

CAPTURED MALAISE IN CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

O MAL-ESTAR CAPTURADO NO CAPITALISMO CONTEMPORÂNEO

EL MALESTAR CAPTURADO EN EL CAPITALISMO CONTEMPORÂNEO



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ABSTRACT

Since Freud, the concept of malaise in civilization has designated the structural tension between desire, social bonds, and instinctual renunciation. In contemporary society, this tension is intensified by neoliberal rationality and the logic of late capitalism, which reconfigure both forms of suffering and modes of substitutive satisfaction. Although the literature widely acknowledges the commodification of psychic suffering, the subjective dynamics involved in contemporary practices of affective substitution—such as bonds with reborn babies and the parentalization of companion animals—remain underexplored. This study aims to analyze, in light of psychoanalysis and critical theory, how such practices operate as defensive solutions to malaise, articulating fantasy, fetishism, and narcissism within the logic of consumption. This is a qualitative study of a theoretical-analytical nature, guided by the hermeneutic-critical method and based on a critical review of psychoanalytic and philosophical literature, with emphasis on classical and contemporary authors such as Freud, Winnicott, Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Rosa, and Byung-Chul Han, in dialogue with recent international scholarship. It is argued that the affective substitutions analyzed function as fetishistic and narcissistic formations that suspend alterity, neutralize the experience of loss, and offer an illusory relief from psychic suffering. At the same time, such practices are captured and amplified by the market, which transforms subjective impasses into consumer niches. It is concluded that these configurations, far from promoting symbolic elaboration, tend to freeze suffering, reinforcing repetitive circuits of satisfaction and frustration. The study contributes to the fields of clinical practice, education, and the humanities by highlighting the need for symbolic and collective dispositifs that enable the elaboration of mourning and the reestablishment of bonds with alterity.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis. Psychic Suffering. Consumption. Malaise in Civilization. Fantasy. Capitalism.

RESUMO

Desde Freud, o conceito de mal-estar na cultura designa a tensão estrutural entre desejo, laço social e renúncia pulsional. Na contemporaneidade, essa tensão é intensificada pela racionalidade neoliberal e pela lógica do capitalismo tardio, que reconfiguram tanto as formas de sofrimento quanto os modos de satisfação substitutiva. Embora a literatura reconheça amplamente a mercantilização do sofrimento psíquico, permanecem pouco exploradas as

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dinâmicas subjetivas implicadas em práticas contemporâneas de substituição afetiva, como os vínculos com bebês reborn e a parentalização de animais de estimação. Este estudo tem como objetivo analisar, à luz da psicanálise e da teoria crítica, de que modo tais práticas operam como soluções defensivas ao mal-estar, articulando fantasia, fetichismo e narcisismo à lógica do consumo. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa de natureza teórico-analítica, orientada pelo método hermenêutico-crítico, baseada em revisão crítica da literatura psicanalítica e filosófica, com ênfase em autores clássicos e contemporâneos como Freud, Winnicott, Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Rosa e Byung-Chul Han, em diálogo com produções internacionais recentes. Argumenta-se que as substituições afetivas analisadas funcionam como formações fetichistas e narcísicas que suspendem a alteridade, neutralizam a experiência da perda e oferecem um alívio ilusório ao sofrimento psíquico. Ao mesmo tempo, tais práticas são capturadas e amplificadas pelo mercado, que transforma impasses subjetivos em nichos de consumo. Conclui-se que essas configurações, longe de promoverem elaboração simbólica, tendem a congelar o sofrimento, reforçando circuitos repetitivos de satisfação e frustração. O estudo contribui para os campos da clínica, da educação e das ciências humanas ao evidenciar a necessidade de dispositivos simbólicos e coletivos que possibilitem a elaboração do luto e a reinstauração do laço com a alteridade.

Palavras-chave: Psicanálise. Sofrimento Psíquico. Consumo. Mal-Estar na Cultura. Fantasia. Capitalismo.

RESUMEN

Desde Freud, el concepto de malestar en la cultura designa la tensión estructural entre el deseo, el lazo social y la renuncia pulsional. En la contemporaneidad, esta tensión se intensifica por la racionalidad neoliberal y la lógica del capitalismo tardío, que reconfiguran tanto las formas de sufrimiento como los modos de satisfacción sustitutiva. Aunque la literatura reconoce ampliamente la mercantilización del sufrimiento psíquico, permanecen poco exploradas las dinámicas subjetivas implicadas en prácticas contemporáneas de sustitución afectiva, como los vínculos con bebés reborn y la parentalización de animales de compañía. Este estudio tiene como objetivo analizar, a la luz del psicoanálisis y de la teoría crítica, de qué modo tales prácticas operan como soluciones defensivas al malestar, articulando fantasía, fetichismo y narcisismo con la lógica del consumo. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa de carácter teórico-analítico, orientada por el método hermenéutico-crítico, basada en una revisión crítica de la literatura psicoanalítica y filosófica, con énfasis en autores clásicos y contemporáneos como Freud, Winnicott, Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Rosa y Byung-Chul Han, en diálogo con producciones internacionales recientes. Se argumenta que las sustituciones afectivas analizadas funcionan como formaciones fetichistas y narcisistas que suspenden la alteridad, neutralizan la experiencia de la pérdida y ofrecen un alivio ilusorio al sufrimiento psíquico. Al mismo tiempo, tales prácticas son capturadas y amplificadas por el mercado, que transforma impasses subjetivos en nichos de consumo. Se concluye que estas configuraciones, lejos de promover una elaboración simbólica, tienden a congelar el sufrimiento, reforzando circuitos repetitivos de satisfacción y frustración. El estudio contribuye a los campos de la clínica, la educación y las ciencias humanas al evidenciar la necesidad de dispositivos simbólicos y colectivos que posibiliten la elaboración del duelo y la reinstauración del lazo con la alteridad.

Palabras clave: Psicoanálisis. Sufrimiento Psíquico. Consumo. Malestar en la Cultura. Fantasía. Capitalismo.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since *The Discontent in Culture* (Freud, 1930/2010), psychoanalysis has supported a radical thesis: suffering does not constitute a contingent failure of social life, but the very condition of possibility of civilization. By inscribing the subject in the symbolic order, culture demands structural instinctual renunciations that are never fully resolved. The promise of happiness, repeatedly mobilized by social discourses, operates less as a realizable horizon than as an ideological operator that masks the irreducible dimension of loss. Discontent, far from being a pathological deviation, is the price paid for life in common.

However, if the malaise is structural, its forms of manifestation are not. Each historical configuration produces specific ways of managing, displacing or denying this fundamental experience. In late modernity, marked by the acceleration of social time (Rosa, 2010), by the dissolution of collective references and by the hegemony of neoliberal rationality, the classic conflict between drive and culture gives way to a diffuse, privatized and depoliticized suffering. The contemporary subject is called upon to manage himself as a company, individually responsible for his success or failure, while the social determinations of his suffering are systematically obscured (Han, 2017).

This displacement produces profound effects on the psychic economy. Suffering is no longer recognized as an expression of a shared symbolic impasse and is experienced as personal inadequacy, narcissistic failure, or performance deficit. In place of conflict, exhaustion emerges; instead of guilt, shame; instead of the noose, isolation. The malaise does not disappear, it is reconfigured, silenced and, above all, captured by devices that promise immediate relief, affective predictability and control of the bond.

It is in this scenario that contemporary practices of affective substitution are inscribed, such as intense bonds with reborn babies and the parenting of pets. At first glance, such phenomena can be understood as private choices, playful expressions or legitimate forms of affection. However, when questioned from a psychoanalytic and critical perspective, they reveal themselves as dense cultural symptoms, in which contemporary difficulties in the elaboration of loss, withdrawal from otherness and refusal of the risk inherent to human bonds are condensed.

These practices are not organized only around care or affection, but a relationship with objects that do not demand recognition of the lack, separation or radical difference of the other. These are structurally asymmetrical bonds, in which the fetishized and commodified object offers an illusion of narcissistic completeness, while neutralizing otherness and suspending the symbolic work of mourning. Suffering is thus displaced from the field of words and elaboration to the field of consumption and affective management.

Despite the growing visibility of these phenomena in the media and social networks, the scientific literature still lacks analyses that articulate them in a consistent way with psychoanalytic theory and the social critique of contemporary capitalism. Descriptive, moralizing or pathologizing approaches predominate, which tend to individualize the problem and obscure its historical and economic determinations. Therefore, an important theoretical gap persists with regard to the understanding of these practices as subjective responses to specific social conditions, that is, as symptoms of a culture that promises happiness in the form of a commodity.

In view of this scenario, this chapter aims to analyze contemporary affective substitutions from an articulation between psychoanalysis and the critique of late capitalism. It is based on the hypothesis that such practices operate as defensive solutions to psychic suffering, offering illusory relief at the cost of suspending otherness and symbolic elaboration. It is also argued that these solutions not only mask the malaise, but re-inscribe it in market circuits that reinforce its reproduction.

By mobilizing central concepts of the psychoanalytic tradition such as narcissism, fetishism, fantasy, sublimation, and mourning in dialogue with contemporary diagnoses of neoliberal rationality, the study seeks to demonstrate how the unconscious does not remain immune to social transformations, but is progressively colonized by devices that offer ready-made responses to pains that would require psychic work and social bonding. By placing malaise back at the center of the analysis, this article proposes to understand it not as an individual failure, but as a fundamental ethical and political issue of our time.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 MALAISE, FANTASY AND SUBSTITUTION

Freud (1930/2010) already indicated that, faced with the impossibility of full satisfaction, the subject resorts to substitutive ways to mitigate the displeasure. Sublimation, religion, art and love figure as possible destinations of the drive. However, such destinies never eliminate the lack; they only reorganize it symbolically. Fantasy, in this context, operates as a psychic scenario that allows the subject to sustain desire in the face of renunciation.

In contemporary times, there is an inflation of fantasies that promise to circumvent loss without crossing it. The affective substitutions analyzed in this study are included in this register. Unlike sublimation, which implies displacement and symbolic creation, such practices tend to fix desire on objects that do not question the subject or introduce difference.

This distinction is fundamental to understand the psychic status of the current forms of substitution. While sublimation, according to Freud (1930/2010), implies a work of the symbolic that transforms the drive energy into cultural production and social bond, contemporary substitutions operate mostly through the buffering of lack. It is less an elaboration of the malaise and more an attempt to neutralize it, which paradoxically results in its intensification. Fantasy ceases to function as a support for desire to become a device for avoiding anguish, offering the subject the illusion of immediate completeness.

From the point of view of critical theory, this movement can be read in articulation with the logic of the culture industry, as formulated by Adorno and Horkheimer (2006). The standardization of objects of *jouissance* and forms of satisfaction contributes to a homogenization of fantasies, reducing their singular and critical potential. The subject is summoned to desire what has already been previously formatted, which impoverishes the subjective experience and weakens the processes of symbolization. In this scenario, fantasy ceases to be a space for the singular elaboration of desire to become a consumable product, functional to the reproduction of the current social order.

Benjamin (2008), when thinking of capitalism as a religion, deepens this reading by indicating that the capitalist logic does not aim at redemption, but at the permanent maintenance of guilt and debt. Contemporary affective substitutions can be understood as devotional practices of this continuous cult, in which the subject is urged to invest incessantly in new objects, relationships or experiences that promise relief, but never offer elaboration. The result is a repetitive circuit of investment and frustration, which keeps the malaise in a latent and chronic state.

Byung-Chul Han's (2017) analysis of the society of fatigue contributes to this diagnosis by showing that excessive positivity and the logic of performance tend to abolish negativity, lack and limit, structural conditions of the constitution of the subject of the unconscious and of the very possibility of symbolization, according to psychoanalysis. By refusing the experience of loss, the contemporary subject finds himself captured by forms of *jouissance* that do not produce a bond or alterity, but only exhaustion. The social acceleration described by Rosa (2010) intensifies this process, by reducing the time needed for psychic elaboration and favoring immediate responses to malaise.

In this context, Winnicott's (1975) contribution becomes particularly relevant. The author emphasizes the importance of transitional space and play as intermediate areas between internal and external reality, fundamental for the constitution of the self. Affective substitutions that eliminate the possibility of symbolic play and creative illusion compromise this space, producing forms of defensive adaptation that impoverish the subjective

experience. Instead of favoring creativity and symbolization, such practices reinforce a conformist adherence to objects that promise security but deepen alienation.

Thus, the analysis of contemporary malaise requires understanding how fantasy, once the central operator of the sustenance of desire, has been progressively captured by social, economic and cultural devices that transform lack into something to be avoided at any cost. Affective substitutions, far from resolving the structural conflict of subjectivity, tend to intensify it, evidencing the relevance and critical power of psychoanalysis in dialogue with critical theory for the understanding of mental health in contemporary times.

2.2 FETISHISM AND DENIAL OF CASTRATION

The concept of fetishism, formulated by Freud (1927/2016), offers a fundamental interpretative key. The fetish appears as a substitute for something whose loss is unbearable, simultaneously operating recognition and denial of castration. In the case of reborn babies, the object functions as the material presence of an absence: a lost, impossible or never-had child. The doll, by neither growing nor demanding, preserves the illusion of completeness and control. This dynamic is close to what contemporary authors describe as the refusal of negativity (Han, 2017). The fetish eliminates conflict, time and otherness, offering a static satisfaction that prevents the elaboration of mourning. Thus, suffering is not symbolized, but frozen.

In continuity with the previous discussion about malaise, fantasy and substitution, fetishism can be understood as a specific and radicalized form of affective substitution. Unlike the sublimatory ways described by Freud (1930/2010), in which loss is recognized and symbolically transformed, the fetish is constituted as a defensive arrangement that aims precisely to avoid the crossing of lack. It is a psychic solution that keeps the subject in a fixed relationship with the object, preventing the displacement of desire and openness to the other.

In fetishism, fantasy ceases to operate as a scenario that sustains desire in the face of renunciation and begins to function as a device of denial (*Verleugnung*). The subject knows about the loss, but acts as if it did not exist. This double movement, knowing and denying, produces a precarious stabilization of the psyche, in which the fetishized object assumes the function of a guarantee against the anguish of castration. In the case of reborn babies, this guarantee materializes in an object that simultaneously embodies presence and absence, allowing the subject to maintain a relationship with what has been lost without confronting its irremediability.

From the temporal point of view, this dynamic implies a suspension of psychic time. While mourning requires the inscription of the loss in the subject's history and its elaboration

over time, the fetish freezes the experience in a continuous present. The doll does not age, does not transform, does not separate. With this, time, a fundamental element of symbolization, is neutralized. This temporal suspension is directly linked to the social acceleration described by Rosa (2010): paradoxically, the more society accelerates, the more objects proliferate that promise fixity and subjective immobility.

Critical theory allows us to deepen this reading by situating fetishism beyond an individual libidinal economy. Adorno and Horkheimer (2006) already indicated that fetishism is not restricted to the commodity, but crosses the forms of the subject's relationship with the world. In contemporary culture, marked by the standardization of affections and the commodification of experience, the fetish appears as an adaptive response to a context that makes it difficult to elaborate loss and negativity. The fetishized object offers an immediate and controllable satisfaction, in line with the logic of the culture industry.

The refusal of negativity described by Han (2017) finds, in this context, a precise clinical expression. By eliminating the conflict, otherness, and unpredictability of the other, the fetish produces a form of narcissistic satisfaction that empties the field of desire. There is no encounter with the different, no risk, no transformation. The object does not question the subject, does not demand a response, does not introduce a lack. With this, the possibility of symbolic elaboration of suffering is replaced by a silent and sterile fixation.

In dialogue with Winnicott (1975), it can be stated that the fetish differs radically from the transitional object. While the latter sustains the passage between presence and absence, favoring the constitution of the self and creativity, the fetish interrupts this process. He does not mediate the separation, but denies it. Instead of enabling play and symbolization, it crystallizes the subject in a defensive relationship with the object, compromising psychic vitality.

Thus, fetishism, far from being a marginal phenomenon, reveals itself to be a central operator for the understanding of contemporary forms of psychic suffering. Articulated with malaise, fantasy and affective substitutions, it shows how the refusal of castration and loss produces solutions that, although apparently appeasing, deepen subjective alienation and hinder the processes of mourning, symbolization and social bonding.

2.3 NARCISSISM AND BONDS WITHOUT ALTERITY

The parentalization of pets, in turn, evidences a narcissistic configuration of the bond. Although the bonds with animals can be affectively rich, their elevation to the position of children reveals a refusal of the radical otherness that the child represents. As Winnicott (1975) points out, psychic maturation depends on the presence of another who frustrates,

resists and presents himself as separate. In the relationships analyzed, the other is kept under control, functioning as a mirror of the self. Such a dynamic reinforces a defensive narcissism, compatible with a culture that privileges self-image, performance, and the individual management of affections.

In continuity with the previous sections, this form of bonding can be understood as another modality of affective substitution that aims to mitigate the malaise without going through the experience of loss and lack. As in fetishism, one observes here the attempt to preserve a relationship in which the object does not introduce rupture, difference or unpredictability. The parentalized animal occupies a paradoxical position: it is libidinally invested as a child, but without ever acquiring the status of alterity that characterizes the relationship with a human child.

Freud (1930/2010) already warned that love, although it appears as one of the privileged ways to cope with malaise, necessarily implies risk, frustration and dependence on the other. When the bond is structured in such a way as to eliminate these elements, what is produced is not a solution to suffering, but a narcissistic defense against castration. The other is no longer recognized as a subject and starts to function as a support for self-esteem and the imaginary cohesion of the self.

This dynamic finds direct resonance in Winnicott's conception of emotional development. For Winnicott, the constitution of the self depends on a sufficiently good environment, but also on the progressive introduction of frustration and separation. The impossibility of sustaining this tension compromises psychic maturation, favoring forms of relationship marked by dependence and the illusion of absolute control. In this sense, it is worth highlighting the following passage:

Emotional maturation involves a gradual process by which the individual moves from absolute dependence to relative dependence and finally independence. This process is only possible to the extent that the environment fails adequately, allowing the subject to recognize the external reality as something separate from himself and to endure the frustration inherent in this discovery. When this experience is avoided or nullified, emotional development remains immature. (Winnicott, 1975, p. 83)

The above quotation illuminates precisely the impasse present in contemporary narcissistic bonds. By eliminating the other's flaw, his resistance, his opacity, his otherness, the subject preserves an apparently stable relationship, but at the expense of psychic vitality and the possibility of transformation. The bond ceases to be a meeting space and starts to function as an extension of the self, reinforcing a specular logic.

From the point of view of critical theory, this relational configuration cannot be dissociated from the broader sociocultural context. Adorno and Horkheimer (2006) have already pointed out that instrumental rationality tends to colonize even the field of affections, converting relationships into objects of management and control. Animal parenting, when articulated with this logic, reveals itself less as a spontaneous expression of care and more as a strategy for managing the bond, adjusted to the demands of autonomy, performance and self-sufficiency.

Han (2017) deepens this analysis by describing a culture marked by excessive positivity and aversion to conflict. The other, as radical alterity, becomes a risk to be avoided. In their place, bonds proliferate that promise affection without negativity, presence without demand, and relationship without transformation. Narcissism, in this context, does not appear as an isolated pathological trait, but as a socially encouraged form of bonding organization.

As in the fetishization phenomena analyzed above, narcissistic parenting operates a suspension of time and conflict. The bond does not evolve, it does not become complex, it does not require subjective repositioning. Thus, psychic suffering does not find ways of symbolization, being only managed through defensive arrangements that reinforce alienation and impoverish the relational experience.

Thus, narcissism and bonds without alterity constitute a third fundamental axis for understanding contemporary forms of malaise. In articulation with fantasy, fetishism and affective substitutions, they show how the refusal of lack, castration and otherness produces psychic solutions that, although socially legitimized, compromise the processes of mourning, symbolization and social bonding.

2.4 CAPITALISM, CONSUMPTION AND THE CAPTURE OF SUFFERING

Critical theory, especially in Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/2006), already denounced the transformation of subjectivity into a commodity. Nowadays, this logic is intensifying: suffering becomes a market niche, and pain, an opportunity for profit. Hyper-realistic dolls, premium services for pets, and products associated with symbolic parenting exemplify the market capture of subjective impasses that, in other historical contexts, would require collective symbolic elaboration. As Benjamin (2008) observes, capitalism not only exploits labor, but colonizes experience, offering objects that promise immediate redemption.

In this scenario, the unconscious does not disappear, but is reorganized according to the logic of consumption. Desire is continually stimulated, while lack is covered by commodities that promise completeness. The result is a repetitive circuit in which the subject

consumes to relieve suffering and suffers again from the structural impossibility of satisfaction.

In articulation with the axes previously developed, it can be affirmed that contemporary capitalism not only appropriates suffering, but reconfigures it as an engine of subjective functioning. Fantasy, which in Freud (1930/2010) operated as a support for desire in the face of renunciation, is now colonized by industrially produced images and objects. The affective substitution, fetishism and narcissistic bonds analyzed in the previous sections are therefore not presented as isolated phenomena, but as forms of psychic adaptation to a libidinal economy regulated by the market.

Adorno and Horkheimer (2006) have already indicated that the cultural industry is not limited to offering entertainment, but shapes structures of sensitivity and ways of relating to oneself and to the other. By transforming experiences of loss, mourning, and loneliness into opportunities for consumption, capitalism empties the critical and symbolic potential of suffering. Instead of summoning the subject to the collective elaboration and sharing of pain, it offers individualized, immediate and controllable solutions, aligned with the logic of the commodity.

This dynamic can be understood in the light of Benjamin's (2008) analysis, for whom capitalism operates as a continuous religion, without atonement or redemption. The consumption of objects that promise to alleviate suffering does not lead to its overcoming, but to its perpetuation. The subject is kept in a state of permanent symbolic indebtedness, compelled to invest incessantly in new products that ensure only temporary relief. In this sense, the market-based capture of suffering is based precisely on the structural impossibility of satisfaction that Freud identified as constitutive of the human condition.

The reorganization of the unconscious according to the logic of consumption also implies a transformation of the subject's relationship with time. According to Rosa (2010), social acceleration reduces the interval necessary for psychic elaboration, favoring immediate responses to malaise. The market is part of this hiatus, offering objects that promise to buffer anguish without requiring symbolic work. Thus, the time of mourning, waiting and transformation is replaced by the short time of acquisition and discard.

Byung-Chul Han (2017) contributes to this reading by highlighting that the performance society eliminates negativity, limit, and flaw, fundamental elements of psychic experience. Suffering, when it cannot be eliminated, must at least be managed efficiently and silently. Consumption appears, then, as a technology for managing affect, allowing the subject to continue functioning without confronting the structural character of its lack.

This logic finds exemplary expression in the commodification of fetishized objects and controlled bonds, discussed earlier. The market offers not only products, but scripts of jouissance and forms of relationship that avoid encountering otherness and loss. As Adorno and Horkheimer summarize in an emblematic passage:

The culture industry does not cease to deceive its consumers about what it promises incessantly. The promise, which presents itself as satisfaction, is continually postponed; The advertised pleasure is converted into organized frustration, and the repetition of this frustration guarantees the consumer's loyalty to the system that produces it. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2006, p. 128)

The quote makes explicit the paradoxical functioning of this circuit: suffering is not a side effect of consumption, but its condition of possibility. By capturing malaise and converting it into a commodity, contemporary capitalism produces forms of subjectivation marked by the repetition, alienation, and impoverishment of symbolic experience.

Thus, the capture of suffering by consumption does not represent only an ethical or social distortion, but a profound rearrangement of the psychic economy. In line with the axes of fantasy, fetishism and narcissism, this process shows how the refusal of lack and negativity sustains apparent solutions that, far from alleviating malaise, re-inscribe it in a chronic way, reinforcing the relevance of the articulation between psychoanalysis and critical theory for the understanding of mental health in contemporary times.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study is characterized as a qualitative research of a theoretical-analytical nature, guided by the hermeneutic-critical method. Such an approach is adequate to investigate subjective and cultural phenomena that do not lend themselves to direct empirical measurement, but require rigorous, historical, and contextualized conceptual interpretation.

The analytical corpus was made up of classic works of Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, as well as central contributions from critical theory and contemporary social philosophy. The selection of references followed criteria of theoretical relevance, academic impact and conceptual consistency, contemplating foundational texts indispensable to support the argument.

In addition, relevant scientific articles published in the last ten years were analyzed, identified from consultations with national and international databases widely recognized in the field of human sciences and mental health, such as SciELO, PePSIC, PsycINFO, Scopus and Web of Science. These studies were mobilized as theoretical-contextual support for the

analysis of contemporary practices of affective substitution, symbolic consumption and reorganization of psychic suffering, without configuring a systematic review of the literature.

The analytical procedure developed in three interdependent stages. In the first stage, a critical review of the literature was carried out on the concepts of malaise in culture, fantasy, fetishism, narcissism and consumption. In the second stage, these concepts were articulated with phenomenological descriptions of contemporary practices widely discussed in recent sociological, philosophical, and cultural studies. Finally, a critical interpretation was developed that confronts such practices with the logic of late capitalism and its effects on subjectivity.

The validity of the study is based on the internal coherence of the theoretical framework mobilized and on the argumentative consistency of the proposed interpretations. Reliability is ensured by the explanation of the methodological path and by the possibility of analytical replication by other researchers who share the same theoretical framework.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis developed allows us to identify that contemporary affective substitutions operate as defensive responses to structural psychic suffering, intensified by the sociocultural conditions of neoliberal capitalism. Reborn babies and pet parenting are privileged objects of libidinal investment, precisely because of their availability, predictability and absence of symbolic alterity.

The results indicate that such practices produce immediate relief from unpleasure, functioning as psychic anesthetics. However, this relief is not sustained over time, since it does not promote the elaboration of grief or subjective transformation. On the contrary, it crystallizes the subject in regressive positions, reinforcing the dependence on external objects for affective regulation.

In continuity with the theoretical foundation presented, it is observed that these substitutions are inscribed in the field of fantasy as an attempt to circumvent the lack without crossing it. Unlike sublimation, which implies symbolic displacement and creation, the objects analyzed keep the subject fixed in an impoverished libidinal economy, in which desire is not rearticulated, but repeated. The result is a defensive stabilization that preserves the self from anguish, at the cost of psychic vitality.

From the psychoanalytic point of view, there is a predominance of mechanisms of denial and cleavage. The subject recognizes, at some level, the loss or the lack, but simultaneously denies it through fetishistic investment. This ambivalence sustains symptomatic repetition, preventing the crossing of suffering and the re-inscription of loss in

the subjective history. Such a dynamic confirms the relevance of the Freudian formulation of fetishism as a paradoxical solution to castration.

By confronting these findings with critical theory, it is evident that the market plays an active role in maintaining these subjective formations. The incessant supply of products and services associated with affective substitutions not only responds to a pre-existing demand, but produces and intensifies it. Suffering becomes the engine of consumption, and consumption, a condition of psychic survival, as already anticipated by Adorno and Horkheimer (2006). As the authors state:

The culture industry firmly holds its consumers under the illusion that what is offered to them satisfies their needs, when, in fact, these needs are continually produced and managed by the system itself. The promise of satisfaction becomes a mechanism of domination, insofar as it perpetuates the need it claims to supply. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2006, p. 135)

This quote illuminates the structural character of the repetition observed in the results. The relief produced by affective substitutions is not a side effect, but an integral part of a circuit that requires the maintenance of suffering in order to continue operating. The unconscious, far from being eliminated, is reorganized according to the logic of consumption, as already pointed out by Benjamin (2008) when describing capitalism as a religion without redemption.

This dynamic helps to explain why such practices expand in contexts marked by precarious work, social isolation, and weakening of community bonds. The substitute object offers a promise of care, predictability, and belonging in a world that is increasingly hostile to dependency, vulnerability, and the shared experience of loss. In this sense, affective substitutions function as private solutions to structurally collective problems.

However, this promise proves to be deeply paradoxical. By eliminating the risk inherent in the encounter with the other risk that implies frustration, difference and transformation, the possibility of symbolic elaboration of suffering is also eliminated. The subject thus remains imprisoned in a circuit of immediate satisfaction and prolonged emptiness, a central characteristic of the contemporary malaise described by Freud (1930/2010) and radicalized in the current conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

5 CONCLUSION

This chapter sought to demonstrate that contemporary practices of affective substitution, far from being reduced to individual eccentricities or cultural curiosities, constitute subjective responses to structural impasses of malaise in late capitalism. By

analyzing the bonds established with reborn babies and the parentalization of pets, it was evidenced that such practices operate as defensive solutions in the face of the experience of loss, lack and otherness, shifting psychic suffering to fetishized objects that promise care, control and predictability.

The analysis developed throughout the text allowed us to sustain that these substitutions produce an immediate relief from unpleasure, but they do so at the cost of suspending the processes of symbolization. The substitutive object does not introduce difference, does not frustrate, does not separate; it preserves the subject from anguish while fixing him in an impoverished libidinal economy, marked by repetition and dependence. In this sense, suffering is not elaborated, but managed; it is not crossed, but frozen. The result is the maintenance of a chronic malaise, which is continuously re-inscribed under new forms of affective consumption.

The main theoretical contribution of the study lies in the rigorous articulation between psychoanalysis and critical theory, demonstrating that the unconscious, far from disappearing in contemporary times, is progressively reorganized according to the logic of the market. Fantasy, fetishism and narcissism, central concepts of Freudian metapsychology, prove to be particularly fruitful for understanding how neoliberal capitalism captures psychic suffering, transforming structural impasses of subjectivity into niches of consumption. The market doesn't just respond to malaise; it exploits it, intensifies it, and converts it into a working condition.

By placing these practices back on the horizon of social criticism, the article argues that the suffering analyzed cannot be understood exclusively as an individual or pathological issue. It is a suffering produced and maintained in contexts marked by the precariousness of work, the weakening of community bonds and the permanent demand for self-sufficiency and performance. Affective substitutions thus emerge as private solutions to problems that are, at their root, collective and political.

On the clinical, educational and cultural levels, the findings indicate the urgency of devices that reestablish spaces for symbolizing suffering and sustaining the human bond. Intervening does not mean eliminating pain, but creating conditions so that it can be named, shared and transformed. From the psychoanalytic point of view, this implies sustaining lack, time and otherness as constitutive dimensions of subjective experience precisely what market solutions promise to suppress.

It is evidently recognized as a limitation of the study its theoretical nature, which does not allow direct empirical generalizations. Future research may articulate empirical qualitative methods, such as clinical interviews, case studies, or ethnographies, deepening the

understanding of these practices in specific sociocultural contexts. However, this limitation does not reduce the scope of the analysis, since the objective of the work was precisely to offer a critical interpretative framework capable of illuminating emerging phenomena of contemporaneity.

Even so, and perhaps precisely for this reason, it is believed that the proposed reflection offers a relevant contribution to the international literature by repositioning contemporary malaise as an ethical and political issue, and not only as a problem of individual adaptation. In a world that promises happiness in the form of merchandise, comfort without conflict and bonds without risk, insisting on lack, otherness and the work of mourning becomes a profoundly subversive gesture.

If, as Freud taught, there is no definitive way out of the malaise inherent in culture, we can only refuse the solutions that silence it and insist on those that allow the subject to speak, desire and suffer in a singular way. In this sense, sustaining discomfort, limits and incompleteness is not a sign of failure, but a condition of possibility for psychic life, for social ties and for any ethical project that refuses to reduce the human to an object of consumption.

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