) argues that political systems do not merely govern and represent their subjects but form them. "This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise, and which others have to recognise in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects." (Foucault, 1982, 781). The formation of subjects through systems of power is a central argument of post-structuralist political theory and a starting point for Butler's enquiry on how the identity formation of political subjects shapes systems of societal power and vice versa. This argument is also the basis for Butler's critique of feminist paradigms, in which they pose the central question of who is the subject of feminism – what constitutes the category of "women"- and what is the object of feminist struggles. Foucault's argument outlined above essentially means that subjects (as in their subjective identities) are always formed, defined, and reproduced in line with the social systems they are subjected by.

Drawing from this, Butler argues that it is of central importance to feminist critiques "to understand how the category of "women," the subject of feminism, "is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (Butler, 2017, 4). For 'women' to be the subject of feminism presupposes a fixed conception of what it means to be a woman – a common identity. If there is no way to universally define women, there is no universal basis for feminism. Based on the central post-structuralist idea that social recognition precedes and conditions the formation of the subject, Butler questions whether the category of 'women' pre-exists their oppression or whether the concept of 'women' could solely be defined by their shared experience of oppression, whereby to be a woman would simply mean to be subject to patriarchal oppression. (Butler, 2017, 5-6) Furthermore, in line with Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, Butler argues that 'woman' is by no means an exhaustive category because gender is constructed contextually and intersects with other identity markers, such as race, class, region and others, which makes the problem of political and linguistic representation even more challenging (Butler, 2017, 3). Settling

this ontological discussion is a presupposition for feminist representational politics, according to Butler (2017, 6). The revelation of the true social function behind our seemingly commonsensical understanding of gender ontology allows for a more strategic ideology critique (Lindberg, 2017)

To conclude, this analysis of Judith Butler's theory of gender formation analysed the social construction of the subject through social recognition, the tautology surrounding the dichotomy between concepts of 'sex' and 'gender', systems of power and oppression behind the formation of identities and Butler's concept of identity formation through performativity. As a result, we are faced with the central question of the ontological nature of gender identity.

Capitalist Realism

In this chapter, I will focus on the concept of ‘capitalist realism’. Beginning with an introduction and analysis of the concept as put forward by theorist Mark Fisher, I will then conceptualise this concept with theories by related theorists and philosophers such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Michel Foucault, and Shoshana Zuboff. In particular, I explore the psychological foundations of capitalism, how the capitalist system shapes our understanding of identity, and the power it holds over our self-perception, as well as the way in which we relate to external societal elements.

In his most well-known work, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative*, philosopher and cultural theorist Mark Fisher (2009) introduces a theory based on the concept he names ‘capitalist realism’. Mark Fisher did not invent the term capitalist realism itself but largely repurposes the name of the art movement ‘capitalist realism’ (Fisher, 2009, 16), which arose in the 1960s and was highly critical of what was deemed to be elements of capitalist culture such as consumerism and middle-class values (Lesso, 2019). Furthermore, the term ‘capitalist realism’ is a wordplay on the more widely used term ‘socialist realism’, which was the official cultural doctrine of the Soviet Union, which served as a sort of guideline for the art to be created in alignment with Soviet ideology (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022). However, Mark Fisher’s concept of capitalist realism is not merely an observation or description of arts or culture but a political concept. He argues, “[c]apitalist realism as I understand it cannot be confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is more like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action” (Fisher, 2009, 16).

Mark Fisher begins his argument with the famous (arguably infamous) provocative statement that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher, 2009, 2). Whilst this phrase, which Fisher attributes to Slavoj Žižek and Frederic Jameson, refers on the surface to the crises of capitalism (specifically climate change) and our political inaction regarding those crises, I want to focus on a different aspect of this argument, in particular the reference to our ability to imagine hypotheticals. Fisher argues that capitalist realism is “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher, 2009, 2). Capitalist realism, therefore, describes an

anti-utopian way of thinking. It is a societal discourse that is not based on conscious anti-utopianism but is subconsciously anti-utopian in its very nature.

This is not to argue that anti-capitalist political discourse does not exist today, which would be factually incorrect. Still, the capitalist discourse has absorbed anti-capitalist discourse and conversely made it a certain kind of modern ‘anti-capitalism’ part of capitalist realism’s logical structure. This is through a communicative concept called ‘interpassivity’ (Fisher, 2019, 13), in which a cultural phenomenon acts on behalf of its audience rather than on its audience. Similar to laugh tracks inserted into modern comedies, whereby the movie seems to laugh on behalf of its audience rather than make its audience laugh, capitalism appears to perform anti-capitalism on society’s behalf so that rather than engage in anti-capitalist political discourse or action, society can continue to unconsciously continue its capitalist discourse and mode of action. Drawing from Slavoj Žižek, Fisher argues that a veil of cynicism masks modern capitalist discourse. While political alternatives to capitalism, most notably fascism or Stalinism, seem to present themselves as ideological and propagandistic to us, modern capitalism, through capitalist realism, presents itself as ‘post-ideological’ (Fisher, 2009, 13-14). Through our cynical distance to capitalism, we “blind ourselves to the structural power of ideological fantasy” (Fisher, 2009, 13). In conclusion, Fisher argues that capitalist ideology consists of the overvaluation of belief, which allows for a total yet unconscious disconnection between our subjective attitude towards capitalism and how we act externally.

This argument is especially interesting because Fisher seems to reference and yet conceptually divert from the traditional Marxist concept of ‘commodity fetishism’. Whilst Karl Marx describes the fetishisation of commodities as an almost mythical obscuration of social relations inherent to production, which arise from the abstraction of labour, which occurs when the production of a commodity is filtered through a system of labour division through which the commodity and its producer are disconnected. Through this process, the commodity, which, in essence, is a simple thing, becomes an object of economic value. (Marx, 1978, 298-314). Fisher argues that the relationship between the subject and our concept of monetary value is psychologically more nuanced. Today, we seem to consciously agree that money holds no intrinsic value, yet we continue to act as if money is the most valuable thing in the world. Rather than an obscuration of productive relations, which the subject is incapable of seeing through, our subconscious cynical distance to

capitalism allows us to seamlessly act in contradiction with our conscious beliefs (Fisher, 2009, 13-14).

However, according to Fisher, this sense of cynicism described above is not the only reason for our seeming inability to act at odds with capitalist realism. Another aspect Fisher brings forward is 'reflexive impotence'. Fisher describes this phenomenon as a situation under which people recognise the flawed nature of the capitalist system but, through the perceptive powers of capitalist realism, come to believe that it is impossible to change the broader political situation. Hence, 'reflexive impotence' is a self-fulfilling prophecy because belief in the possibility of political change is also a prerequisite for enacting political change. (Fisher, 2009, 21).

One reason for capitalist realism's ability to absorb anti-capitalist discourse lies not only in the nature of capitalist realism but also in the flawed nature of traditional forms of anti-capitalist critique, which emphasises capitalism's (im-)morality. Whilst these critiques target the content of capitalist ideology, Fisher argues that capitalist realism absorbs them precisely by emphasising their reality (Fisher, 2009, 16). Rather than denying those critiques, capitalism portrays them as inevitable parts of reality, proscribing any argument that counters those realities to the realms of naïve utopianism. The success of capitalist realism depends on its ability to pose itself as natural rather than to question established values, which is how we usually think of ideology. Therefore, according to Fisher, a fundamental critique of capitalist realism cannot be one that appeals to morality but one that challenges the capitalist notion of reality. (Fisher, 2009, 16-17).

Here, Fisher brings in the psychoanalytic distinction between the real and reality. Drawing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Fisher argues that reality is, in essence, ideological. Capitalist realism has a profound impact on our perception. Capitalist realism has warped our perception so that we perceive the capitalist system as an empirical fact or a logical necessity rather than an ideology. According to Lacanian psychology, reality is constructed by the suppression of the real. This aligns with Fisher's concept of capitalist realism, which constructs a notion of reality while suppressing much of what is real, only allowing fragments of which to enter the public consciousness. (Fisher, 2009, 18).

Furthermore, capitalist realism manifests itself through surveillance – more specifically, self-surveillance. In today's world, in which the private sphere has essentially merged with the public

sphere, in which there is no more clear separation between individuals' private and work lives, Fisher observes that a "consequence of this consequence of this 'indefinite' mode of power is that external surveillance is succeeded by internal policing" (Fisher, 2009, 22-23). Whilst Fisher (2009, 23) notes that "control only works if you are complicit with it," it seems that our complicity in capitalist realism's systems of self-surveillance has subsumed almost entirely in the realm of the subconscious.

A similar analysis is presented in the argument of social psychologist Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) famous work, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. Zuboff claims that the digitalisation of capitalism has allowed for "the human experience [to be unilaterally claimed] as free raw material for translation into behavioural data" (Zuboff, 2019, 14). In addition to classical modes of capitalist production, the entirety of human experience can and is now capitalised, with the introduction of sleep trackers allowing even for the exploitation of the unconscious individual. Therefore, we see that self-surveillance has not only become sub-conscious as per Fisher's argument, but also the sub-conscious and unconscious itself is becoming increasingly surveilled.

Fisher adds that one way that capitalist realism increasingly surveils its subjects is by new management structures, which seemingly flatten organisational pyramids". This approach, which is supposed to increase workers' control of their work, conversely leads to "information systems [that] provide a comprehensive picture of the organisation to top managers in ways which give individuals anywhere in the network little room to hide" (Fisher, 2009, 40-42). Fisher notes that auto-surveillance is complemented by external assessment. This assessment essentially seeks to quantify labour outputs which cannot be meaningfully quantified. (Fisher, 2009, 41-43). This leads to an overvaluing of the representation of outputs as compared to actual outputs. Fisher calls this tendency of surveillance capitalism to focus on symbolic achievements over actual output – performance assessment over performance – 'market Stalinism', as similarly to Stalinism, capitalist realism focuses more on symbolic achievements than actual achievement (Fisher, 2009, 41-42). Similarly to Stalinist fetishisation of symbolic development, under modern surveillance capitalism, rather than being a means to measure performance, performance targets become an end to itself (Fisher, 2009, 42).

Fisher argues that this focus on public relations is essential to late capitalist culture, as economic value depends increasingly on beliefs about companies' economic performance rather than on their

actual performance, as exhibited by global stock markets. Fisher frames this phenomenon in his famous conclusion that under capitalist realism, “all that is solid melts into PR” (Fisher, 2009 43). Fisher links this phenomenon to the Lacanian concept of the ‘big other’, which “is the collective fiction, the symbolic structure, presupposed by any social field. The big other can never be encountered in itself; instead, we only ever confront its stand-ins.”. This essentially means that under capitalist realism, we need to construct an impersonal ‘big other’ to stand in for our lack of conscious belief in capitalism. The function of social reality is based on the very discrepancy between officially accepted knowledge (the knowledge of the ‘big other’ or the lack thereof) and public individual knowledge (what we, as subjects, widely accept). (Fisher, 2009, 44). For us to accept social reality, we are bound to the illusionary belief that the ‘big other’ is ignorant towards the shortcomings of the political system. Fisher argues that capitalist realism is characterised by a lack of belief in the collective fiction of the ‘big other’ (Fisher, 2009, 44). “We, the audience, are not subjected to a power that comes from outside; rather, we are integrated into a control circuit that has our desires and preferences as its only mandate” (Fisher, 2009, 47). This means that under capitalist realism, mechanisms of control, rather than being exercised by a ‘big other’, exist in ourselves and are something we actively participate in. Under capitalist realism, there is no longer a need for outside surveillance because it is replaced by the mere ‘introjection’ of surveillance – the internalisation of surveillance mechanisms (Fisher, 2009, 51). “Traditionally, power was what was seen, what was shown, and what was manifested, [...] [d]isciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time, it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility” (Foucault, 1995, 188). This essentially means that whilst in pre-modern times, power depended on the visible display of authority, in modern times, the exercise of power is based on the visibility of the subjects of power. It is precisely this visibility that, according to Foucault, disciplines subjects into subjection. Rather than exerting its power through displays of potency, the capitalist system exerts its power in far more indiscernible and abstruse ways.

For Fisher, coming to terms with capitalist realism means psychologically accepting the incoherencies of capitalism. As reality is no longer “solid and immovable”, under capitalist realism, accepting realism means to “[subordinate] oneself to a reality that is innately plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment” (Fisher, 2009, 53). Fisher claims that “subjective disinvestment” and “cynical compliance” are what enables workers to continue performing labour that is “pointless and demoralising” and that the unbearable reality of capitalist realism leads to us constructing incoherent subjective realities (Fisher, 2009, 53). We are all conscious of the

precarious reality of our world, but notably, instead of invoking political change, we comfort ourselves in our supposed inability to bring about meaningful change. Uncovering the inherent inconsistencies of capitalist realism depends on memory, which is precisely why, according to Fisher, forgetting has become a central adaptive strategy under capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009, 54). Drawing from Wendy Brown, Fisher names this process ‘dreamwork’ because, similar to when we are dreaming, we not only forget but forget that we have forgotten and are therefore able to “confabulate consistency which covers over anomalies and contradictions” (Fisher, 2009, 58). This means that we are retreating into a “solipsistic delusion” of the world we experience (Fisher, 2009, 55), in which morality has been replaced by a sense of shared feeling (Fisher, 2009, 74).

The lack of a sense of responsibility stems from a lack of a sense of central authority. In times of crisis, responsibility is deflected on the individual (Fisher, 2009, 62). Yet when individuals ought to be held accountable, ominous arguments of structure are invoked, posing that the problem is too big and too structural for any individual to be held responsible (Fisher, 2009, 68). Moreover, this contradictory handling of responsibility leads to the dissolution of any political responsibility. According to Fisher, this disavowment of responsibility happens precisely because the lack of any concrete political authority in capitalist realism, where the only things that exert political power are “nebulous, unaccountable [corporate] interests, is radically unthinkable to the political subject” (Fisher, 2009, 63). Such lack of responsibility strengthens capitalist realism as political frustration has nowhere to be directed and can only be a matter of “aggression in a vacuum” (Fisher, 2009, 63-64). Fisher illustrates this with the example of the impending climate catastrophe we face. In saying that everyone is responsible for solving the climate crisis, we are invoking an entirely impersonal structure fundamentally incapable of bearing responsibility, which, in essence, leads to a total deflection thereof (Fisher, 2009, 64).

As a last aspect, I want to mention that even though the concept of capitalist realism is often conflated with neoliberalism, those terms are not synonyms. While, according to Fisher, neoliberalism is inherently capitalist realist, capitalist realism can exist independently of neoliberalism (Fisher, 2009, 78). In its broadest sense, capitalist realism describes the acceptance that there is no credible or coherent alternative to the ruling (capitalist) system. Whilst this understanding has its roots in neoliberalism, we have seen that a crisis of neoliberalism (such as the banking crisis of 2008) does not directly threaten capitalist realism because capitalist realism can endlessly adapt its object to the present without an alternative. Whereas neoliberalism is a type of

capitalism, capitalist realism is a meta-political phenomenon. This ideological framework presents itself most prominently as a limitation of our political imagination and social identities, which, circling back to Linberg's (2017) methodological framework, shows how seemingly commonsensical discourses, in reality, mirror and entrench existing societal power relations and serve clear though often unnoticed social functions.

To conclude, this analysis of Mark Fisher's (2009) theory of capitalist realism analysed how capitalism, rather than merely a system governing economic relations and only influencing our material conditions, is a complex system shaping our identities and our perception of the world around us. This discursive and socio-psychological dominance manifests itself through 'capitalist realism'. Through this socio-political framework, capitalism shapes our imagination of political potential, our understanding of social responsibility and our role within society, our vision of our self-identity and, most notably, constructs and warps our sense of 'reality' itself.

Putting the Concepts into Dialogue: The Formation of Gender and Sexual Identities under Capitalist Realism

This chapter aims to synthesise the concepts of gender formation, sexual identification, and capitalist realism analysed in the previous chapters. Thereby, I strive to close the theoretical gap between Butler's and Fisher's writings and present my findings as indicated in the research problem. To facilitate this synthesis, I will bring in aspects from other theorists, such as Michel Foucault's (1984) historical-materialist analysis of the construction of sex and Heinz-Jürgen Voß and Alexander-Wolter Salih's (2019) historical analysis of the intersection of queer theory and anti-capitalism.

The theories of Judith Butler and Mark Fisher display a combination of insight and blindness. Both authors display deep insight in their analyses of how social and political norms impose limitations on our identities. Yet, both display a certain blindness to specific processes and mechanisms of identity construction. Whilst Butler's gender theory offers enormous insight into the formative processes behind gendered and sexual identity, they fail to acknowledge the comprehensive impact of capitalism on the perception of our identity. On the other hand, whilst Mark Fisher's theory of capitalist realism offers extensive insight into the psychological and perceptive powers of the capitalist system and its implications on both society as well as the individual, he fails to consider the impacts capitalist realism has on the formation of gender and sexual identities.

Although Judith Butler does not mention Mark Fisher directly, this sense of blindness is exemplified in Mark Fisher's mention of Judith Butler in *Capitalist Realism*. In his chapter on responsibility (or the lack thereof) under capitalist realism, Fisher (2009) quotes Judith Butler's (2010a) work titled *Frames of War* and uses their concept of 'responsibilisation' to inquire how the impersonal structure of responsibility under capitalist realism leads to a complete dissolution of any sense of responsibility. He goes on to exemplify this by addressing the problem of climate change, whereby the notion of shared responsibility ("everyone is responsible") has led to a complete relinquishment of responsibility ("no one is responsible"). (Fisher, 2009, 66). Whilst this example is highly relevant to capitalism and climate change, it is quite peculiar that although Fisher mentions Butler, he does not address the core of their entire academic work, which is concentrated on the analysis of gender and sexuality. Given the conceptual, contextual and contentual parallels in both

authors' work, I aim for a dialectical resolution of this blindness, strengthening both authors' arguments and synthesising their critiques of governing socio-political norms.

The first parallel in Fisher's (2009) and Butler's (2017) analyses becomes apparent in the third chapter of *Capitalist Realism*, where Fisher analyses capitalism and 'the real'. Here, Fisher analyses the power that capitalist realism wields on our perception. He bases his analysis on the Lacanian distinction of 'the real' and 'reality'. (Fisher, 2009, 17). Whilst a clear definition of 'the real' is conceptually unattainable, as Jacques Lacan himself defined the real as "impossible", meaning undefinable, broadly speaking, Lacanian analysis holds that human subjectivity is made up of three components: 'the imaginary', 'the symbolic' and 'the real'. In this analytic system, the imaginary represents the signified, whilst the symbolic represents the signifier – in other words, the symbolic refers to things that give meaning, whilst the imaginary refers to the meaning invoked in our mind. The symbolic and the imaginary come together to form 'reality'. Reality, therefore, merely describes the world as it is presented to us. 'The real', on the other hand, precedes the symbolic and the imaginary and is, therefore, an unsymbolisable and unimaginable entity beyond our imagination and comprehension. Thus, as 'the real' represents the unthinkable and reality the thinkable, one could categorise those two concepts as polar opposites. While 'reality' constitutes the world we interact with daily, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, 'the real' can only be encountered whenever it traumatically bursts through the surface of apparent 'reality', which is formed by the very suppression of 'the real'. (Evans, 2006, 84-85; 162-164; 203-204; Lacan, 2016).

Mark Fisher's analysis of capitalist realism holds that capitalism forms our 'reality' in the Lacanian sense. Reality presents capitalism as a fact of nature, with any contradictions to capitalism appearing to us as contradictions to our very sense of reality. (Fisher, 2009, 17-18). This is very much in line with Judith Butler's analysis of gender. Both the dichotomy between 'the imagined' and 'the symbolic' and 'reality' and 'the real' are central to Butler's analysis of gender and sexual identification. Butler also strongly criticises the Lacanian analysis of gender and sexuality (Butler, 2017, 59-77).

On the surface level, it can be argued that Butler's theory of gender performance draws attention to the distinction between Lacanian "reality" and "the real". Butler's assertion that the "internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts posited through the gendered stylisation of the body" (Butler, 2017, xv) can be understood as an analysis in which the sustained

set of acts that manufacture our gender identities corresponds to the Lacanian concept of “reality”. In contrast, the internal essence of gender” corresponds to the Lacanian concept of “the real”, which is mostly suppressed by our socially constructed reality yet ruptures it in traumatic ways (for example, through gendered violence) and can be glimpsed at only in fragments covered by layers of social reality. Yet, Butler also offers a comprehensive critique of Lacanian analyses of gender. Whilst our gender and sexual identities are constructed within the realm of ‘reality’, not the real, the question arises: in which part of reality do we construct gender – in ‘the imaginary’ or ‘the symbolic’? Here, we need to ask whether gender is a signifier or a signified, whether gender gives objects meaning or we impose meaning on gender. Does gender provide meaning to our identities, or do we ascribe meaning to our gendered identities? *Are* we of a particular gender, or do we *have* a particular gender?

Lacanian theorists, including Jacques Lacan himself, have interpreted gender in various ways, using the exact same theory on the formation of human subjectivity as a starting point for their analyses. On one hand, Lacan argues that the phallus is the central object (the signifier) that initiates the formation of gender. Essentially, men *have* a phallus, whilst women *are* the phallus (specifically the lack thereof). According to this analysis, the female gender is the site of heterosexual male desire, through which the male gender comes into being and which enables the male gender to transcend from a state of mere *having* to a state of *being*. (Butler, 2017, 59-62). As the essence of the female gender, therefore, is entirely negative and one of absence, according to Lacanian theory, women have to engage in a conscious process of ‘masquerade’ or the creation of appearance, allowing women to live up to societal expectations while concealing their gender through autonomous desire (Butler, 2017, 71-72). This can very well be understood as the process of gender formation through performativity central to Butler’s theory (Butler, 2017, 64).

Nevertheless, Butler rejects the Lacanian “refusal to postulate femininity that is prior to [...] the masquerade” as heteronormative (Butler, 2017, 72). Butler argues that rather than a specific masquerade of the female gender, all gender is a form of masquerade, which, rather than consciously, is constructed through unconscious or subconscious acts of gender performativity. Butler rejects the notion that gender is an essential quality we *are* or *have*, but rather a continuous performance creating the illusion of a stable and innate quality. (Butler, 2017, 73-75). Furthermore, Butler sees the heterosexism within Lacanian theory as especially problematic when combined with the Lacanian notion of ‘the symbolic’, where, according to Lacanian theory, the subject is formed

and comes into being. In postulating a heterosexist signifier which both governs and constructs gendered subjects, Lacan is essentially postulating a signifier or 'law' which, according to Butler, is impossible to perform and "guarantees the failure of the task it commands", wherefore its purpose can only lie in "obedience and suffering to enforce the subject's sense of limitation before the law" (Butler, 2017, 76-77). Therefore, Butler argues that the Lacanian theory of masquerade must be viewed as a 'slave mentality', which perpetuates a sense of enslavement rather than liberation (Butler, 2017, 77).

Judith Butler's argument intersects with Mark Fisher's analysis of capitalist realism, capitalism, and 'the real'. If capitalist realism corresponds to the Lacanian notion of reality, breaks in the matrix of capitalist realism uncover the oppressive nature of capitalism, constituting the Lacanian 'real'. For Butler, heteronormativity constitutes the Lacanian notion of reality, whilst a fluid understanding of gender performativity corresponds to the Lacanian understanding of 'the real'. Whilst Butler argues that the notion of masquerade, which coerces the subject into building its life around unattainable gender norms, constitutes a form of 'slave mentality', Fisher argues that capitalist realism coerces us to act in discordance with our deeply held beliefs, forcing us into a cynical relationship with the world around us. In this sense, Fisher's analysis holds that capitalist realism, too, is a form of 'slave mentality'. As both capitalist realism and heteronormativity are part of the same entity – Lacanian reality – it can be inferred that those concepts are inherently tied to one another. Both create the matrix of societal perception of reality whilst essentially enslaving its subjects. 'The real', which is constituted by our inner resistance to capitalism in Fisher's theory and the inner essence of our gender identities in Butler's theory, can only be glimpsed at in traumatic fragments whenever it bursts through the matrix of socially constructed reality, which is constituted by the suppression of 'the real'. Both authors suggest that invoking 'the real' is the basis of social change, allowing us to challenge the oppressive systems constituting Lacanian 'reality' – capitalist realism and heteronormativity (Fisher, 2009, 18; Butler, 2017, 76-77). As invoking the real constitutes a break with the entire matrix constructed by 'reality', this suggests that capitalist realism cannot be challenged without challenging heteronormativity and vice versa. This shows how the aspects of power and psychology (Lindberg, 2017, 97) intersect in both the ideological framework of capitalist realism and gender normativity.

A second point of intersection between Fisher's theory of capitalist realism and Butler's theory on gender and sexual identities is the Lacanian concept of the 'big other', which is part of 'the

symbolic' component of reality and designates radical alterity. (Evans, 2006, 135-136) It is a collective fiction that presupposes any social field and can never be encountered in itself but only through its stand-ins (Fisher, 2009, 43). The 'big other' essentially serves to diffuse the contradiction between official knowledge and public individual knowledge caused by capitalist realism. As individuals, many of us are acutely aware of capitalism's problems. Yet, our belief in a 'big other' that is ignorant of those problems allows us to display ignorance towards those very same problems. (Fisher, 2009, 44-47). Butler suggests a similar view of our perception of gender. Whilst as individuals, or even as a collective, we show a particular awareness for the conceptual problems of traditional gender ontology, such as the gender binary, the discrepancy between the big other and public individual knowledge allows for the reproduction of the problematic social reality surrounding gender and sexuality. (Butler, 2017, xii).

Furthermore, invoking the 'big other' serves as a mechanism of control for upholding social reality. Rather than subjecting subjects to external control mechanisms, through the 'big other', we are "integrated into a control circuit that has our desires and preferences as its only mandate" (Fisher, 2009, 47). Fisher calls this phenomenon 'mode of control by feedback', which is essentially just a rephrasing of Butler's notion of 'performativity' – control enacted through social response, which creates a false sense of autonomy for the controlled subject. Rather than being externally surveilled, the surveillance of subjects under capitalist realism is internalised within the subject by the mere introjection of surveillance by the 'big other' (Fisher, 2009, 53). Correspondingly, Butler notes that "under normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality" (Butler, 2017, xii). More than capitalist realism or normative gender identities being simply externally enforced upon subjects, through imposing a vast network of 'social reality', subjects internally police their adherence to societal norms. Hence, both capitalist realism and 'normative heterosexuality' are both part of the same interconnected network of social reality. The analysis of the 'big other' in relation to mechanisms of control for policing, as well as adherence to capitalist modes of action and adherence to gender norms, intersects the aspects of power and strategy of given ideological frameworks.

A third parallel in Butler's and Fisher's theories can be found in Fisher's analysis of 'reflexive impotence'. According to Fisher, although we tend to understand the deeply flawed nature of capitalism, capitalist realism creates a shared understanding of inability to change the current state of affairs. Fisher notes that this is not an objective observation but a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Fisher,

2009, 21). This corresponds to Butler's Foucauldian understanding of gender performance. Butler argues that more than subjection to societal structures, subjects are "by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures" (Butler, 2017, 3). This means that gender is nothing else than a self-fulfilling prophecy, too. Society imposes a gender on a subject, which leads the subject to act in accordance with societal understandings of the gender that was imposed on it. The subject enters a performative relationship with society, in which society imposes certain understandings of gender upon the subject. As Butler argues, the subject internalises those understandings, acts in accordance with them, and thereby entrenches governing understandings of gender. Society, therefore, does not recognise subjects' identities but constitutes the very identities that the subject is purported to be. (Butler, 2017, xv; Butler, 1993, 34).

The notion of 'reflexive impotence' in resisting capitalist realism broadly corresponds to Butler's understanding of gender hierarchy. Whilst arguing that "sexual hierarchy produces and consolidates gender" (Butler, 2017, xiii), Butler states that this supposed hierarchy is tautological. Gender is a prerequisite for gender hierarchy, yet gender hierarchy produces gender. (Butler, 2017, xiii-xiv). This tautology might be analytically problematic, yet it serves to uphold systems of gender hierarchy and gendered oppression. Butler quotes Catherine MacKinnon: "To have a gender means to have entered already into a heterosexual relationship of subordination" (Butler, 2017, xiii). This essentially denotes that subjects are trapped in this tautological circular debate, utterly unable to break out of it. Society imposes a gendered identity on the subject through pre-existing systems of gender hierarchy and thereby traps it within that same system of hierarchy and oppression. Just as many of us are acutely aware of the problematic societal power relations that our understandings of gender are founded upon, and we seem to broadly acknowledge the problems of gender hierarchy and oppression, so the tautological ontology of gender leaves little room for imagining a system free from those problems because the basis for analysing and combatting gender hierarchies is produced by the very same hierarchy it seeks to confront.

Just as Fisher argues that the ability to envision a political alternative is the precondition for enacting political change – the ability to imagine a world beyond capitalism is required for building a world beyond capitalism (Fisher, 2009, 21), so Butler argues that as long as gender – the subject of emancipatory politics – is "produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought," political emancipation remains impossible (Butler, 2017, 4). This

again does not only demonstrates how capitalist realism and gender oppression do not only function in analogous ways but also suggests that the concepts are inherently linked. Not only are both tautological discourses creating a self-fulfilling prophecy resulting in oppression, but both are actually different sides to the very same tautological discourse. As Heinz-Jürgen Voß (2019, 105-106) notes, recent advancements in the liberalisation of attitudes towards seemingly subversive gender and sexual identities under capitalism are somewhat illusionary. Capitalism is still inherently linked to its power hierarchies, including systems of gendered oppression, yet “the rationale of current flexibilisation and individualisation of gender and sexual identities” serves the capitalist functionalisation of its subjects (Voß, 2019, 106). Rather than freeing ourselves from our ‘reflexive impotence’, the tautological discourse described above has integrated a greater plurality of gender identities that is nonetheless formed by the very same tautological discourse. This, too, exemplifies the inherent link of strategy and power in the construction of the ideological frameworks of gender and capitalist realism: self-reproducing systems of political power render strategic action impossible, whilst the impossibility of strategic action itself becomes a form of political power.

This leads us to the fourth intersection between Fisher’s and Butler’s theories. Fisher argues that a trait inherent to capitalist realism is its ability to seamlessly absorb anti-capitalist discourse into its own ideological framework. This is through a phenomenon he calls ‘interpassivity’. Under capitalist realism, the communicative forces behind contemporary culture work in ways that allow the capitalist system to perform anti-capitalism on society’s behalf. This creates a cynical disconnection between a subject’s beliefs and actions. (Fisher, 2009, 13-14). Judith Butler has explicitly made a similar warning. For example, when she refused an award for civil courage by the organisers of Berlin Pride, she warned that social movements aiming to subvert gendered oppression run the risk of being absorbed by the same institutions that are responsible for violence: “We have seen that [...] queer people can be used by those waging wars” (Butler, 2010). This sort of interpassivity is best exemplified by the phenomena of ‘rainbow capitalism’ or ‘pink capitalism’ (the commodification of subversive gender and sexual identities) in which both interpassivity regarding capitalism and interpassivity regarding gendered oppression intersect. Salih Alexander Wolter (2019, 34) notes how the once subversive movement for gay liberation has turned into nothing more than a niche of the capitalist market, whilst Heinz-Jürgen Voß (2019, 106-107) argues that the commodification of sexuality “means that capitalist relations always encompass areas of human life as commodities” and are thereby able to absorb any potentially subversive force. This final example combines all three elements of ideology: power, psychology and strategy. Through the absorption of

psychological elements of anti-capitalism and subversive gender identities into capitalist realism and heteronormativity, respectively, those ideological frameworks have strategically broadened their scopes of power into an almost all-encompassing matrix.

Finally, I would like to contrast Fisher's and Butler's understandings of ontology, specifically ontological fluidity. On a surface level, Fisher seems to contradict Butler's view of social ontology in problematising what he deems the fluidity of capitalist realist ontology. Fisher notes that whilst 'being realistic' ought to mean "coming to terms with a reality experienced as solid and immovable", being realistic under conditions of capitalist realism means subordinating oneself to a reality that is "infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment" (Fisher, 2009, 53). The fact that under capitalist realism, "space and psyches alike can be processed and remade at will" leads to a situation of 'ontological precarity' (Fisher, 2009, 53-56). As we seek comfort in our presumed inability to change the socio-political state of affairs, we retreat into a "solipsistic delusion" and use forgetting as an adaptive strategy to "confabulate consistency" within the capitalist realist system and blind ourselves to its "anomalies and contradictions" (Fisher, 2009, 54-58).

This is especially interesting, as the notion of 'precarity' is central to Butler's (2004) works, exemplified in their work *Prearious Life*. Conversely, for Butler, it is the rigidity of the frame of social reality that creates precarity. Forgetting plays a significant role in their theory; however, according to Butler, precarity originates from forgetting those who fall outside of the rigid and narrow frames of social reality. "Precarity also characterises that politically induced condition of maximised precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection" (Butler, 2009, 26). For Butler, it seems, a weakening of the frames of social reality allows for inclusion (Butler, 2009, 75-76).

Whilst for Butler, precarity is a result of ontological rigidity, for Fisher, it is a consequence of ontological uncertainty. For Fisher, capitalist realism's ability to distort our perception and twist the frames of reality in order to uphold the capitalist system with all its contradictions leads to a state of uncertainty. It is this sense of total uncertainty that creates immense suffering for the individual. As Mark Fisher (2014, 59) states in *Ghosts of My Life*, we have created an unbearable political reality so littered with incoherencies that "appealing to any particular instance seems superfluous". It is

precisely this sense of ontological uncertainty that forces us into solipsistic delusions that are often deemed depression. Fisher argues that a retreat into solipsism is the main characteristic of depression. The depressed subject flees from a world of ontological uncertainty, walls itself off from the incoherent external world, and withdraws into its “frozen inner life”. “There is nothing except the inside, but the inside is empty” (Fisher, 2014, 59).

Therefore, depression, according to Fisher, rather than being a mental state experienced by an individual, is more of an ontological response to socio-political uncertainty. “Depression is, after all and above all, a theory about the world, about life” (Fisher, 2014, 59). Fisher’s notion of the “frozen inner life” makes clear that the precarity of the subject’s ontological situation itself is rigid. It might be that this sense of precarious rigidity is a response to uncertainty, yet here, Fisher displays a sense of blindness towards the rigid nature of precarity itself.

Whilst in all arguments analysed in this chapter, Butler and Fisher argue in eminently parallel ways, this is where the authors radically contradict each other. In this dispute, I would like to side with Judith Butler and show how an elaboration of Fisher’s original argument allows us to dialectically resolve this dispute. Whilst Fisher’s analysis of capitalist realism’s ontology is not wrong, it is incomplete. Whilst capitalist realism indeed displays a remarkable ability to reconfigure its ideological content, not only is its result ontological rigidity, as argued before, but as a framework, in its entirety, it too is fairly rigid. It thrives on the very ontological condition that Judith Butler criticises – exclusion and displacement. Capitalist realism might be able to ostensibly shift its ideological contents in order to conceal its inherent contradictions. Still, as Fisher has noted throughout his work, there is no real change of the rigid framework itself. Capitalist realism might shift in ways that allow it to absorb identities previously deemed subversive (such as those of gender and sexual minorities), yet this by no means weakens the rigid frames of capitalist realism itself. Therefore, I argue that it is not the ontological uncertainty of capitalist realism that produces precarity but the ontological rigidity of the capitalist realist framework on a meta-political level, which leads to political uncertainty on a micro-political level. Under capitalist realism, the future is always overshadowed by a looming sense of uncertainty, yet under capitalist realism, nothing is as rigidly certain as the continuation of the capitalist system.

Now, it is true that Fisher (2009, 71) seems to be convinced that this framework cannot be reformed and must be overthrown entirely, whilst Butler (2009, 26-30) appears to believe in the possibility of

reform, they meet in the starting point and conclusion of their respective inquiries into the possibility of social change. Whilst Judith Butler starts her analysis by questioning who is the subject of emancipatory politics (Butler, 2017, 6), Fisher ends his work by noting that “this is a struggle that can be won – but only if a new political subject coalesces” (Fisher, 2009, 79).

Conclusion

The thesis in hand sought to analyse the intersections between the formation of gender and sexual identities and capitalist realism. To answer the question of how capitalist realism forms gender and sexual identities, I focused on Judith Butler's (2017) theory on gender formation and Mark Fisher's (2009) theory on capitalist realism. To answer the questions outlined above, I intersected the theories of both authors, aiming for a dialectical resolution.

Through an ideology critique, I sought to analyse and reveal the power of 'hidden social structures' behind the matrix of our supposed social reality. Mats Lindberg's (2017, 97) framework for ideology critiques holds three central patterns of ideology critiques: power-oriented, psychological, and strategic. The thesis examined all three patterns in the theories of both primary authors.

For the aspect of power, I analysed the structures of political and social power, including institutional power, as well as coercion and violence, governing the formation of gender and sexual identities, as per Judith Butler's theory. I analysed how systems of social power construct gender and sexuality through performativity, how the tautological ontology of gender hierarchy upholds systems of gendered oppression, how social recognition governs identity formation, and how the false dichotomy between 'gender' and 'sex' serves political and social interests. As for Mark Fisher's theory on capitalist realism, I analysed how the general overvaluation of belief, 'interpassivity', 'reflexive impotence', and auto-surveillance serve to uphold societal power structures.

Regarding the psychological aspect of ideology, for Butler's theory, I examined the role of subjects' inner psychological identity in the formation of their social identity and vice versa, the formation of inner psychological identities through external actions and the relationship between social recognition and self-identification. As for Fisher's theory, I analysed capitalist realism's influence on our perceptive abilities and our imagination, the disconnection between belief and action, ideological cynicism, beliefs of political impotence, the internalisation of surveillance mechanisms, the deconstruction of 'reality' under capitalist realism and collective fiction.

As for the strategic aspect of ideology, I sought to analyse the causes of strategic action hidden from the actors themselves: the subject unknowingly acting in compliance and sub-consciously upholding the norms of gendered and capitalist hegemony while having its identity and perception conditioned by the tautological nature of gender hierarchy and the automorphic system of capitalist realism.

After analysing both authors individually, I aimed to put their theories into dialogue, seeking a dialectical resolution, allowing me to answer the main questions posed in the introduction. Thereby, I sought to close the theoretical gap between the authors and overcome the sense of blindness they display towards one another while combining their enormous insight into hidden socio-political structures. Intersecting the theories uncovered four notable parallels between Judith Butler's theory on the formation of gender and sexual identities and Mark Fisher's theory on capitalist realism. The main points of intersection were the following:

- Based on Lacanian analysis, both authors draw a strong distinction between notions of 'social reality' and 'the real', out of which both seem to conclude that governing 'reality' coerces the subject into a state of subjugation.
- Based on the Lacanian concept of the 'big Other', both authors seek to uncover some sense of collective fiction. In Butler's case, those are fictitious notions of fixed gender and sex; for Fisher, it is the fictitious postulation of an external subject responsible for incoherencies within capitalism. Both authors argue how collective fiction upholds social reality.
- Both authors liken our notion of social reality to a self-fulfilling prophecy. For Fisher, 'reflexive impotence' under capitalist realism takes our ability to imagine and thereby enact political change, while for Butler, the tautological ontological relationship between gender and gender hierarchy upholds systems of gendered oppression.
- Both authors display concern that governing discourses seem to absorb all sorts of subversive discourses. For Fisher, through 'interpassivity', capitalist realism performs anti-capitalism on our behalf, thereby absorbing anti-capitalist discourse. In contrast, for Butler and other queer theorists, the commodification of sexuality has absorbed and functionalised subversive gender and sexual identities.

Finally, I brought out an apparent point of dissent between the authors: the ontological nature of reality leading to precarity. Whilst for Butler, precarity is a result of ontological rigidity, Fisher's precarity is derived from ontological uncertainty. Yet, by further developing and elaborating

Fisher's argument, I aimed to dialectically resolve the contradiction between the theories by showing that under Fisher's theory of capitalist realism as well ontological rigidity can be seen as both the source and result of precarity: firstly, Fisher's notion of solipsistic delusion and retreat into a "frozen inner life" constitutes a rigid nature of ontology, secondly, while retreating into solipsistic delusion seems to be a response to ontological uncertainty, this uncertainty is superficial – whilst the ontology of capitalist realism allows for ostensible shifts within the contents of its framework, the ontological framework of capitalist realism itself remains rigid.

Bibliography

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. 2022 Socialist Realism. In: *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/art/Socialist-Realism> (accessed March 11 2024).

Butler, Judith. 2017 (1990). *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Oxon: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 2010a. *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.

Butler, Judith. 2010b. Judith Butler über ihre Gründe für die Ablehnung des Zivilcouragepreises. <https://web.archive.org/web/20131003094426/http://www.l-talk.de/gesellschaften/judith-butler-csd-nicht-antirassistisch-genug.html> (accessed March 20, 2024)

Butler, Judith. 2009 (2004). *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

Butler, Judith 1993. *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. London, New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 1988. Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. In: *Theatre Journal* 40 (4). 519-531.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1995 (1991). *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color*. New York: The New Press.

Davis, Angela. 1982 (1981). *Rassismus und Sexismus. Schwarze Frauen und Klassenkampf in den USA*. West-Berlin: Verlag Elefanten Press.

Engels, Friedrich. 1978 (1884). The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. Tucker, Robert. (ed.). *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 734-760.

Evans, Dylan. 2006 (1996). *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London, New York: Routledge.

Evans, Elizabeth. 2015. *The Politics of Third Wave Feminism. Neoliberalism, Intersectionality, and the State in Britain and the US*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

Fisher, Mark. 2014. *Ghosts of my Life*. Winchester: Zero Books.

Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1995 (1975). *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House.

Foucault, Michel. 1984 (1978). The History of Sexuality. Volume II. Rabinow, Paul. (ed.). *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1982. The Subject and Power. *In: Critical Inquiry* 8 (4). 777-795.

Lacan, Jacques. 2016 (1976). *Seminar XIII. The Sinthome*. Miller, Jacques-Alain. (ed.) Cambridge: Polity.

Lesso, Rosie. 2019. Capitalist Realism Movement Overview and Analysis. The Art Story. <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/capitalist-realism/> (accessed March 11, 2024)

Lindberg, Mats. 2017. Qualitative Analysis of Ideas and Ideological Content. Boreus, Kristina & Bergstrom, Goran. (ed.) *Analyzing Text and Discourse*. London: Sage.

Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich. 1978 (1871). Manifesto of the Communist Party. Tucker, Robert. (ed.). *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 469-401.

Marx, Karl. 1978 (1871). Capital, Volume One. Tucker, Robert. (ed.). *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 294-439.

Voß, Heinz-Jürgen & Salih, Alexander Wolter. 2019. *Queer und (Anti-)Kapitalismus*. Stuttgart: Schmetterling Verlag.

Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs.

Royalty-Free License for Reproduction and Publication of the Thesis

Hereby I, Jens Jaanimägi (national identification number: 50306160015), grant the University of Tartu a royalty-free license for my thesis, *The Formation of Gender and Sexual Identities under Capitalist Realism*, supervised by Heiko Pääbo, PhD and Siobhan Kattago, PhD for the purpose of preservation, reproduction and providing access to the public, including for the purpose of inclusion in the digital archive in DSpace until the expiration of the copyright terms.

I confirm that the author also preserves the rights mentioned earlier.

I confirm that granting the aforementioned royalty-free license does not violate the intellectual property rights of other persons or their privacy rights, as defined in the Personal Data Protection Act.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jens Jaanimägi', written in a cursive style.

Jens Jaanimägi, 15th April 2024