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# **UNIVERSALITY AND COMMUNIST STRATEGY; ŽIŽEK AND THE DISAVOWED FOUNDATIONS OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM**

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# Abstract

Using global poverty as its central reference point, this thesis seeks to consider the political applications of Slavoj Žižek's work. Regarded as one of the most significant contemporary continental philosophers, Žižek is also one of the most controversial. Whilst Žižek's Hegelian-inspired reading of Lacan and Marx provides an influential reading of social life, and in particular global capitalism, his political interventions have not been so readily embraced. Arguing that his emphasis upon the essential fixity of capitalism and the need for radical change prevents the identification of any subtle forms of political action, critics have suggested that Žižek's political interventions are misguided, or conservative, despite his radical pretensions. In spite of this rejection, the thesis comes to align itself with Žižek's politics. Considering the applications of Žižek's work to the pressing demands of global poverty, I suggest that whilst his theory does not provide any practical alternative to capital, its value lies in a strategic form of politics which attempts to open up space for political action by evoking the symptoms of capital. It is in this positioning of Žižek's work in regards to practical political issues, that the most original, and valuable, element of this thesis resides. Situating Žižek's work within the Marxism tradition, the thesis begins by documenting the contemporary limitations of Marxist politics, particularly in relation to the discursive turn. Moving to a consideration of the way in which Lacanian psychoanalysis has been deployed to rehabilitate the political efficacy of Marxism, I suggest that Lacanian theory provides neither a normative basis for Marxist politics, nor a form of political organisation in itself. Nonetheless, through Žižek's reading, Lacanian theory provides a powerful political response to global capitalism which has, in Žižek's terms, 'hegemonised the place of hegemony'. This value lies not in the production of a radical alternative to capitalism but, rather, the strategic utilisation of 'surplus labour' – best embodied by 'practicing concrete universality' – to dislocate the place of capitalism such that new space for rethinking the political and production emerge. Moreover, Žižek's politics are not reduced to a negative strategic approach but have been supplemented by a utopian 'communist hypothesis' that potentially reshapes considerations of Žižek's politics today.

# Acknowledgements

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<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Surplus Labour .....	7
Politics and the Political .....	15
Returning to Marxism.....	17
Being Slavoj Žižek .....	25
The Shape of Things to Come.....	28
<b>2. MARXISM AFTER THE SIGNIFIER .....</b>	<b>32</b>
Positive Marxism .....	34
Ontology and the Discursive Turn .....	40
The Postmodern Break .....	43
Postmodernism and Marxism.....	45
(Post)Marxism, Laclau and the Shrinking Hegemony of Socialist Strategy .....	50
Psycho-Marxism .....	59
<b>3. THE BODY OF THE DISCURSIVE TURN.....</b>	<b>67</b>
Symbolic Castration, or, the Materiality of Language .....	71
The Lack of the Real .....	73
The Real between Discourses.....	77
The Presence of the Real: On the Condition of Exceptionality .....	80
Žižek, Hegel and Universality.....	82
<i>Jouissance</i> .....	88

<i>Objet a</i> and the contingent essentialism of desire .....	94
Desire and Ideological Fantasy .....	96
What can Surplus- <i>jouissance</i> teach us about Surplus- value? .....	99
<b>4. THE GOOD LACAN? .....</b>	<b>104</b>
The Good as a Bodily Function .....	107
Capitalism and the Enjoyment Society .....	112
The Ethics of Psychoanalysis – From Desire.....	116
...to drive.....	119
...to the sinthome .....	122
Driving Together?.....	127
Returning to Kant.....	130
<b>5. IS THERE A LACANIAN READING OF POLITICS? .....</b>	<b>135</b>
From Ethics to Politics .....	139
Stavrakakis and Radical Democracy – A trans-fantasmatic politics? .....	142
Against the Democratic Hypothesis .....	148
The Politics of the Political.....	149
What is the Truth of Žižek? .....	154
<b>6. ŽIŽEK ON THE ECONOMY .....</b>	<b>165</b>
Žižek and the deadlock of capitalism.....	167
Žižek and the Impossibility of Class Struggle .....	172
Rethinking Class as Surplus-Labour .....	181
Including the Multitude? .....	187
Surplus Labour Beyond the Feminine Multitude .....	199

<b>7. ŽIŽEK'S REALPOLITICS .....</b>	<b>204</b>
<b>Historicising Anti-Capitalism .....</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>Surplus Labour and Class Struggle .....</b>	<b>208</b>
<b>Strategies of the Real and the Lacanian Dialectic.....</b>	<b>213</b>
The Act.....	214
Subtractive Politics.....	221
Practicing Concrete Universality.....	230
 <b>8. THE COMMUNIST HYPOTHESIS: IMPOSSIBLE UTOPIA OR UTOPIAN IMPOSSIBILITY? .....</b>	 <b>237</b>
<b>The Communist Hypothesis.....</b>	<b>241</b>
<b>Utopia: Demand the Impossible! .....</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>Contemporary Utopian desires.....</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>The Utopian Impossibility .....</b>	<b>249</b>
 <b>9. CONCLUSION .....</b>	 <b>258</b>
<b>The Theoretical Problematic .....</b>	<b>261</b>
<b>The Consequences of Žižekian Politics Today .....</b>	<b>265</b>
<b>Future Possibilities .....</b>	<b>267</b>
 <b>REFERENCES.....</b>	 <b>271</b>





# Introduction

‘The 21<sup>st</sup> Century will overturn many of our basic assumptions about economic life’

This opening statement by Jeffery Sachs in his seminal text, *Common Wealth* (2008), unwittingly reveals far more than he desires. Intending to argue that a number of alterations are required in order to make the global economy sustainable, Sachs symptomatically announces that in order to produce a truly globally sustainable economy, global capitalism cannot continue. The logical consequence of both Sachs’ work and the contradictions of global capitalism are such that anything less than radical political change will produce an environmental and political catastrophe. Either way, our assumptions about economic life will certainly be over-turned, but not in the manner that Sachs intends. Amongst the economic ‘assumptions’ that Sachs believes will be evoked in this century are the end of American hegemony, the emergence of new technologies and an end to the notion of competing nation-states as a new era of global co-operation comes to dominate humanity. These changes will come on the back of enlightened reflection as capitalism, once drunk on its own excesses, peers into the mirror Sachs provides and emerges clean and triumphant. Ultimately, however, Sachs’ work is unsympathetic towards the kind of overturning of economic life that would be necessary to respond to his own problematic<sup>1</sup> – which he defines as the challenge of global sustainability; “protecting the environment, stabilising the world’s population, narrowing the gaps between rich and poor, and ending extreme poverty” (ibid.: 3) – he is apparently unwilling to consider his own assumptions about economic life.

Sachs is no marginal figure and his identification of the material deprivations and contradictions which currently plague humanity are *the* problems of today. Sachs is head of the *Earth Institute* at Columbia University and director of the United Nations (UN) *Millennium Project*, which announced the setting of 15 ‘Millennium Development Goals’ to be achieved by 2015 (United Nations, 2000). Amongst these goals are targets to “Halve,

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis does not go into detail in regards to the structure of a capitalist economy that would be considered sustainable – its purpose is to reveal the unsustainable character of capital.

between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger”, “Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources” and “Have achieved by 2020 a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers” (Sachs, 2005b: xvii-xix)<sup>2</sup>.

Sachs suggests that progress towards these goals is obstructed by four demands: human pressures on ecosystems and the climate, world population growth, extreme poverty and global problem solving processes (Sachs, 2008: 6). These problems do not exist in isolation. Increases in population and economic growth multiply global economic activity, placing unsustainable pressure upon the environment. Sustained economic growth, both from the Western world and from the developing world – primarily China and India but also Brazil and Russia – combined with continued growth of the world economy has meant that global economic production has risen by eight times between 1950-2008 (ibid.: 19). Given further economic growth and population increases, gross world product is predicted to rise by 6.3 times over the period 2005-2050 (ibid.: 23).

Mainstream economists reduce these pressures to a simple economic equation used to determine environment impact: total population (P), income per person (A) and the environmental impact per dollar of income (T), otherwise known as the level of technology. From this equation, the total impact (I) on the environment can be calculated by the equation  $I = P \times A \times T$  (a high T value signifying a high environment effect) (ibid.: 29). Using this equation, Sachs suggests that as the global population is predicted to rise by 40% and global income to quadruple, the impact on the environment with unchanged technology would be six times that experienced today (ibid.: 29). As a corollary, if the current human impact on the environment is unsustainable, a six fold increase would be ‘devastating’ and lead to certain environmental catastrophe.

The hegemonic Green approach to this problem is to defer to technological developments and assertions of ‘political will’. This promethean discourse holds that improvements in energy and resource efficiency, both in terms of production and consumption, will be

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<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, little progress has been made towards these goals UNITED NATIONS 2009a. The Millenium Development Goals Report. New York: United Nations.

sufficient to halt global climate change and mediate against the contradiction between economic growth and environmental degradation. Based on this assumption, one-off increases in resource efficiency produce the change required to hold off environmental collapse. Efficiency increases, however, only ever take the edge off increases in overall economic output. Sachs himself illustrates this point in regards to electricity efficiency, stating that given global economic output is predicted to rise six fold in the years to 2050, even a doubling of efficiency would lead to a tripling of electricity use (Sachs, 2008: 98).

The reliance upon technology discounts what is known as ‘Jevons’ paradox’. First suggested by William Stanley Jevons in relation to coal consumption in Great Britain (Jevons, 1866), the paradox suggests that increases in efficiency tend to produce an increase in the demand for the resource: as the resource becomes cheaper, consumption tends to rise. As a consequence, technological advancements do not tend to reduce environmental impact because gains in efficiency are mitigated by increases in consumption (Foster, 2000: 4). Economist John Bellamy Foster suggests improvements in automobile efficiency as an example of Jevons’ paradox in action. Increases in efficiency in the automobile industry in the United States in the 1970s did not reduce the amount of fuel consumed as the number of vehicles on the road doubled as driving became more affordable (*ibid.*: 5).

Certainly this ‘law’ only holds according to the logic of neoclassical economics; it needs to be viewed critically and does not uniformly apply. In particular, government-mandated efficiency standards tend to increase costs, thus not increasing demand and consumption, although impacting upon private profitability. Nevertheless, technology is not a total solution: it cannot be assumed that technological developments will prevent entirely mediate expansions in economic activity. Technology may expand the range of resources available but cannot do so infinitely. Moreover, technological innovation does not automatically reduce resource consumption.

Perhaps the over-riding point is that capitalist markets are not an efficient system for allocating the use of resources, as it is assumed to be by its ideologues. Capitalism is not based on production to service human ‘needs’ but, rather, continuous accumulation and growth – the drive of capital is profit for the sake only of profit itself. As such, the central

environmental concern in regards to capitalism should not be technology and efficiency but a reduction in the general level of production and consumption.

Conversely, because capitalism is constituted by its own self-revolution and growth, any reduction in economic output sends capital into crisis, further restricting the ‘trickle down’ to those beyond the development ladder. Thus, while the Green demand for reducing the scale of economic activity is a step in the right direction – Western levels of consumption must be reduced in order to halt global environmental collapse and allow the masses to come out of poverty – this move would be disastrous for the hungry populations of the world within the limitations imposed by capitalism. Despite the locally based poverty reduction efforts of trans-governmental agencies such as the United Nations and the World Bank, genuine resolution of poverty can only be achieved within the capitalist ‘development ladder’. That is, for the world’s poorest citizens to bring their standard of living out of extreme poverty, the wealthiest would have had to experience equally large, or larger, economic growth. For this reason, demands from Green discourse and in particular the ‘Affluenza’ movement (see Galbraith, 1958, Hamilton, 2003) to reduce levels of consumption – such as ‘buy nothing day’ – are ill-conceived.

Peter Singer (2009), in his text *The Life You Can Save*, holds to a similar position, this time by reference to poverty rather than environmental conditions. Arguing that those who consume ‘unnecessarily’ are morally obligated to reduce this consumption and give to the absolute poor, Singer argues that a drastic reduction in consumption is necessary for the wealthy to be considering to be living ‘Good’ lives. What Singer forecloses, and we will have cause to return to the politics of this position later in this chapter and its consequences for the psyche in Chapter Four, is that a reduction in Western consumption necessarily leads to a fall in economic growth that will make the circumstances of the poorest worse off. That is, within the capitalist matrix, these reductions can only lead to further hardship for the poor.

Such a reading of the operation of the ‘market’ appears to be a decidedly neo-liberal or conservative position: that the burden of the Global West is to continue consuming in order for jobs and wealth to trickle down to the poorest inhabitants of the Earth. This is certainly not the moral position that will be advocated in this thesis. Instead, we have cause to agree with

Singer's basic contention that for wealthy subjects to consume at current rates whilst so many suffer in abject poverty is morally questionable. The difference lies in the politics of such a position. Whilst Singer, and others of a charitable bent, argue that poverty can be vastly reduced by voluntary redistributions of wealth, in this thesis I shall argue that the disavowal of the political dimension of this position signals the impossibility of enacting widespread change within global capitalism. The ultimate consequence of a reduction of Western demand for consumer items is the fall in the production of these items in the Third World, a decrease which results in unemployment and further suffering for the hungry masses.

Here lies the fundamental material contradiction of capitalism. The environmental capacity of the Earth cannot support the scale of development required to induce a substantial reduction in poverty, even with a significant increase in technological efficiency. Indeed, even without any efforts to reduce poverty, economic growth in the global West is unsustainable. In this regard, the 2008 World Wildlife Fund 'Living Planet' report suggests in 2005 the global ecological footprint (the biological capacity required for the material reproduction of society) was 30% higher than supply; the United States footprint-per-capita was four times that of that global supply. Likewise, '100% Pure'<sup>3</sup> New Zealand's footprint was approximately three times that which is currently sustainable, suggesting that if all the citizens of the world lived like New Zealanders – a nation apparently in immediate need of economic growth – another two planets would be required (WWF, 2008: 14-15). Clearly, these ecological footprints are not sustainable, nor can they be allowed to expand. Increasingly open battles for resources are being witnessed on a global scale and ultimately, in the competition for scarce resources, it is the rich and powerful who will win (see Klare, 2001).

This process is compounded by the exponential growth of the world's population. The 2009 United Nations Population Report (2009b) predicted that the world's population would increase by 37% to 9.2 billion by 2050, 85% of which will reside in regions currently classified as 'less developed'. These population pressures invoke the ghost of Thomas Malthus, once banished by the hope of technology. Malthus argued that population pressures

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<sup>3</sup> The current slogan of the New Zealand Tourism Board.

on resources were the primary cause of hunger, with various 'positive checks' alleviating the pressure. Writing in 1798, his motive here was political; the defence of private property in the face of the French revolution and the enthusiasm for utopian projects that resonated at the time (Ross, 1998: 8). Malthus considered social welfare to be pointless as the increased demand for food would only expand the misery of the poor. Indeed, Eric Ross (*ibid.*: 22) quotes Malthus as stating:

a man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is.

Malthus considered poverty to be a natural occurrence, created because population growth was higher than food production; gains in productivity would be eroded by population growth. What Malthus did not consider, however, was increases in technological efficiency which produced more food per head of population, and restrictions on population growth primarily through improvements in contraception<sup>4</sup>.

For many, this debate was decided by the progress made by the Green Revolution in the 1970s, in which the use of technology raised food productivity above that demanded by population growth. Yet, as the possibility of the total exploitation of global resources becomes a possibility and global population rates continue to increase, now is not the time to forget Malthus' warning, although we may do well to reject his conservative politics. Indeed, these politics – once dismissed by the light of modernism – may also return in the case of quasi-apocalyptic collapse. Perhaps we do not have to go that far. As excessive slum populations develop in less fortunate areas of the world and the wealthiest nations increasingly look to obtain resources from lands other than their own – China's purchasing of large plots of land in Africa in order to grow crops for domestic purposes is an example (Smith, 2009) – population pressure upon resources appears to be the most apparent source of misery.

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<sup>4</sup> We can note that Malthus work – and much of that of his time – does not fit under the normative impulse that constitutes this thesis; that we should be concerned with the plight of the hungry.

It is this surplus population – those with no prospect of formal employment nor the material means to reproduce themselves – that is the ultimate rejoinder to the likes of Sachs. If the carrying capacity of the planet provides an external limitation to the progress of capital, then these excessive populations suggest an imminent contradiction, one that shall be at the heart of the argumentation in this thesis. It is this population, a surplus of labour, to which I now turn.

## Surplus Labour

For Marx, exploitation<sup>5</sup> occurred because of the structural relationship between capital and labour, embodied in the wage-labour system. This structure can only operate under the conditions of an excessive over-supply of workers. That is, capitalism operates as a system of private property where the vast majority are not able to own the means of production and thus, without these means – without the ability and resources to materially reproduce their own conditions of living – are forced to sell their labour power<sup>6</sup> (Wood, 2004: 246). Indeed, the worker generally benefits more from employment than the capitalist – within capitalism, the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited (Robinson in Munck, 2000: 142). Where the worker risks starvation, and ultimately death, the capitalist is set to lose only a small amount of profit and can easily replace the worker (Wood, 2004: 135-136). Thus, in order for the capitalist wage-labour system to operate, an excess of workers must exist such that the threat of losing one's job remains; without the existence of a minimum wage, wage prices are driven down by the excess of willing workers. It is this excess of workers, or rather, non-workers, which I label surplus labour. This is not a matter the identification of the existence of a collective subject which threatens capitalism, nor any sense of (lumpen)proletarian solidarity. Rather it is an abstract identification of the structural conditions of possibility for the reproduction of capitalism.

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that Marx tended not to refer to exploitation in a pejorative sense.

<sup>6</sup> As British literary theorist Terry Eagleton (2003: 42) reminds us, the pre-Marxist conception of the proletariat was those who were too poor to own property so served the state by way of producing children to add to the labour force; the proletariat are “those who have nothing to give but their bodies”.



Liberal-capitalist political discourse tends to conceive of the extreme poverty of these excess workers as being caused by their non-inclusion within capitalism. Sachs, for example, particularly in his previous work (2005a), is expressly concerned with the plight of the most materially deprived but does not consider this population to be part of global capitalism. In line with the strictly analytic philosophical logic which informs his work, Sachs argues that because wealthy Western nations have followed a market logic, the same logic will apply to all nations. Poverty is not caused by capitalism but, rather, by exclusion from capitalism. That capitalism could be responsible for both corpulent wealth and miserable poverty is not a conclusion available to Sachs, who misreads Marxism<sup>7</sup> to the extent that the idea of such a 'reading' appears far-fetched.

That capitalism produces such a contradiction is, however, exactly the conclusion taken here. Following the brief Marxist analysis suggested above, poverty is considered to be intimately related to market relations. The labouring – or unwanted labouring – populations of the world are not strictly excluded from capitalism. Rather, they allow the wage-labour system to function. Nonetheless, this necessary positioning cannot be acknowledged within the ideology of justice that informs the Western world: an ideology that suggests that one's fate depends on personal effort rather than circumstance. A recognition that Western wealth is openly constituted upon the exploitation, suffering and horrifically slow and regular death of those whose labour is considered to be in excess is too traumatic a conclusion to be reached for the delicate, if cynical, sensibilities of the post-enlightenment subject. Surplus labour thus speaks to a sense of exclusion that I shall consider to be best understood by a psychoanalytic discourse and, in particular, the Lacanian term 'extimacy', and Žižek's conception of universality.

Surplus labour is thus the principle symptomatic contradiction of global capitalism. This contradiction has been kept at bay through various ideological displacements which either

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<sup>7</sup>To quote Sachs; 'Note that the focus on technological improvements is starkly different from the failed Marxist notion that the rich are rich because they successfully exploit the poor. If the rich get rich only because the poor get exploited, then world income would be roughly constant, and all of the economic action would be about the distribution of a given level of economic output. That, indeed, is what Marx had in mind' (2008: 206). Indeed, Sachs appears entirely reluctant to evoke Marx's name. He describes Charles Dickens and Friedrich Engels as having best represented the harshness of the first century of industrialisation (Sachs, 2008: 4).

seek to position absolute global poverty as a contingent aberration caused by faulty application of market principles, or a local error produced by corrupt individuals or lazy governance. Mediated by charitable endeavours, the contradiction between wealth and poverty within our increasingly ‘globalised’ society has been kept from the developed mind by geographical distance. It is here that, having identified the structural necessity of surplus within the capitalist economy, it is crucial to consider the quantity and qualities of those who hold this status. Although such an excess of workers exists within every historical formulation of capital, each instantiation produces different formations which lead to differing political consequences.

Globally the working class has been subject to a large geographical shift, whereby 80% of what could be regarded as the Marxist Proletariat now exists outside of Western nations (Davis, 2006b: 13). Western multi-nationals have moved their productive operations to countries whose labour force had previously been regarded as outside of the global economy, relocating in search of reduced costs, lower wages, and more relaxed labour laws. This move has produced an ideological split within capitalism. If much has been made of the move to a different stage of capitalism, from an industrial to a post-industrial society characterised by branding, consumerism and finance capital, the working class has not disappeared – it has merely been placed outside of the hegemonic Western gaze.

It is also worth considering the current capitalist dynamic that is creating a ‘Third world’ underclass within developed western countries, particularly nations that have installed neo-liberal economic policies<sup>8</sup>. Such a dynamic has been explored in detail in developing countries. Here, the economies of Brazil, China and India are developing rapidly but this development is subject to substantial income inequality (Guanghua, 2008, Heshmatic, 2007). While this inequality was already stark, particularly in Brazil and India, differences are becoming more noticeable as the benefits of development accrue to only a portion of the population.

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<sup>8</sup> Neo-liberalism has often become the target of otherwise anti-capitalist critique. Certainly other, more socially democratic forms of capitalism, may domestically mediate more effectively against some of the more damaging elements of capitalism. In terms of global issues, however, such as poverty or climate change, there is little difference between modalities of capitalism.

Predominately framed in terms of ‘human-rights’ violations or a failure of welfare systems and development assistance, such stark national inequality has generally been the source of both disdain and pity in the West. However, the same trend of increasing inequality can also be observed in many of the wealthiest nations. The United States is perhaps the strongest such example. Here poverty, particularly if measured in terms of health and education standards rather than consumed calories, is reaching Third World levels (see Burd-Sharps et al., 2008). Moreover, we can see the active displacement of a surplus population – what might be deemed an underclass – into prison populations such that 1 in 100 Americans are now reported to be imprisoned (PEW, 2008). Thus an operative surplus of labour does exist within the most developed nations, despite the mediating variations of welfare measures, but it is in the cities of developing nations that this excess of humanity is most palpable.

The outsourcing of the working class, along with other reforms, has generated large pockets of surplus labour located in urban slums within the developing world. This development has occurred following what might be termed the second expansion of capitalism – the first being the colonisation achieved by European empires – occurred via the ‘soft’ colonisation of the Bretton Woods institutions, the IMF and the World Bank. Although established soon after the Second World War, these institutions only turned their interest to the Third world in the mid-late 1970s<sup>9</sup>. During this time, World Bank ‘urban lending’ increased from US\$10 million in 1972 to US\$2 billion in 1988 (Davis, 2006b: 70). The results of these Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) have been mixed in the extreme. Some regions have experienced remarkable economic growth which has brought millions out of poverty. At the same time, however, even within these high-growth nations, inequality and suffering has become more extreme. India, for example, one of the shining lights of the SAPs, achieved 6% growth throughout the 1990s, yet the poor are experiencing arguably the worst conditions since independence, with 56 million new paupers on the streets during this time (ibid.: 171)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the ‘Green Revolution’ brought technological advances to the third world. Whilst this was ideologically conceived as a means of creating more food, the ultimate result was the creation of a global food system, situating food as a global commodity and securing a food supply for the United States (Ross, 1998:139).

<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the ultimate effects of what the IMF called ‘the great recession’ upon these developing nations are still to be processed

Contrary to Sachs' contention that it is only when agricultural surpluses are high that urban populations develop (2008:26), these urban slums are, in the terms of American urban theorist, Mike Davis, a "surplus-humanity", built not from economic opportunity but, rather, a lack of it. The most edifying image of this excess humanity is the 'City of the Dead', the slum dwellers who have made their home within the tombs of Cairo. This surplus population, what Manuel Castells has labelled the 'Fourth world' (2000: 68), has developed with the mass urbanisation of the poor. Unlike previous urbanisations, this form has been decoupled from industrialisation. Instead, in a condition in which the US Central Intelligence Agency (2002) reports that a full third of the world's workforce was unemployed in the 1990s, a massive informal economy has developed that does not create jobs but, rather, subdivides existing opportunities (Davis, 2006b: 199).

It is for this reason that the city has become the focus of much scholarship around both global poverty and the critique of capitalism, as well as utopian thinking (Harvey, 2008, Davis, 2010, Davis, 2006a, Harvey, 2009). The city provides the most thorough exemplification of the existence and structural necessity of surplus labour through the dense slums most apparent in developing 'mega-cities'<sup>11</sup> as well as the manufacturing industries and informal economies around which surplus labour and labour meet. Conversely, the city also suggests the most likely points of resistance, not only in terms of potentially revolutionary politics but the kind of forms of shared social life which might exhibit the collective sustainability and solidarity required to ensure the status of the future. Thus, for many the key to the past – and the shape of the future – lies in the city which exemplifies both the evils of the past and present – from sweatshops and exploitation to smog, inequality, alienation and anomie – to the hope of the future in collective solidarity and efficiency.

The nexus of these developments – both increasing surplus labour and the intimately associated urban populations – are the political dilemmas provided by illegal immigration. The central geographical centres of the Western world – Europe, North America and Australasia – are increasingly beset by difficulties associated with illegal immigration.

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<sup>11</sup> Mega-cities are those metropolitan conglomerates of 10 million people or more, almost exclusively found in developing nations.

Europe has inadvertently encouraged migration as the creation of the European Union, and in particular the admission of poorer Eastern European states, has allowed for the free movement of labour across the continent. Moreover, the development of massive urban slums along the North-Western coast line of Africa has made (illegal) immigration into Southern Europe an increasingly appealing prospect.

North America, too, faces a longstanding battle to define who has the rights to citizenship as illegal immigrants attempt to enter the 'land of the free' from Central America and the Caribbean. These 'aliens' have become an established sector of the American population, blending in with a healthy legal immigrant population. Indeed, alien labour forms the backdrop of the United States economy as it supplies domestic labour at Third World rates, allowing the US agricultural industry<sup>12</sup> to compete globally. Alien labour also proliferates through the low-skilled service industry.

Australasia, particularly Australia but also New Zealand<sup>13</sup>, is beginning to experience its own issues with illegal migration. Australia, certainly since the Second World War, has benefited from large immigrant populations from the Mediterranean and Europe. Increasingly, however, immigrants have attempted to illegally enter Australia from South-Eastern Asia, in particular from Indonesia. Making the treacherous open ocean journey, these 'boat people' have created considerable political consternation in Australia as they were first tragically turned away, and then with a change of government, ushered to off-shore islands for 'processing' that has been of a troublingly totalitarian variety.

With the dilemmas of illegal immigration, as the Third World comes to the West, the contradictions of capitalism and surplus labour become more apparent. Add to this the cultural anxiety which comes with the obdurate presence of the Other and illegal immigration becomes the hotspot for the disavowed foundations of capitalism – surplus labour – to meet

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<sup>12</sup> Substantive government subsidies also supplement the supply of cheap labour.

<sup>13</sup> New Zealand, in particular in its largest city of Auckland, has the biggest Polynesian population in the world. This population developed from government policy in the 1950s which strongly encouraged the importation of cheap Pacific Island labour to supplement New Zealand's almost fully employed workforce. When the economy started to struggle, however, their labour was no longer in supply and a larger underclass began to develop. This underclass remains today although Polynesian culture is well integrated within mainstream urban society.

their maker. How this might occur will be the focus of the latter sections of the thesis. For now, however, it is enough to establish that capitalism requires a surplus of labour which is, however, excluded both socially and economically. This analysis suggests that material deprivation is not an innocent consequence of the capitalist empire but an intrinsic characteristic of that empire, one exemplified by what I have identified as the simultaneously abstract and very real presence of surplus labour.

This identification remains, however, formal. There does not exist the kind of collective subjectivity that would make surplus labour an active political entity in the same manner as the proletariat was for Marx. Instead, the ontological status of *surplus* labour is created by my (Marxist-Zizekian) analysis – a change which has significant consequences for the political positioning within this thesis. As outlined, surplus labour as extrinsically positioned as the universal characteristic of capitalism, rather than an aberrant outside produces a radical politics which insists that their plight cannot be resolved within capitalism but is rather a condition of that system.

It is this positioning of surplus labour as the Achilles heel of capitalism which defines much of the argument of this thesis. Thus far I have presented three particular threats to capital: ecological degradation, population growth and surplus labour. If I have presented population growth as extenuating both surplus labour and environmental problems, it is not a threat to capitalism in and of itself as growth in population can lead to both greater markets and further labour surpluses. Instead, the troubling effects of population growth are experienced elsewhere.

For many the most ubiquitous threat to capitalism comes from the threat to the global environment (see Swyngedouw, 2010). Certainly, as outlined thus far, the scale of production produced in capital, along with the focus upon profit at the expense of other concerns makes global capitalism fundamentally unsustainable with the carrying capacity of the planet – no matter what technological developments mediate against ecological degradation. Moreover, as shall be explored in more detail later in the thesis, environmental demands have not become a threat to capitalism – except in a material sense (the environmental externalities of the market are a threat to the our eco-systems irrespective of whether we are ideologically

cognisant of this threat) – but are rather fully integrated within the market (even if attempts to create a market for carbon have become increasingly politically fraught in many states). By contrast, surplus labour provides the ultimate point of tension within capitalism precisely because it cannot be integrated within the logic of the market, yet is required for the market itself to function. This paradoxical positioning, as shall be at the heart of the theoretical debate in this thesis, is the universality of capitalism, its point of Truth and point of weakness.

As such, at this point in my introductory treatise, I have established the problem to which this thesis is directed, that of the unsustainable character of the global economy and the existence of a materially subjugated surplus of labour. Moreover, I have established two limitations upon the capacity of capital to respond to this problematic. The scale of economic activity as determined by population and economic growth is causing unsustainable pressure upon the environment and produces an external limit to the expansion of capital. In terms of poverty, capital requires an excess of partially excluded labour in order to function efficiently. As such, under the reign of global capitalism, the living standards of the poorest residents of the planet cannot be meaningfully increased because of both environmental restrictions and the nature of the wage-labour system – *ergo*, poverty and climate change cannot be solved within capitalism. To this end surplus labour, and the economic growth which is the central cause of environmental degradation, are constitutive elements of capitalism. For this reason, any attempt to seriously respond to the challenge of global sustainability must begin to think beyond the horizon of capital. This may not be a utopian society but it does require a utopian demand for change.

Liberal capitalism is unable to conceive of either sense of utopia. Instead, pragmatic and incremental solutions to problems which are beyond partial measures are in vogue.

Emblematic here is Singer's position towards charity: if you have money to spend on things that you do not strictly require and this money can help others in need, then you are morally obligated to do so. Such solutions may have a positive effect upon the lives of many, as would the development of infrastructure and educational capabilities in the poorer regions of the world. Undoubtedly, for the global economy to operate sustainably within the limitations of the planet, new forms of technology are required if large portions of humanity are going to rise out of the most extreme poverty. Furthermore, if change is to occur, then a

radically different attitude to the right to consume and globally equality is required, as Singer advocates. As such we should not stop recycling because it is not the ultimate cure, although we would do well to understand the ideological side effects of this behaviour<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, reductions in population growth are perhaps the most straight-forward solution to this problematic. Ultimately, however, what is foreclosed by these pragmatic approaches is a consideration of the interconnectedness of politics and economy. As Eagleton suggests in this vein, today it is “hard nosed pragmatists who are the dewy-eyed dreamers, not the wild-haired leftists. They are really just sentimentalists of the status quo” (Eagleton, 2003: 180).

Nonetheless, when it comes to building a just society, change will be material, patient and pragmatic: there is no utopian wand that can renew the world in a week. The problem is not with the solutions, it is with the horizon under which they have arisen, a horizon which means these solutions cannot effect changes of the scale required. It is feasible, for instance, that malaria could be wiped out in developing nations, saving millions of lives. The tragedy, however, is that we are unlikely to be able to support these lives. The ultimate inconvenient truth is that malaria, AIDS and similar plagues upon humanity actually help to manage the global scale of the economy. Ending these diseases would only add to the already bulging surplus of humanity currently suffering on this earth. In facing up to these glum truths about the limitations of the capitalist form of political economy, it is apparent that if we are to continue to have a sense of ourselves as ‘good’ animals, then a move beyond capital is necessary<sup>15</sup>.

## **Politics and the Political**

In this thesis, I shall argue that what is required today is a return to history through a fundamental questioning of the horizon of global capitalism and a consideration of the political foundations of politics. This call does not arise abstractly but, rather, from the

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<sup>14</sup> We might, for example, conceive recycling as the ultimate capitalist fantasy, an attempt to reintegrate its own remainder.

<sup>15</sup> What remains unclear is the kind of mode of production which would not reproduce these difficulties. We shall respond to this omission throughout the thesis.



circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is largely because our current conceptions of the material contradictions facing humanity are inadequate that we simply have no way of responding adequately to the challenges of the global economy within the horizon set by that economy. It is this very impossibility of action which urges us to imagine a new world. This thesis resolves itself to consider the circumstances under which a new world might not only be imagined but that might come into being through a rehabilitation of the disavowed political dimension of global capitalism – that is, surplus labour.

The task of this thesis is not to take issue with the science of global sustainability, nor to construct more feasible policy responses. This is not a ‘How to improve the world one day at a time’ style guide. Instead, my task is to examine how, or rather what, it means to respond to the question of global sustainability under the reign of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism. My response begins with a number of assumptions. The first is that problems associated with the creation of a genuinely just and reproducible global economy are real and worth responding to. Secondly, as established above, there is no possible solution within capitalism. Instead, the problems to which we respond, in particular environmental degradation and poverty, are constitutive of capitalism. On the other hand, if our response must be other than capitalism, the Left is bereft of ideas: Margaret Thatcher was right, there is no alternative. We cannot innocently reoccupy an old-style essentialism that once characterised Leftist radicalism, nor rely on either the administrative approach that characterises Leftist politics today, as typified by the now out of fashion ‘Third way’.

This thesis will bring back the proper dimension of political economy but not in the sense of any alternative empirical proposal. As such, in rejecting the pragmatism of the likes of Sachs and Singer, I have converted a practical and material problem into a theoretical one. The exigencies of natural science are replaced by the troubles of Western Marxism and the politics of psychoanalysis. What we need now is not a rush to activity, frantically attempting to save the hand that holds us down but, rather, a fundamental reconsideration of our horizon and the opportunities for radical action within it. This thesis seeks to identify a new way of thinking about these problems through a turn to theory. I do not use theory here in a sense divorced from materiality but, rather like Marx, as a political force in itself (Eagleton, 1997: 49). This diagnosis, in turn, will generate the possibilities of different responses quite

opposed to those suggested by Sachs, Singer and other such thinkers. It is, in a sense, the return of the repressed of capitalism; the return of *political* economy. As such, although I have thus far placed much emphasis upon material and empirical facts and positions, this thesis does not return to such considerations but rather branches off into a theoretical debate around the possibility, rather than actuality, of responding to these economic dilemmas. Certainly such a material analysis has value, particularly if one was interested in applying the political strategies outlined in this thesis<sup>16</sup>. Nonetheless, I do not believe that this kind of analysis is possible without the theoretical considerations that form the basis of this thesis and for this reason the remaining debate will be conducted at a reasonably high level of abstraction, although one regularly informed by the material concerns of the thesis and the use of exemplifying examples.

## Returning to Marxism

Today, a restoration of the dimension of history is required to de-naturalise capitalism and its political supplement, liberal democracy. Despite the increasingly apparent material contractions of global capitalism, as well as the breakdown of scarcity through the digitalisation of intellectual private property and the destabilising of existing forms of political authority, the political Left remains largely impotent. At best, it offers a softening of the injustices of capitalism. If ‘What is to be done?’ was the proto-typical Leftist question, at least for those able to bear the presence of Lenin (see Žižek, 2002b), today those who cannot do so appear to be reduced to asking ‘How can we help?’

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed, first, the theoretical over-running of Marxism as alternative explanations about the continual flourishing of capitalism and the prospects for human freedom came to the fore, and then its political fall as many actually-existing socialist movements collapsed at the end of the century. These difficulties pre-empted with the Left the development of a hegemonic movement that focused on culture and language, rather than

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<sup>16</sup> Indeed, such a material analysis informed by the theoretical tools developed in this thesis could well be the basis for the ‘sequel’ to this text.

the economy, seeking at first to expand Marxism's explanatory appeal but ending up with the dismissal of the idea of emancipation entirely.

In its normative idiom<sup>17</sup>, Marxism expresses a concern for the dispossessed and wretched of this earth. Moreover, it provides a critical explanation of the cause of this suffering beyond mere aberration, meta-physical theism, or personal failings. For this reason, in responding to the plight of those whose labour power is structurally excluded and to the need for an environmentally sustainable form of economy, it is to Marxist discourse that I turn. Marxism, however, as a political cause some-what divorced from Marx himself<sup>18</sup>, has largely been defeated as a political movement. Moreover, Marxist thought has been threatened and over-run by an ontology which suggests that language – the system of signifiers – mediates our access to 'reality'. Indeed, this reality comes to be constituted in language itself such that the status of the 'referent' outside of language becomes a point of debate.

Beyond mere academic quibbling, this move has had overwhelming consequences for Marxism and politics in regards to the social conditions of the dispossessed. If language is differentially referential – it is not tied to an anchor which would fix meaning in some transcendental sense – then the range of possible explanations of our social world change. No longer can we rely upon descriptions of political performance which depend upon essentialist or deterministic readings of causality, at least in the same innocent sense in which they were once deployed. If the determinism evident in the historical materialist conception of the predestined progress of the mode of production is no longer valid, it has been unclear what would take its place both in regards to the description of the economy and the prescription of what would follow (including both the mode of transition from capitalism and the form of society to follow).

Moreover, as global capitalism spread, becoming the unremarked upon background of all social life, totalising expressions became unnecessary as the practice of capital filled the (disavowed) place of meta-physical determinism. In a world in which the catch-cry of

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<sup>17</sup> Although, as I will suggest in Chapter Two, the normative basis of both Marx and Marxism is an issue for debate.

<sup>18</sup> This is not to suggest that there is a 'pure' Marx that we might be able to return to.

rebellious youth remains 'whatever', the only essentialism required is the assumed solidity of that which appears to exist. For those who cannot find certainty in this ignorance, it is religion rather than political essentialism that often provides the necessary suture. Moreover, if morality is not held absolutely, then the door to relativity is ominously held open. Without a transcendental signifier that provided the basis for normativity, there has appeared to be little solid basis for anything other than an nihilistic ethics of contingency or a position of administrative accommodation. As such, Western Marxists came to explore culture and language for an alternative foundation or a reading of foundationalism that took into account the ontological primacy of the signifier<sup>19</sup> and would both explain the changing form of capitalism and of politics. With this turn, however, came postmodernity and an eventual celebration of the very ethical contingency the cultural rethinking of Marxism had sought to avoid.

The problem of Marxism, as Australian social theorist Matthew Sharpe (2004: 11) suggests, involves an interaction between a prescriptive and descriptive element. Western Marxism, *apropos* critical theory, has been largely formulated as an attempt to understand both the continuation and expansion of global capitalism and the failure of states that had been orientated by reference to Marxism. In this sense, Western Marxism turned to culture and readings of culture that were being inspired by the turn to language within social theory. In doing so, however, Sharpe suggests that the Critical-Western reading of Marxism has devolved into 'total critique' by which Marxism has come to understand capitalism in such a way that any possibility for action is dismissed (ibid.: 12). As part of this process, the political, and prescriptive element of Marxism has been largely abandoned. Without a political home to return to, 'Marxism after the signifier' has become decidedly impotent, offering little more than a continual critique of capitalism with only an assumed sense of ethics and politics<sup>20</sup>. If Marxism opposes capitalism on behalf of the worker, without the

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<sup>19</sup> As we shall expand upon in the following chapter, the relationship between Marxism and normativity is a difficult one. Whilst Marx held to a deterministic sense of history which assured a communist future, he regarded morality to be little more than an element of the ruling ideology. Nonetheless, subsequent applications of Marxism have held to a more morally absolute interpretation of communism.

<sup>20</sup> This is not the final word on Marxism, as shall be explored in the next chapter. Alternative readings and explanations remain which either reject the culture turn or attempt to locate it within Marx himself.

transcendental anchor provided by historical materialism, both the ethical basis upon which it does so and the political formation which would serve its demands, are unclear<sup>21</sup>. In this regard, what began as an innocent attempt to rethink Marxism and ended up with the politics of Warhol has meant that both the essentialism of the Marxist class narrative, along with its offer of emancipation, have become unviable. Lessons were learned but the focus on the particularity of cultural expression is embarrassingly inappropriate in an era of the ‘Star Wars’ defence system, mass famines and floods, and the apparent allure of Rodeo drive.

In response to the disappointments of Marxism the Left can be conceived to have been split – in terms of academia, of politics and ideology – between either the quest for a non-political economy which relies upon administrated devices which are assumed to be neutral (Sachs being the primary embodiment of this position) or a withdrawal from the field of the productive economy altogether, as has been characterised by theoretical concerns around postmodern strands of thought. At best, this latter form of political thought remains within the realm of politics as is the case in some of the more critical forms of late modernity. At worst, the withdrawal from the economy leads only to an uncritical form of cultural studies that refuses to come to any evaluative stance on matters of political economy, least it be accused of being universalist in its aspirations. Postmodernity may display a sense of ethics but it is far divorced from the feeble demands of the hungry. It is as if, without Marxism, politics and economy can no longer be held together at the same time; as if there exists an impossible element whose absent presence prevents a fusion<sup>22</sup>.

If the Left is to begin to respond to the task of reacting to the contradictions of the global economy then it must begin to return to the question of economy and Marxism. It cannot return innocently, however. Past alternative essentialist attempts to grasp the ‘Truth’ that were based around a utopian fantasy – communist, socialist, and fascist – have resulted in deplorable exclusionary violence in the name of political purity; a violence arguably worse

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<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting at this point, before getting into further detail in the following chapter, that this narrative about the fall of Marxism is rather simplistic. Not only have orthodox Marxist explanations continued but there have been alternative attempts to reread Marxism against a determinist hegemonic. Nonetheless, in order to establish the context of the argument that will be presented in this thesis, it is necessary to sketch out the dominant trends within Marxism and Leftist politics before returning to the detail.

<sup>22</sup> As we shall see later, Žižek labels this impossibility ‘class struggle’.

than that experienced today in global capitalism. Nonetheless, as Žižek has come to argue, the disavowal of violence is part of the subversion of radical politics itself (Žižek, 2008b). The Left, Žižek argues, is no longer willing to get its collective hands dirty, refusing to acknowledge that political change itself is a form of violence.

Emblematic of this failure is the sanitised protests of the ‘Red Shirts’ in Thailand during 2010. Protesting outside the office of the Prime Minister, the Red Shirts organised themselves to ‘donate’ blood in medical tents before tipping this blood on the steps of the building (Powell, 2010). Such an act was supposed to symbolise the protestors willingness to spill their own blood but inadvertently represents our apparently shared unwillingness to engage in political violence today. Whether the spontaneous spilling of blood would have been beneficial to their particular cause is a moot point – their protest instead stands as an example of the limitations of radical political practice today.

The wilting of the Marxist influence has left capitalism as the only viable form, and interpretation, of political economy. As a consequence of the critique of the essentialist leanings of traditional Marxism, the Left has withdrawn from the economic altogether as if the only way one could conceive of economic analysis was through an essentialist lens. Moreover, without the political essentialism that characterised the Marxist project, the idea of Left emancipationist politics has become homeless. Those who still cling to such a mode of analysis ideal appear as either sad veterans unable to keep up with the times or idealistic lunatics.

Although not articulated in these terms, a number of theorists have attempted, against the grain of postmodern plurality, to reconsider the prospects of universality and Truth in relation to Marxism after the turn to language. The most seminal of these attempts stems from Ernesto Laclau, initially in conjunction with Chantal Mouffe. In their breakthrough text *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Laclau and Mouffe attempt to re-read Marxism and socialism ‘beyond the positivity of the social’ and the turn to language. Here all links to essentialism are dropped – except the primacy of language – as Marxism becomes little more than an interpretative tradition. Nonetheless, by returning to the question of universality in

response to the particularism of cultural identity politics, Laclau and Mouffe's work remains a decisive theoretical event.

This new, post-Marxist, horizon has come at a cost, however, as the materialist politics of class struggle were dropped in favour of the contingency of hegemony and the battle to hold the empty place of the democratic signifier. Whilst Laclau and Mouffe's work proved to be a significant advance over previous forms of Marxism because of their restoration of the concept of universality<sup>23</sup>, it also banished both the question of materialism and class struggle in favour of contingency and democracy. Whilst the title of the text suggested a revival of socialism, it was democracy that held the transcendental position for Laclau and Mouffe<sup>24</sup>.

This thesis builds on the same question as that which troubled Laclau and Mouffe: the prospects for Marxism after the turn to language. In a sense<sup>25</sup>, this thesis attempts to rework Laclau and Mouffe's project in light of the material contradictions of capitalism. Here, in responding to the economic problematic mapped out thus far, the thesis has cause to diverge from Laclau and Mouffe's project in a number of important respects.

First, it turns to psychoanalysis as an explanatory device, arguing that Laclau's discourse theory does not adequately explain the fixity of language. By reference to psychoanalysis – embodying the discursive turn as being an effect of symbolic castration rather than of differential contingency – and, in particular, the categories of *jouissance* and the Real, we are better positioned to understand the appeal of capitalism and character of the difficulties associated with bringing about a fatal disruption to its operation. Moreover, I seek to return to the matter of political economy and the question of class struggle. This turn is entirely situated by the positioning of the thesis as a response to contradictions in the global economy; in order to contend with these issues, we must consider the nature of exploitation and the structure of the economy.

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<sup>23</sup> Laclau and Mouffe read the universal not as an a priori essentialism but, rather, an empty placeholder to be held by any number of competing particular elements in the battle for hegemony. The universal is thus necessary but impossible. This debate shall be taken in significant detail in Chapter Two.

<sup>24</sup> As we shall consider in Chapter Four, Laclau himself has diverged from radical democracy in his most recent work, in favour of populism.

<sup>25</sup> Although with a severe sense of humility in regards to the differing scale of the projects.

My return to materialism and to class struggle in Marxism is informed by Žižek's reading of psychoanalysis, rather than Laclau. This response – as will evolve from my construction of Žižek's work throughout the project – is not prescriptive but, rather, challenges liberal conceptions of the kind of politics that might be considered an adequate response to the challenge of global sustainability. What is required is a restoration of the critical and emancipationist edge of Marxist theory, along with a rethinking of the notion of universality. It is psychoanalysis which has been able to get closest to achieving this task, particularly when psychoanalysis is viewed through a Žižekian lens.

Adopting Žižek's work in critique of global capitalism and the discourse of the *Millennium Goals* has not been a straightforward decision. Žižek embodies many of the difficulties associated with both Marxism and postmodernity. That said, salient in this regard is his avoidance of the positivism associated with the likes of Sachs, and his refusal to implicitly accept the horizon provided by capitalism and liberal democracy is highly productive for my purposes. Instead, at a time in which humanity is plagued by horrific problems to which capitalism has but limited responses, Žižek asks that we risk a withdrawal from activity into a theoretical rethinking of our horizon. In this sense, his work appears to fit in the same category as those readings of Western Marxism which have sought to reengage the descriptive dimension of Marxism without reference to a prescriptive politics. Indeed, this is the central critique of Žižek's work – that he produces a reading of capitalism and a form of politics which, although intriguing, leads to a political deadlock and ultimate conservatism (Robinson and Tormey, 2005: 102).

Whilst this criticism has a certain validity – Žižek offers nothing like a restored sense of normativity or party politics that would revive the saliency of Marxist politics – his work rethinks the entirety of what it means to practice Marxist politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Not only does Žižek's reject both past Leftist essentialist positions and the contemporary ethics of contingency associated with the likes of Derrida and Laclau but he refuses to posit any substantive alternative. Although his critics argue that Žižek is thereby not far divorced from various forms of political conservatism – acknowledging the irretractable character of the symptoms of capital with positing any alternative – Žižek comes to argue that the shape of



his (radical) politics is an historically appropriate response to the deadlock that characterises global capitalism.

In taking this position, Žižek's commitment to Lacanian theory defines his politics. Psychoanalysis, first through Freud and then Lacan, has been a major influence in the turn to culture and language which has redefined Marxism and Leftist politics. In doing so, it has come to represent the difficulties with this turn; whilst the Lacanian interpretation of Marxism has reinvented the meaning of epistemological validity within that field, no further sense of politics has developed.

In an associated manner, psychoanalytic discussion has been animated by discussion around the collective ethics and/or politics (Bellamy, 1993, Daly, 1999, Glynos, 2001b, Homer, 1996, Robinson and Tormey, 2005, 2006, Stavrakakis, 1999, 2007, Zupančič, 2000). Whilst these discussions have led to several philosophical advances in politics, or what British political theorist Glyn Daly (2009) calls the 'politics of the political', no stable political frontier has emerged. Moreover, Žižek's Lacanian reading of the political rejects any possibility of advancing a Lacanian ideal of shared social life; such an ideal stands in contradistinction to Lacan's own work on ethics.

Instead, what Žižek's work offers – through a combination of Lacan, Marx, and German Idealism – is a critical consideration of the political within 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism. Nonetheless, Žižek's work does not lend itself to a singular approach. Instead it produces a number of strategic alternatives. It does so in relation to a singular conception of ontology based around the operation of the Lacanian Real. It is these alternatives that are the ultimate subject of this thesis, as I come to consider the possibility of a radical Leftist response to the contradictions of the global economy from within Žižek's work.

Yet, although there are no readily apparent substantive modes of political that stem from Žižek's work, this does not mean his work is impotent or conservative. Instead, through a strategic approach which seeks to unveil the disavowed foundations of global capitalism – most notably surplus labour – and hold this point in tension with the ideology which excludes it, Žižek's approach suggests a possible approach to disrupting the progress of capitalism. This disruption is not merely critical or negative, although it does not seek to produce an

alternative institutional horizon for shared social life. Instead, by reference to the inherent impossibilities within global capitalism itself, the question of a utopian imaginary – in particular around what Žižek’s calls the ‘communist hypothesis’ – is rejuvenated. The utopia of the communist hypothesis is not a fantasmatic utopia but, rather, the utopian urge that occurs when we are forced to re-imagine a new way of being, as has been suggested by literary theorist, Fredric Jameson (2005, 2009). That is, if capitalism is unable to integrate surplus labour within its horizon, nor reduce the scale of economic activity, our response should not be to formally construct new modes of being but, rather, to insist on the embodied presence of this impossibility in order to force open space for a reinvention of shared social life.

The context in which this thesis is situated, therefore, can be represented by the following question; ‘After the turn to language, in what way can Marxist theory respond to the material deprivations and contradictions which are symptomatic of global capitalism?’ However, in responding to this dilemma, I shall primarily consider a Žižekian response. Here, positioning Žižek as working within the Marxist tradition, I will consider the role of psychoanalysis in the political through an understanding of Lacanian ethics and its translation into political practice. Psychoanalysis shall be analysed as a form of politics, giving consideration to the possibilities of Leftist political practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The question to which this thesis responds, therefore, is ‘How can Žižek’s work be utilised as a political response to the contradictions of global capitalism?’

## **Being Slavoj Žižek**

Ultimately, this thesis presents Žižek’s work as a response to the contradictions of global capitalism. In response to the pragmatism of the likes of Sachs, of Laclau’s post-Marxism, and of critics who have argued that Žižek’s unwillingness or inability to re-imagine shared social life outside of capitalism makes his work conservative, I argue that Žižek provides a particularly effective form of politics at this point in history. These politics are formed by a dialectical strategic approach which insists upon the intrusion of the disavowed foundations of global capitalism, as well as a utopian *jouissance* for an impossible beyond embodied by

the communist hypothesis. This reading of Žižek's work may not satisfy his critics but it may just provide the most hope for the future and the hungry of this world.

This contribution has two original dimensions. Firstly, in terms of a response to economic dilemmas it seeks to consider the conditions of possibility for a political response rather than a direct or programmatic positioning. This is not unique in itself but it does distinguish the thesis from many conventional interventions into global poverty and environmental degradation. More pertinently, my interpretation and application of Žižekian theory can be distinguished from that of other 'Žižekians' in my attempts to consider his work in the context of a specific political issue and to generate a direct political strategy to that issue— it is this distinction which marks the most original contribution of the thesis.

Žižek's work has been the subject of substantial critique and as I have noted thus far, there are many critics who reject his work outright. Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe, for instance, take a positive view of Žižek's early work but are now extremely critical of his most recent work, both in terms of its political direction and scholarly style (Sharpe and Boucher, 2010). Žižek's style has also been the subject of concerted critique from the likes of Paul Bowman (2007), Ian Parker (2004) and Richard Stamp (2007). Much of this work takes a polemic tone such that Žižek comes to be positioned as a point of enjoyment within academia. Indeed the manner in which he is represented in such work has him operating as a symptom of failure within Leftist academia. Paradoxically, the academics involved (Bowman, Parker, Stamp) demand a political position to rally behind but find themselves constantly thwarted by the equivocations of Žižek around the issue of political responses to capitalism. As evidence of this assertion, not only are critical interventions against Žižek's work often remarkably harsh they also tend to be very repetitive (see Valentine, 2007, Hamilton Grant, 2007). Moreover, a recent special edition of the *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, entitled *Žižek's Communism*, rarely comments on the shift in Žižek's work towards the notion of communism. Instead, it rehearses familiar positions from a number of critics: Yannis Stavrakakis (2010) replies to Žižek's past critique of his work with a continual rebuttal of Žižek's notion of the act; Sharpe (2010) and Boucher (2010) repeat previous critiques of the danger of Žižek's style and politics, and so on.

Alternatively, a number of theorists largely accept Žižek's basic contentions and seek to interpret and adapt them for other purposes. Here I include the likes of Glyn Daly, Jodi Dean, Heiko Feldner, Adrian Johnston and Fabio Vighi. Dean and Felkner, for instance, have utilised Žižek's work as a theory of enjoyment, ideology, and subjectivity. Felkner, particularly in his recent work with Fabio Vighi, has developed Žižek into a theorist of political freedom, one capable of conceptualising potential breakthroughs of our contemporary ideological deadlock (Feldner and Vighi, 2010). Likewise, Dean has supported the manner in which Žižek's work suggests an alternative response to democracy and the capitalist society of enjoyment (Dean, 2007, Dean, 2005, Dean, 2010b). Moreover, Dean has used Zizekian theory to consider subjectivity in regards to (post)modern uses of media technology (2010a).

These theorists have made use of the political applications of Žižek's work without specifically attempting to extend his theoretical apparatus. By contrast, Johnston, whilst seeking to apply Žižek's work for political ends similar to those of Žižek himself, undertakes a philosophical reconstruction of his theoretical underpinnings (particularly in relation to Žižek's ontological commitments and his theory of the political act, contrasting it with Badiou's associated notion of the event (see Johnston 2009, 2008, 2010) ).

In terms of a political reading of Žižek's work, this thesis comes much closer to Daly's style of engagement. Rather than provide a general conception of Žižek's work as a response to ideology and enjoyment, as comes from Dean and Feldner; or the emphasis upon the act that stems from Johnston, Daly removes the stylistic excesses from Žižek's work so as to produce a more 'realistic' and 'useable' political theory<sup>26</sup> (1999b, 2009, 2010). The risk in doing so is that in attempting to remove the excess from Žižek's work we may induce an idealist reading of Žižek that distances his writing from the specificity of the actually-existing political issues that concern him. It is my wager that this need not be the case, however, and that Žižek's work can be rearticulated in a manner that enables the value of its ideas to be determined not with regard to some (inevitably contestable) standard of abstract thought but in terms of its capacity to speak to a specific political problem. Thus, whilst my work here is stylistically

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<sup>26</sup> These are not Daly's terms.

similar to Daly's and generally sympathetic to Žižek's theory, it organises this theory into a political *strategy* as a response to the contradictions of capitalism.

## The Shape of Things to Come

This task begins with a reconsideration of the losses and gains in Marxism 'after the signifier'. In Chapter Two I argue that the move which began with a consideration of culture as a supplement to the determinism of Marx's conception of the economy has ended with a brand of postmodernity which has lost its critical and emancipationist drive. The critique of essentialism and the universality of the grand narrative has been necessary but has robbed Marxism of its ability to respond to the contradictions of the global economy. Conversely, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new thinking emerged around the prospect of an anti-foundationalist politics which was not reduced to the particular. Most prominently, Ernesto Laclau (in initial association with Chantal Mouffe) produced a re-reading of Marxism through the lens of discourse theory. Laclau's post-Marxism has become a hegemonic point of analysis, in particular around his conception of radical democracy. Yet, whilst Laclau has been able to productively respond to the problem of Marxist essentialism after the turn to language, this has come at the cost of materialism and of class struggle as the kernel of the economy.

In Chapter Three, I will consider how these elements might be restored through a discussion of the foundations of Lacanian psychoanalysis; the dialectics of lack and excess in terms of the Real and *jouissance*. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the manner in which Lacanian psychoanalysis has produced a response to the turn to language and the challenge of postmodernity. It ends with a discussion of the confluence between psychoanalysis and Marxism in the homology Lacan identified between surplus-*jouissance* and surplus-value. Such a homology reveals how Lacanian theory constructs the inadequacies of the traditional Marxist approach to politics yet is unable to produce a politics of its own.

Following the overt rejection of Marxist essentialism, in Chapter Four I examine psychoanalytic approaches to politics. This exploration begins with a critique of psychoanalysis and ethics, from Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* through to the

changes in Lacan's conception of an ethical approach. Through this journey, which includes a discussion of Slovenian philosopher Alenka Zupančič's re-reading of the Kantian categorical imperative, I come to suggest that psychoanalytic ethics falls prey to many of the dilemmas of the practice of postmodern political practice, offering little hope for the hungry and in apparent contradiction with the positivist vision of Marxist communism.

Like Marxism, however, psychoanalysis cannot simply be dismissed. In Chapter Five I further examine the possibilities of psychoanalytic practice through a discussion of the relationship between (psychoanalytic) ethics and politics. This chapter moves through the work of Greek political theorist Yannis Stavrakakis on radical democracy, rejecting it on the basis that it is not only a mis-reading of Lacanian theory but also over-privileges democracy and ethics. Ultimately psychoanalytic politics in this form does not provide a cogent response to capitalism because it does not consider the shape of the economy itself.

This is the task set in Chapter Six. Here, I posit that capitalism operates as a form of meta-hegemony, determining in advance the political battles against which Laclau's notion of hegemony is set. Because of this dominance, any possible political activity within the horizon of capitalism can only reproduce that horizon. For this reason, a political response to the contradictions of global capitalism should not posit an alternative mode of production but instead reveal the impossibilities within the current mode. Through a discussion of the 'impossibility of class struggle', and the alternatives posited by both Yahya Madra and Ceren Özselcuk, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, I come to suggest that it is the extimate presence of surplus labour which holds the key to disrupting capitalism and producing undetermined political spaces.

In Chapter Seven I consider the various political positions that have emerged through Žižek's work. These are presented not in terms of chronological development but, rather, as a number of strategic positions each of which has the potential to destabilise existing ideological formations. Critically considering each of these strategies in terms of their capacities to offer a response to the challenge of surplus labour – including 'the act', 'subtractive politics' and the 'practice of concrete universality' – I suggest that it is the practice of concrete universality which proves the most fertile. This strategy – as part of Žižek's re-reading of

universality – is best able to identify and mobilise the disavowed foundation around which global capitalism is founded. Most notably, it is able to restore the dimension of the political and class struggle.

The practice of concrete universality, however, remains a negative position, one that is limited to critique. Chapter Eight expands upon such a strategy by reference to Žižek's recent reference to Alain Badiou's notion of a 'communist hypothesis' (see Badiou, 2008), along with the utopian demand inherent in this reference. Proceeding through Jameson's reading of utopia, Žižek's notion of the communist hypothesis, combined with the practice of concrete universality in class struggle, appears the most productive in the face of the dominance of capitalism. Most importantly it appears to be a feasible and industrious response to the pressing contradictions of the global economy. The question remains, however, of the shape of the future and the relationship between Marxism and political approaches which take reference from the negative ontology which stems from the turn to language.





## 2. Marxism after the Signifier

Marxism has dominated Leftist political practice since its conception. Today, however, Marxism dominates predominately by virtue of its absence. Marxism has been dealt some traumatic blows, both intellectually and politically. Most noticeable in this regard has been the fall of ‘actually existing socialism’ following its symbolic death towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This death has been accompanied by a loss of faith in the essentialist interpretations of history and/or the hope of there being a revolutionary subject. Without the presence of an actually existing communism, or hope of a revolutionary subject which might restore history, Marxism appears as dead as Fukuyama’s sense of history.

Marxism existence is now often defined by passing references to the bad old days, or, for some, the good old days of certainty. This break has been both ontological and political. The postmodern turn, with its associated focus on language and on particularity, has been combined with the decline of communism and the increasingly resigned dispossession of the proletariat. Moreover, the events of 1968 – which simultaneously launched a number of ‘new social movements’ and killed off the hopes of many a revolutionary – and of 1989, finally finished off Marxism as a dominant political cause, even if some outposts and out of fashion theorists, such as Žižek, did not get the message. These events, combined with the ‘turn to language’ that characterised the move towards postmodernity, meant that theorists could no longer speak of class struggle, of communism, and of the revolutionary subject, without an ironic detachment.

In this chapter I shall return the losses and gains for Marxism after its invasion by analytic concerns about the signifier. Rejecting a positivist or scientific reading of Marxism, I consider the ‘turn to language’ that has called into question the foundational fundamentals of Marxism. This discursive turn found a willing participant within Marxism itself as a way of explaining the failure of history to bring about its own consummation, and of the revolutionary subject to advance that progression. In doing so, the dominant strands of thought within Marxist theory moved away from the economy of historical materialism and into culture. What began as a supplement, however, has ended up colonising the entire

approach such that the signifier 'Marx' appears to be no longer required in Leftist political practice.

Such a dismissal has been a major loss for global politics. The withdrawal from the universal and emancipationist dimension of Marxism has allowed for circumstances in which global capitalism has become more widely influential than any mode of politics in history. Today it seems the only feasible alternative to the market is a withdrawal into various religious fundamentalisms, themselves a reaction to the instability of capitalism and of its attendant social inequality.

While a move away from essentialism in favour of a focus on culture, on language, and on the politics of enjoyment might generally be applauded as a response to real problems within the Marxist tradition, the losses have been more significant. In terms of the ideological direction of Leftist politics, forms of postmodern thought have sought to distance themselves from any sense of widespread emancipation, revolution and certainly any notion of the collective Good. Moreover, a gap has opened up between postmodernity and the economic. Although strands of Marxist analysis of political economy remain productive – the work of world systems theorists and in particular Immanuel Wallerstein (c.f. Wallerstein, 1984) are particularly strong resources in this regard – the dominant trend has been away from critical analysis of political economy and towards an implicit acceptance of capitalism as the neutral background for cultural identity. As a result, the Left – either in terms of the turn to postmodernity or in more administrative forms – has not been able to re-establish an alternative critical sense of political economy in response by the threats posed to Marxism after the discursive turn.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, however, Laclau's re-reading of the Marxist category of hegemony offered the possibility of returning to the question of universality within the realm of discourse. Yet, although Laclau's work provided a break from the flighty dominance of postmodern thought, his post-Marxism operates through a distancing of analysis from the economy. For Laclau and other post-Marxists, the economy was an element of discourse and thus could not be distinguished from the political. Whilst we might agree that the economy

could not be anything but discursive, it is nonetheless vital to insist upon the role of the economy.

As a consequence of Laclau's conflation of politics and the economy he ends up largely ignoring capitalism in favour of democracy and the freedom provided by dislocations in the symbolic order; the materiality of class struggle or the suffering of bodies appears not to be on Laclau's agenda. Furthermore, Laclau reduces politics to discourse at the expense of materiality. Laclau's ontology does not specify a driving source, as such, if language is only held together by reference to itself and politics is purely discursive, then fundamental political change should be relatively commonplace. If Laclau has rejected essentialism in favour of contingency, then political practices remain curiously stubborn.

In order to return to both the economy and materiality in Marxism, I turn to psychoanalysis, particularly Žižek's Lacanian psychoanalysis. I find that although psychoanalysis and Marxism have a difficult relationship, the particularly Lacanian conception of language provides the possibility of restoring some of the traditional value of Marxism. Again, however, this comes at a cost as the potentially nihilistic failure of language to suture itself continues to haunt politics.

## **Positive Marxism**

Marx's work is often assumed to be the quintessential example of essentialism, from his grand explanation of the historical destiny of the working class to the inalienable good represented by communism. Certainly, much of postmodernity is built upon a rejection of this image. While we might acknowledge that Marx's understanding of the essential direction of history might fit this image, ironically his conception of communism may have more in common with the postmodern rejection of abstract moralism. Nonetheless, the consequence of the turn to language has been a tendency to reject both the inevitability and scale of Marx's theory of history, resulting in a breakdown in the political efficiency of Marxist politics.

Marx's work was a fusion of description and prescription as he sought to develop a philosophy which changed what it sought to understand (Eagleton, 1997: 3): Marxism can be

considered an ‘Emancipationist Philosophy’ which seeks to develop a relationship between epistemology and politics. Marx argued that an understanding of the contours of capitalism – particularly by the proletariat, who both suffer most from capitalism and are most able to act against it – would be enough to produce a revolutionary class transformation. Of course, knowledge does not bring change in the way Marxists imagined<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, much of the history of Marxism after Marx has considered why knowledge of exploitation under capitalism either remains hidden or has no effect upon those who are exploited – as we shall expand on throughout the remainder of this thesis, much of this explanatory duty has fallen to psychoanalysis.

Although Marx had argued that historical change required a revolutionary subject rather than a teleological sense of itself, he very much relied upon a deterministic theory of history based around the materiality of production. This determinism can be represented by Marx’s supposed ‘base-superstructure’ model, through which he suggested that the mode of production came to determine political affairs. This model is based upon the following statement from Marx’s Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*;

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. (Marx and Engels, 1980: 11-12)

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<sup>27</sup> This is not a problem specific to Marxism; today’s strongest public critics of globalisation – Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein and John Pilger most notably – seem to have the same sense of objective emancipation.

From this idea, Marx argued that all social change comes from contradictions in the form of the economy<sup>28</sup>. As such, the revolutionary transformation from capitalism to socialism and finally communism would come from the proletariat as the revolutionary subject. In this sense the ‘superstructure’ only mediated against the material contradictions of the economy (Eagleton, 1997: 13).

Moreover, Marx had conceived that the human essence could be derived from the materiality of production, production here being divorced from the strictly economic. If postmodernity – and later modernity to an extent – has rejected any sense of foundationalism, Marx argued that ‘species being’ is the material ground for the human condition (ibid.: 17). Species being embodies both Marx’s deterministic view of materiality and production but also his conflation of description and prescription. For Marx, species being – how we are – determines how we should be.

Species being, otherwise known as ‘species essence’ (depending on the translation of the German *Gattungswesen*) attempts to capture the social yet materialised nature of the human condition. What is essential to our species being is the recognised interdependence of human beings, a social bond required by the necessity of material production (production here is not reduced to economy). Through the specialisation of labour which characterises production under capitalism, Marx argued that the worker is alienated from this human essence; communism would bring about the end of alienation.

There is, of course, much more to be said about Marx’s conception of human nature and the possibility of avoiding its alienation. It is not, however, my intention to do so in this project. Rather my task here is to reveal the extent to which Marx attempted to anchor his work in the kind of foundational ground specifically rejected in postmodernity.

As well as Marx’s concept of human essence, postmodern discourses have sought to move away from both the grand narrative of history and the sense of morality which is presumed to prevail throughout Marxism. In terms of a grand narrative, Marx argued that history before

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<sup>28</sup> Although this chapter is directed at establishing the hegemonic interpretation of Marx’s work, it is worth noting an alternative reading of Marxism, based upon texts such as *Das Kapital* and *The Grundrisse*, which refutes the determinism evident in the infamous passage above.

communism (which he labelled pre-history) has been the story of class struggle as the forces and relations of production come into contradiction. It is through this narrative that Marx explained what he conceived as the major epochs of history; from primitive communism or tribal production to ancient, feudal and finally the capitalist mode of production. Each revolution in production had been caused by a breakdown in the relationship between those that control production and those who produce. This process proceeds, according to Marx, by way of the 'iron laws of history'. Nonetheless, history for Marx was not a teleological process; rather history proceeds through the embodied actions of man. For this reason, although Marx argued that the transformation from the capitalist to communism mode of production was inevitable, he relied upon the proletariat as the revolutionary subject which would realise their destiny through self-knowledge of their historical position.

Nonetheless, although Marxism appears to affirm a grand explanation of the existing but whether it offers a sense of morality beyond this is a matter for debate (see Rosen, 2000, Wood, 2004: 18, Brenkett, 1983). Eagleton (1997: 43) asserts that Marxism is not structured around an abstract idealism but, rather, a rejection of the apparent contradiction between the ideals of modernity and the practicalities of capitalism. Marx's rejection of capitalism is not so much in the name of the full expression of species being under communism but, rather, the end of the contradiction within capitalism that, according to Eagleton; "In accumulating the greatest wealth that history has ever witnessed the capitalist class has done so within the context of social relations which have left most of its subordinates hungry, wretched and oppressed" (ibid.: 44).

Marx did not suggest that communism represented any sense of the 'Good'. Indeed, he rejected abstract moral explanations, refusing to critique capitalism in these terms. Marx argued that morality was just the ideology by which the ruling elite justify the existing relations of production (Wood, 2004: 127-142). Morality was never abstract in the sense of being outside of history, consisting of idealistic laws and standards of behaviour but, rather, sprung from existing material conditions. By contrast to utopian socialists of his time, Marx did not specifically argue that the wage-labour system was an injustice but, rather, the only form of economic justice available within capitalism. Although he might have used the term

‘exploitation’ to describe the vulnerability of labour to capital that produces surplus-value and the conditions of the worker, he did not use this term pejoratively (see *ibid.*: 242-264).

Although Marx did not explicitly reference his critique of capitalism to an abstract moralism, there does appear to be a hidden morality implicit in his work. One does not implore people to ‘throw off their chains’ in the name of history alone. Not only is Marx’s work often full with depreciatory terms such as ‘Robbery’ but his understanding of the alienated subject of capitalism as at odds with their ‘species being’ implies an understanding of the Good, even if Marx was unwilling to prescribe it any further in his conception of communism. Moreover, statements like ‘from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs!’ from Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program* appear to be as much of a moral imperative as anything we might find in the likes of Kant. Indeed, the *Communist Manifesto* forms a very programmatic statement – written as it is for a specific political purpose – although it was one that was at odds with the general thrust of Marx’s work. Nonetheless, Marx certainly had a strong dislike for the contemporary order and an equally forceful commitment to the possibilities of the future. Even if Marx’s original work was not a discourse of morality, Marxism and the forms of communism which have followed cannot be considered in the same light<sup>29</sup>. If Marx’s sense of essentialism was limited to history, much of the Marxism which followed installed communism as the transcendental sense of the Good.

In this sense, whilst we would do well to note Marx’s ambiguity in regards to morality, the construction of Marxism to which we respond in this thesis holds to an historical grand narrative and the transcendental Good of communism. I do so not to develop a straw-man which would allow for a cleaner academic argument but, rather, as a consideration of the consequences of Marx’s work. It is possible that Marx himself considered morality to be contingent but that has not been the predominant application of his politics. Moreover, Marxism has certainly relied upon a foundation but only in a descriptive conception of the

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<sup>29</sup> As such, perhaps the important question in our consideration of the relationship between Marxism and essentialism is, ‘Which Marx?’ One cannot have access to a singular Marx but must instead construct a Marx through the discursive lens of our time. Indeed, the Marx to which I am responding here may not be Karl Marx himself but, rather, the hegemonic forms of Marxism. These constructions of Marx range from the strict analytic or scientific Marxian readings of history to the Stalinist Communist regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

path of history. For Marx, however, the descriptive merged into the prescriptive such that he did not require a moral foundation; history provided it for him. In doing so, Marx believed that he had circumvented the need for a moral foundation.

The relationship between Marxism, morality, and essentialism is obviously a difficult one – it could make for the foundations of a thesis in itself. Anything produced in this short section will be insufficient. Nonetheless, the vital point to be taken from this section is that the dominant reading of the Marxist tradition and the forms of communism that followed, relied upon a determinate sense of history, one that stemmed from an essential foundation. As a corollary, the impotence of Marxism as a response to capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century came about because of the twin failure of the totalitarian regimes inspired by his work and the meta-narrative of history which suggested the inevitable transition between capitalism and communism. Marxism lost its efficiency as an intellectual and political current because the explanations and politics it relied upon were no longer considered valid, in large part because of their failure as a political doctrine.

Of course, this is too ‘neat’ a story about the rise and fall of Marxism. Not only was the fall in socialist states and the communist idea based upon more than the ideological downfall of historical materialism (although the two are certainly related) but Marx’s work was particularly rich and dense, leading to a number of interpretations, many against those that I have presented thus far. Moreover, despite the turn to culture which I will soon address, a number of theorists and strands of Marxism have remained. Here I am thinking of the likes of Perry Anderson (1976), Samir Amin (2006), Giovanni Arrighi (1994) and David Harvey (2010). These theorists have remained combined to a Marxist reading of the economy and of capitalism, whilst reconsidering some of the more essentialist elements of Marxist theory. I will not, however, place much emphasis upon these alternative traditions. My purpose in this chapter is to consider a specific re-reading of Marxism – that of Western Marxism after the turn to language – in order to understand the context within which Žižek’s work, and the contemporary political Left, operates.

This positioning is not neutral or arbitrary but, rather, reflects a core assertion of this thesis: that the turn to culture and language, both within Marxism and social theory generally, was



of considerable value. The economy cannot be considered in any objective sense, nor do economic factors determine the interplay of cultural and political elements of society in any analytic mode. Nonetheless, it is clear that the economy is the primary element of concern in regards to responding to the contradictions of global capitalism. For this reason, my purpose in establishing the Marxist context of this thesis is to assert the need to return to political economy after the discursive turn. That is, to consider the traditional concerns of Marxist theory with the tools developed in the cultural movement.

The split between ‘scientific’ or ‘structuralist’ Marxisms and ‘critical’ or ‘cultural’ Marxisms can be regarded as perhaps the most salient in contemporary Marxism (Gouldner, 1980). While the former relied on the objective necessity of the collapse of capitalism – an objectivity based upon a scientific reading of the economy – the latter sensed that social transformation required a subjective embodiment of a revolutionary positioning<sup>30</sup>. While the culturalist rejection of scientific objectivity has proven to be a productive platform for explaining key elements of contemporary capitalism – the continual flourishing of capitalism and the failure of the revolutionary subject – it has given birth to a number of academic disciplines which now appear entirely divorced from the economic concerns upon which Marx’s work was formed.

As such, I will turn to the Marxism that interpreted culture and politics as being more than a simple reflection of the mode of production. This Marxism became entangled with the reconceptualisation of culture itself, through what came to be known as the ‘discursive turn’. Whilst this turn provided a necessary rethinking of Marxism, much was put at risk.

## **Ontology and the Discursive Turn**

The turn to language – otherwise known as the linguistic or discursive turn – which has dominated social theory since the 1960s is characterised by the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure and the subsequent development of post-structuralism. The focus on the ontological

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<sup>30</sup> As such, Alvin Gouldner (1980: 34) suggests that this split within Marxism became the terrain for larger debates within social theory, such as that between determinism and freedom.

dominance of language turned the issue of representation and truth into a dilemma for modernism and a site of the state of impossibility for the postmodern. Rather than conceiving words to be an imitation of the thing they seek to represent, Saussure contended that meaning develops only in relation to other signifiers; meaning develops from the differences between signifiers, not from the referent. For this reason the signifier is arbitrary, contingent upon a history of relationships with other signifiers such that meaning is ultimately differential rather than natural. Because meaning is differential, there are no positive meanings – there are no signifiers which mean in and of themselves – and language becomes a negative substance (Ashenden, 2005: 197).

Saussure, however, considered language to be a system in the sense that all differential meanings form a closed chain: structuralism, for post-structuralists like Jacques Derrida, was not radical enough. Structuralism still reproduced the logic and pathos of Western metaphysics, giving language a systematic presence. Instead, Derrida problematised the notion of language as a system, describing it as ‘a structure lacking any centre’ (Derrida, 1967: 352). In language, meaning is always deferred, and vitally does not catch up with itself; meaning is always ‘still to come’.

The turn to language led to the dominance of negative ontological theory. It rejected not only a grounding in a natural referent but also in a transcendental signifier; a signifier with a positive meaning that could somehow ‘fix’ the contingency of all meaning. In Marx’s terms this was the mode of production from which the superstructure developed. The rejection of the transcendental signifier has had immense implications for social theory and political practice. In theoretical terms, because any sense of meaning could only be grounded in language itself there is no outside to language; Derrida (1976: 158), for example, famously remarked that ‘There is nothing outside of the text’<sup>31</sup>.

This rejection of realism is not necessary idealist. We do not necessarily have to go down the road of Bishop Berkeley, conceiving that only what is constructed in the mind exists. A tree does indeed fall in the woods despite no one being around to hear it crash. More pertinently,

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<sup>31</sup> By this Derrida did not strictly mean that there is no materiality outside of textuality but, rather, that every text can only be interpreted through another text not by reference to an outside referent.

children die in poverty and ice shelves collapse regardless of their documentation<sup>32</sup>. This is a problem Laclau dealt with effectively in debates with traditional Marxists such as Norman Geras (1987) who were unable to come to grips with the consequences of his re-reading of Marxism through the notions of hegemony and discourse. Laclau states:

the discursive character of an object does not, by any means, imply putting its *existence* into question. The fact that a football is only a football as long as it is integrated within a system of socially constructed rules does not mean that it thereby ceases to be a physical object. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990: 100-101, original emphasis)

Nonetheless, language – or, in Laclau’s terms, discourse – provides the horizon through which things appear meaningful: there can be no sense of objectivity or transcendental truth. This has had significant political consequences, at a theoretical level at least. Political formations could no longer make appeals to something outside of themselves, such as God, the Nation, rationality or human nature. These concepts which once provided a guarantee existed only as differential elements in a chain of infinitely deferred meaning. Nonetheless, attempts to access an essentialist anchoring point have not ceased. Indeed, as political liberalism began to question what were once considered the foundations of a good society, various fundamentalist narratives have fought back. Many who would consider the concept of a ‘transcendental signifier’ to be academic mumbo-jumbo, still believe in the transcendental status of God and are willing to bring a gun to a town-hall meeting on health care reform to prove it (see Collins, 2009).

The overarching value of the turn to language, however, has been the capacity to understand these political movements as ideological attempts to fix the chain of meaning. Ideological critique became not a matter of revealing a concealed concrete truth – that there is no God, perhaps, or the contradictions in the mode of production – but, rather, a critique of the abstract manner in which ideological constructions are named. It did not matter what proper name was given to God, only that a God-like signifier can have a structuring role at all. Negative ontological political theory did not seek to substitute one truth with another – the

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<sup>32</sup> This is not to degrade the political importance of representation, only to suggest that representation does not define existence.

Proletariat being a superior Truth than God – but, rather, began to consider what we meant by ‘Truth’. It is this move – from Truth to the meaning of Truth – that signalled a transition from traditional modernism to late modernism and postmodernism.

The turn to language, however, is not a paradoxically homogenous Truth in itself, somehow outside of history. Rather, it is itself an historical discourse, the fundamental elements of which continue to be a focus of debate. As we shall see in this chapter and the next, there are substantive differences between and within poststructuralist or postmodern ontologies and that of psychoanalysis. Moreover, these differences relate to significant distinctions both in what it means to practice politics and political performance itself. Nonetheless, it is vital to note that the turn to language was a significant moment in political theory. In terms of Marxism, this ontological movement marked a change from culture as a supplement to the economy to culture as a determinant in itself. The turn proved a significant threat to Marxism, already challenged by historical events, the link between which was only just becoming clear. What began as an attempt to supplement Marxism ended up rejecting it all together. Both moves occurred within the framework of postmodernism<sup>33</sup>.

## The Postmodern Break

Postmodernity is, according to Eagleton:

The contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human essence and the possibility of objective knowledge. Postmodernism is sceptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends towards cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity. (2003: 13)

Rejecting any possibility of a political anchor that would provide the basis for the kind of essentialism that once defined Marxism, postmodern discourses have emphasised the contingency of language and the differentiability of meaning. Without any metaphysical

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<sup>33</sup> I do not want to suggest that Western Marxism is a form of postmodernism but, rather, that strong links exist between the cultural emphasis which defines Western Marxism and postmodernity.

ambitions, postmodernism suggests a philosophical relativism that at best provides support for diversity, for difference and for a flowering freedom of identity positions. At worst this form of social constructivism leads to cultural support for a cynically debauched wallowing in consumerism and for an administrated hedonism quite divorced from the politics – and political consequences – of its construction.

Nonetheless, postmodernism did not develop in the absence of Marxism but partially as an attempt to reform it. Those acknowledged to be at the forefront of postmodernity, including Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean-Francois Lyotard, each began their work within the Marxist paradigm (Smart, 2005: 259). If, however, these theorists began with the Marxist problematic they largely distanced themselves from Marxism in their latter work. Lyotard, once an avowed Marxist and member of French rebel groups *Socialism ou Barbarie* and *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, began to theorise in earnest about the rise of postmodernity around the same time that he came to the realisation that the proletariat was no longer a feasible revolutionary subject (Anderson, 1998: 26). Indeed, as Lyotard expanded his conception of the postmodern condition, it became increasingly directed towards a rejection of the scale and economic determinism of Marxism. Marxism was just as much a rational meta-narrative as capital and, as such, both should be opposed.

There was much value in the rethinking of Marxism, one that started before the emergence of postmodernism in what came to be known as ‘Western Marxism’. Beginning with the likes of Georg Lukàcs, Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, this label emerged largely as a way to distinguish between the ‘messy’ political practice of Marxism in the USSR and more critical and philosophical forms which emerged in the global West. Arising from attempts to explain the historical failures of Marxism and recognition that change had to be cultural to be effective as economic conditions alone would not produce revolution, Western Marxism focused more on culture and politics, generally discarding the economic determinism of historical materialism.

As a result of the move from economy to culture, much of the rethinking of Marxism was framed in terms of a reconsideration of the essentialist ontology which came to be expressed as the base-superstructure model. What started as an attempt to explain the failure of

revolution resulted in the rejection of the idea of revolution altogether. Moreover, what begun as an attempt to place more emphasis on politics and culture has resulted in the death of the notion of economy altogether, except in practice: ironically, as Marxism and Leftist politics have moved away from the economy, capitalism and the logic of the market became more dominant. As Jameson (1991: 5) states ominously:

this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror.

## Postmodernism and Marxism

The strongest blow to Marxism was the first. When Lyotard rejected any sense of grand narrative, the primary narrative to which he referred was Marxism (Eagleton, 2003:38). The death of the grand narrative signals perhaps the most fundamental element of postmodernism; the rejection of foundationalism and essentialism. Awareness that the referentiality of language left social life without any ultimate guarantee, meant there could be no grand narrative on which to support a vision of politics; any such narrative would have to rely upon a signifier that did not rely upon another. Language proved to be a poor substitute for God or transcendental rationality.

Nonetheless, postmodernism looks suspiciously like “a new epic fable of the end of epic fables”, as Eagleton put it (ibid.: 45). This deterministic narrative about the rejection of deterministic epistemology has led to something of a normative crisis<sup>34</sup>; it has become academically embarrassing to speak seriously about morality. Morality was for those who broke up parties. If the grand narrative is dead, then everything and nothing is possible<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Given Marx’s own rejection of morality, there is something quite comedic about this normative crisis which followed the downfall of the hegemony of Marxism.

<sup>35</sup> This is the paradox of the death of ‘God’, otherwise known as the transcendental signifier. If the original fear of the theists (linguistic or otherwise) was that the dismissal of this guarantee would mean the end of order, then perhaps the opposite has occurred; we have invented new signifiers to fill this lack. Moreover, because they are self-imposed they have an even stronger disciplinary effect. We see this change in the move from a sovereign

Postmodernism, in this sense, can be regarded as deeply conservative, both because the rejection of all foundations has led many to search for even deeper foundations – hence the rise of fundamentalisms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and because of the dismissal of emancipation that became associated with the death of determinism.

Only the most vulgar forms of postmodernity – generally found in cultural practice rather than political theory – dismissed ethics altogether, even if morality was a step too far. Postmodern thinkers began to reconsider what it meant to live the Good life, a large part of which included the rethinking of ‘Good’ meant and whether it was still appropriate to speak of it with a capital ‘G’. Much of the ethical thinking of those of a negative ontological bent is itself negative; a critique of those unities that should be differences. For these postmodernists, any hint of the normative or unity is immediately repressive. Benevolent as it might be to invoke the concept, it immediately restored the primacy of God: etymologists in search of the origins of meaning were the ultimate theists. Because language itself has a normative dimension – language is naturally repressive because it narrows down difference by turning differences into a categorical unity<sup>36</sup> – the task of postmodern ethics was to open up this unity in a celebration of difference (ibid.: 13).

The removal of the emancipationist drive can be regarded as the biggest loss of postmodernism. Without the presence of a transcendental signifier against which to index a sense of the Good, thoughts of global emancipation appear foolishly utopian. Laclau, although not considered a postmodernist, embodies the postmodern position when he states; “We are today at the end of emancipation and at the beginning of freedom” (Laclau, 1996: 18)<sup>37</sup>. Whose freedom is up for grabs is uncertain.

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authority to the all-seeing discipline of panoptical control; if God is dead, then nothing, rather than everything, is permitted.

<sup>36</sup> For instance the concept of ‘tree’ collapses a number of different types of trees under a singular meaning. Likewise, the signifier ‘Women’ is repressive because it ignores the difference between different categories of Women e.g. Black women, black working women, black working homosexual Women, all of which are themselves are repressive concepts...

<sup>37</sup> Here Laclau contrasts emancipation and freedom by reference to transcendentalism and dislocation. Freedom occurs at the point of dislocation from the existing symbolic order. Freedom is not a place but, rather, an action. By contrast, for Laclau emancipation remains within a transcendental construction of a place of freedom that we might reach (1996: 18-19). This construction is confluent with a number of ethical positions after the discursive

Emancipation is incommensurable with postmodern thought, as it invokes unfashionable universal constructions and collective movements whose rationale depended upon the of one or other grand narrative. Most importantly, emancipation rightfully brought up the question of the auspice under which it would occur. The prospect of widespread political transformation relied upon notions of power and universalism that were no longer palatable. Emancipation sounded too much like the unity of the concept, as opposed to the freedom of difference.

Nonetheless, this is not to suggest that postmodern forms of thought construct the social world unproblematically. The opposite is properly true: many forms of postmodernity – deconstructionism, for example – are hypercritical of existing constructions. It is just that for postmodern thought the problem of emancipation amounted to a deconstruction of the meta-physical assumptions inherent in the act of deploying the signifier rather than any material change in people's lives.

Yet, postmodernism is not without value. The danger inherent in the illusionary nature of truth and essentialism has been the biggest lesson postmodernity has taught Leftist politics. No longer can we hold innocently to any sense of ideology, longing for the annihilation of an enemy who is nothing but an ideological construction. The Left should be more than reluctant to forget the horrors that have been committed in its name, particularly in the image of Marxism. As such, for Bauman, postmodernity is modernity without illusions, a reminder that modernism has limits (Bauman, 1993: 32)<sup>38</sup>.

There is certainly value in a form of ethics which supports difference and breaks down barriers closed by essentialist anchors. Nonetheless, although the expansion of ethics and normativity provided by postmodernity should be applauded, we should not mistake the celebration of personal or cultural identifications as the political horizon of our time (see

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turn – Lacanian psychoanalysis one of them – it appears to have little in from those whose suffering is more than symbolic.

<sup>38</sup> Bauman, however, goes beyond this, suggesting that the postmodern subject is aware of truth itself. *If* we can consider this to be the case, it could only be a cynical recognition of truth – I shall discuss the structure of cynical reason in Chapter Seven.



Žižek, 2000a)<sup>39</sup>. Indeed, the postmodern rejection of meta-narratives is intimately linked with the positioning of capitalism as *the* unacknowledged grand narrative of our time.

Moreover, no form of politics beyond the local – or even political engagement – appears to stem from any form of postmodernity, particularly in regards to the problem of global sustainability to which this thesis is directed. At best we might consider the disparate realm of postmodern thought to offer a critique of industrial modernism or a deconstruction of the manner in which capital is constructed. Nonetheless, for postmodern theorists, there appears to be something a little too material, too grand and perhaps too economic, about the contradictions of global capitalism – it brings back the haunting spectre of Marxism.

Indeed, we can consider that postmodernism – instead of being a radical form of emancipation from identity – is just the latest form of capitalism. If early modernity had considered capital to require the parochial discipline that characterised the industrial era, modernity's combined and uneven entry into a postmodern era was considered to be a mortal threat to the interests of capitalism. For Jameson, however, postmodernity has actually saved capitalism from its own inherent contradictions (Jameson, 1996, Jameson, 1991). He postulates that the burgeoning development of social identities that came with the birth of postmodernism became a seamless cure for the ills of overproduction, as, along with the financialisation of capital, new social identities were ideal for the development of new products and new markets.

These markets were created upon the predominant form of politics that has emerged from the turn to language and postmodernity, known as the 'new social movements', or identity politics. Whilst these movements have provided the impetus for the liberation of very real limitations upon subjective expression, they cannot be considered to be subversive. Rather than acting as a threat to capitalism, working women, racial enlightenment and sexual reform allowed the development of new and profitable markets. Postmodernism may have been

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<sup>39</sup> Identity politics, rather than being an exemplary element of postmodernism rather embodies the position of cultural studies between modernism and postmodernism. Identity politics, although a form of particularly concurrent with postmodernism, is an attempt to establish an essential unity that is quite opposed to the celebration of difference which characterises postmodernity. Nonetheless, in terms of political positioning, identity politics and cultural studies have much in common

experienced as liberation for those outside of the hegemony of the white man within Western nations but this expression has come to little more than the commodification of cultural difference. Westerners may have a more diverse range of restaurants at which to eat but for those who experience eating as an infrequent necessary, postmodern liberation remains entirely other<sup>40</sup>.

Thus, while postmodernism acts as a valuable reminder of the dangers of totalising forms of modernist practice, it provides no answer to either the contradictions of contemporary capitalism or the pragmatic attempts to restore the smooth functioning of capital. Moreover, postmodernism operates as a supplement to the modernist approach to politics embodied by Sachs. Whilst this form of Leftist administrative politics works pragmatically towards softening the injustices of capitalism, postmodern culture allows for a celebration of its benefits. Ultimately there is something a little tragic about postmodernity; the Left appears gun-shy, unwilling to take power in any radical sense lest the mistakes of the past are repeated. It is, as Eagleton states in regards to the foundations of the Western empire; “a rather awkward moment in human history to find oneself with little or nothing to say about such fundamental questions” (2003:102). Whilst lessons must be learned from postmodern discourse on epistemology and ontology, contemporary circumstances, in which the contradictions of capitalism are becoming more apparent yet political alternatives are all but extinct, demand a re-entry into the political and the question of universality. Moreover, whilst the postmodern re-reading of Marxism has been necessary, this reading has taken away the universal (and economic) dimensions of Marxism’s critique of capitalism; that capitalism must be opposed through a discourse of emancipation is several steps too far for many forms of postmodern discourse.

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<sup>40</sup> Moreover, no hegemonic mode of politics has developed from postmodern thought. This is no specific reason to discount it but it is worth noting that politics in the United States is divided between the pragmatist Democrats and fundamentalist Republicans rather than any sense of the postmodern. Postmodernism exists but as a form of cultural practice and commodification. For this reason, postmodern culture can be considered as a hegemonic historical response to the impossibility of class struggle – an impossibility I shall expand upon in Chapter Six.

Marxism remains, however, *the* radical alternative form of political economy with the potential to persist against the meta-hegemony of capitalism. It is only through Marxism that the dimension of political economy remains alive. In order to respond to the material contradictions of global capitalism, we must not accept the split horizon constituted by the likes of Sachs and the postmodernists. Rather, we must return to a rethinking of the Marxist tradition and the dimension of universality. The difficulty lies in proceeding with a Marxist approach without the materialist guarantee of history that supported the sense of normativity which rendered Marxian politics hegemonic. We must consider how one can hold to class exploitation as the ultimate form of capitalism, or communism as unquestionable form of the Good, whilst accepting the ontological differentiality of the signifier. Even if we take comfort from Marx's own rejection of morality, we must note that he was only able to hold this position on the basis of his determinist conception of history.

Against these difficulties, it has been the restoration of universality as a category, as has emerged within the discursive turn, which has provided the impetus for post-Marxist theory. For theorists such as Laclau, the discursive turn is not as a threat but, rather, a vital moment in the renewal of the Marxist historical project. Nonetheless, despite this restoration of the primacy of Marxism itself, the concepts of communism and class struggle appeared to fade away so as to leave Marxism without the critical edge provided by its theoretical foundations. It is to Laclau and post-Marxism that we now turn in order to consider these attempts to restore Marxism within the discursive turn.

## **(Post)Marxism, Laclau and the Shrinking Hegemony of Socialist Strategy**

Perhaps the first text in what is now regarded as post-Marxist theory is Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). This breakthrough book introduced both discourse theory and its political dimension, radical democracy. Laclau and Mouffe began from within the Marxist tradition – the work attempts to re-articulate *socialist strategy* (emphasis is required on both these terms) and uses Gramsci's reading of the Marxist concept of hegemony to do so – but establishes a strong break with Marxism, such that it is the first

openly 'post-Marxist' text. Post-Marxist discourse is split, as British political theorist Mark Devenney states, between:

the need to keep in sight the normative idealism which underpins one spirit of Marx, the insistence that things ought to be otherwise[and] ... On the other hand post-Marxist accounts cannot retain intact the rationalist and deterministic limitations of the Western Marxist tradition' (2002: 9).

Moreover, following Jameson's contention (1996: 1) contention that post-Marxisms emerge in response to changes in the structure of capitalism, New Zealand sociologist Chamsy el-Ojeili (2009) argues that we can identify a 'Post-Marxism I' and 'Post-Marxism II'. He suggests that the first associates Marxism with the 'sins' of modernism and consists of a rethinking of its theoretical framework without necessarily developing the political consequences of this revaluation. As such, this move relocates the locus of 'Marxist' critique from capitalism to modernism. As a consequence, the central tenet of this form of post-Marxism is that the problem with both Marxism and capitalism is that they are both too rational, too modernist; instead, an entirely different mode of being is required. In this sense, post-Marxism remains Marxist by association only, having more in common with the forms of postmodernity described in the previous section (ibid.: 41-44).

By contrast, post-Marxism II, as conceived by el-Ojeili, is more of a rejuvenated response to the restructuring and expansion of global capitalism. These forms, and here el-Ojeili includes Badiou as well as Hardt and Negri, focus more on Marxist politics as a response to capitalism rather than the theoretical underpinning of Marxist analysis (ibid.: 46). I will discuss all these approaches (within which we also include Žižek) through the remainder of the thesis as we consider the prospects for Marxism theory after the turn to language. For now, however, I shall consider Laclau's rethinking of both Marxist theory and politics, acknowledging that post-Marxism has come to be 'hegemonically' characterised by Laclau's discourse theory and the Essex school at which he is based.

Along with *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau's approach has been further supplemented with *New Reflections on the Revolutions of Our Time* (1990). In this text,

Laclau (particularly in a chapter co-authored with Mouffe, *Post-Marxism without Apologies* (1990)) declares an affinity to Marxism and to the benefits of psychoanalysis but, ultimately, argues that it is the category of discourse which holds the trump card. For Laclau, if language constructs the social field, this construction is never complete, such that 'Society does not exist'. This incomplete field of meanings is what Laclau labels discourse. The battle of politics – a battle of hegemony – is the ultimately impossible struggle to fix meaning around certain nodal signifier. These signifiers, which Laclau labels empty signifiers, establish a chain of equivalence.

It is around the empty signifier that Laclau, against the central thrust of postmodernity, attempts to return to the category of universality. This restoration, however, has little in common with the sense of universality apparent in the modernist tradition in which Marx was embedded. Early modernism – that established before the discursive turn – assumed an objective correspondence between language and the material world. As such, establishing a universal truth, either in terms of ontology or politics, was a matter of the correct epistemological approach. This is seen in Marx's historical materialism, where he argued that an objective, and thus universal, truth could be established by using the correct interpretative tools. Moreover, this approach remains hegemonic amongst the 'administrative Left' we noted in the introductory chapter. Sachs, for example, assumes that natural science (and economics) is wholly objective. Moreover, he comes to argue that the capitalist form of economics is the universal form and can thus be applied 'clinically' to the symptoms of global capitalism (2005a).

In contrast, postmodernist forms of thought rejected the possibility of any form of universality, arguing that the lack of any final transcendental signifier meant that any attempt to find 'Truth' was ultimately differential and particular. For Laclau, however, the focus on particularism, as well as being philosophically inept, is also a form of political defeatism. Instead, if movements are to grip the polis they must appeal to universality. In regards to the impotence of particularly, Laclau (and Mouffe) state;

If the demands of a subordinated group are presented purely as negative demand subversive of a certain order, without being linked to any viable project for the

reconstruction of specific areas of society, their capacity to act hegemonically will be excluded from the outset. (1985: 189)

Laclau (1996: 36) nonetheless argues – for the same reasons asserted by postmodernist thinkers – that the universal is impossible. Yet, he insists it is necessary. This simultaneous necessity is asserted by the presence of the empty signifier which holds the place of the universal. The signifier which holds this place is not naturally given but, rather, established by way of discursive battles for hegemony. Given that the categories of discourse and hegemony define the political field, political battles become strategic, with particular groupings forming coalitions under a single signifier. If at the moment the hegemonic Leftist signifier is ‘Green’, then ‘chains of equivalence’ have built around this signifier, with the result that Green groupings, whether political parties or otherwise, come to hold the multiple demands which characterise contemporary Leftist politics, most notably the politics of anti-discrimination.

Moreover, Laclau does not only designate a formal matrix of political performance but supplements this ontology with a normative vision, one that subverts the possibility of any sense of foundational normativity. Laclau’s sense of the normative stems, like Marx, from his ontological commitments. For Laclau, the contingency of language allows for the possibility of human freedom from ideological subjugation and containment. As such, the early Laclau suggested that this freedom is best represented by what he, amongst others, labels ‘radical democracy’.

Radical democracy has two readily identifiable dimensions. The first is a celebration of contingency. Laclau argued that; “True liberation does not therefore consist in projecting oneself towards a moment that would represent the fullness of time but, on the contrary, in showing the temporal – and consequently transient – character of all fullness” (1990: 193) and goes on to state; “A free society is not one where a social order has been established that is better adapted to human nature but one which is more aware of the contingency and historicity of any order” (ibid.: 211).

Yet, there is an apparent contradiction here, one that also haunted Marx's work. It is because Laclau sought to envisage politics "beyond the positivity of the social"<sup>41</sup> (1985: 93) that he came to reject historical materialist politics in favour of a discursive reading of the Gramscian category of hegemony. This is, if nothing else, a conception of human nature, leading to a social order which is better adapted to that nature; one without the production of antagonisms which have haunted essentialist politics. Certainly, Laclau would be extremely reluctant to be associated with any notion of 'human nature' but such a postulation is simply the condition of possibility for any theory of being.

Ultimately, Laclau is unable to historicise his own sense of historicity. Instead, his post-essentialist sense of democracy sits somehow outside of the dialectics of history. This ahistorical positioning leads to Laclau's conception of the content of the radical democratic horizon. This consists of an articulation around the fundamental inconsistency of discourse and hegemony. Laclau comes to suggest – with an increasingly loose reference to socialism – that the best strategy for Leftist politics is the development of an articulated coalition of what had come to be known as new social movements, predominately consisting of identity politics, post-colonialism and the burgeoning ecological movement. The key to this strategy has been the dismissal of any notion of a single, privileged, agent of change – the revolutionary subject – in favour of the politics of hegemony and the empty signifier.

Laclau's work has come in for strident critique from within the discipline; so much so that his work has radically changed direction over recent years. The first critique pertains largely to the same issues that affect Lacanian ethics. That is, both the dismissal of the politics of a negative ontology, often by Marxists suffering from both nostalgia and more than a hint of historical blindness (cf. Geras, 1987), and the more considered critique of those that suggest that the Laclauian approach is unable to posit an normative sense of itself. In this sense Laclau's Marxism is haunted by the same nihilism that has plagued continental philosophy since Kant, that of establishing a sense of the 'Good' without a foundational signifier which would guarantee the Good.

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<sup>41</sup> 'Beyond the Positivity of the Social' is the title of the most influential chapter in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, signalling a re-reading of hegemony and introducing the concepts of dislocation and antagonism.

Laclau's solution is a radical recognition of that which is not contingent; contingency itself. If, however, for Laclau the society that is most free is that which is aware of its dependency upon discourse, one must consider what this means for those bodies which have been excluded from the material fruits for society. One could perhaps expand Laclau's thesis – which he does not do – to suggest that the exclusion of these bodies is entirely contingent and can thus be altered. Moreover, this awareness of the contingency of societal construction could be extended by including the previously excluded within a democratic chain of equivalence, such that the world's poorest inhabitants became included within a global demand for justice. Most importantly, perhaps, despite the apparent benefits of his re-reading of Marxism, there is nothing in his theory which suggests a more productive reading of capitalism, one that is more able to explain the continual development of capitalism, its ills or how capital might be overturned.

Thus, if Marx attempted to circumvent the problem of normativity with his 'scientific' historical materialism, which did not rely upon an ideological morality as much as a faith in the progress of history, then the postmodern critique of this determinism left Marxism without any reason to be 'Marxist'. That is, without a transcendental support for the politics of class struggle and politics, either from a descriptive reading of history or abstract moral prescription, there appeared little reason for post-Marxist thought to continue to reference itself to Marxism or to a critique of capitalism.

Indeed, this was the case with Laclau. Although his breakthrough text referenced a rereading of socialist strategy – and a rethinking of the contingency imposed by postmodernity – he came to rely on democracy and politics at the expense of class and the economy to such an extent that his work can no longer be reasonably considered to be Marxist. Marxism, it seems, had been reduced to an empty signifier around which the Left could rally to establish their radical credentials. In terms of political practice, the only difference – with the exception of some institutional tweaking – between the politics of radical democracy supported by the early Laclau and the liberal democracy practiced under late capitalism, is their theoretical reference point.



For this reason, for those who still hold to both a strident critique of capitalism and the validity of Marxist discourse, Laclau's work has come under attack. The primary motivation behind post-Marxism is that the economy cannot be an object in itself and as such cannot determine social relations other than through the contingency of hegemony. Thus the economy is not economic in and of itself but, rather, just another element of political discourse. Arguing that there is no difference between postmodern struggles and class struggle, Laclau rejects any sense of the primacy of the economy, contending; 'class struggle is just one species of identity politics, and one which is becoming less and less important in the way we live' (Laclau, 2000b: 203). In a sense, Laclau is correct; class struggles are becoming less important in the way we (the West) live. It is just that for Laclau this is a point of celebration. Those on the wrong end of class struggle may have cause to disagree. It appears that the category of discourse collapses all other distinctions; the economy is as discursive as ideology. The difficulty with Laclau's post-Marxism, however, is that it has struggled to develop a conception of the economic away from his rejection of Marx's essentialist notion of the economy (Devenney, 2002: 18).

Devenney contention that post-Marxism's loss of its critique of the economy should be treated symptomatically: it is not a contemporary aberration to be resolved with better application of the theory, as Devenney treats it but, rather, an indication of a structural impossibility within post-Marxism with regard to the impossibility of political economy and class struggle. If traditional Marxism, and as we shall see, Žižek, attributed a causal positioning to class struggle and political economy, this cannot be held within a discursive approach. Laclau's theory of hegemony allows for an element to hold a determining position but this cannot be determined *a priori* – rather it is achieved through a battle for hegemony. Without this prioritising of the economy, Marxism loses much of its political edge.

Laclau's position reminds us of the 1970s feminist slogan, 'The personal is political' and its infamous rejoinder 'the personal is personal too, so piss off'. Yes, the economy is political but it is also economic. Just because the economy is always political does not mean that politics is equivalent to economics. Rather, the economy is always the *political* economy. We shall speak more to this matter in Chapter Six when I consider Žižek's Lacanian critique of economy, of determinism, and of causality.

Laclau's (non)conception of capitalism and his rejection of any special status (or, indeed, content) to Marxism or class struggle leaves him with an overly optimistic, even naive, notion of political performance. Perhaps because of this, Laclau's work remains abstract: by contrast to Žižek, Laclau is not known for his detailed elaboration of actually existing politics. Indeed, in a recent heated dialogue with Žižek, Laclau accuses the former of 'waiting for the Martians' in a reference to Žižek's desire to reinstall the category of class struggle (Laclau, 2006: 657). In response, Žižek states that waiting for Martians is the perfect way to describe Laclau's theory of hegemony. The difference between Laclau and his own work, however, is that; "I[Žižek] (am supposed to) believe in real Martians, while he knows that the place of Martians is forever empty, so that all we can do is invest empirical agents with 'Martian value'" (Žižek, 2008a: 294).

Finally, despite an initial affinity and endorsement of psychoanalysis, particularly in regards to the institutionalisation of lack in the struggle for hegemony, Laclau has struggled to integrate his reading of discourse with the materiality of psychoanalysis. As a consequence, it is difficult to conceptualise why universal signifiers would have any more hold over the subject than particular elements – an issue I shall respond to in some detail in the following chapter (see also Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2003, Laclau, 2003, Stavrakakis, 2007).

In response to these criticisms, Laclau has subsequently moved away from Mouffe and radical democracy to a form of politics which focuses more upon the potential for identification, rather than differentiation, provided by his conception of contingency. Laclau's contemporary thought attempts to construct a theory of populism and 'the construction of the people' (Laclau, 2006, Laclau, 2005), a strategy that has moved away from the institutionalisation of lack, to focus primarily on the role of affective identifications in the determination of hegemony. For Laclau, populism is a 'pure' form of politics, a politics which coincides with his theory of hegemony. There are few remnants, however, of the reliance upon contingency which dominated his conception of radical democracy. Instead democracy now accounts for one 'moment' within populist discourse.

Laclau conceives of populism as a neutral movement, like that of hegemony, as opposed to the proto-fascism attributed to it by liberals. Laclau prefers populism to class struggle

because it keeps open the space of power rather than offering a privileged content as the general equivalent of all other struggles. Nonetheless, although Laclau contends that populism exists only in form without suggesting any content, like democracy the very form of its instantiation requires a minimal production of content. This political content consists of a construction of the people as a political subject, giving them, as Žižek's contends, 'Martian Value'. Just as Laclau opined that society does not exist, neither do the people. As such any construction of the people is a hegemonic one, requiring the exclusion of an antagonistic enemy from the chain of equivalence. In this way, Žižek suggests, not only is fascism a form of populism – 'Jew' is the ultimate signifier of lack constructed to fill the lack in the big Other – but populism entails a naturalisation and a potential suspension of the political (Žižek, 2008a:276-285).

Perhaps a more symptomatic example of Laclau's understanding of populism comes from a 2010 report of British football hooligans uniting to protest against Islam. Normally composed of violently opposed groups associated with individual clubs – the groups included the Cardiff City Soul Crew and Bolton Wanderers Cuckoo Boys – the hooligans have begun protesting together under the title 'English Defence League', becoming mobilised against the presence of Islamic religion within the United Kingdom (Briggs, 2010). Here we have otherwise opposed groups – what Laclau would call particular elements – forming a chain of equivalence under an empty signifier 'English Defence League' in a battle for hegemony over the meaning of 'British'.

To summarise, Laclau's descriptive ontology has remained the same but his politics have flipped from the negative to the positive. Both radical democracy and populism rely upon a constitutive impossibility within linguistic structure. This point of impossibility signals the empty place of universality; the element which comes to hold this position is regarded as universal. For the early Laclau, politics should be directed towards holding this place open to allow the inherent dislocatory freedom of language to operate. By contrast, Laclau's populism now suggests that the key task of any political movement is to hold the place of hegemony. This move suggests a radical transition from the politics of lack to the politics of *jouissance*, although Laclau does not use the term, which I shall expand upon in the next chapter before considering its political connotations in Chapters Four and Five.

Populism, at least in the sense in which it is practiced by politicians like Hugo Chavez, provides some hope for the hungry by mobilising resources around their plight; it certainly provides a feasible sense of politics, a politics which ‘work’. Nonetheless in doing so, it falls prey to the same factors that plagued Laclau’s conception of hegemony and radical democracy; an ethical deficit and an inability to consider capitalism in any detail. Moreover, although his notion of populism appears a more powerful political device, in relying upon the positioning of an antagonism to create ‘the people’, Laclau appears to be returning to the same positivising sense of the social against which he initially rallied. Populism may reject the historical naturalism of the revolutionary subject but in accepting that the place of the ‘people’ can and should be held, Laclau’s politics are not markedly different from forms of Marxism before the discursive turn; populism is Marxism without the economy.

Thus, whilst Laclau’s political applications of his theory of hegemony – in both its radical democratic and populist guises – is an effective form of politics across a limit range, his work does not restore Marxism in any manner which provides a response to the contradictions of the global economy. Although Laclau’s attempt to restore the dimension of universality to Marxist discourse should be welcomed, his politics, whether radical democracy or populism, operate through the exclusion of class struggle and the economy. Laclau’s work may mark an advance on the contingent ethics of particularity and difference that characterise the divergent realm of postmodernity but it has not been able to compensate for the losses associated with the rejection of historical materialism. In rejecting economic determinism, Laclau has rejected economy altogether and in doing so no longer engages with global capitalism. Instead Laclau’s work reads as a critique of the difficulties of the politics of modernity. By contrast, interactions between psychoanalysis and Marxism have tended to engage with political economy. Moreover, psychoanalysis, particularly in its Lacanian variety, has been able to return to materiality in its reading of the discursive turn.

## **Psycho-Marxism**

Since its development, psychoanalysis – with its focus upon the unconscious, repression, sexuality, desire, and the death drive as the destructive core of humanity – has had a major impact on social theory. An engagement with psychoanalysis has enlarged understandings of

ideology, of subjectivity, of the role of culture, and of enjoyment in politics and the relationship between the individual and society (Elliott, 2005: 175). Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) exemplified the use of psychoanalysis as a sociological pursuit as Freud developed an understanding of the manner in which the demands of civilised society required a level of repression in the subject that is expressed in a destructive manner<sup>42</sup>. I shall explore this more in Chapter Four.

Freud was re-read by Lacan – who maintained he was only supplementing Freud's work – reworking psychoanalysis in light of Saussure's structural linguistics, famously stating that the unconscious is structured like a language (Lacan, 2006: 416) By this Lacan meant that 'language, as a system of differences, constitutes the subject's repressed desire' (ibid.: 182). In this sense, unconscious desire, like language, constitutes an intersubjective space between and within individual subjects (ibid.: 183). Moreover, intersubjectivity – with the impossibilities associated with its constitution as a differential linguistic system – offers the mediating background for subjectivity. As social theorist Anthony Elliot (2004: 1) states:

For many, the theoretical advantages of Lacan's Freud concerned, above all, his inflation of the role of language in the construction of the psyche, an inflation which happened to fit hand in glove with the 'linguistic turn' of the social sciences.

Lacanian theory, it seemed, had come along at just the right moment, speaking to the analytic dilemmas that came to be associated with postmodernism whilst responding to the problematic to which postmodernism became a response<sup>43</sup>. Against the postmodernists but within the linguistic turn, Lacanian psychoanalysis achieved an alternative hegemony by responding to several of the problems which haunted postmodernism. In particular, Lacanian thought sought to rehabilitate the categories of subjectivity, structure and the body, each of which shall be expanded on in much more detail in the following chapter. Moreover, through the rejuvenation of these concepts, Lacanian theory offered a new way to understand (Western)Marxism and its relationship to the discursive turn.

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<sup>42</sup> This is a line of thought further developed by Herbert Marcuse in particular MARCUSE, H. 1956. *Eros and Civilisation; A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, London, Routledge..

<sup>43</sup> Lacan himself was working contemporaneously with postmodernism but his work has since come to be seen as a response to postmodernity.

The difficulties of combining psychoanalysis and Marxism are intertwined with the collective hope and traumatic failure of Leftist emancipation. Following the dis-ease with the halted progress of Marxist practice and theory, psychoanalysis has been long looked upon both as the saviour and the failure of radical Leftist politics. Yet no stable theoretical fusion has developed between the two traditions, and contemporary theory has come to regard the notion of collective emancipation as rather pathetically passé. Instead of hope, theoretical Leftism holds onto the contradictory fetishes of the necessity of the grand-narrative of capitalism and the contingency of language and culture, between which lies a theoretical waste land where only the brave or unaware dare to stride.

Psychoanalysis was initially attached to Marxism as part of the cultural turn which sought to explain the perceived shortcomings of Marxism in response to the continued presence and development of capitalism. In this initial relationship, characterised by the Freudian Marxism of Wilhelm Reich and the Frankfurt School theorists, psychoanalysis was used to add a theory of subjectivity to Marxism in the face of the failure of the Marxist 'revolutionary subject'. These theories of subjectivity focused mainly on the role of culture in mediating the effects of capitalism and preventing a true class consciousness from emerging.

If this could be described as the first phase of 'Psycho-Marxism' the second phase was dominated by Louis Althusser's structuralist revision of Marxism (Miklitsch, 1998: 85). Althusser did not seek to fuse together the two discourses but, rather, take advantage of what he believed to be a structural homology between class struggle and the unconscious (Özselcuk and Madra, 2007: 86). Althusser's return to Marx through psychoanalysis was the first to be dominated by Lacan, rather than Freud. As such, it cultivated a re-reading of Freud as well, framed in Lacanian terms. Althusser was perhaps the first to politicise Lacanian thought in his reworking of Marxism and ideology. Using Lacan's notion of the mirror stage to exemplify (mis)recognition in ideology through what he called 'interpellation', Althusser's work had a strong influence upon efforts to rework both Marxist determinism and the role of culture and ideology in maintaining the dominance of capital.

The movement from Freud to Lacan proved to be both a threat and opportunity for Marxist theory. Lacan's emphasis on the structuring role, and ultimate failure, of language dismissed

the foundations of Marxist essentialism and previously assumed forms of political action associated with communism. Communism may have remained as a reference point but the essentialist justifications had long disappeared, dispatched to a theoretical attic to allow for occasional bouts of nostalgia. Importantly, however, this dimension was not dismissed altogether. Althusser and those that followed remained committed to Marxism for a reason, although others, such as Laclau, may not have been so sure. The problem was that while psychoanalysis did not fall prey to the transgressive particularism of postmodernity, it did share a deep suspicion of politics, utopianism and revolution. If critics have found psychoanalysis woefully inadequate as a political touchstone, then traditionalist Marxists certainly did not find it a suitable torch bearer.

Although Marxism and psychoanalysis share several theoretical similarities – a committed engagement to reducing the gap between theory and practice, a similar notion of causality (in terms of class struggle and the unconscious respectively) and a radically divergent focus on generating change – in both their underlying ontology and optimism towards the prospects of political change they proved radically incompatible. For some, such as social theorist Sean Homer (2001), this makes any attempt to develop psychoanalytic Marxism as a singular practice a foolish pursuit. As such, he claims that Žižek’s “Lacaniam appears to rule out the possibility of any orthodox ‘understanding’ of Marxism” (ibid.: 7).

Resonating with Homer’s sentiments, psychoanalysis in relation to politics remains intensely controversial. This is the case even though – as Stavrakakis (2007: 1) reports – it has become second in influence only to analytical liberalism<sup>44</sup>. Lacan is accepted as a theorist of cinema or sexuality but not of politics. Indeed, Elliot (2004:2), contends; “At its bleakest, the Lacanian symbolic was deployed to underscore the inevitability of social order and political domination as a fundamental state of human desire”. Moreover, Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey (Robinson and Tormey, 2005, Robinson and Tormey, 2006, Robinson, 2004), in relation to Žižek’s appropriation of Marxism, argue that the negativity inherent in

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<sup>44</sup> Elliot too remarks, “Indeed, for some considerable period of time, it seemed that theory just wasn’t theory unless the name Lacan was referenced” (2004: 1).

Lacanian thought simply ends up reproducing the antagonism, domination and violence of capitalism, the very things they believe Leftist politics should seek to revoke.

Likewise, Homer (1996: 109) states that although psychoanalysis can engage in a “continuing critical dialogue with political and social theory”, its constitutive inability to develop a positive sense of ideology means that more reactionary positions will fill this gap and for this reason psychoanalytic discourse is an inappropriate partner for Leftist political practice. Furthermore, Elizabeth Bellamy (1993) comes to argue that whilst psychoanalysis has tremendous analytic potential, it does not offer any more fruitful opportunities for political action than had already been developed in the discursive turn. Psychoanalysis, it seemed, explained the domination of capitalism and the hopelessness of culture a little too well.

Much – if not all – of this criticism is aimed at Žižek. It is directed at Žižek not only because he is the most significant scholar in the discourse but also because his form of politics relies heavily upon a reading of Marxism that both re-establishes and circumvents the central currents of traditional Marxist politics – most notably class struggle and communism. Žižek’s interpretation of Marxism operates as an antagonistic answer to the question of universality, truth and language. Without wanting to re-occupy any nostalgic sense of Marxist essentialism, he demands that the Left respond to the dominance of capital.

Žižek embodies the impossibilities of Leftist politics because whilst his work grapples with the same difficulties of representation that have brought the downfall of traditional Leftist (essentialist) politics, he maintains that the Left must not abandon the political terrain either by giving way to the dilemmas of representation or losing sight of the economy. As such, although couched within a reading of both psychoanalysis and Marxism, much of the remainder of this thesis entails a reading of the difficulties, challenges and possibilities offered by Žižek’s work. If in responding to the crisis of global sustainability I had reason to again turn to Marxism, in our reading of the difficulties of approaching Marxism after the discursive turn, I have cause to turn to Žižek.

As such, the reference to Marxism becomes largely implicit in the remainder of the thesis. Here I am not so much concerned with an overt discursive rejuvenation of Marxist politics –



although this might well occur through the course and consequences of Žižek's work – but, rather, the manner in which Žižek's use of the Western Marxist tradition, in particular his return to the economy, class struggle, and communism, acts as a response to contemporary capitalism. Ultimately, the prospects for Marxist theory and political practice are beyond the scope of this project which instead focus upon a response to the material contradictions of global capitalism. If I began this response by reference to Marxism, this chapter has shown the difficulties of reviving Marxist political practice. Thus, whilst remaining within Marxism discourse and considering its value as a political resource, the identification of both the problems faced by Marxism and in responding to capitalism, has caused a turn to psychoanalysis, rather than Marxism, as the prime theoretical reference point.

Thus, having introduced the dilemmas of post-Marxism and the psychoanalytic response, it is now time to turn to psychoanalysis itself in order to properly consider Žižek's work.

Although I have thus far introduced psychoanalytic discourse as a positive contributor to Marxism, the situation is far more complex. Through its conception of symbolic castration, psychoanalysis allows for a reading of the discursive turn which is rooted in the body. In doing so it is better able to materialise discourse and explain the apparent fixity of the symbolic order. Moreover, primarily through Žižek's work, a return to the economy is possible without reverting to a strict determinism (this shall be the subject of Chapter Six). In doing so, we see that following the rejection of historical materialism and the political vacuum which followed, psychoanalysis adds to the explanatory power of Marxism, providing an understanding of the difficulty of shifting capitalism and hence the possibilities for doing so without the inevitability of history.

As such, the psychoanalytic reading of Marxism suggests the possibility of restoring Marxism as a political force in order to provide a response to the global sustainability problematic. Conversely, whilst this 'psycho-Marxism' may be able to better explain why the contradictions of global capitalism prove to be obdurate, in the next chapter we shall see that no form of politics – certainly in terms of the material reproduction of shared social life – stems naturally from the combination of Lacan and Marx. If historical materialism produced not only a reading of capitalism but the inevitable progression of the revolutionary subject, Žižek's dialectical materialism provides little such confidence. Indeed, Lacanian theory may

act as the ultimate dismissal of traditional Marxist politics, leaving the question of politics and normativity in the rebellious hands of psychoanalytic discourse and its central troublemaker, Žižek.



### 3. The Body of the Discursive Turn

Although Freud developed psychoanalysis as a clinical means of curing psychological pathologies, psychoanalysis after Lacan can be seen as another response to the discursive turn in both its clinical and socio-political forms. Following Saussure, for Lacan it was “the world of words that creates the world of things” (2006: 229) such that the subject did not use language but is rather constituted in language<sup>45</sup>. Lacanian theory thus suggests that the human subject is fundamentally alienated from within: language, the very stuff of our thoughts, feelings and (ego)identity comes from outside, from something Other that comes to invade, and define, our inner life (Fink, 1995: 7).

The seat of this inner life is the unconscious, which is both formed by language and structured like a language; it has a formal grammar which unfolds like a chain (Ibid.: 8). The unconscious then becomes, according to Lacan, “the discourse of the Other” (Lacan, 2006: 265), acting as the presence of the Other within the body. In this sense the human subject does not use language but is rather used by language through the unconscious discourse of the Other (Fink, 1995: 14). Moreover, the subject of language is alienated not only by the differential separation of the concept from the thing but also the material separation of the body from itself, otherwise known as symbolic castration. The human, unlike its fellow animals, cannot purely react upon instinct or enjoy its body. Instead, upon entry into the symbolic order, the subject loses access to total materiality. Thus, for Lacan in contrast to Marx, alienation is neither contingent nor political but, rather, an ahistorical condition of being.

Lacanian psychoanalysis, therefore, offers an alternative interpretation of the discursive turn within which it is part. Through the restoration of the salience of materialism, many of the difficulties I assigned to postmodernity in the previous chapter can be rethought. Against the differential contingency of the signifier, psychoanalysis emphasises the underlying fixity of being through a (partial) return to materiality of the body and the signifier.

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<sup>45</sup> Perhaps more accurately, the Lacanian subject is constituted by the failure of language.

Postmodernism has tended to reject essentialism, fixity, and emancipation as if they are all one mode of meta-narrative illusion. In some ways the postmodernists are correct – in the absence of any meta-narratives or essential foundations life is inherently fragmented and contingent. Where the post-modernists are misguided, however, is in dismissing the notion of a ‘human condition’ altogether, as if it implied a naturalness that no longer applies after the turn to language. Rather, the ultimate lack of foundation that constitutes both the subject and the human community in language *is* the human condition: fragmentation at the hands of language which dominates meaning and human relations but is exceeded by a surplus materiality, both in terms of what Lacan calls *jouissance*, and the material necessity of reproducing the human animal.

The key error committed in much of the thought considered to be postmodern is that the consideration of the fragmentation which envelops language – the body, the subject (if the subject is given a presence) and human community – places the very existence of these objects in doubt. Conversely, Lacanian theory suggests that whilst language produces a fragmentation to social life from which there is no possibility of recovering, an excessive, materialist, remainder of existence persists. This materiality is not the determining stuff of historical materialism but, rather, a dialectical materialism evident only in the failure of language. Where Marx suggested a commonality to human existence based around the shared conditions of production, for Lacan intersubjectivity is based around the shared grip of language and its remainder, *jouissance*. If for postmodernists all that was solid had melted, Lacan suggested that the signifier does not melt social life into thin air but, rather, into a bodily substance called *jouissance* which ensures that politics is not just a matter of signification.

Here, the human condition is constituted by a complex dialectic between lack and excess: lack in the sense of the negativity at the heart of being caused by the subject’s essential separation from *jouissance* through the operation of the signifier, excess, because of the compensation the subject receives for this sacrifice, a surplus-*jouissance* located in the object cause of desire (*objet a*). Žižek, following Lacan and Freud before him, defines this movement between lack and excess as the death drive; being is never just being, such that; “Human life is never ‘just life’: humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the

strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things” (Žižek, 2006d: 62).

As such, by conceiving of the problem of signification as one of symbolic castration – an issue as much of the body as the psyche – Lacanian theory has been able to restore structure, materialism, and fixity as key elements of theory once lost by Marxism to postmodernity and the discursive turn. In restoring these dimensions, Lacanian psychoanalysis – through Žižek in particular – has been able to rehabilitate Marxism as an explanatory device beyond any deterministic sense of history. What it has not been able to restore, however, is the emancipationist demand at the heart of the Marxist approach. In terms of the loss of this demand. Indeed, psychoanalytic theory – including its Freudian forbearer – can be considered perhaps more sceptical about the prospects of revolution and emancipation than postmodern thought. If postmodern ethics hold some optimism about human freedom – although dismissive of the universality required for widespread political change – psychoanalysis holds no hope; the death drive is not a concept for the sunshine theorists of the human mind.

For Lacanians, revolution entails rotation around a central point of impossibility rather than a reinvention of the wheel itself. As we shall see throughout the remainder of this thesis, this is not the last word on the role of psychoanalysis in politics. It does, however, suggest a vital question: If Lacanian theory is so deeply uneasy about the prospects of progressive politics, why should it be taken to offer any response to the material contradictions of the global economy? This question is complicated by the application of psychoanalysis to Marxist discourse. Communism, class struggle and the revolutionary subject appear quite divorced from desire, fantasy and the essential stability of the *sinthome*.

This disjuncture between the domains of impossibility and ‘positive politics’ is not easily bridged and produces analytic complications that reverberate throughout the remainder of this thesis. I shall argue that Lacanian psychoanalysis, as embodied by Žižek’s work, provides the most powerful strategic response to that disjuncture as it plays out in the context of problems around global sustainability. In order to come to this conclusion, one informed

from a Marxist analysis of capitalism as much as the psychoanalytic clinic, we shall traverse questions of ethics, politics, economy, communism and utopia.

The focus of this particular chapter is twofold: primarily I detail the manner in which psychoanalysis has been a response to the discursive turn. Of particular interest is a consideration of the challenges this response presents for the practice of both Lacanian and Marxian politics. Furthermore, in this reflection I shall discuss the theoretical basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis that will determine much of the basis for future argumentation. As such, I shall consider the dialectical relationship between lack and surplus, embodied in Lacan's notions of the Real and *jouissance*. Such a deliberation requires further development of desire, ideological fantasy, the symptom and subjectivity, along with the emblematic *objet a*<sup>46</sup>.

In response I shall argue that the value of Lacanian psychoanalysis lies in its return to the materiality of discourse, which implies the existence of fixity to being, rather than the contingency which was the focus of postmodernity. Conversely, Žižek suggests that a re-reading of Marxism through Lacan results in a rejection of (the fantasy of) Marxian communism and the revolutionary subject. Thus, while Marxism and psychoanalysis make a powerful couplet, this fusion is particularly troubling for any sense of politics inspired by Marx. In considering the dilemmas inherited by Marxist politics after the discursive turn and symbolic castration, the chapters which follow focus on the political connotations of psychoanalysis, before returning to the economy and possible responses to its inherent contradictions.

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<sup>46</sup> Whilst being aware of the difficulty in defining and utilising Lacanian concepts in a manner divorced from his own clinical concerns, this chapter does not specifically seek to discuss the historical and dialectical movements and controversies inherent in the Lacanian oeuvre. Lacan's work is notoriously obscure, Lacan himself using various concepts inconsistently across the length and content of his work. The basis of this chapter (the dialectics of the human condition) could not only be the subject of a thesis but is a life's work in itself. Whilst acknowledging the difficulties of using these concepts without fully exploring the possible depths of discussion, such are the inherent limitations of a thesis project that does not take these concepts as its specific focus. There is certainly value in this discussion, and one should be very careful – as I seek to be in this thesis – not to reify any notion. Conversely, in the context of this particular thesis and its ultimate subject (the crisis of global political economy) such discussion is not especially pertinent. Thus, whilst it is vital to further argumentation to divide Lacanian thought into several central concepts, the construction of these concepts must be read with the preceding proviso in mind.

## Symbolic Castration, or, the Materiality of Language

Like postmodernity, Lacanian psychoanalysis responds to the dilemmas of the discursive turn, in particular the ontological side of the problematic of representation; that language has no outside from which to grasp itself. For the Lacanian subject, language as its own limit means that the subject has no access to the pure animal materiality of the body nor has any ability to access its situation outside of language. This is the crucial (materialist) paradox of humanity; to be human is to be cursed with both metaphysical concerns and moral anxiety, yet have no perch from which to consider these conceptual impositions. If all that is required is a sufficiently removed perch from which to objectivity view humanity – and the likes of Sachs may think they have found this perch (and called it economics<sup>47</sup>) – much of history entails a struggle to designate this privileged point of objectivity. This struggle, moreover, has mostly involved the battle to remove those who stand in its way.

The discursive turn produced a revolution in the search for a perch; the only possibility came within language itself through what modernity called reflexivity and postmodernity the last illusion (see Bauman, 1993). Late modernity came to suggest that the problem of objectivity lay within us not from some impossibly divorced vantage point. Psychoanalytic theorists, however, were the bearer of bad news; language, as the discourse of the Other, not only alienates the subject from itself, creating a lack of being within the subjective realm but the objective sphere of the Other is lacking in itself.

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<sup>47</sup> Indeed Sachs SACHS, J. 2005a. *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for our Time*, New York, Penguin Press. has constructed what he calls ‘clinical economics’ which can be applied across a number of different contexts based upon a number of central ‘truths’ about the operation of markets. Whilst the standard Marxist approach is to reject this *doxa* offhand, as we shall expand on in detail in Chapter Six, these approaches do ‘work’. That is, the exigencies of the market do have a reproducible logic which allows the interpretation of a number of laws. The vital difference between this interpretation and that of neo-liberalism is that whilst the latter conceives these laws to be a reflection of natural human behaviour our reading is that they are a reflection of the non-arbitrary operation of capitalism.

Moreover, whilst this chapter will suggest a wholly different interpretation of the human condition from that inferred by neo-liberalism and the economic subject, this is not reflected in a corresponding theory of ideal economic behaviour. Nonetheless, in Chapter Six we will discuss Yahya Madra and Ceren Özsalcuk’s attempts to transpose the Lacanian theory of feminine subjectivity onto an alternative reading of class structure in an attempt to suggest an alternative conception of economic subjectivity.



For Lacan, lack was the precondition for any notion of the human condition; language fundamentally alienates the subject from the body. Moreover, Lack is not simply nothingness but has an ontological status *beyond* nothingness; it does not only imply negativity but also excessive attempts to compensate for this negativity. For Lacan, lack has the same form as an empty set – emptiness implying the possibility of fullness. Lack thus has the status of something missing, the necessarily awkwardly represented ‘presence of absence’.

Understanding Lacan’s conception of lack is made more difficult by the inadequate translation of the French signifier ‘*Manqué*’ as used by Lacan. *Manqué* is translated to lack in English because of the grammatical inadequacy of the English verb ‘to miss’ (Fink, 1995: 52). Missing, more than lacking, implies both the lack of something and attempts to regain what is lost. These attempts (the ‘missing’ of the object) characterises the operation of desire; a ‘lack of being’ which generates a ‘want to be’ (ibid.: 103). For Ernst Bloch (1986), this dialectic exchange between lack and longing is evidence of the utopian demand at the heart of being<sup>48</sup>. Lack, Bloch suggests, cannot be articulated other than by imagining its fulfilment. In psychoanalytic terms, lack is the performative presence of absence.

The dialectic of language – of symbolic castration and the presence of absence – is such that the human being operates as a being of desire rather than biological need. Symbolic castration – the birth of the subject through their entry into the symbolic order – creates a division in the body which allows for *jouissance*; the signifier is both the cause and the limit to *jouissance* (Levy-Stokes, 2001:101). According to US psychoanalytic theorist Adrian Johnston, Lacan’s re-reading of Freud switched the focus of castration from the anatomy to the symbolic whereby the drives are alienated by the mediating affect of language (2005: 323). Just as Freud had suggested that the citizen must sacrifice bodily instinct – the drives – to become part of civilisation, Lacan contended that the human condition is marked by the internal imposition of the alien demands of the symbolic order. Importantly, where Freud

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<sup>48</sup> Utopia, as shall be the focus of discussion in Chapter Eight, can be read in two different manners. The Utopian demand could refer to the ‘perfect society’, or in Laclau’s terms, that society exists. This form of utopia would certainly be rejected by Lacan as an ethical or political position, although he would suggest that this form of utopia could be translated in *jouissance*. It would, however, remain equally impossible. The sense in which Bloch is referring, however, is a demand for the very impossibility of utopia; utopia as the very form of the suggestion that another mode of being is possible.

considered the repression of bodily expression to be caused by political civilisation, Lacan conceived symbolic castration as an ahistorical necessity which has led to the occurrence of politics.

Symbolic castration means that desire becomes a biological property of the human animal, not one the infant is born with but, rather, one which impinges on the subject on account of its forced entry into language. The human being, like any animal, is subject to a number of biological needs. Indeed, Eagleton (2003:4) quotes Nietzsche in this regard as stating that; “whenever anybody speaks crudely of a human being as a belly with two needs and a head with one, the lover of knowledge should listen carefully”.

Need, or perhaps instinct, does exist but it is killed and over-written by the signifier (Fink, 1995: 12). We could argue, as does Terry Eagleton (2003) that this re-writing, and all the structural inconsistencies that come with it, is the nature of the human animal. If so, the human condition is of a paradoxical nature: the individual body is born with biological needs that are dependent upon their expression, recognition, and structural support through an Other that does not exist, yet provokes a distance between the body and itself.

I will now move to the two concepts that dominate Žižek’s (Lacanian) conception of (dialectical) materialism, the Real and *jouissance*, in order to explain this paradoxical nature and its relationship to symbolic castration and the turn to language. In the section which follows I shall turn to the former, seeking to understand the manner in which the Real conceives of structure, materiality and the essential fixity of discourse.

## **The Lack of the Real**

The Real can be most broadly defined as both that which resists symbolisation and the very distorting effect which prevents access to that distortion, both the presence of lack and that which provokes attempts to fill that absence. The Real is one of three Lacanian registers – the other two being the symbolic and the imaginary – which make up the rings of the Borromean knot. Within Lacan’s lifetime, it was the other two registers which dominated psychoanalysis; the imaginary was informed by the ‘Mirror-stage’ of the early Lacan and the symbolic through Lacan’s focus on semiotics, the signifier and the unconscious. The Real only came to

the fore in Lacan's latter work, and has been increasingly prevalent in readings of Lacan inspired by Žižek, who focuses much more of Lacan's later work<sup>49</sup>.

The Real is, according to Eagleton (2009: 141) “an enigmatic concept, as well as ... an analogous one, working at several different levels simultaneously”. It is because of this simultaneous operation – one more akin to music than science<sup>50</sup> – that the Real is such a difficult term to grasp<sup>51</sup>. Certainly the Real is not reality in itself, some pure unadulterated access to materiality or biology. Rather reality, along with materiality, is a response to the Real. The difficulty is that the opposite is also true; the Real is a response to materiality that is a part of ‘reality’. For this reason considering a definition is a delicate affair<sup>52</sup>.

The Real does not persist in and of itself: the effect of the Real plays out within a variety of different discursive positions such that one can only speak of the Real in the singular in terms of an abstract form. In terms of its instantiation in language, we can only represent different modalities of the Real<sup>53</sup>. Therefore we can refer to the Real in terms of desire or drive, in the operation of fantasy and *objet a* or in the antagonistic points of exclusion which sustain a discourse. Indeed, as I shall discuss in Chapter Six, Žižek suggests that the operation of global capitalism can be considered a modality of the (symbolic) Real.

Žižek introduces this enlarged notion of the Real, involving a symbolic Real, in the foreword to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *For they Know Not What They Do* (2002a: xi-xii). This distinction came as a response to Žižek's own criticism of his first book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), against which he claims he endorsed a “quasi-transcendental reading of Lacan” and the Real. That is, Žižek argues that his reading of Lacan implicitly constructed the Real as a point of failure with the consequence that ethics involves the acceptance of failure and

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<sup>49</sup> Indeed this chapter, orientated by Žižek's work, begins with the Real in its examination of Lacan's central concepts.

<sup>50</sup> I thank Wendy Bolitho for her insistence upon this point.

<sup>51</sup> Indeed, whether it is possible or desirable to represent the Real is a matter for discussion.

<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the best way to understand the Real is through the very failure to produce a definition. What these attempts do is encircle a certain impossibility, a point of failure in the discourse. It is this point that can be considered the Real; the Real can never be fully represented but can be felt as the failure to account for its presence. This is perhaps what the reader should seek to take out of this section.

<sup>53</sup> Indeed, this signals the operation of the Real – a singular impossibility which produces a plurality of responses

finitude. Instead, Žižek insists upon the Real as not only symbolic failure but as a positive point of excess. In order to do this, Žižek contends that the Lacanian triad of 'Real-Imaginary-Symbolic' is reproduced within itself. That is, we can have an imaginary form of the Real as well as a symbolic form of the imaginary.

In a similar vein to Žižek's enlargement of the concept of the Real, Bruce Fink suggests the Real can be considered as two modalities, the Real 'before the letter' ( $R_1$ ) and the Real that is 'after the letter' ( $R_2$ ).  $R_1$  is the signifier given to that beyond language, an illusionary time and space generated by signification itself such that  $R_1$  appears to be without absence. It is only  $R_2$  that cuts up  $R_1$  through the generation of 'reality' in the symbolic order. These cuts occur because the symbolic realm cannot fully grasp what is beyond its limits, creating a gap between reality and the Real. In essence  $R_1$  exists only as an absence but this absence is given a name and thus an existence; without the operation of naming in the symbolic,  $R_1$  would only be felt as an absence (Fink, 1995: 24 -25). The Real before the letter is thus an original trauma, the fantasmatic point of symbolic castration that turns the pleasures of animal into the torturous being of man. It is a phenomenon best described by Eagleton (2009:143-144) when he states:

We can grasp this alien phenomenon only by constructing it backwards, so to speak, from its effects – from how it acts as a drag on our discourse, as astronomers can sometimes identify a celestial body only because of its warping effect on the space around it.... This void is the precondition for the order's effective functioning but can never fully be represented there.

Conversely, because absence can only be felt through the failure of presence, the Real cannot simply be considered to be external to symbolisation either in the form of  $R_1$  or  $R_2$ . The Real is not just what is excluded from the symbolic but, rather, has what Lacan termed an 'extimate' relationship with the symbolic order, being both within and outside the symbolic at the same time. Thus, although the Real resists symbolisation, it is not alien to the symbolic.

The gap between reality and the Real is strictly internal to reality – there is no reality without the Real. This is the case for  $R_1$  because it establishes the very limits of symbolisation but also for  $R_2$ .  $R_2$  operates as the factor that distorts symbolisation from within; it is the

disavowed 'X' that warps symbolisation in a manner in which we cannot be aware at the time of 'understanding'. Thus, the Real is not simply a time or space before/outside language (this would be  $R_1$ ). It is also the cuts within the symbolic order – that which cannot be symbolised from within a certain ideological constellation. What may be Real to me may not be to you; what is unsymbolisable within one matrix is not within another. Debate over the possible absence of a transcendental God may have a Real affect on a pious church-goer – such that they feel anxious and destabilised by even such a thought – yet be a mundane signification for an atheist. Moreover, the presentation of a signifier may give it a Real presence. Poverty statistics, as an illustration, have such a ubiquitous status that they are no longer disturbing to many but coming face-to-face with hunger and suffering much more so.

Through this understanding of the Real, we are now in the position to assert a Lacanian response to the deadlock between modernist essentialism and post-modern fragmentation. Lacanian psychoanalysis rejects the former because of the failure of language to fully grasp and positivise that which it represents prevents the construction of any such universal essentialist positions. Any such attempts can only exist by way of exclusion – a point we shall build upon in the following section. The rejection of all encompassing universality does not lead, however, to fragmentation and particularly characteristic of postmodernity. Rather, although the universal is impossible, it is also necessary.

Žižek asserts in this same manner that plurality – and he includes false essentialisms in this category – is always a response to some excluded Real element which is simultaneously both a hidden essence and surface appearance. Thus, rather than choosing between universality and particularity, Žižek contends that both are historical responses to the impossible Real. This does not mean the Real is ahistorical but, rather, always takes an historical form. For this reason, Žižek contends that psychoanalysis is able to subvert the contingency-structure dualism. In response to a question from Judith Butler (Butler et al., 2000: 5) in regards to the apparent tension between the (false) transcendentalism of the Lacanian Real and the contingency of hegemonic identification, Žižek states; “The opposition between an ahistorical bar of the Real and thoroughly contingent historicity is therefore a false one: *it is the very 'ahistorical' bar as the internal limit of the process of symbolisation that sustains the space of historicity*” (Žižek, 2000b: 214, original emphasis).

In this sense psychoanalytic theory provides a distinctive step-change from both modernist and postmodernist ontologies. If modernism had spent much of its history trying to grasp, represent and tie down what Lacan called the Real, postmodernism had given up on the whole pursuit, preferring to drift in the semblances of appearances which are but a response to the persistence impossibility of the Real. Psychoanalysis, by contrast, rejects both these approaches in favour of what Stavrakakis calls an ‘encircling of the Real’ which entails the infinite process of considering the effect of absence upon presence and identifying the central cause that drives the production of structure (Stavrakakis, 1999: 130). We cannot, however, introduce a strict divide between cause and structure or causality – one cannot operate without the other. Moreover, as we noted earlier in this section, the Real exists in different modalities, from primordial trauma to the friction that exists between two contradictory discourses. This latter point has significant consequences for the practice of psychoanalytic politics and will thus be the focus of the next section.

## **The Real between Discourses**

Discourse exists as chains of differentially connected signifiers such that the meaning of one is established by reference to another. These chains establish a logical connection in which signifiers form combinations which make sense only by reference to the remainder of the ideological chain. In this conception, the discursive system<sup>54</sup> exists as over-lapping chains that may or may not cross at certain points – points which Laclau labels ‘antagonisms’. In this sense the Real is still, as Lacan (2006: 388) stated, the “domain of whatever subsists outside symbolisation” yet parts of this domain can be symbolised in an alternative discourse and remain absent in another. This is not to suggest that discursive chains are always incommensurable but, rather, that terms cannot be simply transposed whilst maintaining the same meaning: certain chains of reasoning make sense only by reference to the exigencies of the signifying chain.

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<sup>54</sup> The reference to discourse as a system is not a reversion to a form of structuralism but, rather, a recognition that a system is still established even at the moment of its failure – indeed because of that failure.

This circumstance occurs between Marxist and capitalist accounts of political economy. Marxism readily acknowledges that hunger and suffering are a necessary consequence of the interactions of the market. Such an acknowledgement would be a point of dislocation for capitalist political economy – it is a point that Sachs, for instance, struggles to account for – and is excluded from that discourse. Here we have a circumstance in which Marxist discourse can symbolise the operation of the Real within capitalism; a point which cannot be acknowledged within the latter<sup>55</sup>. Such an instance – as shall be the focus of Chapters Five and Six – allows for the effects of the Real to be mobilised in a political manner.

An example of this kind of parallel linguistic logic can be illustrated in the biological world. In January 2010, American Physicist Paul Davies argued that alien life may have co-existed since the beginning of what has become human life (Associated Press, 2010). Davies suggested that there was no necessary reason for all life on Earth to have evolved from a single origin. Instead, an ‘alien’ form of life could have developed concurrently but was unable to evolve past a certain point. Thus alien life might well exist, Davies argued, amongst currently unexplored forms of bacteria. In this case, multiple chains of life might be present on the planet, each with their own biological logic that prevents a connection between them. Moreover, each chain would have different logical impossibilities such that what is impossible within one form of life, say sexual reproduction, is part of the structure of another.

We must be careful here not to get caught up in the abstraction necessary to make this point. It is not as if discourses are self contained branches, never coming overlapping. The point, however, remains: language is not infinitely differential but, rather, is cohered into certain patterns through ideology via the imaginary – patterns which allow for some conceptual chains but not others. Thus, whilst the Real as  $R_1$  is operational as the original trauma which produces discourse itself, within individual discourses unique patterns and impossibilities

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<sup>55</sup> Žižek ŽIŽEK, S. 2006d. *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press. acknowledges a similar point in relation to *objet a*: that what for one person may be an ordinary object can for another be the absolute object of desire

emerge which we have identified as a different modality of the Real –  $R_2$ <sup>56</sup>. Indeed, Lacan suggests a similar logic in his concept of the four discourses – that of the hysteric, master, university and the analyst – each of which identifies a different logic of intersubjectivity.

Žižek suggests a comparable operation to the parallel universe approach to discourse analysis in his recent notion of the ‘parallax view’ – the apparent displacement of an object caused by a shift in the position of the observer. For Žižek, the philosophical twist is that;

The observed difference is not simply ‘subjective’, due to the fact that the same object which exists ‘out there’ is seen from two different stances, or points of view. It is rather that, as Hegel would have put it, subject and object are inherently ‘mediated’, so that an epistemological shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an ‘ontological’ shift in the object itself. (Žižek, 2006d: 17)

The parallax view then produces a ‘multiplicity of symbolic perspectives’ (ibid.: 18) around an ‘unfathomable X’ – a pure difference which is an object in and of itself. A parallax produces what Kant called a ‘transcendental illusion’; the illusion that there exists a point of mediation between two discourses. This mediatory point exists only as the presence of absence, the Real. Vitaly, however, the Real becomes an object itself – the parallax Real. This modality of the Real is the gap which occurs in the parallax shift from one perspective to another. If we take the biblical-postmodern discussions on morality, the parallax Real is the incommensurable gap between the discourses – that barrier which prevents direct communication between them.

Again, the Real here is that point both to which access is not possible and the obstacle itself which prevents this access (ibid.: 26). Furthermore, Žižek goes on to state that the parallax Real brings with it a revision of the standard Lacanian notion of the Real as that which always returns to its place (Lacan, 2006: 17). Rather the parallax accounts for the multiple appearances of the Real itself – that the Real can be entirely different for neo-liberal and Marxist discourse, despite each responding to the same (Real) impossibility of class struggle.

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<sup>56</sup> Fink (1995:16-19), following a model given by Lacan, gives an excellent example of this logic in the coding of a coin-toss game.



The parallax Real is then itself a 2<sup>nd</sup> order variation of the Real: it is not the trauma of symbolic castration but, rather, the impossibilities inherent in attempts to symbolise the absence born by castration. The  $R_2$  is felt both through its absent presence – the primordial example being the Freudian slip whereby the limitations of a particular discursive structure are revealed only through the performative failure of that structure – as well as actually occurring elements of the Real that are incommensurable within an internal logic of a discourse, yet are able to be symbolised from another perspective. The key example of this process comes from the exceptional elements that each discursive perspective must exclude to establish itself as a set; every ideological formation has an exceptional blind-spot that simply cannot be included within the set if that set is to maintain its consistency. It is to these exceptions (and exclusions) that we now turn.

## **The Presence of the Real: On the Condition of Exceptionality**

As I have noted, the Lacanian ontology suggests that the symbolic order is faced with dual pressures: a quest for the imaginary coherence of the body and the dislocatory effect of the Real. Language can never be objective – it can never be a closed system but, rather, requires the presence of other signifiers – but it is also always in the process of seeking objective closure, a process that Lacan associated with the body. The only way to achieve a fragile, ideological, objectivity is by way of an exception to the discursive formation.

The notion of exception often causes confusion within psychoanalytic discourse. Much of this confusion comes from the conflation of different modes of exceptionality into one. This assumption stems from Lacan's theory of sexualisation; the manner in which men and women are structured differently in relation to castration and the lack of *jouissance*. Sexual differentiation has nothing to do with biological essence (Žižek, 1994a: 155) but is rather a structural position in regards to the cut of the signifier; it is entirely plausible to have subjects

with female genitalia identifying with the masculine position<sup>57</sup>. From this distinction between the masculine and the feminine Lacan argued that “there is no sexual relationship”: this does not mean that sexual intercourse does not occur but, rather, there is no logical relationship between masculine and feminine positions. Not only do they represent different structural responses to castration but these responses themselves are not together compatible. As a consequence of the failure of the sexual relationship, Lacan identified sexual difference as *the* antagonism against which both sexuality and sociality is riven; sexual difference is the primary modality of the Real as all forms of discourse are a response to the wound of sexual difference.

Sexual difference can also be conceived of as a logical problem in relation to objectivity and exceptionality in language. The Other is lacking because it cannot complete itself – it cannot name itself within its own set. For there to be an inside there must be an exterior which designates the presence of the inside, otherwise what is internal ceases to be exclusive. By naming the inside that name then becomes part of the set and another exterior signifier is required to constitute the set. Thus, the complete Other, the complete set of signifiers cannot exist – there must be at least one exceptional signifier that names the set, thus exceeding the horizon of that set. Fink (1995: 29-30) here refers to Bertrand Russell’s example of the paradox of the catalogues of all catalogues which do not include themselves as entries. If the catalogue does not include itself within the catalogue, then the list is incomplete – it has an exception, itself. If, however, the catalogue does include itself, then it should not be included within that category .

Such a paradox is the key to Lacan’s understanding of the masculine and feminine; from there to exist a masculine set (a set in which all are included), an exception to that set must exist in order to define the presence of a set. By contrast, the feminine set includes its own exception but loses the ability to define itself as a set and becomes an infinite series.

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<sup>57</sup> Although, as Sarah Kay KAY, S. 2003. *Žižek : A Critical Introduction / Sarah Kay*, Cambridge, UK : Malden, MA :, Polity ; Distributed in the USA by Blackwell Pub., notes the link between biological sex and sexuation is a difficult issue in Žižek’s work. It is not immediately clear why biological men tend to be subjected to the masculine position.

These positions are not just logical possibilities but, rather, responses to symbolic castration; they suggest both a different relation to the phallus<sup>58</sup> and to *jouissance*. The question of the exception in relation to sexuation comes by reference to the phallus. For Lacan, the masculine is altogether subject to symbolic castration and the phallus; man is subject to the *jouissance* of the phallus, otherwise known as symbolic *jouissance* (I shall turn to the question of *jouissance* shortly). Man can only be wholly submitted to symbolic castration by the presence of an exception that is not submitted to these conditions. According to Lacan, that exception had the status of Freud's primordial father in *Totem and Taboo*; the father that has not been subject to castration and was thus able to control and enjoy women fully (Freud, 1960).

Nonetheless, the naming of the set which must necessarily exceed the set is only *one* of the forms of exceptionality. The other is the universal exception, otherwise known as the excluded or the point of concrete universality. This form of exceptionality is the form predominately used by Žižek and is the key to his theory of universality, by which he uses Hegel to read Lacan. This conception of universality and the exception is vital to the remainder of the thesis, so we shall pause to consider it in detail.

## Žižek, Hegel and Universality

In the *Ticklish Subject* (Žižek, 1999: 100-101) Žižek suggests – and rejects – three separate positions on universality. The first is the standard, neutral and positivised universal, indifferent to its particular content; that which is universal applies to all possible circumstances. This conception of universality relies upon a singular and essential foundation and has largely been the subject of critique from the discursive turn – the first question asked of this brand of universality is, from which perspective is this universal? – the very possibility of asking this question reveals the particularity of the universal. Nonetheless, it is

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<sup>58</sup> Lacan broke with Freud in identifying the phallus not with the penis but, rather, the signifier. Again, however, there is a major ambiguity in psychoanalysis around the link between the symbolic phallus and the biological penis, the pertinent question being why the biological penis comes to represent the symbolic phallus – the link appears more than 'radically contingent'

the image of universality assumed by the likes of Sachs and those involved in the natural sciences (or economics).

This conception of universality has been partially negated by the second alternative: universality as an illusion generated by power relations. Here the universal is neither true nor neutral but, rather, a particular reflection of the existing hegemony. Typically, this version is marked by a Marxist conception of ideology, whereby the universal is a partiality, hiding the true, universal totality of social relations. Thus, this form of universality is not postmodern; theorists of a postmodern bent tend to assert that the only possible form of universality is an illusion. By contrast, this 'Marxist' form of universality introduces a split into universality, between an illusory universal and a true underlying universal.

Finally, Žižek offers the universal as empty, as contingent yet always already hegemonised by particular content. This is the version proposed by Laclau. Laclau, in contrast to the previous two positions, acknowledges that the universal is impossible – language prevents a direct or neutral correlation between the universal and particular. Nonetheless, it is in this failure that universality exists. Here, universality occurs when a signifier is abstracted to the point where it represents nothing but itself: an empty signifier. The universal itself is empty but is always filled by particular elements in a battle of hegemony. These particular elements establish a 'chain of equivalence' which fills out the abstract universal horizon such that it coheres our understanding of shared social life. As an illustration, if we were to consider the concept of freedom, Laclau would argue that there is no essential, or universal, definition of freedom. Such a definition would enter into the first notion of universality, where there is one objective understanding of freedom. By contrast, as an example of the second option, Marx argued that ideology under the capitalist mode of production produced a conception of freedom – the freedom to sell one's labour on the market – that masked its immanent contradiction; that selling one's labour on the market takes away one's freedom. Nonetheless, Marx still maintained a universal concept of freedom in species being.

By contrast, Laclau comes to argue that there is no such thing as freedom in itself but, rather, freedom operates as an empty signifier such that any number of possibilities of freedom are possible, whether it is the freedom to vote, the freedom of an honourable death or Laclau's

freedom of dislocation in language. Thus freedom can become universal if it stands in for the empty place of universality. This universal, however universal in form (for Laclau, if not Žižek) can never be neutral in content – this being the major difference which separates Laclau’s conception from the Marxist notion of the universal as an illusion.

Thus, Laclau’s work on hegemony suggests that the universal occurs only through its abstraction from a chain of particular signifiers. This ‘abstract universal’ provides the hegemonic imaginary horizons – the signifiers and images the support any concept of shared social life – that people use to guides their actions, e.g. the concept of individual freedom or that of human rights. This universal imaginary stands in for the lack that constitutes the social domain. The abstract universal is normally based around an empty signifier, or an *objet a*, which in Lacanian terms provides a suture for that primal lack and, because of the sense of fullness that it gives, provides the subject with *jouissance*.

Returning to our example, liberal democratic discourses may be structured around the empty signifier ‘freedom’, which can be taken to mean any number of things. The content of these meanings is not important, unless you happen to be caught under its ideological grasp. In that case the freedom of avoiding the male gaze through a full body Burqa or being bombed into submission in the name of freedom may be of some consequence. In terms of our theoretical argumentation, however, what is important is the ideological form that allows ‘freedom’ to stand in for the presence of absence and structure the field of liberal democracy. In turn, the abstract universal extends this horizon as an ideological formation, taking on further signifiers in what Laclau terms the ‘logic of equivalence’. The condensation of particular elements around a central imaginary horizon through the logic of equivalence offers the prospect of a return to fullness and *jouissance*.

Such a process occurred during the 2008 US presidential elections. The Democratic candidate, Barack Obama attempted to mobilise support under the empty signifier ‘change’.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Early in his campaign, Obama utilising ‘Hope’ as this empty universal signifier. Although Hope remained prominent throughout the campaign, it largely gave way to ‘Change’. This move was most likely enacted in order to avoid splitting the energy of the campaign. Conversely, this example shows that such signifiers are not strictly empty but, rather, carry with them a long history of associations – what Laclau calls a chain of equivalence. The switch from the aspirations of hope to the more mainstream change is not simply a contingent

e.g. ‘Change we can believe in’, ‘Barack Obama is the leader who will bring the change our country needs’. The strength of this strategy was that change meant nothing in itself, save an opposition to the establishment Republican Party – it tapped into an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the status quo. Moreover, it allowed for different political formations to identify with the signifier, whilst setting up a frontier against Republican candidate John McCain’s appeals to leadership and experience; ‘Country First’.

Žižek, however, rejects all three of these versions of universality. That said, although he holds that there is some value in Laclau’s work, particularly in the assertion that the universal is an impossible object. Despite this apparently radical conclusion, Žižek argues that Laclau is not radical enough – he leaves in place the exclusion which allows for universality in the first place. For Žižek, the question of universality is “not which particular content hegemonises the empty universal” but, rather, “which specific content has to be excluded so that the very *empty form* of universality emerges as the “battlefield” for hegemony?” (Žižek, 2000a: 110). As such, Žižek contends that rather than a split between the universal and the particular (causing the universal to be impossible) the universal itself is split between its empty abstraction and concrete remainder, otherwise known as the universal exception.

Žižek’s understanding of universality is exemplified in a defining chapter in his first major text, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Žižek, 1989: 11-53). Here Žižek suggests that Marx ‘invented’ the Lacanian symptom by;

detecting a certain fissure, an asymmetry, a certain ‘pathological’ imbalance which belies the universalism of the bourgeois ‘rights and duties’. This imbalance, far from announcing the ‘imperfect realisation’ of these universal principles – that is, an insufficiency to be abolished by further development – functions as their constitutive moment: the ‘symptom’ is, strictly speaking, a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genius (ibid.: 20).

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move between equal signifiers but signaled a change in political strategy. Nonetheless, this does not change the fact that – once in place – each ‘empty’ signifier can be articulated by any number of discourses.

Here, Žižek is specifically referring to Marx's understanding of freedom, an example I referred to earlier. If liberal capitalism is based around an empty signifier of freedom, which becomes universalised through an abstract hegemonic horizon, then this notion is subverted by the freedom to sell one's labour on the market. Although this freedom is a vital element of liberal capitalism, the very act subverts that freedom – in selling one's labour power, the worker loses their freedom (ibid.: 21). It is this freedom to sell labour power which is the universal exception to the abstract universality of bourgeois freedom.

Here then we have an abstract universal notion of freedom. It is one which is subverted by a concrete element that is simultaneously part of the set and beyond that set. It is this element that Žižek labels the universal exception which produces concrete universality. The universal exception is thus the cut of the universal whereby one of these particulars does assert itself as universal by its very exclusion from the abstract universal. The universal thus encounters itself in the form of its opposite within itself. Universality proper thus becomes a struggle between the particular elements involved in a battle for hegemony and the singular element which belies this horizon (Žižek, 1991a: 33-36).

As such, Žižek states:

With regards to the opposition between abstract and concrete universality, this means that the only way towards a truly 'concrete' universality leads through the full assertion of abstract negativity by means of which the universal negates its own particular content: despite misleading appearances, it is the 'mute universality' of the particular content which is the predominant form of abstract universality. In other words, the only way for a universality to become concrete is to stop being a neutral-medium of its particular content, and to include itself among its particular subspecies. (Žižek, 1999: 92)

Further to this, the same symptomatic element exists in relation to the production of surplus value. Žižek argues that once labour becomes a commodity – that is, for sale on the market – 'equivalent exchange becomes its own negation' (1989:22). Although the worker is fully paid for their labour (according to the market), the very form of surplus-value is one of

exploitation. The worker is exploited not because they are underpaid but because of the position in which the worker exists; having to sell their labour as a commodity.

Concrete universality thus not only signals the presence of an exception to a (false) abstract universalism but “persists in the very irreducible tension, non-coincidence, between these different levels” (Žižek, 2006d: 31) . One should not distinguish between the abstract and concrete universality but, rather, consider universality as the place of this split, not so much the exception itself but both the exception and the plurality of responses which occur in response to it – this is universality proper, universality as struggle (ibid.:34).

Thus, in Žižek’s reading of universality, difference does not occur between the neutral, mediating universal and its particular elements but, rather, between the universal and its own exception. This difference is experienced as an absence which in the analytic process is represented as the Real. It is by bringing this absence into the symbolic order, not in a manner in which it can be pacified by understanding but, rather, in direct contrast to the official horizon of understanding that a proper critique of universality can occur; by revealing the exceptions upon which the ‘false’ universality is founded (Žižek, 2000a: 102). Thus, the Hegelian triad of the universal, particular and singular (exception) is expanded in its Lacanian reading – a fourth element exists in the very gap between the universal and its particular, the Real (Žižek, 1991a: 43-48, Žižek, 1999: 79).

Politically, the central value of this particular identification of the exception is that the exception operates as a modality of the Real. If we consider concrete universality to reveal the place of a constitutive exception – an element of the set which is excluded from that set – then we see that the exception takes a material form and yet does not have a presence within the abstract horizon: its intrusion produces a dislocation. Thus the Real can have an existence, or at least a non-existence in Lacanian parlance, outside of the discursive construction of a certain narrative; concrete universality threatens the horizon from which it is excluded and also constitutes the point of the distortion which prevents its own appearance.

In terms of my previous example in which I identified the freedom to sell labour as the exceptional element of freedom, not only does this dislocating element exist in form – we can identify the formal structure of the wage-labour system to have an element incommensurable



with its ideological narrative that cannot be acknowledged within this narrative – but the political operation of this structure produces actually existing exceptions which are excluded from an ideology. It is these points of exclusion which provide the strongest tension within ideology.

As such, if the effects of the Real are only felt as an absence then, alternatively, the Real can be an already symbolised or symbolisable element that is unable to be acknowledged within the dominant perspective. Moreover, that element can be signified within the discourse but attributed to a different cause or within a separate chain of equivalence.

In regards to the wage labour system, as we have already noted, in order for this system to operate a surplus of labour must be excluded from employment. This excluded surplus exists as an exception to the operation of capitalism and more pertinently the ideological narratives of freedom and justice around which capital functions. In this case surplus labour is not universal itself – the universalism of capital lies in the gap between its abstract and concrete instantiations – but reveals the concrete existence of a point that cannot be included, or properly acknowledged, within the abstracted horizon of understanding.

Nonetheless, we can see that surplus labour, positioned as the embodiment of concrete universality, becomes a point of dislocation – the effect of the Real within an ideology. This effect is a bodily one which has not been accounted for thus far in this rather abstract description of Lacanian theory, based around lack, absence and exceptionality. This reading – with the exception of the previous expedition through universality – is not far divorced from Laclau's Marxism and has given no hint as to the distinctive psychoanalytic reading of materialism discussed in the beginning of the chapter. For this reason, it is now time to turn to the other side of the dialectic of lack and excess that is at the basis of the Lacanian conception of the human condition – *jouissance*.

## ***Jouissance***

*Jouissance* is Žižek's ultimate (Lacanian) answer to the question he poses in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: "What creates and sustains the *identity* of a given ideological field beyond all possible variations of its positive content?" (1989:87). Žižek begins to answer this

question by suggesting that Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* provides an answer to this question in the conception of the nodal point or empty signifier, that;

the multitude of 'floating signifiers' proto-ideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain 'nodal point' (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) which 'quilts' them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning. (ibid; original emphasis)

As the discussion extends, however, it becomes clear that Žižek's answer goes beyond discourse into the materiality which sustains the empty signifier. If Laclau's schema works only at the 'level of meaning', then the full Lacanian analysis of ideology also requires the 'level of enjoyment' (ibid.: 121). Enjoyment dominates meaning and the symbolic field, bending discourse to its perverse will; the paradoxes of enjoyment are perhaps the most original, intriguing and powerful insight of the Lacanian response to the discursive turn. As such, the materiality of enjoyment also has profound consequences for the practice of Marxism. We shall soon turn to these consequences but let us first consider the level of enjoyment.

*Jouissance*, in all its paradoxical forms, is the central force of the human condition. It produces an excessive 'enjoyment' centred in the body and experienced via language, through a dialectic of excessive *jouissance* and the lack of the Real. Along with the anchoring effect of the exception, for Lacanian psychoanalysis *jouissance* is the ultimate reply to the contingency suggested by forms of postmodernity and post-structuralism. If Lacan's analysis of the symbolic register has much in common with post-structuralism, such that Lacan has at times been mistakenly categorised in this group, then *jouissance* allows Lacan's work to go beyond the confines of the symbolic order. This transgression has occurred because Lacan did not conceive of the cut of the signifier as a discursive act alone but, rather, one of symbolic castration; meaning is a bodily function. As such, Lacanian theory has little in common with the likes of Jacques Derrida; indeed the Lacan/Derrida schism is one of the most fundamental within continental philosophy.

*Jouissance* is a specifically Lacanian – as opposed to Freudian<sup>60</sup> – concept and one that carries all the inherent brilliance and difficulties that stem from Lacan’s work. Although sometimes translated into enjoyment, *Jouissance* is the paradoxical state of suffering/enjoyment that lies ‘beyond the pleasure principle’ (Evans, 1996: 92). *Jouissance* is not simply enjoyment or pleasure but, rather, it goes beyond this into a kind of troubling, excessive pleasure that includes elements of transgression and suffering; *jouissance* is excessive because it serves no purpose, relating more to the death drive than any sense of ‘biological instinct’, evolutionary or otherwise (Levy-Stokes, 2001b: 101). As such, *jouissance*, like the Real, exists both beyond language and as an intimate part of language.

As with the Real, Fink (1995:60) argues there are two orders of *jouissance*, before ( $J_1$ ) and after the letter ( $J_2$ )<sup>61</sup>.  $J_1$  is the pure unmitigated *jouissance* that is thought to be sacrificed with the castrating entry into language – it is the subject’s unmediated connection with their body. This original enjoyment is thought to be held by the Other, as if symbolic castration is a unique experience. It is for this reason, Žižek (1997: 64-65) suggests, that we become so resentful of the explicit enjoyment of our neighbour. As such, the ultimate narrative of ideological fantasy is that castration has not occurred; language produces the impossibility of moving outside of itself and allows for the illusion that this is possible, that we can return to a time before castration. This illusion is supported by attributing lack to an obstacle ‘out-there’ that is blocking the fullness of society. The immigrant often holds this position; their very presence is that antagonistic exception which prevents the full expression of nationality. These signifiers, such as ‘Wall Street’ or ‘Jew’ become signifiers of lack and the posited reason for the failure of  $J_1$  *jouissance* and thus a source of *jouissance* in and of themselves;  $J_2$ .

Signifiers of lack or antagonisms are just one element in the operation of  $J_2$ , which occurs when an object comes to substitute for the loss of  $J_1$ . The compensation which is thereby enacted occurs through fantasy in the staging of impossible acts to regain this original

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<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, although Freud did not use this term, the beginnings of its Lacanian composition can be noted in Freud’s work on the death drive and the dialectical relation between Eros and Thanatos.

<sup>61</sup> Adrian Johnston makes a similar distinction between *jouissance* expected and *jouissance* obtained (2005: 297).

*jouissance* ( $J_1$  being impossible because the subject cannot return to a time before language). Such a failure sustains an unconscious instinct for a time without a sense that there is something missing from being. As  $J_1$  is a creation of language, Žižek contends that there is no *jouissance* for the subject before  $J_2$ , surplus-*jouissance*; if the surplus is removed from *jouissance*, it is *jouissance* itself which is lost (Žižek, 1989: 52). For this reason Lacan suggested that lack must always be accompanied by excess; the lack of *jouissance* creates an excessive response. *Jouissance* is not a primordial and absolute enjoyment of the body, broken by language, culture and civilisation before being bastardised into compensatory forms. Rather, *jouissance* occurs only because of the failure of our bodies to obtain this imagined utopia through our forced choice into language and the reign of the signifier: it is nothing but this failure, sustained by an unconscious fantasy of unmediated bodily enjoyment.

Paradoxically then, *jouissance*, according to Johnston, is “enjoyable only insofar as it doesn’t get what it is ostensibly after” (2005: 239). The structure of language is such that *jouissance* ( $J_2$ ) is only able to be enjoyed in its own failure, a failure which keeps alive the prospect of an enjoyment beyond that experienced through the structure of language; the only thing worse than the *ce n’est pas ça* of surplus *jouissance* is the prospect of meeting (surplus) *jouissance* in its bare naked form, and worst of all, knowing it. Such a horror turns the desire of ‘that’s not it’ into the melancholic horror of ‘that is all there is’. In this sense Oscar Wilde’s famous statement – there are two tragedies in life; not getting what you want and getting it – looks positively Lacanian.

Furthermore, Johnston (ibid.: 240-241) contends that the choice of *jouissance* mirrors the ‘Highway man’s choice’: your money or your life. Of course, this choice is no choice at all; choose ‘life’ and lose your money, choose ‘the money’ and (one can only assume!) lose your life and your money. For Johnston, the choice of the subject of language is ‘your *jouissance* or your life!’ If the subject chooses life, which they must, then *jouissance* is lost; the subject is destined to spend their existence in the trauma of this loss<sup>62</sup>. The ‘crazy/impossible’ choice

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<sup>62</sup> As we shall examine in more detail in regards to ethics in the following chapter, much of the clinical process involves coming to terms with this choice and learning to enjoy the possibilities for enjoyment which remain. The vital switch is between the subject as the tragic victim of language and the comedy of actively accepting that over which we had no control; the entry into language

is *jouissance*, to go for full enjoyment, which is naturally impossible after the subject's entry into language. Taken to the end, the subject can only lose their life in search of more extreme forms of *jouissance*. Perhaps more sedately, by choosing *jouissance* and refusing the limitations of human existence, one could suggest the subject loses their life by not experiencing the possibilities for enjoyment inherent in the human condition, the possibilities of surplus-*jouissance*.

Surplus-*jouissance* ( $J_2$ ) should not be considered a secondary effect – all *jouissance* is secondary – but, rather, as the central focus of analysis. Nonetheless, neither should the fantasmatic form of *jouissance* be dismissed; the operation of *jouissance* can only be understood as a relationship between modalities; an excessive compensation for an original lack, one which is simultaneously an imaginary illusion and very Real. It is the task of fantasy to maintain the dialectic between the two modes of *jouissance*, constructing the 'lure' that the semblance of *jouissance* in the symbolic order may lead to something greater.

This analysis has thus far been limited to the masculine mode of enjoyment. As noted earlier in this chapter, Lacan's theory of sexuation produced an incompatible couplet; the masculine and the feminine. The masculine structure was entirely submitted to symbolic castration, such that any enjoyment can only be a secondary, surplus-*jouissance*. The feminine, however, posits a different and somewhat mysterious alternative that has led some to suggest that in the feminine lies the prospect of a radical reshaping of the political.

If all of the masculine subject is submitted to castration – with an exception – then the feminine is not-all submitted to the effect of castration. The feminine subject is also castrated but some part escapes, allowing for the possibility of an 'Other' *jouissance* beyond the phallus (Levy-Stokes, 2001a: 48). Conversely, because there is no exception to the feminine in itself – the feminine is 'not-all' – Lacan argued that 'Women does not exist'. By this he meant not that there is no such thing as woman but, rather, that women cannot be universalised. What Lacan claimed did not exist was the definite article that precedes women – in the original French it is not 'Women' that is under erasure but, rather, the feminine definite article '*La*' (Kay, 2003: 82). There is no set of 'Women', rather the feminine is

structured as an infinite series from which an element can be added or subtracted without affecting the structure of the set.

In regards to *jouissance*, the feminine is able to expand beyond the realm of the phallus, although it is still subject to castration and the phallus. This is perhaps the biggest misconception of the feminine. Feminine enjoyment is not an alternative structure, strictly divorced from the masculine – rather it occurs as an impossible supplement to the masculine beyond the boundaries of the signifier (Levy-Stokes, 2001b: 105). Feminine *jouissance*, according to Carmela Levy-Stokes (2001c: 175) “goes beyond that which can be signified”, and it is the texts of mysticism that best describes this *jouissance*. Renata Salecl (1997), for example, uses the myth of the Sirens to describe feminine *Jouissance* and in Seminar XX, in which Lacan thoroughly discusses feminine *jouissance*, he makes regular reference to the Lewis Carroll’s fable of logic of ‘What the Tortoise said to Achilles’.

Feminine enjoyment, however, remains more of a logical possibility than a symbolic reality. As Salecl (1997:27-28) contends, Lacan speaks to it mainly to emphasise the impossibility of its conception. Indeed, it is only because language contains terms such as ‘unnameable’ that we can speak of feminine *jouissance* at all (Levy-Stokes, 2001c: 179). According to Fink (1997:120), the Otherness of the feminine *jouissance* speaks suggests that “The Other is not just an outside *relative to* a particular, determinate inside; it is always and inescapably Other, ‘outside’ any and all systems”.

For Žižek, however, what is important is not the beyond that the feminine signifies but, rather, that “*beyond it there is nothing*” (1994a: 151, original emphasis). Žižek insists that this distinction is ontological, not epistemological: what we perceive as beyond is purely a fantasmatic projection of the possibility of an eternal *jouissance* beyond the signifier, or, as we shall see in regards to Stavrakakis’ notion of democratic enjoyment, a radical alternative to the masculine. Žižek emphasises, however, that the feminine offers not the prospect of a beyond but in a typical Hegelian twist, “there is nothing beyond ... the feminine is the structure of the limit as such, a limit that precedes what may or may not lie its beyond” (Žižek, 2005: 71). I shall return to this conception in Chapter Five in which I consider Stavrakakis’ attempt to mobilise the feminine in support of his ‘democratic theory of enjoyment’. For now,

I will move on with our understanding of masculine *jouissance* through the embodiment of surplus *jouissance* in *objet a*.

## ***Objet a* and the contingent essentialism of desire**

*Objet a* is the ultimate Lacanian answer to the stability of meaning and ideological formations. Generally untranslated, *objet a* refers to the A that represents the Other in Lacan's algebra. In *The Parallax View* (Žižek, 2006d: 19), Žižek argues that *objet a* is; "The object of psychoanalysis... the core of the psychoanalytic experience". Likewise, Richard Boothby (2001: 242) considers *objet a* to be perhaps Lacan's greatest original contribution to psychoanalysis and certainly the most significant element of his work.

*Objet a* has a transitional status, split between the subject and the Other/Object – it is both the object of desire and cause of desire. Moreover, *objet a* is integrated, yet not completely found, within each of the three Lacanian registers; although often considered primarily as an imaginary object because of the coherence sought by the subject through the object, *objet a* also exists in symbolisation as a remainder of the Real (Boothby, 2001: 241-244). Recently, however and primarily through Žižek's work, *objet a* has been considered to be most productively thought of as an element of the Real. Here *objet a* operates as the little remainder of the Real within the symbolic order, the unknowable 'X' that forever eludes the symbolic and produces a multitude of symbolic responses through which the subject seeks to give it form. As such, *objet a* can be considered to be the residue of symbolisation, the last remainder of unity produced with the breakdown of *jouissance*. In this sense it is the positive 'waste' of symbolisation (Zupančič, 2006b: 159).

*Objet a* thus takes the position of the missing element in being, the void at which the symbolic order remains perpetually riven. As such, via a fantasmatic relation, *objet a* connects the lack of the Real and the excess of *jouissance* by becoming both the object-cause – the gap that sets off the symbolic chain of being – and the logic of desire as *objet a* becomes embodied in specific objects which signal both the limit point of the symbolic order and the possibility of its suture. The paradoxical logic of *objet a* is such that whilst an object may appear to be the cause of desire, that object is actually a largely arbitrary – and certainly

unconscious – embodiment of the hidden cause of desire (Kay, 2003: 166). *Objet a* becomes attached, embodied, in a particular signifier. It is this attachment which overwhelms the signifier with *jouissance* that makes language materialist. An object, say a commodity item like a pair of shoes, may appear to be the cause of desire; ‘I have to have those shoes, they are perfect for me because...’ The illusion, however, is that this object has taken the place of *objet a* which is causing the desire for the object. As such, desire has no object – only a cause, *objet a* (Fink, 1995: 90-91).

*Objet a* functions as both the object of desire and the object-cause because it is the remnant of the Real, of  $R_1$ . It is an element that remains in the subject after the subject enters the symbolic order while remaining an element of the Other, a lack that persists on account of the inability of language to connect with material reality<sup>63</sup>. The manner in which *objet a* functions is thus dependent upon the manner in which lack is constructed in fantasy. This fantasmatic construction creates the illusion of consistency in the subject. For this consistency to operate, some object must be postivised such that it can stand in for the inherent lack that would otherwise threaten consciousness (Žižek, 1997: 81).

There is, however, always a gap between the cause and object of desire, a gap which further prevents the satisfaction of desire; the object can be obtained but when it is it ceases to be the object of desire. Instead desire continues on its metonymical chain. This impossibility is the central element of the role of fantasy in desire; fantasy supports the subject’s desire, maintaining an appropriate distance from the object. This object is then retroactively posited as the cause of desire. Thus we can consider *objet a* to be the embodiment of surplus-*jouissance*, the “coincidence of limit and excess, of lack and surplus... the left over which embodies the fundamental, constitutive lack” (Žižek, 1989: 53, Žižek, 2001: 149). In this sense, as Fink suggests; “Desire is an end in itself: it seeks only more desire, not fixation on a specific object” (Fink, 1997:26). Such is the emptiness of desire that the subject does not

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<sup>63</sup> Although, as Žižek notes, to define *objet a* as the which emerges at the point of loss is to stay within the realm of desire, as opposed to drive, which I shall expand upon later ŽIŽEK, S. 2006c. *Objet a* in Social Links. In: CLEMENS, J. & GRIGG, R. (eds.) *Reflections on Seminar XVII: Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Durham: Duke University Press..



*really* want to obtain the object of their desire, instead what is desired is desire itself, a distance which is maintained by the construction of fantasy (Fink, 1995: 90).

## Desire and Ideological Fantasy

*Objet a* allows Lacan to understand why meaning is not entirely contingent, even if there is no transcendental ultimate referent. *Jouissance* adds a material weight to the signifier; meaning does not simply drift from signifier to signifier but, rather, gets fixated upon certain nodal points. These points anchor the field of meaning. This conclusion, however, is no different from the dry analysis of Laclau's discourse theory. What lends power to Lacan's analysis is the ability to understand why these points hold a hidden power that operates beyond linguistic structure – his answer was *objet a*. Through the logic of *objet a* certain signifiers-objects become embodied with the power of *jouissance*, a power which suggests the possibility of a traversal of symbolic castration and a return to the fullness of the body. This power allows certain signifiers to not only take a structural role in discourse but a determining function in the body. For this reason, radical change can only occur through a break with the ideological fantasy that structures political enjoyment. Thus, although Laclau's approach to hegemony reveals the manner in which political struggles can occur within a pre-established horizon (although without taking into account the materiality of this battle), Žižek's psychoanalytic reading suggests that because of the grip of *jouissance* and the stability provided by the exclusion of exceptional points, radical change can only occur by 'traversing' ideological fantasy. Although the politics of this break will be discussed in some detail in Chapter Seven, it is worth signalling here that the most effective strategy for achieving this radical change with capital come through the intrusion of the exceptional element into the (fantasmatic) discursive frame.

Fantasy helps the subject maintain a manageable distance from the cause of desire (*objet a*), supporting desire but not getting burnt by the empty horror revealed by the substituted object. This fantasmatic construction creates the illusion of consistency in the subject. For this consistency to operate, some object must be positivised such that it can stand in for the inherent lack that would otherwise threaten consciousness (Žižek, 1997: 81). This substitute can occur in either a positive or negative manner. In terms of the latter, there becomes a

signifier of lack, one that either signifies the cause of this lack, the reason why negativity has entered the order. ‘Wall St’ has recently functioned as this signifier, although ‘Jew’ is the more powerful historical example (this exception is the masculine mode exception discussed earlier in this chapter).

On the other hand there exist positive ‘place-fillers’, or empty signifiers, which suggest the possibility of full enjoyment. Barack Obama functioned as this signifier in the 2008 US Presidential campaign, largely staying away from detailed policy issues, using signifiers like ‘Hope’ and ‘Change’ which enabled a multitude of (often contradictory) signifiers to identify with his campaign. In this sense Obama became the signifier which suggested a fantasised return to the true (and great) fullness of America, a fullness and certainly greatness which is an historical fantasy<sup>64</sup>. It is interesting to note that in 2009, once it had become apparent that Obama’s Presidency was not going to restore America – at least in a fantasmatic sense – an equally passionate reaction was experienced on the opposite side of the political spectrum. During ‘town-hall’ debates over Health Care reform, protestors were seen – often yelling and crying hysterically – platitudes such as ‘This is not my America!’ Furthermore, impassioned attempts have been made to position Obama as an outsider, both through the ‘birther’ movement (which argues, despite all evidence, that Obama was born in Kenya; these arguments often insinuate that he is also a Muslim) and by labelling Obama a socialist, communist or Nazi<sup>65</sup>.

Desire is constituted in fantasy, which for Lacan acts as a defence against symbolic castration and the lack in the Other. Because there is no sexual relationship, no naturally occurring formation between the subject and *jouissance*, fantasy is unique to the subject, although it can take a myriad of forms, each producing a different relationship to castration and *jouissance*. In this sense fantasy offers the prospect of reuniting the subject with *jouissance* through the remainder of *jouissance*, *objet a*. The fantasmatic relationship mediates between *objet a*, the remainder of *jouissance* after the letter, and the idea of  $J_1$ , providing the subject

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<sup>64</sup> The greatness of America being a fantasy no matter our political position. Even if a nation was once somehow empirically the ‘Greatest’ and had now fallen from grace, any attempt to return to that position remains a fantasy.

<sup>65</sup> On a side note to our ‘American’ theme, globally the most powerful signifier of lack for those outside of the global hegemony of the West is ‘America’, often preceded by ‘death to’.

with a (relatively) coherent sense of being through the possibility that these objects could fill the empty spaces in the symbolic order (Žižek, 2006d: 40, Fink, 1995: 60).

Fantasy is ultimately a narrative about the deadlock of symbolic castration. Fantasy responds to castration and antagonism, explaining the lack of *jouissance*, teaching the subject to desire through language. Because language is inherently intersubjective, so too is fantasy and desire. Fantasy is never singular but, rather, responds to the desires of others – the ultimate question of fantasy is *Che Vuoi?*, What does the Other want from me? (Žižek, 1989: 118). Indeed, the most powerful logic of fantasy is that the Other is responsible for my *jouissance*. That is, it is the Other who has stolen my *jouissance* – the *jouissance* owed to me exists in the Other (Žižek, 1997: 7-44). For this reason fantasy is also social – fantasy is always ideological fantasy – and politics itself is often a battle to defend fantasmatic enjoyment. Nonetheless, both terms remain important. Fantasy does not simply become ideology. Rather the implications of fantasy upon ideology has led Žižek to produce a theory of ideology which breaks strongly with the traditional Leftist-Marxist version.

Ideology, like history, is often stated to be on the wane. Nonetheless, if it appears that big power battles are over, Žižek's notion of ideology suggests that this is the surest sign that we continue to live in an ideological world. Ideology, in this sense, comes from the illusion that there is no ideology; that society exists. British psychoanalytic theorist Jason Glynos (2001a: 196) distinguishes this ontological sense of ideology from the two approaches which dominate ideology today; Marxism and liberalism. Classical Marxism assumes that society exists; it has a positive essence which is distorted by the partial perspective of ideology. Ideology here is an illusion, dominated by power relations which Marx attributed to the essence of class relations.

The major difference between the Marxist and the Lacanian-Žižekian sense of ideology is that for Marx ideology consists of a partial representation (dominated by class-power interests) of a total reality. Alternatively, for Žižek (1989: 30-33) ideology entails a totalising attempt to represent partial social relations. As has been insisted throughout this chapter, society does not exist – it is punctuated by the Real – but the human process involves various attempts to compensate for this lack. In the social, as opposed to clinical domain, these

attempts can be included under the umbrella concept of ideological fantasy. Ideology shapes cultural relationships to *jouissance* – as Daly states; “The central paradox of ideology is that it can only attempt closure through simultaneously producing the ‘threat’ to that closure” (1999: 220). In this sense we can link ideological fantasy to the abstract mode of universality identified earlier in the chapter.

Žižek’s distinction of the Lacanian reading of ideology from its Marxist equivalent signals the major Lacanian critique of Marxian politics: the impossibility of *jouissance*. In relation to our previous example of freedom and labour as the universal exception of capitalism, Žižek argues that Marx’s utopian illusion was that universality – full and equivalent exchange – could occur without a symptom (1989: 23). Žižek argues that Marx’s mistake was to “assume that the *object* of desire (the unconstrained expansion of productivity) would remain even when it was deprived of the *cause* that propels it (surplus value)” (2000d: 21). For this reason, although psychoanalysis, and Žižek in particular, has restored both political economy and materialism to Marxism and radical Leftist politics, rehabilitating Marxist politics has proven a tougher task. To explore the difficulties posed by psychoanalysis, we shall turn to a homology to which both Lacan and Žižek draw our attention.

## **What can Surplus-*jouissance* teach us about Surplus-value?**

Lacan identified a homologous logic between the logic of *jouissance* – that there is no *jouissance* without the obstacle that propels it – and the logic of surplus-value that was missed by Marx in his work on surplus-value and productivity. Marx believed that by removing the obstacle – the private appropriation of surplus-value – the productivity generated by surplus-value would remain and could be utilised for the good of all. Marx’s notion of communism relied upon the development of productivity and surplus so that the worker could be freed from the alienation of specialisation to pursue their own sense of species being. Today, it is only the wealthiest that are able to enjoy ethical benefits of Marxian communism.

Ultimately, for Marx, the production of surplus-value was the key to capitalist productivity and the expansion of capital through circulation that ‘realises’ surplus-value, turning it into profit: it is surplus-value, based upon the historical over-supply of workers, which is the goal (object) of capital. Essentially, although the worker is fully compensated from their labour-power, the nature of labour as a commodity is that its use value produces greater value than its own; a constitutive surplus which is appropriated by the owner of the means of production (Žižek, 2006d: 57) .

Žižek takes the fundamental logic of surplus-value – an element of lack that generates more than itself – and extends it to the operation of capitalism as a totality. In this definition, capitalism is characterised by a dialectical circulation of lack and excess which corresponds to the relationship within the psyche of the Real and *jouissance*. Žižek’s (Marxist) point is that under capitalism there is a commodity that, through exchange, produces more than itself; the natural operation of labour is surplus. The appropriation of this surplus by the owner is expanded through the circulation of commodities which turn money into capital; capital is embedded with a quality which makes it capable of producing a surplus which we can now label profit.

Because surplus-value acts as the core driver of capitalism, Žižek contends that the production of surplus has the same structural role in capitalism as *objet a* has in the psyche. Indeed, surplus-value is the *objet a* of capitalism. However, by labelling surplus-value as *objet a*, Žižek suggests that there is more to surplus-value (profit) than a simple goal. Rather, profit embodies the logic of *objet a*, in that it simultaneously operates as the condition of possibility and impossibility of the logic of capital. Žižek signals this when he describes surplus-value as an inner contradiction within capitalism but one that operates as the condition of possibility of the system.

However, it is not only Marx who believed that capitalism needs to rid itself of these symptoms. The whole capitalist edifice is driven to avoid its own inner contradiction but in doing so only produces more. Capitalism cannot be stable; rather it has to operate in a state of constant revolution of its own conditions in order to function, generally either by producing new commodities or selling existing commodities in new markets (Jameson, 1996). Hence,

the World Bank acknowledgement of the world's poor as the 'customers of the future' (Moore, 2002). Capitalism is in essence a system in crisis but a constitutive crisis which produces the upwards spiral of productivity which is its basis (Žižek, 1989: 52).

Thus, capitalism, like the hysterical psyche of capitalist consumer subjectivity, is never at a state of rest, there is never just value or *jouissance*; capitalism is a system based on movement (circulation) and the production of excess that hides an ultimate lack. Capitalism's inherent and disavowed strength is its ability to revolutionise its own conditions, which is to create markets out of its own failings. The threat of global warming and the capitalist response of sustainable development and the 'Green Dollar' is perhaps the strongest contemporary example of this logic. This has led to what Alenka Zupančič (2006b: 175) describes as a "paradoxical convergence of power and resistance" where threats to the system are now simply opportunities for profit. It does not take long for 21<sup>st</sup> century marketers to commodify the latest counter-culture movement. Indeed, some would argue that the marketers are generating this culture.

Thus, the structural homology between surplus-value in capitalism and the surplus-*jouissance* of the psyche can tell us much about the operation of capitalism. In both, the surplus is not an excess which is tagged onto the normal state of affairs. Rather, this surplus is the normal state, the cause which drives the excessive balance of the system. Just as in the logic of *objet a* (the object of surplus-*jouissance*) in surplus-value there is produced what appears to be a waste, an unaccounted for surplus, in the normal operation of the system (Zupančič, 2006b: 162). For Zupančič, surplus-value comes about when this waste is valorised, accounted for, not as waste but as an integral part of the system; profit (ibid.: 170). Thus, in capitalist ideology, there is never surplus; all things are accounted for as profit is simply the appropriate return for the investment of capital. Capitalist surplus excess cannot be tamed, nor integrated into a new form, such as Marx's communism. Instead, the question is, as Žižek suggests:

The theoretical task, with immense practical-political consequences, is here: how are we to think the surplus that pertains to human productivity 'as such' outside its

appropriation/distortion by the capitalist logic of surplus value as the mobile of social reproduction? (Žižek, 2007a: 55)

This is a question, it seems, that Marxism is no longer equipped to handle. If Marxism has been unable to respond to the contingency of the discursive turn, it fares little better with the materialism of psychoanalysis – politically at least. What can be taken from the psychoanalytic response to the discursive turn is a deeper and more productive analysis of capitalism. If the deterministic essentialism of classical Marxism had proven unfeasible at best, the turn to language and culture removed any sense of structure, history and emancipationist drive that held Marxist discourse together. Lacanian psychoanalysis has not been able to restore the latter but through a reading of Marxism has been able to revive the concepts of structure, of history and of a rehabilitated sense of determinism and causality. This rehabilitation of Marxism has allowed for a stronger critique of capitalism, in particular an exposure of its symptomatic structure, exceptionality and relations of enjoyment. It has not been able, however, to develop a form of politics that might match communism and the revolutionary subject. If the question is of our relation to surplus, then Marxism has no answer.

Psychoanalysis, however, is built on the question of the subject relation to surplus-*jouissance*. It is to this response that we shall now turn, considering the psychoanalytic conception of ethics as a response to *jouissance* both moving onto the question of politics. In doing so we shall begin to consider how the Lacanian response to surplus might inform a rehabilitation of Marxism and ultimately a response to capitalism.





## 4. The Good Lacan?

Lacan appears an unlikely hero for the destitute populations of the world or for those unrescinded Marxists still intent upon a communist future. If Lacanian psychoanalysis was able to offer an alternative reading of the discursive turn, one which did not wholly reject materialism or structure, this reading put any restoration of communism inspired by historical materialism to bed. Instead, psychoanalysis appears more equipped to understand the flourishing appeal of capitalism than provide a new revolutionary hope for the proletariat. As was illustrated in the previous chapter, a Lacanian interpretation of Marxism is able to update the latter's explanatory understanding of the seductive grasp of capitalism but Marxist politics were dismissed as yet another utopian illusion – despite anything Marx might have had to say about this categorisation. As yet, however, I have not explored the relationship between psychoanalysis, politics, and the Good.

Lacan, both as a psychoanalyst and continental philosopher, was part of a French *avant-garde* movement that was, according to Eagleton (2009: 273-274), rather contemptuous of everyday life and practical concerns. For this batch of theorists – here we include the likes of Derrida, Levinas and Sartre – there is something inauthentic about the commonplace. It is as if starving is rather vulgar and mundane, whereas philosophical expression – whether artistic, literary or bodily – speaks to the heart of being.

Nonetheless, despite the esoteric nature of Lacanian theory, there is much to be celebrated. The advantage of being 'ahead of one's time' is that new avenues of exploration come to the surface – if initially their work appeared abstract, this philosophical vanguard produced new ways of understanding the concrete and as such produced changes in the commonplace itself<sup>66</sup>. Lacan may have been more at home narrating the eccentric paths of desire but his discourse speaks to political practice as well. Moreover, psychoanalysis, much more than most subsets of continental philosophy, has been able to identify with the everyday, even if at the abstract level of illusion. Žižek certainly has established his reputation on the dialectics of

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<sup>66</sup> Indeed, it is the wager taken in this thesis that a new, abstract, consideration of global capitalism will be able to produce material changes.

abstract and the concrete, most commonly through his contrasting use of examples (see Stamp, 2007, Pfaller, 2007, Kunkle, 2008). Most firmly, psychoanalysis – more than either theories of late- or post- modernity – has been able to consider the appeal, necessary failure, and the consequences of the essentialist ambitions of ideology that are tied to images of ‘the Good’.

Vitally, both Freud and Lacan indexed the desire for an essential kernel of being as a moral demand upon the body. For Freud, essentialism arrived in the guise of the sovereign Good, otherwise known as civilised morality or the Law. Freud, primarily in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) – perhaps the first text in political psychoanalysis – but also in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922) and *Totem and Taboo* (1960), begins with the premise that the body pays a high a price – guilt – for its insertion in civilisation. Freud’s psychoanalytic treatment sought to reduce the burden on the subject – not through political change but, rather, subjective realignment – allowing it to receive some enjoyment from bodily instinct. Thus, although Freud begins with the problem of morality, he ends only with ethics<sup>67</sup>, making no effort to enter in politics and certainly not political economy.

For Lacan, morality lies in the form, rather than content, of signification. That is, whilst we might determine a particular discourse to be moral in the sense that it suggests a form of the Good – a prescriptive way of being – morality is located in the form of transcendental demands. Here Lacan indexed morality to ‘the law’ – not the law in a legislative sense but, rather, as the governing structures of shared social life; the guidelines of symbolic exchange otherwise known as the law of the signifier (Evans, 1996: 98). Morality depends not so much upon the content of the law but, rather, its expression. That is, when the symbolic order asserts itself as a meta-law – a law without further need for justification – it becomes normative.

In this chapter I discuss the possibilities for a normative or prescriptive positioning which does not fall prey to the positivism which has been the subject of critique in the previous two

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<sup>67</sup> I shall distinguish between ethics and morality later in this chapter and in Chapter Five. At this stage it is enough to note that morality entails a transcendental horizon and ethics an interpretation of that horizon.

chapters. As such, in this chapter and the next (on politics) I discuss the prospects for using Lacanian psychoanalysis in our response to the troubling contradictions of global capitalism. Inherent in this problematic are strong normative judgements, not only about the comparative value of human life and the acceptability of inequality and exploitation but about the prospects for the future of shared social life. In contrast to these lofty ambitions, psychoanalysis – in distinction to Marxism – is more likely to be accused of nihilism. Nonetheless, Lacan orientated his psychoanalytic treatment around an ethical imperative: that the analysand should come to identify with that which causes their desire, otherwise known as an ethics of drive or as an identification with the *sinthome*. This imperative is ultimately an attempt to subvert the morality of the symbolic law. Despite this apparent subversion of the Good, it is not without (political) value.

As with Freudian analysis, the ethical pursuit of Lacanian theory was orientated at the body of the individual rather than the interactions of a community of bodies: Lacanian ethics is a response to the guilt experienced by the subject from having to forego its bodily instincts upon entry into the symbolic order. For this reason, whilst we might be able to assert a normative basis to the Lacanian clinic, there is much reason to debate whether the political consequences of Lacan's work, particularly in regards to political economy, go beyond nihilism.

Ironically, it is because Lacan situated the clinical problematic in terms of language rather than civilisation – breaking down the dualism between the individual and community and turning Freud's meta-psychology into a sociological endeavour – that Lacanian theory offers the possibility of being translated into the collective realm. Where Freud's work had been used to provide a supplementary theory of subjectivity to political theory, Lacanian analysis has been used as a theory of the political itself. Yet, whilst we might be able to assert a non-nihilistic basis to the Lacanian clinic, there is reason to debate whether the political consequences of Lacan's work, particularly in regards to political economy, go beyond existentialism – Can the *avant-garde* elite reveal, or even heal, the wounds of *Homo Sacer*?

Thus, the question I shall consider in this chapter and the following (on politics) is whether Lacanian psychoanalysis can provide an alternative conception of political practice after the

apparent downfall of Marxist communism. If global capitalism has become both all-encompassing and fatally flawed, yet its once powerful political opponent has lost its voice, can a Lacanian orientated approach provide an alternative restoration of Marxism, or indeed radical Leftist politics, which would provide the political resources to respond strongly to the symptoms of global capitalism?

This chapter begins with a consideration of the manner in which psychoanalysis has come to reject the Good as a form of the super-ego. Following an understanding of the notion of guilt I turn to the manner in which Lacan responded to problem of ethics and the way in which these responses changed over time. The implications for these forms of ethics will then be discussed around Zupančič's reading of the Kantian imperative and the prospects of drive for the formulation of a sense of collective experience.

## The Good as a Bodily Function

Freud was not so much concerned with the content of the Good but, rather, with its formal imposition upon the body<sup>68</sup>. For Freud, morality was a libidinally bound sense of the Good which served to bind civilisation together against individual gratification<sup>69</sup>. By contrast to traditional moral philosophy, Freud did not posit a systemised prescription for being, nor debate the distinctions between differing conceptions of the Good. Rather, whilst acknowledging the necessity of the value-form in binding together civil society, he was concerned with the effect each of these prescriptions has upon individual subjectivity.

Like Marx, Freud's description of the structure of society and of the individual foreclosed upon the possibility of an abstract prescription of what should be. Yet, Freud did not share Marx's hopeful reading of history and human endeavour. Instead, he asserted that the "tendency to aggression is an original, autonomous disposition in man and ... represents the greatest obstacle to civilisation" (Freud, 1930:74). The necessary channelling of aggression

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<sup>68</sup> Freud did make reference to the possibility of various progressive moves to lessen the demand of morality upon the body but this was not the central direction of his work.

<sup>69</sup> In this sense, Freud's concept of morality is analogous to Hobbes' sovereign – morality involves a necessary deferral to an external point in order to maintain individual security.

by the structures of civil society, along with the distortion of other instinctual drives – primarily relating to sexuality – leads to the perversion of these drives. As such, Freud’s primary political position was that civilisation represses and distorts the contrasting passions of human drive – represented by Freud as the battle between the drive towards life (Eros) and towards death (Thanatos). Civilisation, through government and other forms of societal policing – most notably ideological binding – then becomes a trade-off between individual gratification and collective security.

The image presented by this struggle between collective security and individual desire suggests that constant external control is required, that libidinal anarchy is only held back by the explicit presence of external authority. However, Freud noted that this was not the case. Obedience does not require physical vigilance, only the internalisation of the possibility of violence into the body through the symbolic law. The role of authority is taken on by the internalised expectations of the wider community, symbolised in law and experienced through societal forms of policing (1930: 78). It is as if, according to Freud, the body is a conquered town which is kept in cheque by a remaining force (ibid.: 77).

Freud called this internalised force the super-ego, that stern guardian whose vigilance never achieves satisfaction. If external authority could be satisfied by obedience, no such satisfaction is available via the super-ego (1930: 82). Instead, the demands of the super-ego are unquenchable: the more the subject attempts to turn their back on drive and conform to the internalised requirements of civilised morality, the more is demanded. As Freud notes:

The more virtuous a person is, the sterner and more distrustful is his conscience, so that the very people who have attained the highest degree of saintliness are in the end the ones who accuse themselves of being the most sinful. (1930: 80)

For Freud then, the super-ego, as the site of moral conscience or what Lacan will come to call the demand of the Other, was not at all progressive. It does not offer a ‘moral’ sense of the Good but, rather, exemplifies the effect of such demands upon the body. Moreover, beyond the individual body, Freud was concerned with the collective expression of the repression of drive – he suggested that society posits too strong a demand upon the individual and experiences various negative consequences. As such, Freud advocated a practice that we

might label ethical – as opposed to the abstraction of morality – in response to these conditions. That is, against his unease with moral consciousness in both the individual and societal instantiations, Freud still maintained a clinical practice which sought to establish a ‘compromise’ between the individual and the moral demands of society.

Alternatively, Lacan’s reading of the Freudian super-ego and the associated demands of the Good holds to no such sense of balance. According to Lacan (1992: 6), the demands of the super-ego cannot be reduced to the requirements of civilised society but are rather the effects of symbolic castration, his version of the Oedipus complex<sup>70</sup>. Lacan did not consider the Oedipus complex to be strictly an effect of the nuclear family structure. Rather, (symbolic) castration is an ahistorical trauma that is expressed in a temporal, historical manner both in terms of the initial entry of the subject into the symbolic order and the manner in which this trauma is both repressed and returns throughout the lifetime of the subject.

It is this kind of analysis which has led to psychoanalysis being accused of both a Eurocentric bias and non-historical universalism. This is an accusation which must be wholly rejected as a misreading of the impetus of psychoanalysis. The trauma caused by the Oedipus complex is certainly ahistorical in itself but it must be stressed that the complex itself does not occur (Lacan, 1992: 308). That is, the Oedipus complex (taken as symbolic castration and the subject’s loss of *jouissance* upon their forced insertion into language) does not have a presence in itself – it cannot be the subject of positivist research – but, rather, is an absent trauma to which history (and subjectivity) is a response. Certainly the mechanism through which this collective dynamic is expressed may have altered – along with our methods of understanding it – but we can only endorse Freud’s identification of this fundamental dialectic of the human condition, one that can be considered analogous to that introduced earlier between the Real and *jouissance*.

The super-ego is ultimately a subjective reaction to the trauma of castration. In Lacan’s re-reading of Freud, the psychoanalytic understanding of morality and the super-ego was extended, such that Lacan considered that the super-ego is not only the subject’s ‘moral’

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<sup>70</sup> If Freud referred to the Oedipal myth to explain the prohibition against incest, symbolic castration transfers this prohibition to *jouissance*.

conscience but, more productively, an unconscious site of enjoyment. Thus, where Freud fundamentally conceived the unconscious to be an area of resistance to enjoyment or drive, Lacan regarded the unconscious, permeated as it is by the super-ego, to be the very place of compliance (and *jouissance*).

In the Lacanian conception, the super-ego is the obscene supplement to the symbolic law. Here Lacan's reference to the Law is not limited to legislation but, rather, refers to the structures of civil society, whether moral norms or governmental structures. The symbolic law could otherwise be known as the 'Good', the moral standards of behaviour constructed and policed within society. I have previously considered the symbolic order to be structured around empty signifiers which structure an abstract (universal) imaginary horizon: ideological fantasy moving the symbolic law towards a transcendental sense of the Good. In this sense, Lacan ultimately came to conceive of the super-ego as the guilt that acts as a form of surplus-*jouissance* that supplements the inadequacies of this order.

Nonetheless, as Žižek (2008a:89) suggests, for Lacan the super-ego "has nothing to do with moral conscience as far as its most obligatory demands are concerned". Instead, as shall be discussed, the super-ego demand is the point of ethical betrayal, urging the subject to ignore the cause of their desire and instead to suture the symbolic law. The super-ego demand is not a matter of the moral conscience filling out ambiguity in the law but, rather, an 'obscene' imperative to enjoy through the symbolic order. For this reason, Žižek comes to suggest that the law which is the object of psychoanalysis is the super-ego which emerges at the point of failure of that law (Žižek, 1994a: 54). The *jouissance* that stems from the super-ego – an enjoyment I have previously labelled  $J_2$  – comes by way of a supplement to the 'official' order. The super-ego is not the official ideology but, rather, the underlying relations of enjoyment which hold it in place. As such, this enjoyment is quite distinct from the order to which it is attached. As an illustration, if the explicit moral ideology of a community is anti-racist, both in its explicit laws and socially enforced norms – such that 'you are just a dirty racist' is a legitimate rebuke – then the super-ego supplements this position as a transgressive undercurrent of racist jokes and unacknowledged racial boundaries. Indeed, Žižek (ibid.: 57) goes on to suggest that it is this undercurrent that provides the shared basis for community identification.

Colonel Kurtz in Francis Ford Coppola *Apocalypse Now* exemplifies the super-ego supplement to an official ideology. Kurtz, a soldier in the elite unit, snaps after witnessing an act of brutality and begins operating independently of the Army with a ‘savagery’ of which they disapprove. US Army generals state that he is ‘clearly insane’, whereas Kurtz explains to Willard, the agent sent to ‘eliminate’ him, that he now conceives of the act of brutality as genius, displaying the truth of warfare. The problem with Kurtz is that he displayed the underlying structure of Army life too explicitly. In contrast to the official army doctrine of clean and fair war, Kurtz had come to see with ‘clarity’ the underlying truth of warfare. Where he was insane and had to be eliminated with ‘extreme prejudice’ was in demonstrating this point too literally<sup>71</sup>.

For Žižek, the enjoyment that stems from the super-ego provides the necessary support for the failure of the symbolic order. Conversely, this enjoyment cannot be displayed too openly – like Kurtz did – lest it disturbs the law. Indeed, this kind of enjoyment can only really function as a transgression of the law itself – without the law it becomes psychotic. As has been noted previously, the failure of *jouissance* before the letter leads to attempts to find other forms that would provide a suture. Super-ego enjoyment is one of those forms – in attempting to fill out the symbolic order, the super-ego allows the subject an alternative sense of enjoyment. This enjoyment, however, is never enough, meaning that the more the subject experiences 2<sup>nd</sup> order *jouissance*, the more they require. Indeed, this is the very structure of desire, as the inconsistencies within the symbolic law create desire in itself. Moreover – and

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<sup>71</sup> Kurtz also illustrates the manner in which the trauma of the Real dislocates the subject and offers the possibility of radical change, when he recalls the horrific instant and its affect upon him:

We went into a camp to inoculate some children. We left the camp after we had inoculated the children for polio, and this old man came running after us and he was crying. He couldn't see. We went back there, and they had come and hacked off every inoculated arm. There they were in a pile. A pile of little arms. And I remember... I... I... I cried, I wept like some grandmother. I wanted to tear my teeth out; I didn't know what I wanted to do! And I want to remember it. I never want to forget it... I never want to forget. And then I realized... like I was shot... like I was shot with a diamond... a diamond bullet right through my forehead. And I thought, my God... the genius of that! The genius! The will to do that! Perfect, genuine, complete, crystalline, pure.

Whether this change is for the ‘Good’ or not, is of course another matter.



here Lacanian theory links back to the morality of the Freudian super-ego – these failures lead to a sense of guilt within the subject.

Lacan suggests that the guilt imposed on the subject by the super-ego when the subject attempts to fulfil their primal loss is a secondary guilt. The true guilt of the subject occurs at the point of symbolic castration and the (forced) choice into language. That the super-ego presses more guilt upon the subject the more they attempt to suture this wound suggests that guilt is indeed misplaced<sup>72</sup>. This operation of the super-ego is well illustrated by consumer subjectivity under late capitalism, to which I now turn, before returning to the question of psychoanalysis and the Good.

## Capitalism and the Enjoyment Society

Žižek suggests that super-ego enjoyment is the prevalent form of contemporary *jouissance*. Indeed, one of the key practices of contemporary psychoanalysis has emerged around this form of enjoyment. This practice can be deemed the ‘psychoanalysis of capital’ (Özselcuk and Madra, 2007). The psychoanalysis of capital is characterised by the work of Stavrakakis (2000, 2007), Glynos (2001b), Todd McGowan (2004) and a certain reading of Žižek. These authors focus on what Žižek has described as ‘enjoyment as a political factor’. Moreover, this study focuses on a structural move from a society in which enjoyment is prohibited by moral norms<sup>73</sup>, to one in which it is explicitly demanded and has come to be administered largely through the consumption of commodities.

The paradox of the capitalist society of enjoyment is that rather than producing greater freedom, we are more exposed to the impossibility of enjoyment and are reduced to inventing new forms of discipline and control which create a distance from that enjoyment. We may now be free to enjoy our sexuality but in order to do so we have adopted a more stringent

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<sup>72</sup> Indeed, this is an argument not far from Freud’s own reading. In his conclusion to *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Freud argued that not only may a variety of neurotic symptoms develop from the repression of drive but a sense of guilt may actually develop not from disobedience to the law but, rather, the prevention of satisfaction of the drives (1930: 96-97).

<sup>73</sup> This move can be read both spatially, as totalitarian regimes have given way to capitalism and Western values, and temporally, as a development within the now globally dominant Western society.

attitude towards attraction, not only in terms of spending more time improving and worrying about our appearance but through obtaining the perfect sexual relationship.

Instead of freely enjoying our sexuality, the reduction in prohibition has resulted in further dissatisfaction with enjoyment. Ultimately there is something quite destabilising about being allowed what you desire – desire functions most effectively when an obstacle is in its path; being faced with the openness of raw *jouissance* is a rather traumatic possibility. Under the super-ego society, much enjoyment is available in the very (largely unconscious) creation of these obstacles.

The enjoyment society is characterised by the structuring of desire through the commodity form (Stavrakakis, 2007: 232). Commodities act as the embodiment of *objet a*, offering the prospect of full enjoyment. The failure of a commodity to achieve the promise of fantasy is taken to be a sign of the failure of a singular act of consumption and this lack is carried over into the next purchase, the next object that offers the possibility of full enjoyment. Enjoyment is forever postponed but the deferral is the epitome of *jouissance* itself. It is not that the subject of the commodity receives enjoyment from failure itself – as we shall soon discuss, this would bring a change in subjective position to that of drive – but, rather, that so long as the possibility of fantasmatic fulfilment remains, enjoyment stems mainly from the possibility of enjoyment, rather than the (failed) point of culmination. Such is the logic of advertising. Effective advertising constructs a fantasmatic scenario around the commodity such that the commodity itself does not suggest a certain lifestyle but the image of the lifestyle itself suggests the commodity (see Stavrakakis, 2000).

In regards to this point, Žižek describes Coca-Cola as the perfect embodiment of *objet a* and as such the ultimate capitalist merchandise, deeply embedded in the logic of the super-ego and surplus-*jouissance*. In Coke, we have a drink removed of all the objectively necessary properties of a satisfying drink; it provides no nutritional benefit – it certainly does not quench thirst – or provide the ‘satisfied calm’ of an alcoholic beverage. Instead, all that is left is the mysterious ‘X’, the surplus over enjoyment that is characteristic of the commodity. Žižek thus argues that diet-coke is the final step in this process – the commodification of nothing itself – since the caffeine that gives Coke its distinctive taste has been removed and

“We drink the nothingness itself, the pure semblance of a property that is in effect merely an envelope of a void” (Žižek, 2000d: 23).

The Coke marketing team have perhaps taken this critique as a challenge – they certainly seem to have been reading Žižek’s books<sup>74</sup> – witness the recent launch of Coke ‘Zero’; quite literally nothing in a can. Coke’s marketers further revealed their understanding of Lacanian theory with the marketing campaign which accompanied Coke Zero. This campaign portrays Coke Zero as an element of perfection as its malignant elements have been removed; advertising slogans are culturally specific variations of ‘Why can’t all the good things in life come without downsides’ or ‘Ridding the world of the negative consequences that limit us all’. Ultimately, perhaps Coca-Cola and Marx have more in common than one might think, both attempting utopia by retaining the object without the obstacle that propels the cause.

Conversely, Daly (2009: 290) argues that the enjoyment of consumption should not be reduced to “materialistic superficiality”. Rather, the increasing influence of ‘ethical’ consumption has come to supplement the interaction between super-ego guilt and enjoyment; not only does the commodity itself not fill the gap but it is also never good enough for the liberal conscience: the paper is never recycled enough, fair-trade coffee does not quite pay the farmer a fair price etc.

With capitalism, therefore, the articulation of the super-ego has undergone an historical alteration. This adjustment is simply a different attempt to come to terms with the traumatic symbolic impossibility of castration but one best understood through a Lacanian reading. If the super-ego was once considered the mechanism of conformity by Freud, under capitalism and the Lacanian reading, it is also an expression of transgressive enjoyment. What is most important, however, for the development of our argument is that the super-ego is ultimately a conservative force, even in its transgressive sense. The super-ego may appear transgressive against the law but it does not threaten the law itself; transgression becomes an element of the law itself. Thus, the super-ego is conservative both in the sense of a response to the subjective trauma of castration and as a political device.

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<sup>74</sup> Previous marketing campaigns – Coke ‘Enjoy!’ and ‘Coke is *it*’ suggest that this is the case.

For this reason, psychoanalysis, in both its Freudian and Lacanian variations, is strictly opposed to any sense of morality in an abstract sense. Freud did argue that the relaxation of moral prohibitions would be desirable for the health of the subject but he did not believe that any sense of the Good could be invoked which would avoid the displacement of the super-ego. He postulated that guilt was the biggest problem facing civilised humanity; “the price we pay for cultural progress is a loss of happiness, arising from a heightened sense of guilt” (Freud, 1930: 91). Psychoanalytic practice refuses to add to this sense of guilt, rather hoping to reduce the burden felt by the subject in favour of an acceptance of that level of enjoyment still available to the subject.

In this sense, psychoanalytic theory does not seek to enter into debate over the differing conceptions of the Good. Instead, it is engaged with the form of the Good. As such a large degree of the history of psychoanalytic thought has been directed towards the problems of what Freud deems the ‘cultural super-ego’ and moral philosophy, characterised by commandments such as ‘Love thy neighbour as thyself’ (1930: 102). Lacan’s reading of Kant’s categorical imperative is particularly instructive in this regard. Kant regarded his imperative – ‘so act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal laws’ – as the key to regulating civilised behaviour. Lacan turned around this maxim in his essay *Kant avec Sade* (Lacan, 2006), suggesting that Kant’s imperative was an example of the pathology of the moral law and little more than the demand of the super-ego (Žižek, 1989: 81). As such, Lacan subverted Kant’s imperative such that it was analogous with that conceived by the Marquis de Sade; “Anyone can say to me, I have the right to enjoyment of your body, and I shall exercise that right without any limit to put a stop to whatever capricious demands I may feel inclined to satisfy” (Lacan, 2006: 648).

Later, however, Žižek will reverse this Lacanian position, which appears to be based on Lacan’s earlier work which focused on lack rather than excess. In a foreword to Zupančič’s *Ethics of the Real* (2000) Žižek describes his “*envious hatred*” at having not being able to see the value of Kantian ethics earlier (2000c: xiii, emphasis added). I shall return to Kant later in this chapter. For now, the argument moves onto Lacan’s conception of the ethics of psychoanalysis.

## **The Ethics of Psychoanalysis – From Desire...**

Despite this rejection of morality, Lacanian psychoanalysis is not divorced from the moral. Lacanian theory is neither nihilistic nor hedonistic, instead it suggests that all morality is a repressive illusion that prevents an expression of the unmediated enjoyment of the body. Although Lacan expressly noted in his seminar on ethics that he spoke of ethics rather than morality, he also acknowledged that psychoanalysis is deeply submerged in a moral problematic (Lacan, 1992: 2). Moreover, Lacan contended that moral experience is not limited to the super-ego but, rather, begins at the point of castration – the super-ego being a possible response to the guilt of castration (ibid.: 7).

Psychoanalysis is thus implicated in moral experience but not in terms of the production of the Good. Instead, Lacan insisted upon an ethical approach considered to be at the heart of analytic practice, one strictly opposed to the idealism of the transgressive enjoyment that characterises morality. For Lacan, if moral experience “puts man in a certain relation to his own action that concerns not only an articulated law but also a direction, a trajectory, in a word, a good that he appeals to, thereby engendering an ideal of conduct” (ibid.: 3) then the dimension of ethics is situated beyond this dimension, although is embedded in moral experience.

Lacan was seeking to establish an approach which prescribed a form of being for the subject that would not reify into a systematic programme. In doing so, his ethics proposes no ideal content for the subject but, rather, a formal approach to the subject’s desire in relation to their unique experience of symbolic castration. Moreover, the clinical application of this approach in analysis does not produce a permanent state within the subject but, rather, a transitional dialectical which dissolves during the process of its application. That is, the goal of analysis is not a final point of stability but rather a dialectical form which holds no permanent content.

At this point in our analysis, however, it is unclear how this form of ethics relates to Marxism and political economy. In order to return to this line of argument I will first expand a reading of Lacanian ethics, before considering its application to politics. For Lacan, the field of ethics did not involve the ideal, the symbolic or the imaginary, although as Eagleton has shown in

his excellent study *Trouble with Strangers* (2009), normative positions are available in terms of each of these registers. Rather Lacanian ethics concerns “the location of man in relation to the Real” (ibid.: 11). Ultimately, for Lacan, ethics constituted a secondary judgement: ethics is a judgement of our actions, under the condition in which those actions constitute a judgement in themselves (Lacan, 1992: 311).

Consequently, Lacan postulated that morality meets ethics at the problem of guilt in relation to desire. The subject has a right to feel guilty but only because they have given way to their desire. Lacan described this as a last ethical judgement; the final judgement of judgements provided by the psychoanalytic treatment (ibid.: 313). By this Lacan was not suggesting that the subject should endlessly pursue the object that comes to embody their desire – *objet a*. Rather, the subject can only be guilty if they give up on the form of *objet a*; the cause of desire. The Lacanian maxim might then be better read as: ‘Do not give way on that which causes your desire’.

The cause of desire is the original loss which occurs when the subject enters language and experiences castration in their own unique circumstances. The subject becomes free, becomes a subject, when they come to recognise that there is “no cause of their cause” (Zupančič, 2000: 29-34). That is, the only cause of the cause is the subject itself. Here the subject comes into being at the point of castration, of the forced choice; the subject must accept the impossible conclusion that they were free to chose their unconscious. Thus, as Zupančič states, ‘The Other of the Other is *objet a*, the object cause which determines the relation between the subject and the Other in so far as it escapes both’ (ibid.: 38).

A pertinent example of this recognition – taking ownership for one’s own desire through the very recognition that it is not my own – comes in the reflective autobiography of tennis star Andre Agassi (2009). Agassi, a tennis prodigy who came to be recognised as a ‘great’ despite a turbulent career, describes how he hated playing tennis having been forced into it at a very early age by a domineering father. Yet, Agassi states that his story is about: “a person waking up in a life that they didn't choose, in a life that they maybe don't want, and not being sure how to take ownership of their own life, and figuring that out” (Associated Press, 2009).

Conversely, desire was not Lacan's last word on the ethics of psychoanalysis. He attempted two more structural revisions at theorising the notion of cause: cause as the subject of drive and as an identification with the *sinthome*. If Lacan's rethinking of the radicality of desire, leading to a support for the subject of drive, was little more than a change in positioning<sup>75</sup>, his support for the identification with the *sinthome*, although continuous with his earlier work, was more radical in itself, though the resulting conclusion maybe more conservative.

In his initial work, Lacan argued that successful analysis could occur through the symbolic order. This version of Lacan, characterised, according to Fink (1997: 206), by his essay on Edgar Allan Poe's 'Purloined Letter' focused much of its attention upon the letter of what is being said by the analysand. Here Lacan contended that the subject has been broken by the signifier and must come to accept that the body has been overwritten by the signifier. In order to come to terms with this circumstance, the analysand must assume responsibility for the forced choice into language through language itself. To do this, the subject must come to accept the organisation of their desire, not by the Other but through the unconscious. This version of Lacan is quite a tragic one. Indeed, in his seminar on ethics, Lacan had recourse to discuss in great detail the tragic figures of Antigone and King Lear as ethical exemplars.

The use of these examples continues to be controversial today in Žižek's work. Certainly Antigone has little to say of poverty, human rights or Marxism, although she does speak to civic affairs. There is no doubt a tragic aspect to Lacanian theory, certainly for those readers who find it difficult to accept Lacan's notion of the original forced choice. Lacan was not a utopian and, like Freud, he was not optimistic about the human condition. This alone, however, is not enough to dismiss his notion of ethics. Optimism is not the only possibility for progressive ethics or politics, although hope might be. Indeed, as Lacan came to identify in his later sense of ethics, grander possibilities for *jouissance* and change emerge once any notion of pure *jouissance* is abandoned.

As part of this abandonment, Lacan came to realise that there is nothing pure or radical about desire; desire is dependent upon the symbolic law. Instead of identifying the subject as

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<sup>75</sup> Indeed, Lacan's ethical reference to desire occurred relatively early in his work (up to the early 1960s), although it did include his seminal seminar, 'The Ethics of Psychoanalysis' (Fink, 1997:205).

founded within unconscious desire, Lacan began to identify the subject with drive, or the cause of desire. The cause of desire is loss itself; it is desire purified, or, the desire of desire, otherwise known as drive. This movement within Lacan's work changes, in Fink's words "Not so much the general idea of what analysis wishes to achieve that changes but the terms in which those goals are expressed" (ibid.:207). That goal remained constant throughout Lacan's work: to separate the Other from the subject such that the latter can achieve a state in which satisfaction can be achieved.

### **...to drive...**

Drive, in Freud's original conception, corresponds to the plurality of instincts possessed by the human body. For Lacan these instincts were produced through the effect of the signifier on need, an effect which translates need into the fragmentation of drive. Freud suggested that the nature of the human condition was such that these instinctive drives were repressed, renounced or averted, in favour of the Law, leading to a sense of societal malaise or unhappiness. The issue with Freud's theory of culture, as Johnson (2005: 243- 254) suggests, infers the possibility of a 'free' human before civilisation. Although Freud considered civilisation, and thus repression, as a necessary evil, his Hobbesian conception of shared social life still holds open the possibility of a 'time before the fall' (see Freud, 1960). There is not, however, either a pure drive or a pure instinct; drive occurs only through the sublimation of language and as such only in relation to desire. One cannot consider instinct or drive to be an original biology of humanity. Rather, if the human animal can be considered to have a nature or biological status, it is that of a broken animal whose only enjoyment is a fractured one.

The benefit of Freud's reading of drive is his distinction between conscious and unconscious drive, which roughly corresponds to the Lacanian couplet desire/drive. Where the conscious is struck by the loss of the object, the unconscious continues to enjoy this loss, just as in drive (Johnston, 2005: 373). This unconscious enjoyment explains the difficulty – or impossibility – of fundamentally altering the subject (or society). The subject's relationship to *jouissance* can be altered but the subject itself remains relatively stable. The only possibility of massive restructuring exists through what Žižek labels the act, or 'psychic suicide' by which the



subject renounces their attachment to the *sinthome*, that which was fundamentally structuring their enjoyment – I reflect on the political possibilities of the act in further detail in Chapter Seven.

Drive is thus caught between the thrusts of the human body, being over determined by the structural repetition of the symbolic order. Rather than the fantasmatic attempts to obtain the object, drive only has an aim, that of movement around the object. The important move is then from *objet a* as the object that represents loss (and thus the possibility of subverting that loss) to loss as an object in itself. Drive is not the failed (fixation) of desire; whilst desire moves metonymically from object to object in search of ‘the impossible Thing’, drive remains stuck around one particular object. This fixity is not the breakdown of desire – that in the search for the Thing the universal thrust of desire is caught up in the object – rather drive goes beyond desire: drive is this fixation itself. Here, the Thing is not an object to be found – an object which could fill a void – but, rather, circulation around the void itself which brings its own modality of *jouissance*. This *jouissance* of drive is not a full ( $J_1$ ), *jouissance*, rather drive still remains within the dialectic of impossibility inherent in the structure of language and the corresponding structuration of drive (Fink in Johnston, 2005; 247).

This is not to suggest that the subject of drive is not grammatically structured, some kind of blob living only for a pleasure obtained through the very failure to obtain satisfaction.

Lacanian psychoanalysis is certainly not a libertine ethos, the subject being able to wallow in their own enjoyment. Lacan himself argued that historical movements – situated around the 18<sup>th</sup> Century – based around the ‘natural liberation of desire’ have failed and have served only to raise the level of obligation and create greater pathologies (Lacan, 1992: 3).

Moreover, political movements during Lacan’s time, most pertinently the movements around 1968 and the work of Deleuze and Marcuse (1956), have also failed to production a political liberation of desire.

Nonetheless, Lacan argued that a more satisfying enjoyment is available for the subject of drive than the subject of desire. *Objet a* still exists for the subject of drive and it is to this object (rather than to the Other) that the subject of drive orientates themselves – the subject

recognises the presence of the Other but does not appeal to it for satisfaction. More importantly, for the subject of drive the fullness of *jouissance* no longer exists, or, at least, the subject comes to acknowledge that the Other is not responsible for their *jouissance*.

It is this recognition that was the key to ethics for the later Lacan. If for the early Lacan the ethical was the result of the subject coming to terms with lack, with the failure (castration) which caused their desire, for the later Lacan the ethical concerned fidelity to the lost enjoyment which remained in drive. It is not that there has been a loss of *jouissance*, that there is not enough *jouissance*, but now we have too much – *jouissance* is an excessive stain to which the subject must respond (Zupančič, 2000: 240-242). Lacanian theory is not about finitude but, rather, the infinite, of the immortality of the subject in the face of death drive (ibid.: 249). In this sense, not giving up on your desire means that in order to preserve one thing, one has to be ready to give up on everything else (ibid.: 258).

Thus, for the early Lacan at least, the course of analysis takes the subject from demand, to desire, and ends in drive. The Lacanian subject cannot be considered to be only the subject of drive or the subject in the Real but, rather, according to Fink, has an imaginary, symbolic and Real face (1997: 210) This change in position – from the subject of the symbolic to the subject in the Real – involves the vital move of ‘traversing the fantasy’, bringing about a change in the relationship between desire and satisfaction at the end of analysis. The subject that remains is not the subject of unconscious desire, as in the earlier Lacan but, rather, can be considered the subject of the Freudian id, that sense of enjoyment which exists independently from language; what might traditionally be regarded as a non-subject (Fink, 1997: 208).

Thus drive is transformed in analysis. From being hidden by the demands of the Other, drive is established as the Other’s desire, before – in the final stage of analysis – being freed to pursue *objet a*. This can be considered to correlate with the three stages of analysis: alienation, separation, and the traversal of the fantasy in which the transitory subject becomes the subject of the Real (Fink, 1997: 209).

By traversing the fantasy, the clinical subject alters their relationship to *objet a*. Both the object and the fundamental fantasy remain but the subject now identifies itself, rather than

the object, as the cause of that fantasy (Žižek, 1989: 65). In this sense *objet a* continues to exist but now only as a materialisation of the lack with which the subject must now identify. The identification with lack corresponds to an identification with the symptom, which Žižek suggests occurs as the final stage of analysis. This involves a realisation that it is only the symptom that gives any sense of consistency to the subject (ibid.: 75).

Conversely, traversing the fantasy is not the ultimate road to *jouissance*. In traversing the fantasy, the subject does not obtain a ‘post-fantasmatic’ grasp of reality in which naked reality (and *jouissance*) itself appears. Then subject may have journeyed across the frontiers of their fantasmatic horizons but there is no ladder outside of fantasy, only a key to its cause. Not only does the subject remain in the grips of *objet a* but is also more taken by the fantasy than ever. Additionally, despite Fink’s assertion that the trans-fantasmatic subject is able to finally enjoy their enjoyment as the metonymy of desire stops hounding the subject, for Lacan this enjoyment does not exist (Fink, 1997: 209-210). Rather, the last fantasy to be unveiled is that of a successful cure and a breakdown in the belief of the ‘*jouissance* of the Other’. In this sense analysis come to an end with the analysand is ‘cured of the cure’.

## **...to the *sinthome***

Drive, however, was not Lacan’s last word on the ethics of psychoanalysis. Lacan’s final movement was to suggest that the subject has ended the analytic relationship when they come to identify with their symptom, or *sinthome*, depending on the reading of Lacan (see Thurston, 2002). Lacan introduced the *sinthome* – an extension of the concept of the symptom – as the fourth ring of the Borromean knot, the other three being the symbolic, the imaginary and the Real, with the fourth ring holding the other three together. The *sinthome* becomes enjoyment-in-meaning: as the level of enjoyment that persists in the subject after the letter, the *sinthome* is what makes meaning possible. The *sinthome* is the ultimate support for the subject and that which ultimately gives it a semblance of coherence (Hoens and Pluth, 2002). As such, the *sinthome* gives the subject a certain fixity not apparent in Lacan’s earlier work. It is, one might suppose, Lacan’s final answer to the failure of analysis. Consequently, this reading of the later Lacan, although still in the tragic-comedic dialectic, suggests a more

comedic conception of the human condition as it acknowledges that we are doomed to search for an object that does not exist.

Nonetheless, we are not in a position to posit a comedic form of being as the ideal Lacanian state. A comedic ethics is certainly the horizon that Lacan is aiming for, an argument which is extended in Zupančič's work (2008, 2006a). Tragedy turns to comedy when the subject comes to accept that the subject has not lost 'the Thing' but, rather, never had it in the first place. This is the logic of both Lacan's assertion that the subject needs to come to terms with the cause of their desire and their identification with the *sinthome*. Again, however, it is not a final state but, rather, a method of change – Lacan did not prescribe any position at the end of analysis.

Therefore, for Lacan, an identification with the *sinthome* does not suggest an alternative way of being but, rather, suggests the possibility of change, for the subject at least. This change is not a radical restructuring as such but, rather, a repositioning in relation to the essential coordinates of subjective being. In terms of politics, Žižek has expanded this further with his notion that the first step in radical transformation is to identify with the symptom. In order to traverse the fantasy, or break down the relations of enjoyment which currently structure ideology, one must come to identify with that which is excluded from ideology itself.

Nonetheless, what works for the subject appears to be difficult, or impossible, to institutionalise in politics. I shall return to this debate in the following chapter but it is worth continuing to note that whilst Freud had begun his analysis hoping to develop a causal treatment which would permanently remove symptoms, by the end of his work he gave up on this hypothesis (Vergaeghe and Declercq, 2002: 59). Indeed, Lacan began with this conclusion; the subject receives *jouissance* from their symptom and is thus motivated to maintain a relationship with the symptom, although he argued that this relationship could be altered through analysis. Although the symptom would remain, by regaining the territory previously held by fantasy, the subject would be able to achieve a more – but not ultimately – satisfying relationship to the symptom, such that the symptom itself does not need to exist, although its cause would remain.

Such an understanding causes a reconsideration of the notion of the Good and any response to capitalism. If the spontaneous response to hunger is a charitable one – to offer as a gift the food that one has – Freud teaches us that this demand is simply one of the super-ego.

Singer's imperative to give to the poor, introduced in the initial chapter, is the strongest exemplar of this position. Citing a range of moral philosophy, Singer (2009) argues that we are 'sinful' by withholding or consuming wealth which could be transferred to the world's poor without endangering our own lives. There is a seductive logic to this quasi-communist moral philosophy. Conversely, not only does Singer fail to engage with capitalism and political economy, considering how widespread change might occur but he also struggles with the 'human' element of this moral philosophy. Holding to an evolutionary conception of human nature and relying upon experimental psychology, Singer considers a number of elements of 'human nature' that prevents charitable giving, including the 'bystander effect' and the 'diffusion of responsibility' and concludes that a 'culture of giving' can be created through the manipulation of these factors, including public identification of givers and the needy, to create a culture in which giving becomes part of self-interest (Singer, 2009: 45-78).

Singer, however, does not critically consider the role of the super-ego in his political demand. Instead, he acts as the voice of the super-ego. He suggests that it is our 'duty' to give what we do not need. This obligation is the elementary form of the super-ego, which as both Freud and Lacan have reminded us, is not only unquenchable but as a form of *jouissance*, leads to perverse consequences of the displacement of desire and *jouissance*, outside of its prescribed sense of the 'Good'<sup>76</sup>. This raises a dilemma which is vital to this thesis. Critics of psychoanalysis would be justified at shrugging their collective shoulders at the demands of the super-ego in this case. If the Western subject feels a sense of guilt in the disparity between their wealth and the abject poverty of others, then this is fully justified; the subject

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<sup>76</sup> I experienced this effect myself in a first significant overseas trip to Europe. Upon encountering a number of beggars on the streets of Paris, I was initially stunned and steered clear of their desperate demands. However, haunted by a particularly edifying image of a hunched over elderly woman, I resolved to give whenever asked. Upon handing over a small remittance, however, I became even more discombobulated by the poverty around me. Not only had I not altered the circumstances of those to whom I was giving but my inability to give to *all* of those I encountered became increasingly apparent. It was a brutal reminder of both the depth of super-ego guilt and the limitations of charity – as a result, I resolved to intervene in the political circumstances which caused this poverty that disturbed me so much, rather than give up the small surplus I lived on as a student. In a large way, this thesis is a response to the evils of capitalism I witnessed on that journey.

should feel guilty. If the price to pay for an act of charity is a pathological displacement of drive within the wealthy subject, so be it.

Perhaps, we might be able to concede this point. If, upon walking down the street one may happen across a beggar demanding change, what might one do? Certainly both Freud and Lacan would suggest this demand is the demand of the super-ego. If the subject submits, and hands over some remittance, they will only feel guiltier. The circumstances of the beggar may be improved but the giving subject pays a greater price than the few coins they may have handed over. It is as if, according to Eagleton; “the French [theorists] prefer to be thought wicked than wet behind the ears” (2009:275). Nonetheless, this exchange might be one we are willing to live with. Moreover, the Lacanian analysand at the end of analysis would be able to indulge in a charitable act without engaging in the affairs of the super-ego; for this subject, such an act is not in the name of filling a gap in the Other but, rather, is an act of charity in and of itself.

For Eagleton (2009:294), however, it remains unclear why one should favour the Lacanian conception of ethics over what he regards as a socialist ethics in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. If Lacan regarded the domain of the Good as a battle for power, surely so is a desire for the Real or a refusal to give way to desire. Moreover, Eagleton states that if continental philosophy rejects the question of the Good because it immediately suggests the question of ‘Whose good?’, then this is no reason to discredit the process of creating a more just society.

Although Žižek (1994a: 68) addresses this point directly, his response remains unclear. Žižek suggests that there is a radical disjunction between ethical action and the Good. Acting in the name of the Good provides an infinite number of excuses to avoiding accessing our individual desire. For Žižek, even if these “excuses” are well-founded in a political sense, we must not give into the “demands of reality”. Nonetheless, he suggests that:

This ethics of persisting in one’s desire irrespective of the common Good inevitably gives rise to anxiety; is not such a radical attitude the preserve of a few ‘heroes’, while we ordinary people also have a right to survive? Consequently, do we not also need an ‘ordinary’ ethics of ‘common Good’ and distributive justice that would meet

the requirements of the majority, despicable as it may appear in the eyes of the suicidal heroic ethics advocated by Lacan? (ibid.: 69)

Žižek further suggests that to consider the consequences of one's actions is to immediately pathologise our desire – it is to move away from the object-cause of desire – and as such it is an ethical compromise. Unfortunately, although symptomatically, Žižek does not return to this point. All this makes clear is that a disjuncture remains between ethics and the Good. We can take either of two conclusions from this apparent omission. Either Žižek is simply unable to answer the question which he has provoked or there is no programmatic answer to such a question – its answer lies in the form of the reply which dissolves the question almost as soon as it is asked<sup>77</sup>.

These questions speak to the heart of the dilemmas of this thesis. If the problem I am dealing with is material and practical in its nature (providing a sustainable material existence for the global populace whilst remaining within ecological limits) then what is the relevance of Lacanian ethics? Moreover, how can these ethics co-exist with a reference to Marxism?

Lacan does not suggest an ideal form or relationship to *jouissance* but, rather, suggests a dialectical transition for establishing a relationship to the (unique) cause of one's desire established in castration. There is no collective ideal but, rather, an individualised process. From this apparent incommensurability the journey back into the political begins. Along with the previous question. I shall seek to consider two factors: can the ethics suggested by psychoanalysis be applied equally outside of the boundary formed by the body of the analysand, and, whatever is the case, can the ethics of psychoanalysis be translated into a form of political practice?

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<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, Žižek ŽIŽEK, S. 1994a. *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, London, Verso notes (and rebukes) his efforts to bridge such a gap in *Looking Awry* ŽIŽEK, S. 1991b. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge, MIT Press. in which he supported a democratic non-violation of the Other's fantasy space.

## Driving Together?

Lacan's support for the application of ethics to the collective could at best be described as inconclusive. Although his work clearly offers significant insights into the structure and well-being of the subject that can also be transposed to an understanding of society and politics, it is not immediately clear why these ethics should be favoured over others forms, particularly in regards to the context of this thesis. As Eagleton (2009:298) suggests, it is not clear how an ethics framed against the normality of the *polis* could become a form of politics for the polis – if the Other doesn't exist, how could one come to care about the material deprivation of others?

Two primary objections exist. The first is regularly thrown at Lacanian theory – it is a standard reproach against Žižek's work (see Devenney, 2007, Homer, 2001, Robinson and Tormey, 2005): the Lacanian ontology produces too tight a restriction on ethical or political action. This critique generally does not take aim at Lacanian ontology but, rather, its consequences. Like Marxism, Lacanian ethics stem from a firm notion of what is (or rather, what does not exist) instead of what should be. For this reason any form of ethics or politics which takes Lacanian ontology seriously could not support any sense of scientific Marxist political practice, nor any form of deconstructionist ethics, characterised by the likes of Derrida and Simon Critchley (see 2007b).

This rejection, however, should not be put down to sheer ontological bloody-mindedness. Lacanian's do not stick to their guns for the sake of it. Likewise, any ethical position that takes its orientation from Lacanian theory does not need to be an ethics of the Real. Indeed, Eagleton's reading of Lacan (2009: v) suggests that ethical theories can be developed out of the imaginary and symbolic, as well as the Real.

The second objection to the Lacanian rejection of the Good is harder to dismiss. If Lacanians reject the Good, where does this leave Leftist politics? A response to this question begins with the ambiguous endorsement of an 'ethics of drive' which animates the work of several contemporary (political) readers of Lacan. The proto-typical model of this movement comes from Glynos (2001b) who suggests, through a reading of Žižek's work, that capitalism



operates according to an ethics of desire, such that, to quote Glynos; “Lacan’s logic of desire and the logic of capitalism share a deep homology in structuring contemporary subjectivity” (ibid.:87). Moreover, if we are to move on from capitalism, subjectivity can no longer be constituted by desire. For Glynos then, the logical move is to follow the ethics of psychoanalysis and move onto the logic of drive as an organising principle (ibid.: 96). He finishes the argumentation, however, with the question, “What would a community of subjects of the drive look like?” (ibid.: 103).

Analyses like these misread the dimension of the economic, giving undue status to ideology and subjectivity – in this sense Glynos’ work belongs to the ‘psychoanalysis of capital’ noted earlier – and excluding the dimension of class, to which ideology is simply a response<sup>78</sup>. Moreover, they also give drive a kind of mystical political quality, one that can only be explained by the fact that it is not desire. Drive suggests an alternative mode of being (much like feminine enjoyment) that becomes desirable for Lacanian-orientated political theorists because it seems to suggest a way out of the dead-end of desire, capitalism and the administrated enjoyment of post-democracy. Such a mythical beyond speaks to the circumstances of both political psychoanalysis and anti-capitalism; both cannot conceive of a resolution within their horizon of possibility. Drive or feminine enjoyment (the politics of which shall be expanded upon in detail in the following chapter) suggest this possibility but like all objects of desire, this sublime mystic only exists as long as one maintains an appropriate distance. Hence the number of texts which finish with a call for an alternative mode of being, without moving to extend upon these possibilities.

Daly (2009: 296), for example, in an otherwise excellent discussion that builds on a patient analysis of the difficulties in the use of psychoanalysis in politics, ends his paper with (in the penultimate paragraph) a suggestion that “Žižek’s Lacanian radicalism can be thought of as something that tries to break out of the endless cycle of desire and to move towards a certain logic of love”. This statement, which follows a brief discussion of traversing the fantasy, is then supplemented by a small definition of the Lacanian concept of love that appears divorced from the detailed analysis earlier in the paper.

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<sup>78</sup> I shall expand on the relationship between class and ideology in detail in Chapter Six.

Additionally, Žižek too – in his earlier work at least – was optimistic about the potential for the development of an ethics of drive as a guide to Leftist political action. In *For They Know Not What They Do*, Žižek (1991a) suggested there were four predominant forms of subjectivity. The first three – the ethics of hysterical desire, obsessional demand and perverted enjoyment – all remain within the logic of desire. Žižek suggests that the only ‘hope’ lies with the fourth ethical attitude available, drive. For Žižek the logic of drive is beyond the other attitudes in being ‘inherently ethical’, hence Lacan’s assertion that the subject must not give way to their drive. Žižek goes on to describe the ethics of drive as the “only possibility for the Left to attain a distance on the present and discern the signs of something new” (ibid.: 273).

This ‘drifting off’ from the collective applications of drive is symptomatic of the difficulty of matching the theory of drive with intersubjective practice. Marx is one of many philosophers who have suggested that ethical practice requires an end to instrumentality; the full expression of species being involves creative self-development for no point other than itself. Human existence peaks when we associate with each other for no purpose other than association (Eagleton, 1997: 18). Nonetheless, despite his avowed attachment to a classless society, Marx was specifically vague about the shape of the communism society to come, a society in which humans associated as ends rather than means. Indeed, perhaps the point here is that the very prescription of the shape of that society lends itself to the kind of instrumentality which would make it an impossibility.

It is unclear, therefore, how far the ethics of drive is able to be advanced into the political in terms of an alternative response to political economy. If psychoanalysis suggests a new way of being, it appears to apply to the selected few who have access to the knowledge of its art (and it must be acknowledged, analysis is a bourgeois pursuit). The “hotline” to the Real, as Eagleton puts it, does not seem to be available to the masses (2009: 281). Certainly a communal ethic of drive holds no utopian – in the sense of a quest for *jouissance* – longing: drive still remains subject to the dialectical interactions of lack and excess although a different (fantasmatic) relationship will certainly exist. Rather, it is the notion of a social form without excess and antagonism that is properly utopian. Even an ethics of drive will operate around the constitutive excess of *objet a*, perhaps more than ever.

## Returning to Kant

One text that does not finish with the drive but, rather, begins with it, is Zupančič's *Ethics of the Real* (2000). Providing an intriguing construction of Lacanian ethics, Zupančič reads Kant through Lacan to consider the interactions of Lacanian ethics – specifically drive – with Kant's understanding of the Good. By doing so she is not only able to combine the Kantian imperative with the disruptive element of ethics – a disjuncture between ethics and the Good (Žižek, 2000c: xi) – but is also able to re-consider the notion of the Good in relation to ethics of drive without dismissing it entirely.

Zupančič's project is essentially to restore the ethical status of Kant's work by reference to the Lacanian ethics of psychoanalysis. In order to do this, Zupančič's first task is to reconsider what she perceives to be historical mis-readings of Kant. This restoration begins with the notion of the pathological. The pathological is not the opposite of the normal – our 'normal' actions are generally pathological. Instead, actions are pathological if they are not ethical. We act pathologically when our will is determined by an external object. The pathological, therefore, is correlated with desire: what is pathological is the impossible desire for an object (2000: 9). In this sense, our deepest convictions – and most notably our notions of the collective Good – are fundamentally pathological (ibid.: 23). Because the ethical is not pathological, or normal, Kantian ethical action is always subversive, arriving from outside of the law of desire (ibid.: 11).

Zupančič (2000: 1) argues that psychoanalysis has provided two 'blows' to traditional ethics. First, has been documented earlier in this chapter; for Freud the moral law was nothing but the defence provided by the super-ego against castration. Such an assertion called into question the notion of any foundation for ethical judgement, whilst placing ethics at the heart of the psychoanalytic project. Zupančič, following Lacan's assertion that the "best thing philosophy has to offer in the name of ethics is a kind of 'Practical Philosophy of the Bedroom'" (ibid.: 2) considers Lacan's combination of Kant with Sade to be the second blow.

This second blow to ethics, however, offers the possibility of its rehabilitation through Kant. For Lacan, Kant was the first philosopher to go beyond the super-ego. If Sade offered the

perverse Truth of Kant, at the same time Sade has an ethical value (ibid.). Morality might be impossible but ethics are not – ethics becomes a conceivable project only by reference to the impossibility of an anchoring sense of morality. Zupančič argues that Kant provided the break with the form of morality that “spelled out obligations in terms of the possibility of fulfilling them” (ibid.: 3). In doing so, Kant inadvertently discovered desire as the essential dimension of ethics. Traditional ethics was defined by an excessive element, outside of the Good, that threatened the status of the ethical. Kant turned this excessive threat into the very condition of possibility for the ethical.

Kant’s (ethical) categorical imperative makes a distinction between actions done in the name of duty and actions done for the sake of duty itself. Actions that solely conform with duty are actions of the law. Actions that both conform with duty but do so only for the sake of duty (without reference to the object of duty) are ethical. Zupančič considers the ethical to be a surplus, a supplement, to the law. Thus the ethical does not speak to the dualism legal-illegal but is rather outside of this register – an excess element that cannot be accounted for within the realm of law. Zupančič goes on to suggest that the ethical-as-supplement has the same form as *objet a*. This ethics can be considered to be an ethics of the Real, rather than the Good. Not an ethics orientated towards the Real but, rather, an attempt to rethink ethics by recognising the dimension of the Real as it is already in operation in ethics.

As such, the Kantian ethical imperative reflects Lacan’s ethics of drive. Desire-in-law is directed at an object which is always not the object demanded. The object demanded is desire-as-cause. In Kantian terms, what is ethical is not desire of the object but, rather, desire for the sake of the desire itself. In Lacan terms, this desire of desire itself – pure desire – is drive (ibid.: 17). In this way some notion of the Good exists but not as a transcendental signifier, or super-ego imperative. Instead the Good becomes an object of the ethical; an ethical relation between the lack in the subject and the lack in the Other.

As such, Zupančič states that her goal in ‘*Ethics of the Real*’ is to:

provide a conceptual framework for an ethics which refuses to be an ethics based on the discourse of the master but equally refuses the unsatisfactory option of a

‘(post)modern’ ethics based on the reduction of the ultimate horizon of the ethical to ‘one’s own life’. (ibid.: 5)

Zupančič’s project is thus vitally related to my own. Her discourse of the master could be considered the neutral administration tools activated by the (neutral) hegemony of the United Nations in understanding the dynamics of poverty and environmental degradation.

Postmodern ethics require no translation. The most important element of Zupančič’s self-definition of her project, however, is the final phrase “reduction of the ultimate horizon of the ethical to one’s own life”. Thus far I have considered the operation of the psychoanalytic ethos to be limited only to individual subjectivity, being unable to translate it to a form of political community, or even collective ethics. Yet, despite Zupančič’s apparent attempt to rethink ethics outside of the limitations of the individual – a move which could only be deemed political – her work remains within a subjective framework. This framework, admittedly, has been expanded not only through Lacan’s own reference to the Other but through a discussion with Kant’s categorical imperative and the supreme Good. Such a consideration does provide valuable guidance for any attempt to translate Lacanian ethics to politics – a topic to which I will soon turn – but it does not give guidance to the latter sphere. More importantly, Zupančič’s work does not speak to the economy.

Perhaps, as Eagleton comes to suggest, Lacanian ethics do not translate well to the collective realm. The reading of ethics suggested so far in this chapter is an ethics of the exception, not the norm. It is a dialectical ethics that is in excess of the existing but gives no sense of how it could become the norm itself – how it might become the basis for shared social life, or even an alternative mode of being to that currently operative under the reign of capital. As Eagleton states:

An ethics which illuminates the moment of conversion, revelation, disruption or revolution, as this one valuably does, cannot be projected on to social life as a whole, which will inevitably prove unequal to it. The Real is thus in danger of behaving like Freudian super-ego or Kantian moral law, rubbing our noses in our own frailty by making demands which we find impossible to fulfil. (2009: 298)

Thus, even without considering the destabilising effects of political economy, psychoanalysis' wholesale rejection of the sovereign Good in the name of private ethics leaves open the question of how to proceed. Indeed, since the turn to language and the defeat of essentialism(s), this is the question which has haunted the Left – how to orientate political action without the kind of systematic formalisation which would contradict its own movement. If, as Zupančič's stated, we do not wish to return to the essentialism of the discourse of the master – having come to acknowledge the trauma of the demand for *jouissance* which comes from the passion for the Real which characterised the 20<sup>th</sup> century – nor wallow in the relativism of post-modern relativity, how can politics continue? Moreover, in light of the horror of the material contradictions of capitalism, how can the Left respond in a meaningful manner?

In order to respond to these pressing questions, in the chapters which follow, I first examine attempts to form a political project from Lacan's work, most notably from Stavrakakis' work on post-fantasmatic democracy, before turning to the possibilities for formulating a psychoanalytic response to global capitalism via a construction of the economy itself.



## 5. Is there a Lacanian reading of Politics?

The previous chapter conveyed a strong scepticism towards the prospects of transposing the principles of Lacanian ethics as a basis for shared social life. I had previously suggested that the contradictions of global capitalism demanded a Marxist response, yet Marxism has appeared largely impotent after the theoretical and political defeat of historical materialism. In attempting to revive Marxism, I had cause to turn to psychoanalysis as a lens through which to read the discursive turn, conceiving it as a bodily, rather than linguistic, cleavage. Nonetheless, despite restoring the cogency of a materialist reading of capitalism, I came to suggest that the primary psychoanalytic intervention into Marxist politics was as a rejection of its utopian sense of communism. As such, in the previous chapter I turned to Lacanian ethics to attempt to traverse this apparent normative-political deficit. Our progress thus far has brought us to the question at the core of this section of the thesis: Can psychoanalysis be translated into a form of political action?

Importantly, it must first be acknowledged that Lacan, like Freud before him, held no particular political stance, aside from cynicism. As such, there is no ‘natural’ Lacanian political position. This is a point noted by Stavrakakis – that the ‘Lacanian Left’ is an empty signifier – who then, paradoxically, goes on to establish *the* political reading of Lacan (2007). In large part the question has been troublesome since the foundation of psychoanalysis, or at least the latter stages of Freud’s work. Freud contended that the development of the individual and the community are not far divorced, although because civilisation exists at a “higher level of abstraction”, it is difficult to transpose analysis in concrete terms (1930: 98). Nonetheless, whilst Freud concluded that: “the processes are very similar in kind, if not one and the same” (ibid.), the minimal distance between them produced contradictions that Freud was unable to resolve. Thus, it is tempting to follow Freud’s contention that; “it is almost as though the creation of a great human community would be most successful if there were no need for concern with individual happiness” (1930: 99). This certainly seems to be the



maxim of the great totalitarian empires of human history, those that took societal progress, rather than subjective happiness, to be the purpose of their presence.

Furthermore, Freud argued that the cultural influence of the super-ego and its associated maxims simply ask too much of civilisation, issuing commandments without consideration for whether they can be obeyed (ibid.: 103). Ultimately, Freud appeared to be cynically confounded over the prospects for civilisation, adding that; “I have no doubt, too, that a real change in peoples’ relations to property will be of more help here than any ethical commandment”, although, as he continued, “the recognition of this fact among socialists has been obscured and made impracticable by a new idealistic misreading of human nature” (ibid.: 104).

Likewise, Lacan, when considering the ‘moral goals of psychoanalysis’, stated that the universalisation of the ‘servicing of goods’<sup>79</sup>; “does not in itself resolve the problem of the present relationship of each individual man to his desire in the short period of time between his birth and death. *The happiness of future generations is not at issue here*” (Lacan, 1992: 303, emphasis added).

Ultimately, Freud’s suggested that individual therapy can achieve its goals by reference to a standard of normality established in the community; therapy can allow the subject to function ‘normally’. By contrast, civilisation itself is not subject to any such background. For this reason, Freud had no desire to evaluate the prospects of human civilisation. Certainly he is unwilling to posit any sense of a human ideal, contending that any argument can only be positioned by one’s relative relationship to happiness, or, as Lacan would come to suggest, one’s own *jouissance*. Thus, he ends *Civilisation and its Discontents* with a withdrawal:

I therefore dare not set myself up as a prophet *vis-a-vis* my fellow men, and I plead guilty to the reproach that I cannot bring them any consolation, which is fundamentally what they all demand, the wildest revolutionaries no less passionately than the most well-behaved and pious believers. (ibid.: 106)

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<sup>79</sup> By the servicing of goods Lacan is referring to the support for ideological notions of the Good.

His main concern, it seems, was a situated one (Freud was writing between the two World Wars): Will humanity be able to overcome the disturbance in the development of civilisation by the aggression and drive at the heart of humanity? To this question, he does not risk an answer, although one suspects he would be pessimistic

It is not a matter, however, as Freud appears to resigningly suggest, of psychoanalysis simply helping the subject through their own tragi-comedic existence whilst politics aspires to loftier ambitious of human enlightenment. Psychoanalysis has more to say about politics and civilisation than a withdrawal to the clinicians couch. Most potently, from a Freudian perspective, an identification of the dialectic of Eros and Thanatos and the paradoxical interactions of the pleasure principle with the political community, gives a valuable insight into the operation of ideology and the manner in which the subject is able to be incorporated into and to relate to the Other.

Moreover, a tight bond exists between the subject and the political. In large part – not particularly acknowledged by Lacan himself – it is Lacan’s association of the individual and the unconscious with language which has identified this point. Lacan’s conception of psychoanalysis as a theory of intersubjectivity has allowed for different attempts to answer, or perhaps recast, Freud’s question – how the psyche can maintain itself in the face of the demands of civilisation – as a political one. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to note that Lacan firmly suggested that “the ethical limits of psychoanalysis coincide with the limits of its practice” (Lacan, 1992: 21-22). Thus, the question to be considered is whether the sphere of the political, or, in regards to this thesis, political economy, is outside of the limits of the practice of psychoanalysis.

Certainly, the ethical impulses discussed in the previous chapter provide food for thought, if not for bodies. Conversely, we must consider whether the ethical imperatives suggested in the previous chapter can be translated from the ‘private’ sphere of subjectivity to the collective of political community. The problem rests upon whether psychoanalysis can be translated from the problem of the body positioned within civilisation to the interactions of bodies which make up civilisation itself. This task will be primary in this chapter, which will begin by attempting to delineate the difference between ethics and politics before moving

onto Stavrakakis' efforts, following Laclau, to translate Lacanian ethics into a politics of radical democracy.

Stavrakakis' attempt to supplement Laclau's democratic ethos with a theory of *jouissance* provides a salient example of the limits of psychoanalysis and politics. His form of politics is not only based upon a misreading of Lacanian theory but also contradicts its fundamental ethos by attempting to institute an ethics that is developed against the symbolic law. The dialectical nature of Lacanian ethics is such that the process dissolves itself at the climax of its instantiation – the clinical subject at the end of analysis has no need for analysis itself – yet Stavrakakis seeks to institutionalise this process. Moreover, we see that Lacanian ethics reaches the limit of its practice in the collective materiality of the economy and democracy with the impossibility of class struggle. Ultimately, Stavrakakis over emphasises the content of Lacanian ethics rather than the formal shape of its dialectic.

By contrast, Žižek rejects the possibility that the content of Lacanian ethics – the politics of drive, for example – can become a direct form of politics. Instead, he does not withdraw from politics but, rather, – through a re-reading of Lacan via Hegel and reference to the Marxist tradition – considers the (impossible) political moment to be at the heart of psychoanalysis and the dialectical form of the Lacanian ethic. Most notably, for Žižek the failure of morality (or the supreme Good) does not result in a banishment to ethics but, rather, opens up the ground of the political and of the class struggle at the heart of political economy. This does not mean, however, that a 'natural' political discourse stems from Lacanian theory; instead any position must be an interpretation.

Two readings of Žižek's work dominate in this regard. The first focuses on the interpretative plurality that emerges from his theory. Here there is a different Žižek that reads film theory from he who engages with politics or ideology: there is no essential Žižek but instead a range of contextual interpretations. Yet, despite the apparent range of his work, Žižek's politics have an increasingly clear anti-capitalist, Marxist, and as I will soon develop, communist, positioning. It is these commitments that the second hegemonic interpretation focuses upon, attempting to nail down the essence of Žižek's work. In this chapter, I shall develop a third reading, suggesting that Žižek's work does revolve around a singular position.

It is not, however, one that ‘exists’, so to speak. Here, Žižek is read as a philosopher of the Real; he holds a singular commitment but one that does not lead to a ‘natural’ political approach. It leads, instead, to a number of possible political strategies. These strategies correspond to the dialectic identified in the previous chapter, read through both Hegel and Marx. It produces a political approach based around universality, class struggle and the Real. The question which accompanies this third reading relates to the relationship between these Lacanian strategies and Žižek’s (Marxist) political commitments. I seek to address this pivotal enquiry throughout the second half of this thesis.

This chapter commences by delineating a distinction between a Lacanian interpretation of morality, ethics, politics and the political, before considering the two most prominent readings of these positions: Stavrakakis’ attempt to translate Lacanian ethics to politics and Žižek’s ‘short-circuiting’ of the ethical and the political. I begin with a discussion of the difference between ethics and politics.

## **From Ethics to Politics**

Having made a distinction in the previous chapter between morality – pre-destined senses of the Good – and ethics, how can politics be distinguished from ethics? Certainly, for many theorists there is little difference between the two fields. Eagleton, in an excellent discussion of the distinction between ethics and politics states:

Ethics and politics are distinct modes of investigation in the sense that each scrutinises social existence from a different angle – in the case of ethics, the values and qualities of human conduct and relationships; in the case of politics, public institutions and processes of power. Yet there is no clear ontological distinction at stake here. The difference is more methodological than real. (2009:306)

Yet, by the end of the discussion, Eagleton does end up giving priority to the ethical ahead of the political, suggesting that politics is a translation of established ethical principles. To this end, he considers the latter to be “a matter of how we may live with each other most rewardingly, while the political is a question of what institutions will best promote this end” (ibid.: 325). As shall be developed, ethics are never able to be probably distinguished from

the political horizon within which they are established, nor are politics ever without the ethical. Ethics, politics and the political thus have an intimate, dialectical relationship; one can never be solely in one and out of another. They are points on a Möbius strip; bearing points shift as soon as they are established. In this sense there can be an ethical approach to politics and a political approach to ethics as any instantiation of ethics or politics relies upon the ethical or political position from which we speak. Thus, the ethical itself is nothing but an empty signifier that houses the various readings of ethics.

As Žižek (1994a: 156) notes in regards to philosophy, there is no neutral or (abstract) universal conception of ethics. Instead, every particular notion of ethics installs itself as universal and in doing so encompasses all other particular understandings of ethics. Just as continental philosophy understands itself to be philosophy – analytic philosophy amongst others being reduced to a moment within philosophy itself – each particular conception of ethics redefines the category of the ethical in its universal form. Indeed, this reading of the ethical as an empty signifier implies both an ethical horizon and a political-historical positioning.

This psychoanalytic conception ethics, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, always entails a secondary judgement. Ethics is never simply ethics but an ethics of (...). If we ask the question ‘Is this behaviour ethical?’ a political horizon is always already assumed. Ethics here is a reaction to law and morality. For this reason, ethics can provide a guide as to how to act within a horizon but not of the horizon itself. Thus, Lacanian psychoanalysis has been able to provide an ethical interpretation of shared social life – what might be called politics – and a form of subjective ethics that almost becomes normative, if only by a rethinking of what it means to be normative.

There has not, however, been a hegemonic translation of the Lacanian theory of ethics to a sense of politics, although there have been a number of attempts, including the two that shall be the focus of this chapter, those of Stavrakakis and Žižek. The central question is whether the domain of ethics can be transposed onto the collective decision making that constitutes politics, as Stavrakakis argues, or whether the psychoanalytic approach to ethics suggests a different relationship to collective power, one that operates more on the political than politics.

At its heart, this question suggests two points. Firstly, is there a normative sense to psychoanalysis beyond the individual? In the previous chapter I came to argue that Lacanian ethics involved a recasting of the question of normativity in relation to the subject rather than a hedonistic nihilism. What remained unclear, however, was whether this sense of normativity moved beyond the individual. Secondly, can this dialectic process be formulated into the kind of systematic institution that would structure shared social life, or does it remain a formal response to these structuring institutions?

The difficulty in developing a psychoanalytic form of politics occurs because, thus far, Lacanian theory has only formed a reaction to an imaginary political horizon, rather than the horizon itself. Nonetheless, it is clear that beyond a critique of morality, Lacanian ethics provide at the very least a negative conception of normativity. This understanding certainly does not rely on a transcendental Good but, rather, in rejecting the suturing illusion of moral discourse because of the consequences both for the enjoyment of the subject and the ideological construction of civilisation, the foundations of a Lacanian theory of politics emerged. This theory relies upon a critique of utopian ideology and politics. It does not, however, suggest any form of institutions, procedures of power or economic organisation.

Indeed, Lacanian thought appears to have developed only as a reaction to institutionalisation, power and organisation. For this reason, as has been noted in Chapters Two and Three, psychoanalysis has largely been used as a reference point or a supplement to political ideology, rather than a direct contributor. Although psychoanalysis did enjoy a brief exposure as a hedonistic ideology in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation*, (1956) along with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's critical psychoanalytic study, *Anti-Oedipus* (1977) being the prime examples – it was Laclau's radical democracy that has provided the hegemonic reading of psychoanalytic politics.

Laclau, and most recently Stavrakakis, have drawn a direct parallel between the logic of democracy and that of psychoanalysis. Laclau – although often not directly referencing his work with a Lacanian vocabulary – considered psychoanalysis, along with forms of post-structuralism, to mirror the rejection of the determining status of the big Other and the necessity of contingency that was at the heart of the democratic structure. Stavrakakis has

taken this further, suggesting that Lacan's notion of feminine sexuation provides a form of *jouissance* or passionate attachment that mirrors what is required in democracy. I will now turn to Stavrakakis' work before considering Žižek's alternative conception of the role of psychoanalysis in politics.

## **Stavrakakis and Radical Democracy – A trans-fantasmatic politics?**

Following on from Laclau, Stavrakakis has sought to continue the radical democratic tradition, becoming the flag-bearer for the political institutionalisation of Lacanian psychoanalysis through the production of two influential texts; *Lacan and the Political* (1999) and *The Lacanian Left* (2007). In the earlier text, Stavrakakis begins with the assertion that modern politics is a response to the decline in the symbolic efficiency of the big Other. Today, Stavrakakis contends, politics is split between various attempts to restore the utopian fantasmatic dimension of the Other and what he labels a 'politics of *aporia*'. The latter is an impotent form of politics without a motivating force, unwilling to reinstate the Other but unsure how to proceed (1999:99).

The problem Stavrakakis constructs is that which is addressed in the opening chapters of this thesis. In response, Stavrakakis asserts that the Left cannot resort to a 'politics of reoccupation' characterised by the fantasmatic hold of utopianism. Lacanian theory teaches that these fantasmatic attempts to restore the big Other can only be instituted upon the basis of the exclusion<sup>80</sup> of an element which is then posited as the enemy; that which is preventing the (impossible) realisation of Utopia (ibid.: 107). The question, according to Stavrakakis, is how the Left can maintain democratic practice whilst maintaining affective political engagement.

Moreover, Stavrakakis' work is a response to the kind of pessimism around psychoanalysis displayed by the likes of Homer. According to Homer (1996: 109), psychoanalytic politics remains impotent because it does not positively enter into the ideology of the Other. He

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<sup>80</sup> Stavrakakis uses exclusion in terms of constitutive outside rather than concrete universal.

suggests that although psychoanalysis may make for good theory, it does not allow for an effective mode of politics. If Lacan insisted that the big Other must be resisted, there are plenty of (ultimately more powerful) ideological positions willing to take up this space.

In reply, Stavrakakis argues that Homer assumes that fantasy and the status of the big Other are entirely universal. Instead, in acknowledging that importance of the question; “How can we have passion in politics without the Holocaust?” (1999:111), Stavrakakis supports the “possibility of a post-fantasmatic or less fantasmatic politics” that rejects the necessity of restoring the Other whilst engaging in affective politics (ibid.: 120). This form of politics is made possible by an application of Lacanian ethics which reject the emphasis upon unity and harmony that has characterised modern democracy, in favour of a collective “traversal of the fantasy of utopia” (ibid.: 122-127).

In this form of (radical) democracy, Lacanian ethics is utilised to perform an “encircling of the Real” (ibid.:130) best achieved by an identification with the *sinthome* – defined by Stavrakakis as that which must be excluded in order to constitute a universal totality – in order to make visible the point of lack which would otherwise be excluded. This ‘ethics of the Real’ (which he attributes to Žižek (ibid.: 130)), needs to be institutionalised into the democratic order, allowing a form of society in which democracy does not have an ontic presence, yet is able to produce a better and more free society (ibid.: 140). Nevertheless, in this first text Stavrakakis is unable to answer his two primary questions; How is a form of (democratic) enjoyment possible that does not require exclusion? And, how can this form of democracy be instituted?

At this stage in his theoretical development, Stavrakakis’ work reads very much like Žižek’s early texts. Indeed, much of the conclusion to *Lacan and the Political* is attributed to Žižek. Nonetheless, as we shall see from our latter discussion of the politics of Žižek’s work, Žižek does not believe that an order can be produced which is based upon the presence of its own exclusion, such that it becomes non-exclusive. It is this kind of positioning which leads the likes of Sharpe (2004: 248) to suggest that Žižek’s demand to identify with the abject leads only to permanent critique. This is exactly the kind of approach that Stavrakakis is seeking to



avoid, so it is almost in response to Žižek, as well as the continual problem of the feasibility of the democratic project, that *The Lacanian Left* begins.

In this text, Stavrakakis seeks to create a “democratic ethos of the political” (2007: 254). Building from *Lacan and the Political*, he claims that contemporary politics has featured a rapid increase in democratic rhetoric, combined with a sustained erosion of liberty and equality. Although this has led some theorists – here Stavrakakis includes Žižek and Badiou – to abandon the horizon of democracy because it has become too imbued with the exigencies of capital and consumption, Stavrakakis refuses to do so, counting that democracy is the “most important invention of our political imagination and experimentation” (ibid.: 256). For Stavrakakis, democracy is *the* political horizon, both in the sense that in its very structure it replicates the Lacanian rejection of the big Other, and because it allows for a greater degree of human freedom than any other.

Radical democracy, Laclau’s original conception of democracy, provides the ultimate democratic ethos because it allows for conflict and an acknowledgement of the lack in the Other: for Stavrakakis, it is the natural translation of Lacanian ethics into politics. If the institutions of democracy – the empty place of power, the respect for conflicting conceptions of the polis – re-create the lack in the Other, what is required is a subjective ethos of democratic participation, one that celebrates lack and the unifying acceptance of disharmony (ibid.: 257). This is a democracy founded on an ethical acknowledgment of self-institution, one that comes to recognise its own lack of foundations.

Stavrakakis cannot acknowledge, however, that this democratic ideal itself relies on the production of a big Other – that of Democracy itself. Democracy is not solely self-instituting and contingent; it requires at least a minimal demand that the institutions of democracy cannot be revoked (Žižek, 2008a: 412-415). Voting an anti-democratic party into power is not considered a democratic outcome. Moreover, Stavrakakis’ conception of democracy itself relies upon an exclusion; that of the economy and class struggle. The economy plays no role in Stavrakakis’ work except as a realm of consumptive enjoyment, which he suggests is one of three political responses to lack – the others being nationalism and religious fundamentalism (2007:260).

Thus, Stavrakakis seeks, particularly in *The Lacanian Left*, to go beyond the institutionalisation of lack in favour of a democratic ethics of enjoyment. Rejecting Žižek's apparent conflation of radical democracy with the dry formalism of Habermas' deliberative democracy<sup>81</sup> (a comparison Stavrakakis describes as 'astonishing' (ibid.: 277)) Stavrakakis seeks to find "another *jouissance*, an ethos beyond the politics of fantasy ... an *enjoyable democratic ethics of the political*" (ibid.: 268-269, original emphasis). This democratic enjoyment is the partial, or feminine, enjoyment which occurs after the subject has 'traversed the fantasy'.

This enjoyment strays away from the convention notion of full *jouissance* that characterises Stavrakakis' reading of utopia. Instead, the other *jouissance* to which Stavrakakis refers is a feminine enjoyment available to the subject after they have traversed the fantasy. By traversing the fantasy, Stavrakakis contends that the democratic subject is able to come to terms with the antagonistic demands of the Other, an acceptance required for the restoration of the democratic project. If the goal of clinical analysis is for the analysand to acknowledge that the Other does not exist (and thus stop relying upon it for enjoyment), Stavrakakis' conception of a democratic ethic requires the same knowledge both in the subject and in the (democratic) structural practice which performs this knowledge for the subject.

Ultimately, for Stavrakakis, democratic enjoyment is an enjoyment of lack and its dialectical excess. Stavrakakis contends that this enjoyment can occur without the stabilising effects of the exception, conceived here as the Lacanian *objet a*, stating;

the central task in psychoanalysis – and politics – is to detach the *objet a* from the signifier of lack in the Other to detach (anti-democratic and post-democratic) fantasy from the democratic institutions of lack, making possible the access to a partial enjoyment beyond fantasy. (2007: 280)

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<sup>81</sup> Daly (2009: 286) notes that Aletta Norval NORVAL, A. 2004. Democratic Decisions and the Question of Universality: Rethinking Recent Approaches. In: CRITCHLEY, S. & MARCHART, O. (eds.) *Laclau; A Critical Reader*. Oxon: Routledge., from the same Essex School as Laclau, also draws a similar comparison between Laclau and Habermas' conception of democracy.

Here, Stavrakakis is attempting to follow Fink's argument from *Lacan to the Letter* (2004: 161), a re-reading of Lacan *Écrits*. Stavrakakis (2007: 279) refers to Fink when he states, "Only the sacrifice of the fantasmatic *objet petit a* can make this other *jouissance* attainable". The key to this statement rests upon the meaning of "the fantasmatic *objet a*". Two distinct readings remain open. Stavrakakis could be suggesting that *objet a* is a fantasmatic object; when one lets go of fantasy, *objet a*, as the object of desire, is no longer required.

This reading of the status of *objet a* has been scornfully rebuked by Žižek. Rejecting the suggestion that society can operate without *objet a*, Žižek demands that a distinction be made between the status of *objet a* in desire and drive – a distinction between *objet a* as the cause of desire or object of desire (Žižek, 2008a: 327). Stavrakakis may be applauded in seeking to remove the illusionary utopian desire from politics but one cannot remove the excesses of *objet a* altogether. Instead, even in the trans-fantasmatic realm of drive, *objet a* still dominates subjectivity. It is just that for Lacan the movement from desire to drive is a movement from the object as loss (and thus a desire to recapture it) to loss as an object itself.

Additionally, Žižek contends that a traversal of 'the fantasy' does not leave the subject without fantasy, as Stavrakakis advocates. To traverse the fantasy is not to confront reality and its antagonisms directly, as Stavrakakis' post-fantasmatic democratic ethos suggests. Rather, traversing the fantasy involves coming to terms with the co-ordinates of fantasy itself, to be caught up in fantasy more than ever and fully identify with one's subjective position in relation to fantasy (Žižek, 2008a: 324-331). In this sense, fantasy is flattened: fantasy exists but it no longer serves as a defence against the symptom. Thus, to traverse the fantasy is still to remain within fantasy and *objet a*. The traversal of the fantasy, however, is not a conservative movement. One does not simply enjoy the symptom, wallowing in the perversity of failure. Rather, failure loses the 'depth' that allowed the subject to enjoy the symptom; fantasy becomes two-dimensional, no longer mediating against the exclusions which constituted its former boundaries.

Moreover, Stavrakakis seems to have been seduced by the power of the feminine. As noted in Chapter Three, within Lacan's work the feminine appears to have a strange mysterious quality, largely because it provides an alternative to the masculine; Lacan says very little

about it, except to say that nothing more can be said. Indeed, as Žižek (1994a: 151) notes, Lacan appears to hint that he will say more about the feminine in *The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire* when he ends with “I won’t go any further there” (2006: 700) suggesting there is more to be said. Lacan, however, does not extend further on the feminine, which has left the feminine with a mysterious alternative status, suggesting that an alternative form of subjectivity is available – one that would avoid the pitfalls of contemporary subjectivity and structure.

This conception of the feminine is, however, a major misreading of Lacan. For Lacan the feminine was indeed mysterious but only because of its very impossibility. If the feminine has an existence, it is as a supplement to the masculine enjoyment of the phallus (Levy-Stokes, 2001b: 105). The feminine is a structural clinical possibility – the subject can experience feminine *jouissance* but not without the phallus – but not an ideological one in any singular sense. This ‘Other’ *jouissance* is, as Fink (1995: 122) states, ‘fundamentally incommensurate, unquantifiable, disproportionate, and indecent to ‘polite society’’. One cannot develop a political discourse of the feminine *jouissance* – this would be impossible in both the Lacanian and everyday sense of the term – and even if this was possible, there is nothing to suggest that this kind of enjoyment would have anything to say about democracy or indeed poverty and class struggle.

Following this critique, Žižek states that not only is his work a misreading of Lacan but “Stavrakakis’ political vision is vacuous” (Žižek, 2008a: 331). Contending that Stavrakakis remains a ‘Freudo-radical democrat’, seeking to supplement a political theory with an ethics of enjoyment rather than developing a politics directly from Lacanian theory as Stavrakakis contends, Žižek argues that we should not be looking for a democratic ethos of enjoyment but instead considering why there is no passion invested in our current forms of democracy. Žižek does not reject democracy outright – it is not that democracy is without value – but, rather, suggests that democracy is not the ultimate political horizon and holds no emancipationist potential at this stage of history.

As Žižek has stated, radical democracy, “comes all too close to merely ‘radicalizing’ this liberal democratic imaginary, while remaining within its horizon” (Žižek, 2000e: 325). In this

case Stavrakakis' reading of psychoanalysis remains an ethical one, transposed onto the field of existing political institutions. Under capitalism, democracy is nothing more than an empty political supplement to capital. Politics under capitalism is strictly post-politics, and it is on this point that Stavrakakis and Žižek are finally in agreement.

Nonetheless, Stavrakakis' position may still be in some degree compatible with Žižek's. Clearly, for Lacan *objet a* exists beyond fantasy. It is not only the object of desire but the cause of desire. If Stavrakakis comes to this reading – a fairly fundamental conception of Lacanian psychoanalysis – it could be that by 'the fantasmatic *objet a*', Stavrakakis has meant that the fantasmatic element of *objet a*, not *objet a* as cause or a remainder of the Real. This is perhaps a little generous. Nonetheless, we must proceed from this point, taking Stavrakakis at his best. If we propose what Žižek deems to be the correct reading of the Lacanian *objet a*, does Stavrakakis' theory of radical democracy still hold?

## Against the Democratic Hypothesis

In response to this question, Žižek's argues that Lacanian ethics simply cannot be institutionalised in any fashion. Returning back to the Kantian notion of the ethical, ethics is always in excess to the law. Thus, the ethical excess cannot be subsumed into law but must always remain outside of law. Moreover, Stavrakakis conflates the difference between the form and content of Lacan's work, which has led to his attempts to transpose this clinical analysis to the political realm. In terms of politics, what must be taken from Lacan's work is not so much the content of his analysis – although, as we have thus far suggested, it is a productive approach to political analysis – but, rather, the form of his dialectical approach. This approach is evident in each of his articulations of ethics, whether of desire, drive or the *sinthome*. Here, the focus is exposing that upon which being rests, yet cannot be acknowledged. It is this formal process of analysis – finding the point of exclusion, symptoms, or cause of desire, which dissolve through analysis – that can be transposed across contexts and beyond the limits of clinical practice.

Furthermore, beyond his critique of Stavrakakis' reading of Lacan, Žižek's central reproach is that Stavrakakis conflates the difference between ethics and politics. That is, although

Stavrakakis is overtly attempting to transpose ethics to politics, no such translation occurs. Rather, Stavrakakis suspends the political moment – the assertion of radical inconsistency that haunts social life – in favour of the democratic hypothesis that he believes to stem directly from the content of Lacan’s work. His work then attempts to add an ethos to existing democratic institutions, based upon a Lacanian reading of *jouissance*. Yet, there is nothing inherently democratic about psychoanalysis, despite Stavrakakis’ demands. Instead any political demand must be inserted into the Lacanian dialectic, thus contradicting its process. Despite the problems with Laclau’s work, at very least he acknowledges that it is politics which dominates the human condition (Tie, 2009: 259).

Stavrakakis’ politics, despite his appeals to the contrary, are an ethics of the symbolic, not the Real. It is an ethics of the administration of affairs, not the radical repositioning of the Real. This may not be a harmful thing in itself – there is no reason to suggest, as Eagleton (2009: 301) argues in relation to Badiou, that “a just society must remain in perpetual thrall to its moment of foundation” – but it is certainly not a Lacanian thing. Given that Stavrakakis is seeking to provide a specifically Lacanian conception of democracy, it is unclear how much of his theory remains after this critique.

## The Politics of the Political

The key distinction between Žižek’s and Stavrakakis’ theoretical practices lies in the distinction between politics and the political. Despite the title of his first text, in practice Stavrakakis attempts to read Lacan as a form of politics, whereas Žižek interprets Lacan as a theorist of the political. This distinction, as Daly (2009: 280) notes, is most often associated with Claude Lefort (1988), although it has become increasingly common in contemporary continental theory. Stavrakakis (1999: 71), for example, considers the distinction between politics and political to be equivalent to that between reality and the Real. We cannot push this comparison too far (largely because Stavrakakis often appears to take a pre-ontological conception of the Real, conceiving it as the bedrock of reality rather than as having been created by reality itself) but it remains an effective mechanism; politics is the ontic instantiation of the inexhaustible ontological horizon of the political. Politics is the particular to the universality of the political, a universality that exceeds the particular not through an

over-riding hegemonic horizon but, rather, through the very failure of the political. The value of the psychoanalytic reading of the analogous relationship between the Real and reality is in providing an understanding of the extimate relationship between politics and the political, such that we are never in one without the other.

This understanding of the extimate relation between politics and the political is based upon the exclusion, or rather failure, of morality. Here, in the post-world after the turn to language, the political takes the place of morality; the transcendental horizon of judgement. This political dimension is not a judgement in itself but, rather, signals the impossibility of any final decision. The political moment is the end of all judgements, that dislocatory point which signals the foundational indeterminacy of being. For this reason, ideology acts to disavow the political moment, such that today, when ethics fails, the political dimension is not evoked but, rather, the moral. When an element exceeds the pre-conceived co-ordinates of the ethical, under liberal democracy we do not evoke the dimension of the political: we do not begin to question the manner in which we exist, or the exclusions which are necessary for this condition. Rather, we substitute in morality, looking for the big Other to fill the hole in our ethical administration. This is seen in the practice of the 'conscience vote' in parliamentary democracies. This vote, whereby representatives vote according to their 'conscience' rather than the party line, is an apparent attempt to get outside of politics for issues which are considered 'moral'<sup>82</sup>.

As an illustration, the 1980s and early 1990s in New Zealand were characterised by the sudden predominance of neo-liberal ideology. After its initial instantiation – which involved the evocation of a crisis and the (silent) dimension of the political – this discourse became private in the sense that the political horizon appeared inevitable. Government administration became a matter of ethics; debates were had over the best administrative means through which to install neo-liberal ethics.

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<sup>82</sup> Interestingly, conscience votes are considered the norm under the American to the extent that the term is rarely used.

One of these means was the creation of two pieces of legislation which sought to limit the practice of future governments. Seeking to use ethics to permanently exclude the political, this legislation – the Fiscal Responsibility Act (1994) and the Reserve Bank Act (1989) – both enshrined neo-liberal principles in the practice of government. As such, those behind neo-liberal ideology managed to expand the ethical horizon, rearticulating the very practice of government. With the disavowal of the political dimension – in this case legislation was developed to specifically prevent political interference – there exists not a politics of liberal democracy but, rather, an ethics of the administration of privatised political practice. When the political is suspended, politics becomes ethics and the moral substitutes for the political. These are the circumstances of ‘post-ideological’ liberal democracies in which politics has been reduced to an empty formalism. As such, politics disappears and debate becomes ethical; because there is no longer any debate over the Good (the discontented are marginalised or subjugated) the polis becomes a private community, unaware of the exclusions upon which it is founded.

As a further illustration, although the nation-state has come to be questioned in academic discourse and threatened by changes in global politics, few question the inherent good of the Nation. When the exclusions through which the concept of Nation from become apparent, they tend not to threaten the nation but, rather, enhance its identity. The treatment of refugees is an example of this process. In recent times numerous attempts have been made by ‘boat people’ to immigrate to Australia by illegal means. The Australian state, through both the Howard and Rudd governments, has failed to allow these people to arrive in Australia, forcing them to either turn around or land at pre-established detention centres in the Pacific. This policy, which has led to several ‘tragedies’, has not been case for any rumination about what it means to be Australian. This would be a political intervention, suggesting, for instance that all people have to the same right to citizenship, and their lives have a greater status than that of the Nation – a proper political moment which occurs when that which has been excluded is forced into being. Instead, the morality of the nation has been affirmed. At best separate ‘administrative’ solutions have been found, allowing the boatpeople the privilege of seeking asylum or transporting them safety back to their point of departure. Without the political, there is no politics, only administrative ethics.



We can perhaps best explain these tight conceptual distinctions – between morality, ethics, politics and the political – by reference to the economy. A moral understanding of the economy would make reference to a transcendental signifier which dictates the structure of the economy – it is the economy of those who take their orders from God, or a signifier thereof. For neo-conservatives, these orders can be taken from the Bible, or the doctrines of free-market economics, a difference which has somehow oft times become blurred. In terms of a solution to difficulties of the global economy, at its best this form of economy might entail acts of charity in attempting to plug the gap between the apparent benevolence of its doctrines and the unruliness of its discontents. Karl Anderson's response to the 2008 financial crisis, *Reset* (2009), for instance, argues that it offers the opportunity not to rethink the American way of life but to “restore our values and renew America”. This is clearly a moral discourse which takes ‘America’ to be an axiomatic signifier beyond reproach

An ethical response to the economy already takes the economic horizon for granted, either by right or resignation. Those who are resigned to the structure of the economy seek ethical practices which do not fundamentally tackle this structure. As such, today the strongest sense of an ethical economy comes in the fair-trade/sustainability movement. The ethics of this form of economy takes the fundamentals of the economy for granted – markets, trade, poverty etc – but seeks to modify them through a set of judgements upon existing conditions. This is largely the position taken by the Left today.

Conversely, the Left does not have a monopoly on being economically ethical. For those on the political Right, ethics involve those institutions or decisions which keep capitalism ‘fair’ by resisting the urge to interfere with the market. Here, ethics entails a legislative approach to maintain the formal standards that maintain free-market competition. If capitalism itself has a moral status, then ethics is about maintaining the ethos of the moral. Both sides of the political equation are seeking to maintain the morality of capitalism, although this morality is more explicitly acknowledged by the Right.

The politics of economy has a similar structure to the ‘ethical economy’ but considers the institutional arrangements of the economy. Today's Leftist politicians might, for example, agree that capitalism operates best with a thorough welfare state, whereas the Right maintains

that welfare is an inefficient means of distributing wealth. In this sense we are returning to Eagleton's topological distinction whereby ethics is a judgement of the Good instituted in a form of politics.

This kind of debate occurred in the 2008 US election campaign where both McCain and Obama postulated their differing conception of the manner in which the economy should be managed, without calling into question the economic horizon: when the banking crisis reached its peak, both candidates momentarily ceased campaigning to reach a bi-partisan agreement to shore up the banking system. At this point, politics came to rest in the name of the moral imperative of maintaining the 'American way of life', which was called into question by the collapse. That the breakdown of the banking system was treated in much the same way as the declaration of war (both in Afghanistan and Iraq), is telling in regards to the moral status of capitalism. It was only after the crisis was considered over that politics resumed through debate over the institutional arrangements of the system.

By contrast, a political approach calls into question this very horizon, enforcing its own inherent lack rather than attempting to fill it. A properly political economy entails an attempt to evoke the impossibility of economy itself, calling into question the very ontic horizon of the economy. Today, to accomplish such a move would necessitate a critique of capitalism itself and class struggle. Moreover, it would require an evocation of the impossibility of the economy itself.

Of value in helping us to understand what his move towards an evocation of this impossibility of the economy itself is Daly's sense that the distinction between politics and the political beyond Lefort's work is not uniform, such that we can have a 'politics of the political': there exist different ways (politics) of conceiving of the inexhaustible horizon of the political (2009:280). Indeed, he argues that the major distinction between Laclau and Žižek – a distinction that largely defines the argumentation in this thesis, both in terms of reading Lacan and what it means to act politically – can be understood as the politics of the political. We could consider, as Daly (*ibid.*: 281) does, that the difference between Laclau's (constitutive exception) and Žižek's (universal exception) understanding of the notion of outside is an example of the politics surrounding the conception of the political horizon.

Yet, if Žižek rejects Stavrakakis', or indeed any, attempt to translate Lacanian ethics into an institutional form of politics, in what manner does Žižek articulate the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics? Before going on to discuss the difficulties with reading Žižek's work, a preliminary answer can be suggested: Žižek does not use Lacanian ethics as a form of politics but, rather, as a sense of political practice that attempts to bring about a 'short-circuit' by which the ethos of Lacanian theory is used to evoke the foundations of the political order. It operates not so much from the content of the Lacanian approach to ethics but, rather, from the dialectics of its form. This approach does not seek reform or political protest but, rather, a wholesale questioning of the political order.

## What is the Truth of Žižek?

Žižek's location within the Left – as both saviour and disappointment – has meant that his work is the subject of much frustration, speculation and adulation, either being sought out as a mysterious messiah, misguided conservative or confused pluralist. Žižek is both none and all of these things, depending on our construction of his work. Given Žižek's status as the embodiment of the difficulties of the Left, the construction of Žižek to be utilised in this thesis is of vital importance. Moreover, I will consider the consequences of speaking in this manner, given the particular materiality of the problematic to which this thesis speaks.

The question is whether there are various Žižek's to be constructed, or rather a singular Truth of Žižek to be found, whereby a correct reading of his work that can be deployed. Certainly, the Truth of Žižek's work does not lie within Žižek himself. We cannot consider Žižek to be somehow outside of language, a miraculous theoretical object of which direct consideration is possible. It is not possible to wholly represent Žižek's work such that the Truth emerges as a coherent map. Instead, if there is a Truth of Žižek, it could only lie outside of him in the interpretations of his work and the interpretations his work produces.

As could be expected from a theorist who seeks to combine Lacan, Schelling and Marx, some have argued that Žižek's work is without a core trajectory such that there is not a true Žižek but in an ironically postmodern analysis to which Žižek would stand in stanch disapproval, that there are multiple Žižek's to be constructed. Sarah Kay, for example, states

that, “As with Lacan, every reading of a Žižek text is only a possible trajectory” (2003: 16). Likewise Denise Gigante more harshly contends that Žižek:

is unique, and where he makes his radical break with other literary theorists who take up a position, any position at all that pretends to some notional content or critical truth, is in the fact that he fundamentally has no position. His recent outpouring of critical texts – ranging from ideologico-psychological film theory, such as *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, to the politico-philosophical *Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (matters which include, and why not, quantum physics) – describes a hybridized critical identity that is almost impossible to pin down. Rather than importing interdisciplinary texts and events to his own theoretical perspective, he functions as a “vanishing mediator,” mediating between various theoretical points of view. (Gigante, 1998: 153)

Certainly, Žižek’s work displays a number of political stances, or perhaps strategies: from an initial implicit support of Laclau’s radical democratic project; calls to traverse the fantasy and repoliticise the economy; a controversial affair with the Lacanian act (one that still lingers today); a more recent move into ‘subtractive politics’; and a sure to be controversial support for the ‘communist hypothesis’<sup>83</sup>. Under this interpretation, these strategic positions are not a chronological development, by rather evidence of the plurality – or the confused development – within Žižek’s work. More, Žižek does not appear to consider any subject outside of his discipline – if discipline is the correct term – and infamously moves between them at rapid pace. A joke by the Marx Brothers can appear to hold the same analytic value as a quote from the *Communist Manifesto*. In this sense, a different Žižek can be constructed in any number of discourses – Žižek could be film theorist, a reader of political or cultural enjoyment, a Marxist or a cantankerous communist with a nostalgic bent.

Despite the apparent plurality, however, these positions can be considered to be fundamentally a response to a singular ontological commitment in the Lacanian Real and politically to a form of anti-capitalism increasingly informed by Marxism. The former

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<sup>83</sup> These strategies shall be the focus of Chapter Seven.

overwrites the latter such that against the pluralism noted above, we can consider Žižek to be a philosopher of the Real. Identifying Žižek as a philosopher of the Real appears to place this thesis in the second category, attempting to identify a Truth of Žižek. We must consider, however, what kind of Truth this would be.

If constructing Žižek as a philosopher of the Real appears to be singular representation of his work, it is not one that produces any firm political position or systematic philosophical coherence. Although Žižek's continued reliance upon the Real can be identified – as has occurred throughout this thesis – this does not aid in the development of *the Žižekian* political position. The vital difference lies in the aforementioned distinction between the content of Žižek's interventions and their form. The content may change across discursive context – Žižek's reading of Marxism or anti-capitalism – but the formal dialectic remains constant. This form is reflected in the content of Žižek's reflections but this link is not a necessary one.

This absence of firm political positions of philosophical coherence can be illustrated through his political commitments. The over-riding political allegiance within Žižek's work is to an anti-capitalism that relies on the Marxist tradition. As illustrated in the 'surplus' homology with which I finished Chapter Three, Žižek's Marxism is determined by the formal logic of the Real which is indifferent to its political content. That is, no singular Marxist position emerges from his work but, rather, a plurality of often incommensurable readings or political strategies. These strategies do not hold a singular purpose but, rather, can be deployed depending of the political circumstances. Žižek does not, therefore, attempt to substitute in a new revolutionary agent or suggest a new form of communism that stems directly from this interpretation of the dialectic. Conversely, his refusal to do so by reference to the Real does suggest a firm commitment. It is a commitment, however, that is easily misread, leading to attempts to fill the 'lack' in Žižek's work with an additional attachment.

Here we strike the alternative to the pluralist reading of Žižek, which attempts to identify a singular vision of Žižek's work. Most often, as is the case with Homer (2001:7) who claims that Žižek's Lacanianism rules out any possibility of being a Marxist, Žižek's work is rejected because of a fundamental commitment to either Lacan or Marx, a commitment

which distorts the influence of the other. By the same reasoning, Laclau claims that Žižek's reliance upon Lacanian psychoanalysis prevents him from developing any sense of politics, stating; "Žižek's thought is not organised around a truly *political* reflection but is, rather, a *psychoanalytic* discourse which draws its examples from the politico-ideological field" (Laclau, 2000a: 289)

An interesting split occurs within the essentialist reading of Žižek, between those who attempt to attach a signifier to Žižek's fundamental attachment and those who go in search of a missing essence (as if Žižek is a mysterious Master hoping that his subjects will find the hidden truth before he has to spell it out to them). Yet, there is no hidden or disavowed truth to be found here; that Žižek does somehow hold a position to which he is unwilling to openly commit, although his recent work on the communist hypothesis<sup>84</sup> may have produced knowing smiles in some critics.

Certainly, Žižek's early work features no firm commitment to any alternative position to capitalism, other than a purely formal reference to something other than capitalism. As Critchely (2007a: xvi) recalls, Žižek once commented to him at a conference, "I have a hat but I have no rabbit". In this sense we should not consider Žižek's support for the communist hypothesis to be a borrowed Rabbit but, rather, the shape of a new hat, a renewed epistemological approach.

Thus, there is nothing in Žižek's work that would inspire policy wonks. Nor does there exist a singular reading of Marxism or psychoanalysis that would translate into a radical alternative to global capitalism. Nonetheless, few critics are prepared to accept the limits of Žižek's work, rather searching through his work for a hidden essence. Too many theorists and critics look to Žižek as a distorted form of the master, constantly demanding answers from his work. Laclau, for example contends:

Žižek had told us he wants to overthrow capitalism; now we are served notice that he wants to do away with liberal democratic regimes – to be replaced, it is true, by a thoroughly different regime which he does not have the courtesy of letting us know

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<sup>84</sup> The communist hypothesis shall be the focus of Chapter Eight.

anything about ... Only if that explanation is made available will we be able to start talking politics, and abandon the theological terrain. Before that, I cannot even know what Žižek is talking about – and the more this exchange progresses, the more suspicious I become that Žižek does not know either... I can discuss politics with Butler because she talks about the real world, about strategic problems people face in their actual struggles but with Žižek it is not possible to even start to do so. (Laclau, 2000a: 289-290, original emphasis)

Likewise, the title of Jeremy Gilbert's contribution to the polemically critical text, *The Truth of Žižek* (Bowman and Stamp, 2007), *All the Right Questions, All the Wrong Answers* (2007), suggests the predominant political reading of Žižek's work – that Žižek provides an interesting form of critique, provoking exciting questions but providing disappointing answers; the implication being that it is possible to provide the right answers to Žižek's questions. Nonetheless, theorists looking for 'the right answer' within Žižek's work will be sadly disappointed. Perhaps symptomatic of this demand to the master, is the tendency to allow Žižek some form of a 'right of reply' in publications critical of his work, including the *International Journal for Žižek Studies*, and a number of critical and introductory texts (Bowman and Stamp, 2007, Sharpe, 2004, Kay, 2003, Wright and Wright, 1999, Eagleton, 2009, Zupančič, 2000, Stavrakakis, 1999).

I have thus far established and rejected two possible readings of Žižek: Žižek as a pluralist and Žižek as a disavowed essentialist. The first rejected any sense of universality in Žižek's work, missing his commitment to the Real and anti-capitalist politics. The other has over-read these positions, seeking to find and install a singular abstraction as the universal image of Žižek's work. Both these interpretations of Žižek – the pluralism of his interventions and his fundamental commitments (if not his missing essence) – hold some value. Nonetheless, neither – or, more accurately, both – are the interpretation of Žižek to be taken in this thesis.

Following Sharpe (2004: 4) this interpretation holds that for Žižek there is a singular 'Truth of Žižek' provided by the Real but that this singularity – based upon the paradoxes of the Real identified in Chapter Three – has no necessary content. Rather it is an impossibility that pervades every theoretical concept or political position. As such, the Real may prevent the

development of positivist positions but a plurality of positions exists in relation to the Real. It is only by conceiving of Žižek as an essentialist of the Real that we approach the dimension of universality. This identification produces a short circuit between the particular and the universal, such that the Real – one of the particular signifiers in Žižek's work – becomes the universal image of his work through its very impossibility. That is, the Real becomes the point of failure to which every Žižekian position must respond but it does not produce a position in itself.

Here, Žižek can be considered to be a comedic philosopher. Žižek's work is often supplemented by jokes which serve as illustrative examples, however, the comedic logic goes beyond these witticisms, pervading the deepest logic of his work. Žižek is a comedic philosopher because he is a meta-philosopher – a philosopher of everything – of the Real, which does not exist. Žižek's work is not tragic in this regard in the sense that it points to the existence of something that was had, Marxism for example, and is now lost but, rather, comedic; the thing that we were looking for was never present to begin with.

This basic logic of humour – as ably illustrated by Zupančič (2008, 2006a) – marks the Hegelian logic of universality upon which much of Žižek's work relies. The standard doxa of the discursive turn is that the universal is lost, an impossibility generated by humanity's constitution in language. This tragic logic leads to many of the defeatist critiques of postmodernity. The same critique is thrown at Žižek's work, and at psychoanalysis in general, but it misses a vital point; for Žižek the universal is impossible, but it was never possible to begin with. Human life is constituted as a search for a lost object that was never possessed. Moreover, Žižek suggests that because humanity continues to search for the universal – installing various signifiers in its image – it is this failure which constitutes the universal in what Žižek, following Hegel, labels concrete universality.

This understanding of Žižek can be best illustrated by a regularly cited example within his own work, that of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' interpretation of a tribal village (see Žižek, 1994b: 25, Žižek, 2008a: 287). Here the villagers were asked to draw ground map of their village. Two groups emerged – one that represented the village as two concentric circles, the other separated by an invisible linear frontier. The question Žižek asks,



following Levi-Strauss, is how to interpret this discrepancy. Within contemporary social science, there are two dominant positions which can be broadly identified as modernist and postmodernist. The postmodernist position conceives that there is no true village layout – reality exists only in the manner in which it is constructed by the villagers – there is no truth to be told about any social construction. By contrast the modernist perspective takes an opposite – scientific – approach to truth. Here there is a truth to be had and it is one that can be discovered empirically, perhaps by obtaining some aerial photographs of the village.

The same division can be seen in interpretations of Žižek's work, split between attempts to map his work or constructions of particular positions that emerge. What both these positions miss, however, is the antagonism which is causing the division in representation. Žižek suggests that it is this antagonism which holds the Truth in any given situation and provides the dislocating force to which discourse is a response. This antagonism is nothing but the Real, which provokes both singular attempts to label that 'thing' that Žižek's work is doing, and the plurality of positions which emerge from the failure of these attempts.

There is not, however, any necessary translation of this understanding into politics – Žižek does not produce a 'Politics of the Real'. Although Žižek is committed to this ontological reading, what emerges is a number of different relationships with the impossibility of the Real. Žižek's work, therefore, produces a short-circuit between ethics and the political, using the formal foundations of Lacan's dialectical understanding of ethics to bring into play the indeterminacy of political being. Žižek's politics, therefore, are constituted by different strategic interpretations of the political. These different relationships might productively be interpreted as strategies that can be deployed depending on the political circumstances.

These strategies – including, as we shall detail in Chapter Seven, the act, subtractive politics, and the practice of concrete universality – could mobilise Žižek's ontology as a political strategy in support of some conservative ideological position. Indeed some would suggest that Žižek's disdain for multi-culturalist identity politics does exactly that. In this thesis, however, as is congruent with Žižek's political ambitions but also in relation to the contradictions of the global economy, we shall attempt to understand how Žižek's universal understanding of the Real relates to the question of economy, of capitalism, and of Marxism.

The emblematic question for this thesis relates to the consequences of this particular interpretation of Žižek against the specificity of the economic problematic around which this thesis is based. If I have initially rejected the ‘Scientific Hypothesis’ of Jeffery Sachs’ understanding of the economy, and subsequently shown how both unreconstructed Marxist-communism and the psychoanalytically informed ‘Democratic Hypothesis’ of Laclau and Stavrakakis is unable to contend with both the economy and the global dominance of capitalism, what are the possibilities for political action?

The foremost consequence of this interpretation of Žižek is that his work does not produce a singular political vision – we cannot reply to Stavrakakis’ questions with a simple formulaic approach – nor a series of approaches but, rather, both. That is, as has been noted, the effect of the Real upon which Žižek’s relies means that his work produces a plurality of political strategies that can be reproduced depending on the structure of the particular political circumstances. Conversely, these strategies are based upon a singular perspective – the Real and Marxism – with reference to ontology and politics respectively.

Moreover, Žižek has begun to identify these approaches with a single signifier: class struggle as a modality of the Real and the ‘communist hypothesis’ as the political horizon. As shall be developed in the following chapters, however, neither of these points provides any positive sense of coherence. Žižek’s understanding, however, of comedy, of concrete universality, and of class struggle does aid the rethinking of some of the issues of Marxism after the discursive turn. In particular, they speak to the question of how to renew Marxist political practice at this point of history, given both the theoretical failure of scientific Marxism and the revolutionary subject, as well as the meta-hegemonic dominance of capitalism.

As noted in Chapter Three, Žižek’s reading of Marxism through Lacan and Hegel allows for a return to materiality and the question of economy. Conversely, Žižek has decisively displayed the failure of Marxist politics and communism as resulting from an inability to consider the impossible dialectic of lack and excess that is the basis of the psychoanalytic intervention. Moreover, in the past two chapters – on ethics and politics respectively – I have contended that psychoanalysis alone is unable to provide the resources for a feasible alternative modality of shared social life, particularly in terms of the materiality of the

economy. What psychoanalysis does suggest is a dialectical approach for understanding shared social life and deconstructing ideological formations.

This interpretation of Žižek's work becomes a strategic one: how to mobilise his theoretical work on universality, class struggle, and on the Real against the contradictions and deprivations of the global economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a manner which provides hope of a better future. It is to this point that I shall now turn in the next section of this thesis. Here, having constructed the problems of global sustainability, Marxism after the signifier and the Lacanian reading of politics, I will construct a Žižekian response – and beyond – to these dilemmas.

This response shall proceed in three stages. The first consists of a reading of Žižek's work on the economy. This move is necessary because so much of the critique of Žižek's politics is based upon either a lack of understanding of his reading of capitalism and the ontic status of the economy, or a blatant disavowal of the consequences of this move. Much of the positioning of Žižek as 'good theory, poor politics' is based around a refusal to acknowledge how his 'theoretical' construction of capital and global capitalism cannot be divided from his politics.

In particular, Žižek's use of class struggle and capitalism as a modality of the Real, suggests crucial limitations in the range of political action available in response to the meta-hegemony of global capitalism. It is in light of these limitations, along with those established in this chapter in relation to Lacanian politics, that I will begin to construct a Žižekian political approach to politics in general and global capitalism specifically.

Here, I shall consider the range of strategic alternatives which emerge from Žižek's work in relation to the contradictions of the global economy, specifically the surplus of labour which emerges with Žižek's reading of global capitalism. Finally, in the penultimate chapter of the thesis, I shall turn to Žižek's recent reference to the communist hypothesis and consider how it is that Žižek is able to hold on to what might be deemed a 'Big Idea' given the difficulties with such positions already established thus far.

The task in the next chapter, however, is to consider Žižek's (Marxist) construction of the economy. This move has three points, taking into account the meta-hegemonic dominance of capitalism, Žižek's reliance upon class struggle, and the political alternatives that have emerged in relation to class struggle.



## 6. Žižek on the Economy

Žižek holds a symptomatic point within Leftist politics; his work grapples with the same difficulties of representation that have brought the downfall of traditional Left (essentialist) politics – namely that there is no ultimate foundation from which politics can be guaranteed – yet he maintains that the Left must not abandon the political terrain either by giving way to these dilemmas or by losing sight of the materiality of the economy. Nonetheless, whilst I have argued that Žižek is able to produce a form of political analysis based upon a Lacanian reading of the dialectic, he has (willingly) been unable to renew Marxist politics in their traditional form – one which holds to the inevitability of history and communism. This is not to suggest, however, that Žižek’s (Lacanian) form of politics elides a Marxist reading. Instead, the very purpose of producing a Žižekian response to the economic problematic that defines this thesis is to suggest that Žižek’s work reconstructs Marxist politics in manner that can be relevant to the critique of contemporary capitalism. This analysis starts with Žižek’s conception of capital through which Žižek, particularly through his concern with class struggle, suggests a Lacanian re-reading of the structural primacy of the economy.

Thus far I have noted how Žižek’s Lacanian reading of Marxism suggests a damning critique of both the traditional concept of the revolutionary subject and the fantasmatic utopianism inherent in many forms of communism, both existing and theoretical. The turn to psychoanalysis, both in terms of Lacan’s clinical understanding of ethics and attempts to translate these ethics into a political system, has not produced any further optimism. Although the Lacanian orientation provides a productive understanding of politics and ideology, the institutionalisation of psychoanalysis is entirely contrary to its dialectical thrust. Moreover, the ‘radical’ Leftist movements which have emerged from a broad psychoanalytic reading – Laclau and Stavrakakis foremost – have operated by way of an exclusion of the economy via what we have identified as the ‘Democratic Hypothesis’.

In reply to this hypothesis I returned, in the previous chapter, to Žižek’s strategic reading of the political implications of Lacanian theory. Here, Žižek has developed a number of political positions in relation to the singular impossibility of the Real. To properly understand

his work and the hope it provides in response to the structure of capital today, I will now consider how Žižek's work is able to return to the economy and the politics at the heart of the Marxist demand; class struggle and communism. It is only then that we shall be able to understand the value of Žižek's work – and psychoanalysis – as a response to the daunting dilemmas of the global economy. This response does not suggest an alternative, or Lacanian-inspired, mode of production but, rather, a form of political action which insists upon the contradictions in the current mode.

Nonetheless, against Žižek's dismissal of psychoanalytically inspired alternative conceptions of political economy, we still have cause to consider attempts to generate such an alternative to capitalism. If Žižek's notion of class struggle suggests a condition of impossibility at the heart of all political economy, United States political theorists Yahya Madra and Ceren Özselcuk seek to rearticulate this impossibility in a manner which positions it as the principle of a renewed form of communism. This position – whilst suggesting a number of reasoned points of critique against Žižek – faces two difficulties: the limitations of feminine politics and the contemporary structure of political economy (in particular surplus labour and the ineluctable logic of capital).

As such, this chapter begins with a discussion of Žižek's understanding of capitalism and class struggle, one that defines his political approach. I will then consider the possibilities for political action that stem from this understanding, in particular in its resonance with the work of Özselcuk and Madra, as well as Hardt and Negri. Ultimately these perspectives, whilst shedding an illuminative light on the structure of capitalism, are unable to account for the unruly and disavowed excess that defines capitalism. Instead, Žižek comes to argue that it is only by reference to a 'communist hypothesis', based upon the excluded element of the global polis more than an ideological position, that can begin to return to the Marxist political tradition and properly respond to the contradictions of the global economy. The first step is to consider Žižek's conception of capital.

## Žižek and the deadlock of capitalism

Žižek argues that capitalism is not another object like any other. It is not a matter of conceiving capitalism to be a particular moment in the symbolic order. Rather, Žižek considers capitalism to have a deeper hold on the political field. Capital is not just one object in the field of hegemony but has rather hegemonised hegemony itself. As he states:

in so far as we conceive of the politico-ideological resignification in terms of the struggle for hegemony, today's Real which sets the limit to resignification is Capital: the smooth functioning of Capital is that which remains the same, that which 'always' returns to its place', in the unconstrained struggle for hegemony. (Žižek, 2000b: 223)

For this reason, Žižek holds that the only possibility of invoking radical change within capitalism is the internal rupture of capital itself – there is no outside which could force a cleavage within capital.

This claim, along with the associated notion of capitalism as a modality of the Real, has been the source of much consternation from his critics. The primary accusation is that by constructing capitalism in such a manner, Žižek leaves room only for the Lacanian act as a mode of radical politics (see Devenney, 2007). Laclau, for example, states:

According to Žižek, capitalism is the Real of present-day societies for it is that which always returns. Now he knows as well as I do what the Lacanian Real is; so he should also be aware that capitalism cannot be the Lacanian Real. The Lacanian Real is that which resists symbolisation and shows itself only through its disruptive effects. But capitalism as a set of institutions, practices, and so on can operate only in so far as it is part of the symbolic order. And if, on top of that one thinks – as Žižek does – that capitalism is a self-generated framework proceeding out of an elementary conceptual matrix, it has to be conceptually fully graspable and, as a result, a symbolic totality without holes. In that case, capitalism as such is dislocated by the Real, and it is open to contingent hegemonic retotalisations. *Ergo*, it cannot be the *fundamentum inconcussum*, the framework within which hegemonic struggles take place, because –



as a totality – it is itself only the result of partial hegemonic stabilisations. (Laclau, 2000a: 291)

Laclau here makes a reasonable point in relation to the framework of capitalism but ultimately misses the subtlety in Žižek's argument. Capitalism is certainly part of the symbolic-imaginary order; I have previously discussed the manner in which the commodity form operates as a form of enjoyment. The commodity form itself is supplemented by several other (ideological) modalities of enjoyment, most notably that of democracy (as the official ideological supplement of capitalism) and culture itself, either in multi-cultural or fundamentalist/reactionary forms. Moreover, we can observe the operation of capitalism as a symbolic form, both in terms of the economic framework which is enshrined in law as the 'invisible' hand of the market and the emptiness of the money form. Finally, capitalism exists as a power structure, embodied in the military-industrial imperialism of the United States and its NATO allies. However, whilst Žižek touches on the structural content of global capitalism, he is more concerned with the form of capital.

In regards to this form, an initial analysis may suggest that Žižek is engaging a rhetorical device through which to make a point about the status of capital: capital has become *the* political-hegemonic force of our time, the point to which everything returns without becoming a specific modality of the Lacanian Real. Nonetheless, as is always the case with Žižek, there is some truth in appearance. Žižek is not simply using 'Capital as Real' for shock value; rather this assertion suggests a deeper point to which he returns in his later work.

Žižek does indeed argue that global capital has become the determining factor in contemporary global affairs. It has done so, however, with a twist. Capital is not dominant in the totalitarian sense of exhausting all opposition, although both violence and systematic megalomania lie – disavowed, rather than dominant – at the heart of the beast. Rather, capitalism is a modality of the *symbolic* Real because it is the (absent) point to which all symbolisation returns.

As noted in Chapter Three, Žižek's definition of Capital as a symbolic form of the Real owes to his distinction (in the foreword to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *For they Know Not What They Do*, written in 2002) between the triadic modalities of the Real – the Real also having

imaginary and symbolic dimensions. Of most interest to this argument is the symbolic Real, which Žižek describes as “the Real as consistency” – capital is thus the consistent background against which shared social life operates, even if capital is inconsistent in itself (Žižek, 2002: xii).

Žižek’s development of the capital as the Real has been a relatively sedate and contemporary occurrence. It was not until 1999 in *The Ticklish Subject* that Žižek began to speak of global capitalism and the Real in the same terms. He stated (in reference to global climate change and the El Nino effect); “This catastrophe thus gives body to the Real of our time: the thrust of Capital which ruthlessly disregards and destroys particular life-worlds, threatening the very survival of humanity” (1999: 4). Here though, Žižek is using the Real in a more conventional Lacanian sense; the Real as a traumatic point within the symbolic field, rather than as the unsymbolisable logic of consistency in a symbolic field.

Žižek’s initial conceptualisation of capital as the symbolic Real arose through his three-way collaboration with Laclau and Judith Butler, *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality* (2000). Here Žižek considers capital as the background against which all symbolisations must relate, a “limit to resignification” (Žižek, 2000b: 223). Furthermore, Žižek goes on to describe capital as “structuring in advance the very terrain on which the multitude of particular contents fight for hegemony” (Žižek, 2000e: 320). Žižek is clear, however, to make a distinction between capital as a limit to signification and hegemonic struggle, and of capital as the positive condition that creates a symbolic background against which hegemonic struggle occurs (ibid.: 319).

This last point is vital. It is not that capital prevents the production of non-capitalist discourse but, rather, that these discourses occur upon a background (which remains politically implicit, unless provoked) that determines in the last instance the parameters in which they operate. It is in this way that capitalism is a modality of the Real; as a non-explicit limit. It can appear that an outside to capital exists, as not all relations are capitalist relations. Rather capital is structured in a manner similar to one of its iconic structures, the shopping mall.

The ‘mall’ allows all apparent freedoms and is experienced as a site of consumptive enjoyment. One is free to move around and experiences no apparent repression, except in

acting against the interests of the mall. What the mall has achieved is the subsumption of public space: the historical village centre, with all its associated public space and room for dissent, is now contained within the mall itself. In this sense one can be free within the mall – and within capitalism – only by following the rules and internalising the structures of the mall. These rules appear coercive only in an imaginary sense; through the insistence of *jouissance* and ideology.

Beneath the benevolence of the mall and the doctrines of capitalism lies a more openly coercive sense of power, both in terms of symbolic restraint – codes of behaviour – and an undercurrent of violence. Indeed, the success of capitalism lies in its ability to combine resistance and subversion into the ideological dialectics of power: what appears to be a counter-cultural or subversive movement is always a possible opportunity for profit, whether it is the Green, Pink or Punk dollar. Moreover, if the likes of Greenpeace provide the most visible power of resistance today, then it is a form of subversion which will only serve to make capitalism more sustainable. These movements, amongst which we can include various forms of progressive action, including unions and ‘rights’ groups, act only as a ‘conscience’ – with all its super-ego connotations – upon capitalism, ultimately smoothing the wheels to prevent political unrest (Daly, 2009: 291, Hawken, 1997, Žižek, 2006e: 238). This ‘ability’ has been evident since the origins of the capitalist empire: England, for example, avoided the violence of the French revolution largely through the development of ‘poor laws’<sup>85</sup> (Ross, 1998: 8). The ability to integrate the demands of the polis – both progressive and populist – is the great advantage of capitalism, and not only in a critical sense. Under capitalism a great number of progressive developments have occurred. We should not, however, lose sight of the cost at which these developments have come, in particular the massive contradictions of poverty and over-development identified at the beginning of the this project.

The identification of capitalism as a form of the Real has significant consequences for political action. Firstly, it suggests that there can be no ‘outside’ of capitalism from which to establish an alternative position with any traction against capitalism. Just as in the mall analogy, an alternative or outside position can only exist so long as it is not a threat to the

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<sup>85</sup> These laws, however, came to be seen as a restriction upon the activities of capital.

existence of capitalism. As an illustration, against the rhetoric of ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ and the spread of democracy, critics of the US invasion of Iraq have suggested that the attack was motivated by Iraq’s vast Oil resources. Conversely, others have suggested that the Bush administration had no issue with Iraq’s use of their Oil resources, until they switched from trading their Oil in US Dollars to Euros, threatening the hegemony of the (petro)Dollar as the universal currency of the Oil market (Henderson, 2003, Clark, 2005, Looney, 2004). Indeed, immediately after the invasion, Iraqi Oil accounts were switched back to the US dollar (Petrov, 2006).

In this sense, also, the Euro – despite being an integral element of capitalism as an exchangeable currency – operated as an antagonistic ‘outside’ to the hegemony of the US Dollar in the Oil market. Its presence threatened the hegemony of Dollar to such an extent that the intrusion of the Euro into the market produced a major dislocation, one that forced violent intervention. Thus, while the Euro cannot be conceived as an inherently anti-capitalism currency, we can see from this example the consequences of a threat to the smooth running of the logic of capital – the dominance of the US Petrodollar being part of that hegemony.

Furthermore, any radical political approach that attempts to gain traction within capitalism hits a limit at capitalism itself. This is the fundamental limitation of the democratic approach of Laclau and Stavrakakis, or the deconstructionist ethics of the likes of William Connolly (2002, 2008) and Critchley (2007b). These theorists are regular critics of Žižek, accusing him of political impotence. They suggest that Žižek’s work holds no political value because he refuses to partake in political ‘activity’ within capitalism. Connolly and Critchley, for example, each argue that we should ‘chip away’ at the capitalist structure, making whatever possible progressive political adjustments within the system. Ultimately they are social-democrats, appealing for greater tolerance and environmental standards. Stavrakakis and the earlier Laclau make similar demands in relation to democracy. What these theorists fail to understand are the limits to action posed by capitalism. Most notably, these piecemeal reforms are unable to gain any traction against the global material contradictions and deprivations which are at the heart of this thesis. What Žižek advocates, therefore, is a kind

of withdrawal from the activity of politics. Here he reverses Marx's famous Eleventh thesis, stating:

the first task today is precisely *not* to succumb to the temptation to act, to intervene directly in and change things (which then inevitably ends in a cul-de-sac of debilitating impossibility: 'What can one do against global Capital?') but to question the hegemonic ideological coordinates. (Žižek, 2006e: 238, original emphasis)

This withdrawal, however, is only from politics: it does not signal a withdrawal from the political. Moreover, the ontic conditions of global capitalism do not mean that radical action is impossible. Rather, an identification of the emergent void, or impossibility, within capital that opens the possibility for action is required. Capitalism is not only a repetitious monster against which we have no resistance; it may be the consistent background to political symbolisation but it is inconsistent in itself. That is, within the repetition of the chain exists a condition of impossibility that sustains as a latent possibility the entire subversion of the power of capitalism: Žižek labels this impossibility 'class struggle'.

## **Žižek and the Impossibility of Class Struggle**

Žižek's approach has led critics to suggest that his work suffers from a political formalism, capable of holding no commitment other than to the Lacanian ontology. Although this accusation is largely unfounded in Žižek's earlier work – which displayed a foundational theoretical commitment to Marxism and an increasingly apparent anti-capitalist agenda – it has become entirely redundant in Žižek's most recent texts, in which he mobilises a 'communist hypothesis' and begins to speak of 'our side', a commitment that shall be the topic of Chapter Eight.

Nonetheless, Žižek's most persistent commitment, however, comes via the very formalism of his ontology, producing as it does a consistent position throughout his oeuvre. Žižek argues that *the* antagonism which founds society today is class struggle. It is this distinction – more than the materialist character of his critique – which distinguishes Žižek's project from Laclau's. Laclau, first through radical democracy and then through populism, rejects the notion of an objective, or transcendental, revolutionary agent. Instead, he argues that the

elevation of a particular group to the position of universality must come through the open and contingent battle for hegemony; that a particular struggle for hegemony becomes the general equivalent for other struggles, is a political, rather than economic, struggle. For Laclau:

the notion of class struggle is totally insufficient to explain the identity of the agents involved in anti-capitalist struggles. It is simply the remainder of an old-fashioned conception which saw in an assumed general proletarianisation of society the emergence of the future burier of capitalism. (2000b: 201)

He goes on to argue that:

Žižek could be criticised for introducing into his discourse a set of categories [class] which, taken literally, either have no precise meaning, or the little they have goes against what I would have thought is the main tendency of Žižek's thought....One cannot avoid the feeling that the notion of class is brought into Žižek's analysis as a sort of *deus ex machina* to play the role of the good guy against the multicultural devils... this is what Žižek ultimately does, and it is a new example of the way in which his discourse is schizophrenically split between a highly sophisticated Lacanian analysis and an insufficiently deconstructed traditional Marxism. (ibid: 204-205)<sup>86</sup>

Without wishing to enter into any *ad hominem* commentary<sup>87</sup>, one can sense the threat to Laclau's work when he continues further into the debate, arguing that “Žižek's thought is not organised around a truly *political* reflection but is, rather, a *psychoanalytic* discourse which draws its examples from the politco-ideological field” (2000a: 289, original emphasis); and “the only thing one get from him [Žižek] is injunctions to overthrow capitalism or to abolish liberal democracy, which have no meaning at all ... his way of dealing with Marxist

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<sup>86</sup>By contrast, Homer HOMER, S. 2001. It's the Political Economy, Stupid! On Žižek's Marxism. *Radical Philosophy*, 108., although suggesting that Žižek's rehabilitation of class is 'to be welcomed' (ibid.: 14), contends that Žižek's lack of positive definition of class has meant that the successful integration of Marxian politics and class struggle into his project has been prevented by his adherence to Lacanian psychoanalysis.

<sup>87</sup> Dialogue between Laclau and Žižek almost reaches this point in their debate over the value of Populism LACLAU, E. 2006. Why Constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics. *Critical Inquiry*, 32, ŽIŽEK, S. 2006a. Against the Populist Temptation. *Critical Inquiry*, 32..

categories...would put the agenda of the Left back fifty years” (ibid.: 290). Ultimately, for Laclau, class is simply one of the possible antagonisms in a radical democratic or populism movement, and one that “has lost all intuitive content” (ibid.: 298) such that “[t]here are still remainders of full class identities in our world – a mining enclave, some backward peasant areas – but the main line of development works in the opposite direction” (ibid.: 301).

As Madra and Özselcuk (2005: 81) suggest, here Laclau is strangely resistant to the consequences of his own work – he rejects class as an essentialist notion, without any possibility of reconstruction. Laclau does not, for example, reject the notion of sexuality because it is essentialist but, rather, encourages an emphasis on the contingency in every construction of sexuality. Thus, whilst Laclau’s project began with a reworking of Marxism, it now appears powerfully opposed to any such rehabilitation of Marxist categories. In his view, Žižek is a theoretically lost soul, attempting to find meaning in a proliferation of particularised identities by hanging on to one last sense of Marxist essentialism.

Žižek, however, relies far more on Lacan than Marx for his understanding of the form that class struggle takes, even if the narrative remains Marxist. Here, class struggle does not refer to any empirically existing class structures – the disappearance of the Western working class, for example – but, rather, an absent antagonism around which social life is constructed. Žižek’s identification of class struggle as this transcendental antagonism began as an almost sheepish aside in a discussion of the Real in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. He stated:

In this way we might reread even the classic notion of ‘class struggle’: it is not the last signifier giving meaning to all social phenomena (‘all social processes are in the final analysis expressions of the class struggle’) but – quite the contrary – a certain limit, a pure negativity, a traumatic limit which prevents the final totalisation of the social-ideological field. (1989: 164)

In his next major text, *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991), Žižek was more bullish about the status of class struggle. He argued that while class struggle *is* the totalising moment in society its holds no final guarantee. Instead class struggle – because it signals the failure of society to constitute itself – is the antagonism which holds together society. Class struggle acts as this point not as a transcendental signifier but, rather, in its absence within the social

imaginary. In this sense class struggle is a modality of the Real; it is both the antagonistic point to which direct access is not available and the factor preventing this access. Therefore class struggle is not only the failure of each symbolisation but also operates so as to “conceal and patch up the rift of class struggle” (1991: 100).

Here class struggle – as with the Real – is not simply a historical occurrence but is rather the non-historical kernel to which history responds. This notion of class struggle does not suggest any particular form of ideological formation (including that of the communist state) but, rather, holds that all class formations are ultimately a response to the failure of the class relationship. Indeed, all political formations are a response to this absence – that of the Real (ibid.: 100-101).

The logic of sexuation (between the masculine and the feminine) is the model for Žižek’s understanding of class struggle. Just as for Lacan there is no sexual relationship, Žižek suggests that there is no class relationship. The condition of sexual difference is not the ultimate referent of sexual relations but, rather, that point which prevents the understanding of sexual difference itself (Žižek, 1997: 216). In this same vein, as a consequence of the exclusion of class from the symbolic realm, Žižek argues that class struggle cannot become the “positive object of research” (2006b: 82). The problem for Žižek is that there is no meta-language in which to discuss class; any definition of class struggle cannot but be positioned within class struggle. Even the designation of class struggle as this point is not neutral; class struggle itself is included in class struggle. Thus, Žižek contends that class struggle doesn’t exist because it has the character of being non-all; there is no exception that escapes its terms (1994b: 22). In this sense Žižek suggests that class struggle has the structure of the feminine, in the Lacanian sense of the word. Under the Lacanian logic of the masculine, all subjects are submitted to the law through the existence of an exception which completes the set of all possible social relations. The feminine, in comparison, is without exception. The feminine is non-all; there is nothing of the condition of the feminine that is not included in the set. This formulae means that there is no possible neutral point – no meta-language – to give coherence to any social formation, or which would allow society to exist. Instead, society is marked by an internal limit which we can only ascertain through the effects within social relations of the absence of its presence (ibid.: 125).



This point attracts strong criticism (Devenney, 2007). Devenney contends that Žižek's account of capitalism is inadequate, in particular his apparent refusal to define the manner in which he is using the concept of class. Suggesting that Žižek's argument is 'extraordinary', with the only purpose that it "allows Žižek to wear Marxist labels" (ibid.: 54), Devenney roundly dismisses Žižek's argument that an element – specifically class – can come to structure the social through its absence. For Devenney, this is a statement entirely without 'evidence' (ibid.: 54).

In reply, Žižek is equally critical of Devenney, in particular his 'faked ignorance' at the possible structuring role of an element which, while being present symbolically – we can write the word 'class' – is absent at the level of the imaginary (insofar as we cannot imagine the presence of something that is absent) (Žižek, 2007b: 212). For Žižek and other readers of Lacan, the effect of absence (in the form of the Real) does not equate to an absence of effect; a phenomenon can form an absence within ideology, yet it is this absence which propels ideology itself. Such is the nature of the Lacanian Real; although it 'does not exist' within the positive contours of reality it produces a range of effects.

Nonetheless, a potent question remains – one that Laclau would certainly be asking at this point: Why is it that the economy and in particular class struggle hold this privileged position? Has class struggle taken this form because of contingent historical circumstances relating to the meta-hegemony of capitalism, or is class an ahistorical antagonism? Moreover, what is the relationship between class struggle as Žižek has identified it, and what might be deemed 'actually existing class struggle' in relation to capitalism?

Žižek compares class struggle, which can be read as the economy, with Freud's sexual 'essentialism'. Žižek takes Freud to argue that sexuality holds this status because there is no sexual relationship – as a result of symbolic castration, the subject is constitutively unable to both achieve the sexual 'Thing' and to acknowledge this impossibility. Instead, this search for the fullness of the sexual relationship spills over to other discourses – the arts, for example – contaminating their content (2008a: 294). Moreover, Žižek argues that:

the Marxist hypothesis is that, *Mutatis Mutandis*, the same goes for the "economy", for the collective process of production: the social organisation of production ("the

mode of production”) is not just one among many levels of social organization, it is the site of “contradiction” of structural instability, of the central social antagonism (“there is no class relationship”), which, as such, spills over into all other levels. (ibid.: 294).

This move has a double significance. Žižek speaks for the first time about the content of class struggle – the contradictions of the mode of production – making it clear that his conception of class struggle is not simply a substitute for the Lacanian Real but, rather, has a reference to the history of Marxism. Secondly, Žižek identifies the economy – in the form of class struggle – as the base of social totality. This is not a simple reproduction of Marx’s historical materialism; indeed, as has been discussed thus far in this chapter, Žižek’s conception of class struggle has been developed through Lacan to subvert this form of determinism.

Furthermore, Žižek rejects any suggestion of economic determinism, arguing that the effect of the absent presence of class struggle suggests an extimate relationship between politics and economy rather than a strict division. Žižek here attempts to move between the two readings of Marxism presented in this thesis; the economic determinism of traditional Marxism and the (discursive) political essentialism that has dominated post-Marxism after the discursive turn. For Žižek, because class struggle ensures that the economy is non-all, class is the politics at the heart of the economy – the impossibility of the class relationship means that there is no naturally occurring sense of economy, hence every form of economy is a *political* economy. To rephrase, because class struggle means the economy is never complete, it is class struggle which ensures that the economy will always be political; *contra* Marx, there is no historically inevitable form of the economy. Instead, class struggle means that any formation of the economy will always have to be a political formation.

At this stage, however, it is unclear how this definition is continuous with Žižek’s previous conception of capitalism as a modality of the Real. If the economy *qua* class struggle has the ahistorical determining role discussed above, the empirical and historical observation that capitalism has become a Real limit to shared social life appears redundant. Capitalism, as the contemporary mode of economy, has no particular transcendental status: the economy itself has this status. Nonetheless, whilst Žižek himself has not sought to make a strong distinction

between the economy and capital in relation to the Real – indeed he appears to have largely abandoned the capital-as-Real thesis – we can locate a divergence between the economy as an abstract form and global capitalism as an empirical system.

By empirical, here I am referring to a phenomenon which has a symbolic-imaginary appearance rather than a Real effect. Global capitalism as an empirically existing system can be symbolically identified as it arguably has an imaginary formulation. Alternatively, class struggle as an ahistorical antagonism perforates each modality of economy. Both Žižek and Badiou have come to argue that capitalism is not a form of civilisation, that it is without ideology (Žižek, 2009a: 25). Whilst this would reinforce Žižek's point in regards to capital as a symbolic chain, we can perhaps now risk a triadic conception of capitalism – as a symbolic chain, as being punctured by class struggle as an effect of the Real, and as being sutured through an imaginary cultural formation. Moreover, whilst class struggle can be identified as the impossibility in every ahistorical (abstract) form of the economy, class struggle itself takes a specific form in every instantiation of the economy, capitalism being no exception.

Žižek's point in regards to the economy is that whilst capitalism has both an imaginary and symbolic appearance, punctuated by class struggle, its dominance has become such that the symbolic logic of capitalism has become a form of the Real. The capitalist form of economy has become such a strong historical form, in terms of militancy and its materialism, its incitement of cultural *jouissance* and, most importantly, its own revolutionary feedback system, that every threat to the system becomes an opportunity for profit. Moreover, never before has an economic system had a grip on the global polis such that its 'truth' becomes self-reinforcing; if one were to attempt to introduce a 'socialisation' of the means of production, the degree of 'capital flight' would be such that both the efficiency of capitalism and its status as the 'only game in town' would be reinforced. This is a historical assertion, divorced from the ahistorical Real of class struggle.

What, however, is the relationship between actually existing class formations within capitalism, and the structure of class struggle itself? Despite suggesting that class struggle never directly appears, Žižek does make regular references to class formations. Sharpe (2004: 202-205) argues that this is a hesitation within Žižek's work, contending that his

identification of class formations contradicts his reference to class struggle *qua* Real. Here, Sharpe suggests that Žižek becomes entwined in the same impossible game that Laclau rejected: the identification and necessary enlargement of conceptions of the working class. If Žižek is to speak of class as an empirically locatable phenomenon, then a more detailed analysis of class structure is required. Sharpe comes to argue that today such a description has become impossible and it is for this reason that Žižek can only refer to class without expanding upon it.

Indeed, Žižek does make fairly regular references to changes in class structures which, in Sharpe's terms, can appear 'ad hoc' or 'journalistic'. Sharpe (ibid: 197), for instance, cites Žižek's distinction between the 'symbolic' class of Western professionals, the middle class of Western manual labour and the excluded class, which he links to the symbolic, imaginary and Real (Žižek, 2000e: 323). There is a certain logic to Sharpe's critique; such an analysis does not engage with the difficult history of class structure, nor does it appear to have a strong empirical backing. Conversely, the mapping of class structure is not Žižek's central point in this passage; rather it is the subsequent reference – a reference Sharpe ignores – to the manner in which class antagonism is the underlying factor beneath all these political forms of identity.

Somewhat sloppy scholarship aside, the difficult question of the relationship between class struggle and class structure remains. Žižek appears to be arguing two points: that class struggle is the antagonism which determines social life in its absence: and that class as a specific antagonism is excluded from political life within capitalism. Yet these positions are not strictly correlative. Just because class struggle is never directly expressed does not mean that class struggle never occurs. Class struggle has a symbolic form but not an imaginary one – whilst we can speak the word, we cannot imagine a coherent class relationship. That is, whilst the feminine form of class struggle makes a definition of the raw form of class struggle strictly impossible – we cannot speak of the content of class struggle in itself – because class struggle actually occurs in class formations, we can encircle this possibility and produce a reading which relies upon both Lacanian and Marxism notions.

The difficulty is that Žižek does not come to define what he means by class structure – can it be taken from Marx’s critique of the contradictions of the mode of production, as Žižek’s previous comments imply? That is, if class has a symbolic form, rather than a singular signifier, can we specify what that form is, even if an ideal content cannot be identified?

We can move towards answering this question through one of Žižek’s most common suggestions, that class is the excluded antagonism from the list of ‘new social movements’ that dominates the ‘New Left’. Žižek argues that class is not just one on the list but, rather, is *the* antagonism today – but not in terms of the set of empirically-existing struggles. For Žižek it is the exclusion of class struggle qua the Real from the symbolic chain that allows for the coherent construction of capital. In this sense, Žižek argues that it is this exclusion of class which constitutes the global capitalist horizon. In relation to the battle for universality and hegemony in global capitalism via the exclusion of class, he contends:

This contamination of the universal by the particular is ‘stronger’ than the struggle for hegemony (i.e. for which particular content will hegemonise the universality in question): it structures in advance *the very terrain* on which the multitude of particular contents fight for hegemony... the question is, also and above all, which secret privileging and inclusions/exclusions had to occur for this empty place as such to emerge in the first place. (Žižek, 2000e: 320, original emphasis)

Thus, we can identify (imaginary) forms of class struggle – say changes in the relationship between the managerial function of ‘knowledge’ workers – but these imaginary forms are themselves only a response to the impossibility of the class relationship. Just as the lack of a sexual relationship does not prevent sex from occurring – in fact it is the reason it occurs – class relationships occur as a response to the impossibility of class struggle. Moreover, just as there is no imaginary ideal form of sex, *contra* historical Marxism, there is no ideal form of class relationship.

This is a point taken up by Madra and Özselcuk – working as part of a group based around the *Rethinking Marxism* journal – who, like Stavrakakis in regards to democracy, argue that a (partial) ideal form of class relationship can be found in the institutionalisation of the impossibility of class struggle. It is to this vital point of discussion, one quite opposed to

Žižek's work, which I shall now turn. If much of this response has been rehearsed in the previous chapter by way of a reply to Stavrakakis, Madra and Özselcuk raise a more interesting point in regards to the structure of class relations, both in terms of the ahistorical conditions of possibility for class formations and of their structuration within capitalist political economy.

There appears to be a gap within Žižek's work thus far unaccounted for: I have identified the formal (Lacanian) structure of class relations and suggested that this does not rule out attempts to formulate class relationships in ideology. Žižek, however, has only implied the Marxist structure of class struggle; here Madra and Özselcuk seek to be more explicit.

## **Rethinking Class as Surplus-Labour**

This strand of work has emerged from a collection of scholars working largely out of the University of Massachusetts. This group has formed the Association for Economic and Social Analysis (AESAs) and Community Economies Collective (CEC), publishing primarily out of the *Rethinking Marxism* journal. Explicitly following both Laclau and Žižek, the grouping hopes that by rethinking Marx's notion of class struggle through Lacanian psychoanalysis, possibilities will emerge for "not only repeating Marx's critique of the political economy of capitalism but also of reformulating communism as an axiom without resorting to a utopian social ideal as its fantasmatic support" (Özselcuk and Madra, 2005: 80).

The group itself has attempted, inline with Althusser's work on overdetermination, to reconsider class as a process – understood as the "processes of producing, appropriating and distributing surplus labour" (Graham and Amariglio, 2006: 200). This contrasts with a consideration of class as a fixed or determinate position. Thus, rather than occupying part of the working class, one might be embedded in class processes as both a producer involved in direct labour and the consumer of symbolic capital. Class is thus a process with three distinct moments; the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus. These moments are enacted within an infinite number of discourses, making the process of class somewhat similar to Žižek's notion of class struggle; class is a process that is expressed through other discourses. Indeed, like Žižek, Madra and Özselcuk (2007: 92) argue that class struggle is

“[the] foundational, constitutive lack as the absent cause, the foundational antagonism, the constitutive impossibility, around which sociality is constructed”.

Whilst the AESA have opened up class and took a step away from economic determinism, their position has remained open to two separate threats. Politically, the AESA delineation has tended to remain within a transcendental ontology of class and ethics, relying on notions of theft and exclusion which assumed that producers were the natural owners of surplus (Madra, 2006: 206). Additionally, and economically, by defining class as a process, the AESA have rejected any structural necessity to class and instead focused on the contingency of class identity and process. Like Laclau’s work, this conception of class has appeared to leave itself open to the possibility that the dissolution of (Western) class identities would mean the disappearance of class struggle itself.

Two particular theorists in the AESA group, Madra and Özselcuk have sought to mediate this difficulty by taking on a more Lacanian reading of class. Citing Žižek (Özselcuk and Madra, 2005: 85), they suggest that Lacan’s maxim ‘there is no sexual relationship’ can be transposed to class struggle, such that ‘there is no class relationship’: there is no possibility of successfully integrating the hitch of class struggle into any organisation of political economy. Although sharing the same ontological commitment, Madra and Özselcuk diverge strongly from Žižek in their epistemological interpretation of this commitment, a distinction with real political consequences.

Whilst Žižek has (implicitly at least) rejected a definition of the structure of class antagonism, Madra and Özselcuk base their work around a deconstruction of the structure of class struggle. They posit that concrete class structures do exist but any attempts to consummate the class relationship will necessarily fail. Madra and Özselcuk argue that Žižek’s refusal to delineate the cause of class relations, rather than its effects, results in an inability to see past specifically *capitalist* class relations. As part of this, Madra and Özselcuk critique Žižek’s use of surplus-value – as opposed to surplus-labour – in conceiving of the homologous relationship between Lacanian surplus-*jouissance* and Marxism. They contend that by referring specifically to the capitalist form of surplus-labour in surplus-value, Žižek is unable to see envisage the possibility of class relations outside of capitalism. To reiterate this

important point, Madra and Özselcuk argue that because Žižek abstracts his conception of class struggle only from capitalism, he is unable to conceive of the possibility of alternative forms of production and as such is destined to remain within the horizon of capital.

Furthermore, Madra and Özselcuk argue that Žižek allows for contingency within capitalism only at the moment of consumption. In terms of production, however, Žižek considers only a structural approach, the cyclical ‘accumulation of capital’ (Özselcuk and Madra, 2007: 85). This approach gives capital a teleological presence, as if it could continue reproducing itself infinitely.

This is not a point with which Žižek would disagree; the basis of his argument in regards to capitalism *qua* the symbolic Real is that the reproduction of capitalism no longer requires an active subjective presence. It is, however, a point on which Madra and Özselcuk take issue. Capital does not simply exist, rather it is actively reproduced by subject positions (ibid.: 84). They argue that because Žižek does not subjectivise the sphere of production, or consider the conditions of possibility for production outside of capitalism, he misses a possible realm for political action. This critique is a familiar reproach to Žižek’s work – that his ontological commitments, in particular his construction of capitalism as a self-revolutionising beast run amuck – leaves too little room for political action (ibid.: 83).

By contrast, Madra and Özselcuk argue that class formations “are fantasmatic and libidinally animated formations, structured around an impossibility that stains all attempts to institute a stable and harmonious organisation of production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labour” (Özselcuk and Madra, 2007; 78). If class struggle is impossible, then this impossibility occurs within ideological formations which attempt to seal the wound of their foundation. In response, Madra and Özselcuk seek to develop a “*psychoanalytically informed economic difference* that pertains to class” (ibid.: 79, original emphasis) arguing that Žižek has been unable to “imagine the ethico-political principles of a non-capitalist and non-exploitative relation to class” because he is “neither clear as to what the *object* of class struggle is, nor indicative of what a new way of organising our enjoyment to the economy might be” (ibid.: 79).



Madra and Özselcuk contend that by examining the conditions of possibility for the necessary failure of the class relation we will be in a position to both understand how class operates in capitalism and how it might operate in a non-utopian conception of an axiomatic communism. In doing so, they implicitly assume both that such a transition is possible at this stage in history and that class struggle itself can be understood. Žižek, no doubt, would suggest that any position taken on class struggle can only be ideological – one cannot get outside of class struggle to speak about class struggle. Nonetheless, this appears to be a risk that Madra and Özselcuk are willing to take.

Madra and Özselcuk's conception of surplus labour – as opposed to the surplus of labour to which we have previously reference throughout this thesis – is vital to both their epistemological understanding of class and its ontological status. Özselcuk and Madra argue that production is always collective and cannot be reduced to the reproduction of singular workers. As a result labour is always the aggregation of socially organised individual parts and one cannot distinguish between labour which is necessary and that which is surplus. As a corollary, they contend that all labour is surplus labour; the natural operation of labour is the production of surplus (Özselcuk and Madra, 2007: 91).

Madra and Özselcuk explicitly seek to distinguish the universal form of surplus labour from its capitalist instantiation claiming that Žižek's failure to do so significantly reduces the possibility of conceiving of class structures outside of capital. For the former, class structures are always a response to the production, distribution and appropriation of surplus labour. Although there is no naturally occurring form of class relationship – class relationships always fail – this does not prevent their occurrence as fantasmatic forms of *jouissance*. That is, all forms of sociality are ultimately a response to the lack imbued by the impossibility of class struggle. As such, these structures are not simply absent, as Žižek suggests but, rather, occur as forms of ideological fantasy, attempting to compensate for the lack upon which any instantiation of class struggle is founded. As a corollary, Madra and Özselcuk suggest that the basic (ahistorical) form of class struggle can be identified – *contra* Žižek, not only can the operation of class struggle within global capitalism be represented but the prospects for class struggle beyond capital can be envisaged.

Žižek suggests that class struggle occurs in the imaginary only to the extent that the presence of absence can be staged in the symbolic order. By contrast, Madra and Özselcuk argue that by identifying both the symbolic formula of the impossible class relationship – based around surplus-labour – as well as the manner in which they are subjectively embodied as forms of fantasy, a new, non-exclusive class formation is possible. As such, they reject the apparent consequences of the Lacanian homology between surplus-*jouissance* and surplus-value (focused on in the conclusion to Chapter Three) contending that it applies only to capitalism; replacing surplus-value with surplus labour introduces a new range of possibilities. Here they follow the same line of thought as Stavrakakis, suggesting what is required is a different relationship to lack, specifically one informed by a feminine, as opposed to masculine, logic.

According to Madra and Özselcuk, within capitalism it is a masculine logic which structures the field. Under this logic, the antagonism of class is partially sutured by relations of ideological fantasy and *jouissance* which operate through the production of an exception. They locate this exception to the capitalist, masculine, form of political economy in the Board of Directors (2007: 94). In contrast to other stakeholders throughout the organisation who battle for surplus, the directors enjoy other people's surplus without giving anything in return. As noted in Chapter Three, the authors are here using only one possible sense of the exception. We may take issue with both the example given – would not the silent shareholder be a better embodiment of this position? – as well as the status of the exception. A more pertinent example of the exclusion is the constitutive surplus of labour within capitalism, both in terms of the officially unemployment and those unfortunate souls noted in the introduction to this thesis, for who employment is a strange exception rather than the norm.

It is this identification of the masculine as the defining exception to capitalism that causes the biggest difficulty in Madra and Özselcuk's conception of an ethico-political movement to feminine class struggle. They consider that psychoanalysis has a very 'precise' sense of difference; sexual difference between the masculine and the feminine (2007: 98). Madra and Özselcuk argue that this difference specifies a move from the capitalist (masculine) 'all' to a communist, feminine 'non-all'. For the authors, the feminine offers an entirely plausible and possible alternative ontological horizon, as if the masculine had simply held a historical

hegemony that could be overturned with through a stunning grasp of the communist (partial) truth.

According to Madra and Özselcuk – and here their work is confluent with Žižek’s – the masculine logic of class relations within capitalism allows for an unlimited sense of difference but this play of difference depends upon the existence of a constitutive exception. By contrast, the feminine allows for unlimited difference without an exception because it is non-exclusive; there is nothing that is not included within the set. For this reason, “exclusive rights over the dispatching of the surplus” (2005: 93) and a “dictatorship of the proletariat” would simply reproduce the fantasy of the wholeness of being and reproduce the masculine logic of exception.

Like Stavrakakis’ conception of feminine *jouissance* and radical democracy, feminine class struggle appears both logical and desirable. If the masculine produces an exception and the feminine does not, then surely this is a preferable way for the economy to operate. An axiomatic commitment, the idea that “no one can have exclusive rights to the appropriation of surplus” (2007: 100) is entirely congruent with the history of Marxism. Indeed, this axiomatic commitment – one derived from the work of Alan Badiou – informs the communist hypothesis that we shall build upon in the final chapter. This key difference, as we shall see, is with the way in which this commitment is held.

If this solution appears too simple – given the complexity of the global economy and the sustainability problematic to which this thesis is directed – then it sadly is. The concern here is not so much abstract theoretical idealism around the utopian society but, rather, of a plausible response to the contradictions of the global economy. There are two central concerns with the notion of a feminine class struggle. The first objection is philosophical, the other pertaining to political analysis of the global economy.

Firstly, Lacan did not conceive of the feminine as an alternative panacea to the ills of the subject or society. Instead, for Lacan the feminine was a strictly impossible position, held only by comparison to the masculine. The masculine and the feminine are two alternative logical positions in regards symbolic castration but only the masculine is historically possible. Class struggle may be have a feminine form but, as noted, in the previous chapter in relation

to Stavrakakis and radical democracy, feminine *jouissance* is not a feasible position upon which to structure politics – the content of class struggle cannot be feminine.

Yet, if feminine *jouissance* is impossible, is it nonetheless possible to suggest a form of class struggle without exception? At the core of Madra and Özselcuk's argument is an axiomatic commitment – one they see as key to a communist politics – to the non-exclusive rights to surplus. If I have thus far rejected their proposed approach for achieving this structure – class formations structured around feminine *jouissance* – is it possible to specify a form of economy that does not rely on any particular group receiving exclusive rights to surplus?

## Including the Multitude?

This logic is found at work in Hardt and Negri's conception of the multitude; the operation of postmodern forms of 'immaterial' labour whereby the means of production are directly embedded in the workers themselves (Hardt and Negri, 2000, Hardt and Negri, 2004). Hardt and Negri suggest that the postmodern form of capitalist sovereignty – sovereignty that occurs without an exceptional agency but, rather, through direct communication between workers – leads to the possibility of 'absolute democracy' and a decisive break with capital.

Both Hardt and Negri and Madra and Özselcuk identify the board of directors or 'management' as the exception which is constitutive of power within capitalism. Together they argue that the abolition of this managing figurehead, who receives surplus only from this (unnecessary) organising function, is the necessary step towards a new era in history. Conversely, by focusing on the materialism of the economy and Žižek's – as opposed to Laclau's – understanding of universality and exception, such that it is excess labour, rather than the board of directors which maintains the structure of capital – then we might more productively interpret the lumpenproletariat as the point of exclusion. Through this conception, the inability of any postmodern mode of political economy to respond to the exclusion of excess labour from the global polis can be seen.

Hardt and Negri, identify the global (political) economy as 'empire', within which lies the latent potential of the workers of the multitude. Empire's predominate feature is the reliance upon communication and cooperation between subjects. That is, one is no longer able to

make a strict distinction between politics, the economy and social life; the reproduction of shared social life through communication and cooperation, always political in itself, is now the primary source of profit for Western capital. We have entered an era of biopolitical production, such that; “the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: xiii).

The changing nature of capitalist sovereignty is reflected in the movement from a disciplinary society to a society of control, where power is directly bio-power, internalised into the body as the whole of social life comes to be administered in the ‘panoptican affect’ (Hardt & Negri, 2000: 23-24). Instead of a single entity controlling power – a modernist organisation of power – sovereignty is rather constructed via the processes of the cultural reproduction of capitalism. Whilst we can acknowledge an influential structure of governing organisations, including the United Nations, the Bretton Woods financial instruments, regional trade organisations and agreements and the easily forgotten nation-state itself (as well as more local forms of sovereignty within the state), the dominant form of sovereignty within Empire is what Hardt and Negri label ‘ether’ – the reproduction of shared social life (in the name of profit) by immaterial labour through cooperation and communication (2000: 346).

In contrast to modernist imperialism, for Hardt and Negri empire is without exception: all forms of social life potentially falls within its grasp. Neither has it a home, despite the apparent hegemony of the United States, instead it is organised around the ‘non-place’ of capital. This non-place is mediated by the continuous flow of ether; sovereignty is guaranteed only to the extent that it is reproduced in our social relations as nothing exists outside of the existence of capitalist social relations that might secure the system. Instead capitalism is actively – if unknowingly – reproduced by those who participate. Here, Hardt and Negri return to a traditional Marxist conception of ideology; ideology prevents the subject from acknowledging the truth about their place in the mode of production.

For this reason we can argue that Hardt and Negri’s conception of empire – and, as we shall see, its reactionary potential, the multitude – matches the same (feminine) structure as

suggested by Madra and Özselcuk. The feminine, outside of the clinic, here appears to be nothing more than a postmodern cultural practice. As part of this practice, theorists of postmodernity have come to suggest that the decline of stable identities and power relations which result from the loss of sovereign authority has offered the prospect of widespread freedom from the symbolic order, even if material emancipation is no longer an appropriate political goal.

Capitalism, or rather empire, has achieved this level of hermeneutic self-containment through the deployment of communication and cooperation as the hegemonic forms of labour in capitalism – immaterial labour. Emblematic here are social networking sites. These sites – most notably Facebook, MySpace and Youtube – commodify human relationships by offering a free and attractive service to users who update their personal details in order to interact with their peers. This information is then stored and sold to advertisers, both for research purposes and for the benefit of more direct advertising. The business model of these sites is similar to that of newspaper<sup>88</sup> – the selling of readers’ attention to advertisers – with a greater reliance upon user interaction. Here, social relationships and communities are actively created and reproduced for the sole purpose of the production of profit.

The industry which embodies both immaterial labour and the femininity of the postmodern economy is finance capitalism. Finance capitalism is the ultimate example of immaterial labour, whereby production itself does not exist; vast sums of money change hands through an intangible global system of co-operation and communication. Yet, that money exists not only because we believe it to exist (money being a system of trust whereby I believe that the currency which you offer me is ‘legitimate’) but because our societal practices establish this belief for us. We have no choice but to use money and in functioning economies only the most neurotic of users would concern themselves with the acceptance of their money.

Moreover, finance capital comes to stand between Madra and Özselcuk’s critique of Žižek’s understanding of capital as the symbolic Real, and Hardt and Negri’s reading of immaterial

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<sup>88</sup> Indeed social networking sites have taken this model further than print media such that the later are trying to utilise the methods of social networking sites in order to increase online revenues enough to compensate for falling hard copy sales.

labour. Žižek argues that the machinery of capitalism is engineered only for its own continued expansion. Money becomes an end in itself rather than being tied to some notion of 'actual material progress' (Žižek, 2006d: 61-62). Žižek's main target here is financial capital and its continual expansion of the circulation of money, in which there is no actual goal other than the more money. Currency trading and arbitrage, in which money is bought in one market and quickly sold again in another to take advantage of a temporary misalignment in prices (Moles and Terry, 1997: 19) are examples of this kind of symbolic money-for-money transactions within capitalism. Moreover, Žižek comes to argue that this process exemplifies the movement of drive where the goal is circulation and movement around the goal (money for the sake of money) as opposed to surplus-value in desire, which is linked to imaginary desires for notions such as progress, under the guise of commodity fetishism. This movement is characterised by the change from C-M-C (the commodity is exchanged for money in order to obtain other commodities) to M-C-M (money is used to obtain commodities for trade in order to make more money). The latter is certainly the logic of capital but it operates under the illusion of the former, which carries the ideological illusion of a progression towards the object.

By contrast, as I noted earlier, Madra and Özselcuk argued that this contention takes away subjectivity from the mode of production and depersonalises the potential for political action. Moreover, we see in the notion of Empire that finance capital is based upon subjective communication and cooperation. Thus, Žižek may be correct in his description of the pure structure of capitalism adhering the dynamics of drive, yet although at an abstract level of analysis we can detect the structure of drive, there remains a subjective level of production. Indeed, by contrast to the systematic production of drive, those actively involved in production are more likely to adhere to an economy of desire. Thus, while those embedded in the process, say currency traders, may be aware on some level that money is ultimately empty they still operate in a discourse of desire; whether to fulfil their personal budget, to get further status or to get a pay raise, at this level capitalism remains driven by desire, even if the resulting structure is of drive. As a corollary, Žižek's point is that whilst global capitalism is necessarily subjectivised in the bodies of its participants, the systematic operation of capital is such that no radical political action is possible at that level. Instead, the

consequence of his identification of capital as a modality of the Real is that effective political action can only occur by taking this systematic structure into account.

These ideas find their expression, also, in the notion that the development of financial capital has been congruent with the rise of postmodernity, or as Jameson calls it, late modernity<sup>89</sup> (Jameson, 2000). Financial capital, although always operative in some form throughout the modern era, established its dominance in the 1970s. The 1970s saw the advent of two vital and interlinked trends, over-production and the decoupling of the dollar from the gold standard. The crisis of over-production, combined with the oil shocks early in the decade, led a mass of surplus looking for an investment home. Some of this surplus was redirected into newly established 3rd world markets but the core of the problem remained. The solution was the development of the financial industry, whereby 'excess' currency was able to be put into circulation and expanded without any physical reference (Jameson, 1996, Wade, 2008, Wade, 2007).

Key to this move was Richard Nixon's breaking of the US Dollar from the gold standard (Hardt and Negri, 2000; 266). The move to floating currencies was followed, in various speeds, by the majority of governments. The floating of national currencies allowed for the trading of currencies themselves, rather than through physical trade. The trading of currencies for profit, whether nominally attached to commodities or not, is the basis of the international financial industry. This move was of massive historical significance; along with the development of the financial industry, the dropping of the Gold standard removed the guarantee of the 'general equivalency' of money. Instead, in a definitively postmodern – or feminine – manoeuvre, money no longer exists, there are only currencies<sup>90</sup>. Such a move is part of a historical development; money having moved from being an element of value itself, to being supported by an item of supposed value (the gold standard) to its current state as a purely virtual occurrence, given a presence only because we believe in the value of its presence.

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<sup>89</sup> We shall focus on Jameson's work in Chapter Eight.

<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, in a Laclauian dynamic, although money itself does not exist, this does not mean that the international trading market exists as a series of particular currencies alone. Instead, one currency – the US Dollar – come to take the place of money, acting as a hegemonic general equivalent.



Indeed, physical commodities are no longer the basis of much trade. Certainly the growth in physical trade, production and consumption continues, as the materiality of the climate crisis reveals. Nonetheless, increasingly commodities are traded simply as placeholders for currencies – livestock might be bought in Euros only to be traded when the value of that currency rises – particularly through mathematical ‘derivative’ trading through which value is ‘derived’ via various instrument of finance trade, including hedging, options and swaps. This trading has established a certain distance from the ‘real’ economy, such that the material operation of economy in the sense of fulfilling ‘needs and wants’ of consumers is no longer operative. Instead the real economy – in the sense of value and influence – lies in the financial centres of the Western world, where value rises and falls based upon the second-order expectations of the fate of financial products developed only for monetary gain. The financial crisis that first became apparent in 2008 saw these self-destructive tendencies in action as the credit ‘bubble’ burst, most of all because people lost their faith in money. To a certain degree actors have come to realise that money does not exist and have withdrawn their confidence from the system. For this reason the main task of the Obama administration in handing over unthinkable amounts of US currency to their financial institutions, is to restore confidence in the value of money<sup>91</sup>.

The financial industry, therefore, is the paradigmatic postmodern industry not only because it is without a general equivalent or sovereign exception but because it is based upon immaterial labour, cooperation, and communication. Because under empire cooperation has become inherent to labour in a way that it never has previously, labour power moves from variable capital (a force activated by capital itself) to capital itself; knowledge has become the key means of production. Hardt and Negri contend that:

Today, productivity, wealth and the creation of social surpluses take the form of cooperative interactivity through linguistic, communicational and affective networks.

In the expression of its own creative energies, immaterial labour thus seems to

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<sup>91</sup> One of the more interesting elements of the financial crisis was the confusion amongst the general public as to the contraction of the economy – the paradigmatic question here being ‘Where did all the money go?’ as if someone had to have ‘the money’, that it could not simply be lost. The (comedic) illusion here is not that we tragically had money and then lost it but that the money never existed in the first place. It seems, however, that most investors were without a philosophical sense of humour.

provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 294)

Conversely, if knowledge is the most important means of production, then for the first time the seeds of a new order lie with the workers themselves. Workers no longer need capital to reproduce shared social life; the workers are already doing so in their everyday movements. Capital loses its organising function and becomes purely parasitic (Žižek, 2008a: 351). The material reproduction of society occurs in the workplace already in the forms of communication, cooperative and affective labour produced by the multitude. Rather than workers being solely operators of fixed capital, deploying the resources provided for work, the immaterial labourer is now a source of capital in itself; knowledge. The worker is thus a unit of variable capital, such that the economy no longer requires specific sources of capital for its reproduction<sup>92</sup>.

Hardt and Negri suggest that this move, by which the knowledge inherent in labour power becomes the key means of production, produces a subversive potential in what they label the 'multitude': the germs of the future produced within capitalism. Thus,

from one perspective Empire stands clearly over the multitude and subjects it to the rule of its overarching machine, as a new Leviathan. At the same time, however, from the perspective of social productivity and creativity, from what we have been calling the ontological perspective, the hierarchy is reversed. The multitude is the real productive force of our social world, whereas Empire is a mere apparatus of capture that lives only off the vitality of the multitude. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 62)

Therefore, for Hardt and Negri the multitude is the inherent form of resistance produced within capital. There may not be an outside within empire which provides a nodal point for the subversion of capital, rather this point is produced by capitalism itself; capital provides the seeds of its own destruction. If postmodern production is immaterial, then the most important means of production lies with the bodies and the minds of the workers. Capital is

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<sup>92</sup> That the capitalist is largely redundant was noted by Marx himself ÖZSELÇUK, C. & MADRA, Y., M. 2005. Psychoanalysis and Marxism: From Capitalist-All to Communist Non-All. *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 10, 79-97.

no longer machinery and tools but is increasingly immaterial in itself. As Žižek comments; “[i]t was Marx who emphasised how material production is always also the (re)production of the social relations within which it occurred; with today’s capitalism, however, the production of social relations is the immediate end/goal of production” (Žižek, 2006d: 262).

The role of the multitude – and here Hardt and Negri return to classical Marxism – is to become conscious of their position as both subject and object of history and come to determine the world themselves, to break free of capital and realise the ‘absolute’ democracy that they are already in the process of creating. The multitude is in the paradoxical position of both holding an inherent potential for resistance to the system yet being the point of subversion of that resistance; all that is required to formulate a political movement is a realisation of this power.

Again, we have reached a Marxist critique of ideology, whereby the worker requires an awareness of their circumstances in order to break free of their chains. Ironically, however, it is knowledge which has become the very object of production under empire. Thus, it is the reproduction of knowledge and social relations by the multitude which holds the potential for radical action, yet at the same time the ideological construction of capital – itself reproduced by the multitude, though in the implicit name of empire – prevents the realisation of that radical potential. If knowledge is power, within empire it is immanently contained by the power of capital.

Here, perhaps the most pertinent point is that it is difficult to determine the enemy within because of the sovereignty of ether and the ‘non-place’ of power within empire. Ironically, given the shared communicative mechanisms which define the multitude, the problem they experience is a lack of clear language, both in identifying the enemy and articulating the future (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 210). Once this can be established, and the multitude become conscious of their dominating status, all that is required is to locate and knock off of the nominal head: communism and absolute democracy are within reach, all that is to be done is to realise our fate. Yet, is this approach not, however, as Žižek suggests, confluent with the ultimate capitalist fantasy of frictionless capitalism, capitalism without governance, simply organising itself through the invisible hand of the market? (2006d: 263). That is, if Hardt and

Negri imagine the multitude to be a point of resistance to capital within capital itself, the danger is that this logic is entirely confluent with its operation.

Whilst the multitude are a possible point of resistance against capitalism – any agent involved in the creation of the commons holds a radical potential – they remain a resistant group particular to capitalism. Moreover, rather than provide the hope for what Hardt and Negri label ‘absolute democracy’, the multitude have more in common with contemporary liberal democracy; both are based upon the exclusion of surplus labour. The ultimate risk of focusing political hope upon the multitude is that they will only expand the operation of capitalism.

The essential difference between Hardt and Negri’s empire and Žižek’s reading of capitalism as a modality of the Real is their conception of what is outside to capitalism. The former argue that the multitude can break free of the logic of capital from within capital itself, suggesting an alternative mode of production can develop within capitalism. We see this in the manifesto style statements which end *Empire*, in which they propose a minimum social wage, the right to global citizenship and reappropriation. The assumption is that the functioning of the multitude is such that this can occur outside of capital, yet within empire. Žižek, on the other hand, argues that there is no exterior to capital in this sense. Instead, not only would the guaranteed minimum income solution be drawn into a capitalist understanding of redistribution, justice, and the market but the multitude too will continue to be an element of capital – indeed, revealing a potentially more efficient functioning.

Symptomatically, for Žižek and for Hardt and Negri, there is little difference between the multitude and Bill Gates’ image of ‘frictionless’ capital. It is just that the former believe that the multitude can be detached from capital, whereas Žižek has no such illusions. Moreover, for Žižek the democracy of the multitude and frictionless capital are sadly entwined because they both require the same propeller for sovereign-less development; surplus-value. Thus, given the materiality of the problematic suggested in this thesis, it is not a matter of simply reproducing capitalism without capitalists – not only is this impossible (without capital itself, what would drive the organisation of the multitude?) but it would only serve to reproduce the reliance upon surplus which is the structuring factor behind environmental degradation.

In this sense the multitude cannot be considered to be a group in themselves. Rather, they arise only as a point of resistance to capitalism, just as the feminine is only possible by reference to the continued existence of the masculine. Rather than the immaterial labour of the multitude, it is the universality enabled by the unwanted horde of today's political economy that provides hope for a radically different future. Thus empire is not without exception – it is ultimately not a form the Lacanian feminine – instead it operates via a disavowal of its exception, the excess of labour outside of even the multitude.

What Hardt and Negri miss is that the absolute democracy they believe can be developed from within empire is based upon the same exclusion which constitutes liberal democracy, that of the reserve army of labour. There is no reason to suggest that a democratic reconstruction of immaterial labour would include the currently excluded populations of the world any more than is currently the case. Instead, the immaterial surplus which is created by 'the multitude' is only generated on the basis of an exclusion; an exclusion which constitutes the wage-labour system. Empire is not without exception, it is only without an apparent governing exception. As has been thus far noted in this thesis, however, the governing exception is only one possible modality of the outside. More pertinent in terms of the global economy is not the diffusion of governing or managerial power but, rather, the (extimate) exclusion from the global economy.

Hardt and Negri, however, do not consider there to be any exclusion from either empire or the multitude. Symptomatic of this position is their definition of the proletariat, which is so wide as to diffuse the real difference within this category, particularly in terms of suffering. Here Hardt and Negri state, "we understand proletariat as a broad category that includes all those whose labour is directly or indirectly exploited by and subjected to capitalist norms of production and reproduction" (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 52).

To compare the wealth of a professional sportsman and the poverty of a third-world farmer – both equally subsumed into capitalist exploitation – is to lose sight of the contours of exploitation and suffering. Moreover, it is to lose the reason why we oppose capital at all; the necessary suffering it imposes. For Hardt and Negri, "exploitation occurs but it is increasingly hard, perhaps impossible to designate a place of exploitation – the non-place of

exploitation – exploitation can no longer be localised and quantified – instead they are universal qualities” (ibid.: 209). Consequently; “although exploitation and domination are still experienced concretely on the flesh of the multitude, they are nonetheless amorphous in such a way that it seems there is no place left to hide” (ibid.: 211).

Hardt and Negri addressed this point in the follow up text to *Empire, Multitude* (2004). Here they note the suggestion that those who are excluded from the waged labour are also excluded from the Multitude. Instead, they argue that the excluded are not in fact outside of the biopolitical realm but are, in fact, an integral to its reproduction such that, at a general level, “biopolitical production – including the production of knowledge, information, linguistic forms, networks of communication and collaborative social relationships – tends to involve all of society, including the poor” (ibid.: 130)

Thus, whilst the absolute poor are strictly excluded from capitalist production, they are not to be excluded from political organisation. Hardt and Negri acknowledge the Marxist conception of the reserve army of labour and the role of excess labour in maintaining the wage-labour system, particularly in the globalised labour market with its large ‘dumps’ of unproductive population groups. Nonetheless, they reject the idea of an industrial reserve army because there is not the unity that the term ‘army’ implies. Instead, the nature of employment today is such that there is little division between the employed and unemployed and, “there is no reserve in the sense that no labour power is outside the processes of social production” (ibid.: 131). Moreover, even those who may be technically in reserve employment are still socially productive.

Hardt and Negri’s conception of global unemployment largely misses this point, however. Whilst the absolute poor might be culturally rich in some areas and may well contribute to forces of social cooperation, the extent of the stretch is revealed when Hardt and Negri argue;

In many respects the poor are actually extraordinarily wealthy and productive. From the perspective of biodiversity, for example, some of the poorest regions of the world, generally speaking the global south, have the greatest wealth of different plant and animal species, whereas the rich global north is home to relatively few. (ibid.: 131).

Whilst diverse biological resources and the knowledge that goes with these resources may have value, it is little compensation for today's poor. Hardt and Negri may emphasise the cooperative productivity of the linguistic community and its potential for resistance but this is of little consequence for empty stomachs (ibid.: 132). The authors almost glamorise the lives of those who live in squalor, not only because their historical ontic positioning is a primary point of resistance but also because of their simultaneous cultural unity and diversity. If "part of the wealth of migrants is their desire for something more, their refusal to accept the ways things are" (ibid.: 133) then Hardt and Negri seem to be dangerously down-playing their often desperate plight.

Although Hardt and Negri acknowledge the misery of migrant workers and the like, ultimately they prove unable to fully recognise the structural position of those groups:

Our point rather is that these should be conceived not as a matter of exclusion but one of differential inclusion, not as a line of division between workers and the poor nationally and globally but as hierarchies within the common conditions of poverty. All of the multitude is productive and all of it is poor. (ibid.: 134)

Differential inclusion appears very close to the Lacanian concept of extimacy and Žižek's understanding of concrete universality, whereby the point of exclusion is simultaneously included within that from which it is excluded. Hardt and Negri may be correct in asserting that we should not insist upon a sharp differential between the poor and the unemployed. Nonetheless, where they argue that the absolute poor should simply be included within the larger grouping of the multitude we should still maintain the concept of the reserve army of labour. I do not wish to engage in a game of 'enlarging the concept', attempting to map exactly who it is who might fit this category – the distinction is more abstract. In actually existing conditions there may be little difference between the social interactions of the poor and the very poor, the waged and the unwaged. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that globally, the wage-labour system only operates because of the excess condition of labour.

This operation is seen on a global scale. Yes, there may be some degree of cooperative solidarity across nations and cultures for those who can afford such technologies but employment conditions remain dependent upon excess labour populations. The strongest

effect of the process of globalisation is not transnational class solidarity but the ability to export employment. If labour costs increase in China then jobs are likely to go to a poorer nation such as Bangladesh. This is not to suggest that we could walk down an alley in Bangladesh and divide up the lumpenproletariat from the proletariat but the operation of the reserve army of labour is much more real than Hardt and Negri and willing to acknowledge.

## **Surplus Labour Beyond the Feminine Multitude**

While the multitude may be actively reproducing society through communication, we must still come to acknowledge the structuring role of the ‘part with no part’ which is truly supporting capitalism – an excess which acts as an exception beyond the apparent femininity of the ‘postmodern’ economy envisaged by Hardt and Negri. These people largely lie in these massive urban slums – slums in which all of the global three billion strong population increase is predicted to occur – unemployment has reached meaningless levels, in some places reaching 80% such that employment being a marginal exception. This concept may remain abstract but the suffering of those whose only claim to wealth is as a linguistic community is very Real.

The excluded – a surplus of labour – are truly the necessary and constitutive exception which must be excluded for the continued functioning of the system, and so it is with capital and its reserve army of labour. Surplus labour, therefore, constitutes the capitalist form of the class relationship. It is the exclusion of these masses which allows for the capitalist form of the production and distribution of surplus value. This disparate grouping, which might otherwise be labelled the lumpenproletariat, is the new breed of entrepreneur, a neo-liberal dream in a Hobbesian nightmare. These enterprising business-workers sell whatever they can to survive, whether it is knick-knacks or their bodies. Their inadvertent subversion of intellectual property in the huge market for inauthentic designer merchandise may be an example of a multitude-esque anti-capitalism but there is nothing liberating about the circumstances of their lifestyle.

In this conception – against Laclau, the New Left, and the AESA – my argument has returned full circle, although a little wiser, to Marx’s conception of the revolutionary social grouping.



The twist, however, is that no revolutionary potential lies with surplus labour itself. There will be no storming of the White House from outside the slums of Bangladesh. Nor will the excess workers of the world throw off their shackles and overthrow their now unnecessary bosses. Instead the revolutionary potential lies in the tension, the gap or lack, between this excess and the relations of enjoyment which rely upon it.

It is the management of the tension which this gap creates that Hardt and Negri, as well as Madra and Özselcuk, do not consider. On the one hand there exist the postmodern corporations, characterised by Hardt and Negri's immaterial labour. On the other side – generally the other side of the world – is the remaining material labour, a capitalist historical tribute to industrial era production and suffering. The multitude is not self-organising; it still relies upon a managerial function. For this reason, while Hardt and Negri, along with Madra and Özselcuk, are incorrect to assert that capital is purely parasitic, capital does not simply sit back and suck up profit but has a vital organising function not only in terms of organisation and strategy but also in bringing the two sides of capital together and managing the tension (Žižek, 2008a: 359).

I seem, therefore, to have reached an impasse, both in terms of the development of the argumentation in this thesis and more importantly in political action against the hegemony of capital. In terms of the later, it appears that not only has capitalism subsumed the entirety of the production and reproduction of shared social life – such that any alternative production of shared social life will automatically be drawn into capitalism – but we are also left with no 'natural' form of politics that would provide an alternative to capitalism.

In this thesis, I have thus far rejected any essentialism which stems from a predestined chosen revolutionary group. Nonetheless, a different kind of approach – that of the political, rather than politics – stemming from Žižek's reading of both Lacan and Marx, suggests that the most productive form of anti-capitalism today is associated with the existence of this excluded group that I have constructed as surplus labour. This potential comes not from the group itself, nor any alternative economic construction that might attempt to include this group but, rather, a strategic manipulation of the tension that exists between the ideological narratives of the global West and the necessary exclusions from this conception of shared

social life – that the wage-labour system operates only on the basis of a surplus of labour which cannot be acknowledged within Western civilisation itself. To restate this in base terms, the tension within capitalism lies in the disavowed Truth that capitalism is constructed in such a manner that for the living standards of Western civilisation to continue unfettered, an excess of workers must remain outside of the wage labour system, and as a consequence of this status, the quality and length of their lives are significantly reduced.

The revolutionary potential here lies in the intrusion of this disavowed element of our civilisation into the ideological narrative of the West, whether in relation to justice, equality, freedom or some other high-minded abstract ideal, to potentially cause a revolutionary dislocation in the structure of that narrative. This disruption has the potential to open up space for alternative modes of political action. How these responses occur, as well as generating a dislocation in the first place, is the battle of politics.

Moreover, it is the acknowledgement of the presence of surplus labour in relation to class struggle which allows for this potential. Although much of this chapter has been dedicated to rejecting Madra and Özselcuk's work, their work on the symbolic structure of class has some value. That is, although Žižek does identify the Lacanian structure of class struggle, he only makes an implicit reference to the history of Marxism. He does this not as a lapse in scholarship but, rather, through an ontological commitment to the Real status of class struggle. Nonetheless, as we noted in Chapter Three, reading the Real through Žižek's concept of (concrete) universality allows for an identification of the point of exclusion in relation to class struggle. This is a vital point, and shall be a central focus point in the final two chapters.

These chapters concentrate upon formulating a Žižekian-inspired approach to the contradictions of global capitalism. Thus far I have rejected both traditional Marxist politics and the production of alternative forms of shared social life based upon Lacanian psychoanalysis. Moreover, this chapter has illustrated Žižek's construction of the ontic structure of capitalism, one that limits the range of political action available. My Žižekian response begins from this point, considering a reading of class struggle which provides

opportunity for political action, and a number of political strategies that stem from Žižek's work, including the utopian demand of the 'communist hypothesis'.



## 7. Žižek's Realpolitics

Having developed a Žižekian reading of the contours of global capitalism, I am now in a position to consider the possibilities of a Žižekian-inspired response to global poverty and environmental degradation. What is at stake here is both a reading of the role of psychoanalysis in politics and the viability of a Marxist response to capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In terms of psychoanalysis, having thus far rejected the possibility of a collective sense of institutionalised normativity stemming from the Lacanian conception of shared social life, I can now offer an alternative Lacanian approach to the political, with particular reference to the pressing contradictions of global capitalism. Chapter Five established that Žižek's construction of the political does not lead to a reductive or institutionalised approach to politics but, rather, the development of a range of strategic possibilities based around the singularity of the Real; a plurality of strategic responses in relation to the context of existing conditions (in this case, the question of global capitalism and surplus labour).

As constructed in the previous chapter, our time in history is such that we cannot simply posit alternative modes of being and hope that they will flourish. The strength of capitalism means that there is no outside space that is immune to its reach. Any point of otherness, whether resistant to capital or not, is drawn into the logic of capitalism. As a result, alternative understandings or practices only 'make sense' or 'work' if they fit in with the operation of capitalism. This historical positioning of capital produces a rather bleak picture of 21<sup>st</sup> century politics, at least for those who are on the sharp end of Western progress. Not only have I suggested that the central dilemmas facing humanity – absolute poverty and environmental degradation – are caused by capital through the opposing effects of the interactions of the wage-labour system and over-production but my reading of capitalism suggests that no alternative is currently possible. Nonetheless, although history appears 'stuck' in the self-revolutionising flows of capital I have been able to nominate a central fault line – surplus labour. By understanding surplus labour as both *the* central contradiction of capitalism as well as a modality of the Real – this understanding of the presence of the Real being constructed through Žižek's reading of universality – a new possibility for disturbing the operation of capital is revealed. This possibility lies in the presence of an 'extimate'

outside to capitalism in surplus labour. Excesses of labour are not strictly outside of capitalism – they play an intimate role in its functioning – but are nevertheless excluded from its official operation. As such, surplus labour has a threatening role within capital as an unruly element not entirely controlled by its operation.

Conversely, the troubling presence of an excess of labour does not suggest either a natural alternative form of social life – one in which this surplus is dissolved – or an predestined political response. Although the identification of labour as a potentially revolutionary site evokes images of the rise, and subsequent dictatorship of the proletariat, as well as the spectre of productivism, Žižek's work strongly rejects such a reading of historical progress. Instead, the form of politics I have thus far attributed to Žižek is based upon an alternative sense of history, economy and class struggle.

Žižek's reading suggests a strategic form of politics based on an expansion of the Lacanian ethical dialectic identified in Chapter Four. This dialectic produces a number of interpretations across political contexts. Here, given the material structure of our reading of history and the currently pressing contradictions of capital, I shall attempt to consider these strategic applications of a Lacanian dialectic in regards to capitalism and surplus labour. Such a reading implies that whilst this dialectic might have an established form, this subtext varies across the context in which it is applied. As such, this chapter makes reference to three distinct yet intertwined applications that feature through Žižek's work: the act, subtractive politics, and the practice of concrete universality.

Although they each feature prominently throughout his work, Žižek has not explicitly labelled these positions as strategic alternatives. It is difficult, and somewhat undesirable, to attach an objective coherence to each of these strategies. Rather they are similar processes which relate back to the singular operation of the Real within ideology as identified throughout this thesis; they are processes more than objects. The danger here lies in reifying Žižek's position to a form of methodologism through which each political strategy becomes a separate object. The intent in labelling these positions is to identify different possibilities in approaching the Real rather than pacifying the Real as a form of presence. Indeed, the

manner in which each strategy attempts to avoid such a pacification – the very process it attempts to avoid – is a key focus of each construction.

Perhaps ultimately any reification of Žižek's politics which does occur in this thesis is more a problem of the discourse of the university and the requirements of academia. These strong divisions would not occur in the messy practice of street level politics; it is only the level of abstraction required by the university and philosophical inquiry itself which creates these problems. Nonetheless, there is much advantage in the more subtle delineation of the distinctions between these approaches each produces differing responses to capitalism and for this reason in this chapter I will identify each of the act, subtractive politics, and of the practice of concrete universality as distinct strategies.

It is through these strategies that we shall respond to the issue that this chapter ultimately addresses, of how to translate Žižek's work into a political response to the disavowed foundations of global capitalism. In response to this specific question, this chapter suggests that while 'the act' formulates the basic Žižekian political strategy by opposing activity to the revolutionary gesture which is the act, it remains too 'crazy' to be considered an effective political formulation. The miraculous transformation of the act may appear feasible in a subjective sense. It is, however, unable to resolve not only the limitations of psychoanalysis as a political force but also the difficulties of responding to the reign of global capitalism. More appropriate is the subtlety of subtractive politics, which suggests that the grand reformation of the act can occur through subtle political movement. Žižek argues that in an age of cynical ideology based around fetishised objects, a withdrawal from this ideology is the most effective form of politics. In this chapter, however, I argue that the practice of concrete universality alone holds this potential on account of its utilisation of the tension evoked by surplus labour as the universal exception within the abstract hegemonic horizon. This strategic positioning allows for the contradictions of surplus labour to intrude into capitalism itself in a manner which will not allow it to continue unhindered.

This position is not the final word on Žižekian politics, however. Recently, Žižek has also begun to make reference to Badiou's notion of the communist hypothesis, a reference that invokes the presence of utopian theory and the work of Fredric Jameson. It through this

reference that I shall return to the question of normativity, as well as the future and the value of Žižekian politics. For now though, I consider the historical positioning of capitalism that dominates his political approach.

## Historicising Anti-Capitalism

Much of the critique of Žižek's politics either disregards or rejects his reading of capitalism and of history. Prominent critics that have thus far been introduced in this thesis – including Laclau, Stavrakakis, Hardt and Negri, and Madra and Özselcuk – have all tended to assume that an alternative form of society or economy can flourish within or outside of capitalism. Under this approach the task of radical politics is to consider the form of the ideal society – no matter what the reading of ideal – and then construct the manner in which that society might come into being. Stavrakakis' radical democratic ethos, for example, establishes the (partial) form of the ideal society and then rather meekly – suggesting a collective 'productive mourning' – considers how this society might be established (Stavrakakis, 2007: 274).

Žižek's reading of the historical positioning of capitalism leads to a radically different approach, one that begins to reveal the value of the kind of politics developed thus far: a politics of change rather than of the ideal. Žižek has two central contentions in regards to capital, each of which was constructed in some detail in the preceding chapter. The first argument is that capitalism is a modality of the Real. Crucially, there is no operable outside from which to construct an alternative position to capitalism; any point of resistance that threatens capital is immediately brought into its logic. For this reason, Žižek considers suggestions such as Hardt and Negri's 'social wage' or 'global citizenship' to be unfeasible for the same reasons that any free-market economist would – they are impractical within contemporary structures. They immediately invoke very practical questions of how these transformations might occur (Žižek, 2004c: 308).

The second crucial point of Žižek's reading of capitalism exists largely as a corollary of the first – at this point in history we are 'stuck' in the self-revolutionary cycle of capitalism. That is, any resistance that might emerge from the self-evident contradictions of capitalism does



not produce the kind of dislocations which might lead to alternative modes of being. Instead, these points become intimate elements of capitalism as sources for profit in themselves: the social revolutions of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not truly threaten capitalism but, rather, became new segments of an expanded market place. Nor has increased awareness of the threat to the environment dislocated our understanding of capitalism – instead the ‘Green’ dollar, both in terms of consumption and the production of new technologies, has come to the fore.

For this reason, as a response to the pressing contraction between environmental degradation caused by overdevelopment, and the plague of poverty afflicting much of the globe, what is required is not the formulation of a new mode of the material reproduction of society which avoids this contradiction. Without a doubt, at some point such a form will be required. Yet at this time in history, when capitalism is reproducing this troubling contradiction and we cannot seem to reach beyond capitalism, this is not our task. Instead, the task today is not so much to conceive of what mode of production should replace capitalism but, rather, to consider how we might open up cleavage(s) within capitalism such that the seeds of the future will be able to flourish. Having articulated the ‘stuckness’ of capital, my task in these next two chapters is to consider how a reading of Žižek’s work might offer a manner in which these spaces might be unveiled. The central lever in this task is the interactions between the final two elements in Žižek’s construction of capitalism; the impossibility of class struggle and the presence of surplus labour. It is to these two points that we now turn.

## **Surplus Labour and Class Struggle**

Contrary to his apparent construction of capitalism as an monstrous juggernaut, Žižek argues that four antagonistic points currently threaten capitalism: the possibility of ecological collapse; the contradictions between immaterial labour, intellectual property and private property; the development of new scientific technologies which are changing the nature of life in its barest form; and the new forms of political exclusion, which pertain to attempts to separate urban slum population from wealthier areas, both in within cities and across national borders (Žižek, 2008a: 420-427).

Under this construction it is the latter element that defines the group: the other three contradictions have been able to be included within the limits of capitalism.

Environmentalism, despite the apparent radical possibility of a chaotic breach of nature, has become sustainable development. The contradictions of private property (the loss of scarcity through digital production and the associated difficulties of applying current property laws to intellectual and communicative production) have become a legal challenge and bio-genetics has developed into an ethical, or even scientific, struggle. For Žižek these three elements are part of the battle for the commons. Here Žižek follows Hardt and Negri in suggesting that the commons – particularly in the postmodern articulation of the commons in immaterial labour and knowledge – are increasingly being enclosed and privatised. In relation to these specific antagonisms, environmentalism equates to the commons of external nature, intellectual property to the commons of culture and bio-technology to the commons of internal nature. Whilst this enclosure and exploitation of what is common to all evokes the necessary use of communism, it is only the fourth symptom, that of exclusion, which adds the dimension of universality in that it is the element which constitutes the construction of capital.

The question that I have thus far deferred, however, is the relationship between this ‘part with no part’ and class struggle. The previous chapter suggested that the ultimate value of Madra and Özsalcuk’s work is their identification of the structure of class struggle. This identification opposed Žižek’s conception of class struggle as a point of ideological absence: although class struggle had a symbolic presence as a signifier, it was felt as an absence in the imaginary. Through Madra and Özsalcuk’s work, I do not seek to wholly reject this reading by filling out an imaginary sense of the class relationship. Rather, I argue that by expanding the symbolic contours of class struggle a deeper understanding of the relationship between class struggle and surplus labour within capitalism can be forged. This understanding is key to producing an operative strategic relationship to surplus labour that allows for greater political control.

In order to further articulate this relationship, it is necessary to return to an example regularly posited by Žižek and referred to towards the end of Chapter Five of this text; that of Levi-Strauss’ example from a tribal village. As a reminder, Levi-Strauss asked a group of villagers

to illustrate a representation of the ground layout of their village. Some of the villagers drew a village divided by a linear split, others as divided into a central circle and an outside circle. Žižek takes Levi-Strauss to be suggesting that we should take neither a relativist reading of this split – each representation being a valid construction of reality – nor seek an empirical truth but, rather, seek to understand the disavowed antagonism which is causing this division.

For Žižek, that antagonism is class struggle. He suggests that class struggle is the unrepresentable distorting point which is the (absent) cause within society; “class struggle as antagonism is, as it were, its own obstacle, that which forever prevents *its own* expression into clear symbolic or positive terms” (Žižek, 2004b: 100). As such, Žižek suggests that class struggle is a modality of the Real. If, however, we return to the ‘parallel’ construction of the Real suggested in Chapter Three, in which what might be an example of the Real within one discourse can be constructed symbolically within another, then an alternative point of construction becomes available. Through a ‘parallax view’ of the structure of global capitalism, we can understand the operation of class struggle within capitalism, identifying it with an exclusion of surplus labour.

If the expression of class struggle is always a reaction to the formal impossibility of itself, it nonetheless occurs. Class struggle may be a modality of the Lacanian Real but is not simply the Real – class struggle carries with it connotations of Marxism and productivism. Through Žižek’s work, however, it is unclear why class struggle is substituted for the Real. By rehabilitating class struggle as both a Marxist and Lacanian concept, we are in a more productive position to read the underlying weakness within capital.

The actually existing character of class struggle can be restored to the Žižekian interpretation of capital through Žižek’s own sense of universality. As Chapter Three has suggested, the split operation of the universal reveals the effect of the Real upon society. In order to expel the violent effects that the Real has upon symbolisation and the body – remembering that the Real itself is nothing but a reaction to the body entering symbolization – an imaginary coherence is attempted to be produced through the installation of abstract universal horizon, based around an empty signifier and competing ‘chains of equivalence’. This horizon attempts to construct an objective sense of social life but only through the exclusion of an

exceptional element – it is this exclusion which allows for the abstract constitution of a universal set. Žižek, through Hegel, identifies this exceptional exclusion that constitutes the universal imaginary as the place of concrete universality. His point is not that the exception is the true place of universality – although it opens up the path towards Truth – but, rather, that the site of universality proper is the gap between the abstract and concrete functions of the universal. This gap can also be identified as a modality of the Real.

The example of the tribal village is again illustrative here. A political battle would occur at this point over the ideological representation of the village. In order for one to constitute itself as an ‘objective’, universal, representation – each position would internally posit such a reading but it is likely that over time one position would become hegemonic – a point must be excluded from that representation. This exclusion, caused by the inescapable absence of the Real, becomes an extimate outside, registering the effect of the Real.

In regards to class struggle, this construction of the operation of universality suggests that class struggle operates as a universal gap within symbolization. As a gap, it cannot be symbolised but it nonetheless occurs: every instantiation of the economy produces an abstract conception of this gap – a conception that attempts to elide the presence of that gap – and a concrete remainder that emerges as a consequence of the exclusion from symbolization of that gap. Although hegemonic ideological forms within capitalism – such as justice, freedom or human rights – attempt to elide the gap that is class struggle, the surplus labour which constitutes the wage-labour system is a concrete remainder of its existence.

Thus, while there is no class relationship, the content of class struggle within capitalism can thereby be identified. This implies, however, that there is a universal structural form behind this content. At this point I return to the Marxist element of class struggle. Following Madra and Özsalcuk, class relationships are impossible but are nonetheless structured around the production, distribution and appropriation of surplus labour – class is thus understood as the politics of the mode of production. This formation of class, however, does not suggest that class relationships have an imaginary presence within capitalism. Instead, we can only distinguish the presence of class struggle via the exclusion it produces within capitalism; the universal exception *qua* surplus labour.

Thus, class struggle is still conceived to be an irreducible stain upon society but we have now identified the structure of that mark. Each mode of production necessarily revolves around the impossibility of class struggle and as such will reproduce the failed class relationship in a particular way. Although the class relationship itself cannot be assigned an imaginary status, the extimate presence of an excluded concrete remainder of the mode of production signals the manner in which that class struggle has occurred. Within capitalism the remainder of the failure of the class relationship is surplus labour. Although both economic ideology – the justice of the ‘invisible hand of the market’ – and political ideology attempt to disavow the presence and status of surplus labour, through this analysis we are in a position to assert its violatile presence.

Such an identification allows for a more productive sense of the operation of surplus labour within capitalism. By suggesting that surplus labour is the evidence of class struggle in capitalism, we are no longer seeking to provide the ideal politics of class struggle – such a relationship is impossible – but, rather, a way of invoking this impossibility at the heart of capitalism. The lesson to be learned here is that class *struggle* is not simply a matter – as in traditional Marxist-Communism – of the excluded yet universal class overthrowing their capitalist masters, as is their historical destiny. Instead, class struggle relates to the disavowed and distorting affects of the Real within social life: we literally struggle with the impossibility of class justice. Nonetheless, these two positions are not entirely divorced. History does not require the proletariat to cast off their shackles. Yet it is their exceptional status – perhaps more appropriately attributed to the lumpenproletariat – that provides the central friction with capital.

Thus, class struggle refers to the presence of the Real within capital, both in terms of the formal gap provided by the impossibility of the class relationship and the exceptional exclusions created by attempts to elide this impossibility. To rephrase this vital point, class struggle is not only the impossible stain that prevents the full instantiation of society but because of the desire to fill out shared social life, class struggle also has a presence in the concrete remainder that occurs when ideological class relationships are formed, necessarily excluding an element in order to constitute themselves

As such, my Žižekian response to global capitalism focuses on evoking this Real element of capital: surplus labour and the impossibility of class struggle. I shall now turn to the strategic possibilities for operationising this disturbing interaction between class, universality, and the Real as embodied by this excess of labour.

## **Strategies of the Real and the Lacanian Dialectic**

Žižek's work does not provide a psychoanalytic conception of an ideal form of shared social life. Nor does it reject considerations of subjectivity under capitalist conditions. Rather it provides a number of political strategies that might be deployed in response to capitalism. These strategies, which should be read topologically rather than chronologically, are unique only in the sense that they each respond to the singularity of the Real. That is, there is no one Žižekian form of politics although each strategy is a response to Žižek's ontological commitment to the Real. As such, Levi Bryant suggests:

rather than looking to Žižek's various texts for a theory of practice or what we should do, we should instead read these texts themselves as a form of practice. That is, we should not ask whether Žižek's interpretations are true or false but should instead ask what these interpretations do. (2007: 22)

If we regard Žižek's strategic approach to be based around the Real, as discussed in the previous chapter, we can regard surplus labour – the constitutive excess of global capitalism – as an element of the Real. The Real is not only an absence but becomes embodied in an actually occurring element that holds an extimate position within the symbolic order. Attempts to suture this impossibility are rife throughout the imaginary register of ideological fantasy. In this chapter I consider that Žižek's politics consists of strategic attempts to resist this imaginary coherence and instead evoke the intrusive tension of the Real in relation to this (named) excessive element. These strategies all relate to attempts to invoke the tension or anxiety present in the absence embodied the Real. If we can consider ideological formations to be structured to minimalise this absence and the resulting production of an exception – an effect discussed in Chapter Three, whereby attempts to mitigate against the impossibility of the Real result in an exceptional element which guarantees the coherence of

the set – then Žižek’s political approach entails various attempts to consider how that fantasmatic coherence can be disturbed. In disturbing the fantasmatic formations that hold together global capitalism, it is hoped that gaps will appear in which action would occur that would be otherwise impossible within the current regime of global capitalism. I now turn to Žižek’s political construction of the Lacanian act.

### **The Act**

The (Lacanian) act is perhaps the most controversial element of Žižek’s political strategy, coming to represent all that is conceived to be wrong with Žižek’s work. Indeed, the act stands as the universal procedure of Žižek’s political work; all other aspects of Žižek’s political interventions come down to the basic division he identifies between the act and activity in regards to capitalism. As Žižek states in regards to radical politics in the capitalist epoch:

What is needed is the assertion of a Real which, instead of being caught in the vicious cycle with its imaginary counterpart, (re)introduces the dimension of the impossibility that shatters the imaginary; in short, what is needed is an *act* as opposed to mere activity – the authentic act that involves disturbing (‘traversing’) the fantasy. (1999: 374, original emphasis)

The act is always radical; its basic form is action which reformulates a systematic logic such that it retroactively produces its own conditions of possibility – an act occurs when an action that was previously considered impossible happens, causing a change in the very coordinates of the situation. A true act occurs without any guarantee in the form of fantasmatic support from the big Other and for this reason at the moment of its occurrence the act always appears to be an act of madness. In this sense, the act is divorced from Laclau’s battle for hegemony, in which the development of new modes of being is achieved through discursive redevelopments of the existing, or traditional Marxist politics based upon the ideological unity provided by the instantiation of an alternative signifier such as Communism.

Nonetheless, we must not confuse the act with a drive for action at any cost. Žižek’s emphasis upon the act corresponds to a translation of Lacan’s ethics but also our historical positioning. We must avoid mere activity at a time in which we have little influence: it is

better to think and reflect on the possibilities for action. When this opportunity comes, however, it is vital that we jump to the act without any regard for fantasmatic support from the big Other (Žižek, 2009a: 11). In this sense – given the restrictions on political activity within global capitalism identified thus far in this thesis – the act appears to be the necessary form of political strategy for any form of anti-capitalist politics.

Žižek uses the act to signify a distinction from the ‘politics as usual’ approach which dominates late modernity. Here, often in particular reference to the economic problems this thesis responds to, Žižek notes a prohibition on radical politics. Writing on the general rejection of Lenin as a political philosopher, he states, “the moment we show a minimal sign of engaging in political projects which aim seriously to challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately ‘Benevolent as it is, this will inevitably end in a new Gulag!’” (2002b: 168). This is a typical ideological response to global development issues: do not engage in radical politics, although they appear necessary to produce change, they will only end in genocide. Instead, the problem must be ‘managed’ through the administrative measures available within capital. Žižek heartily rejects this approach and instead insists that we must reject the system itself, suggesting the necessity of the act.

It is unclear, however, how this systematic transformation might occur. Žižek’s references to the act do not focus on the practicality of acts – instead the act appears to have a miraculous element, acts ‘just happen’. Indeed, Žižek describes the act as a miracle, a foreign body that invades with my control – an act ‘just happens’ (ibid.: 375).

It is this theological element of the act which provokes the strongest criticism. Critics have focused upon the ‘crazy’ – in the sense of being without justification – aspect of the act, unable to conceive of it as a considered strategic intervention. Žižek’s examples of the act, particularly in his earlier work, do not help here. It is difficult to consider a reasoned strategic response to capitalism from shooting one’s own family, as is the example Žižek gives in *The Fragile Absolute* (2000d:149-150) of Keyser Soeze in the movie *The Usual Suspects*. Neither can we seek political inspiration from Mary Kay, the teacher convicted of raping her 13-year old student. Žižek describes her as taking an ‘authentic subjective stance’ – the authentic *act* of being in love (1999: 385-386, original emphasis). Here, for Žižek the act is not intentional



– there is no subjective or ideological control – but the subject must nonetheless take responsibility for a truly ethical act, positing themselves as the cause of the act:

The paradox of the act thus lies in the fact that although it is not ‘intentional’ in the usual sense of the term of consciously willing it, it is nevertheless accepted as something for which its agent is fully responsible – “I cannot do otherwise, yet I am none the less fully free in doing it”...The paradox is thus that, in an authentic act, the highest freedom coincides with the utmost passivity, with a reduction to a lifeless automaton who blindly performs its gestures. (ibid.: 376)

The key point for Žižek’s act is that it has a subject but no agent; “the agent is *not* ‘on the level of its act’, that he himself is unpleasantly surprised by the ‘crazy thing he has just done’, and unable to come to terms with it” (ibid.: original emphasis). As such, Žižek deems Kay to be an ethical subject because she remains faithful to her desire. What he ignores is the cause of Kay’s desire: is she acting pathologically through her unwavering fetishistic attachment to her young lover, or is she ‘refusing to give way to the cause of her desire’ at the expense of everything else? In either case, Kay’s faith to her cause provides little political inspiration and indeed contradicts Žižek’s original point – such blind faith is more likely to suggest ideological activity, not the act.

At best, what Žižek is suggesting here is a reformulation of the co-ordinates of the situation based upon a momentary suspension of the symbolic logic<sup>93</sup> such that new opportunities for action become available. In this sense, both Soeze and Kay can be seen to have acted in a manner which has no justification within its given structure. Here, we must agree that such an action does reconstitute the situation, yet not only is it difficult to translate this action from the subjective to the collective but it appears to strongly push aside any aspect of political consideration, reducing Žižek’s politics to the kind of empty formalism that his critics love to address.

Although the form of the act restricts the possibilities of its content, the act remains a formal intervention into the political. Moreover, it appears to be an entirely subjective, rather than

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<sup>93</sup> Or, more importantly, imaginary coherence is based on the subjective guarantee of *objet a*.

collective, form of action. An act may occur to the subject but it is difficult to reconcile this notion with a political revolution which Žižek calls the elementary political form of the act. A revolution does not just happen but is rather made through strategic intervention. Žižek's point, however, is that a revolution cannot occur with the support of ideological fantasy: for it to be a true revolution or act it must come from outside of this hegemonic position, traversing its co-ordinates. In terms of the subject, this is a feasible position: an act can just occur to an individual body. In terms of politics and global capitalism, revolution 'just happening' is the worst kind of optimism.

Psychoanalysis, in this sense, is a practice of grand movements rather than subtle progression. Although its aims are modest, almost cynical, the implications of entering into the Lacanian discourse are nothing but radical. That there is no indication of what might follow this radical act of destitution, except an assumption of difference is the risk of psychoanalysis: it provides no positive ethical or moral guidelines for shared social life outside of the dangers of ideology and *jouissance*. The act, like all the strategic positions to be discussed in this chapter is ethical only in a Lacan sense – it provides an opportunity to reconstitute politics and subjectivity – but this ethics is the ethics of a moment, not of a political formation.

The act suggests a kind of avant-garde faith that the new will be inevitably better than the present. When we speak of global capitalism, there may be some truth to be held here but as a form of politics it is not difficult to see why Žižek<sup>94</sup> looks to a form of (materialist) theology to supplement his approach. Moreover, because the act cannot be referenced to any sense of Good – the act is strictly in excess of the Good and the Law – it is difficult, if not constitutively impossible to distinguish the act from evil (Eagleton, 2009:.282).

This is ultimately the issue with the translation of Lacanian ethical dialectic into politics, as suggested in Chapters Three and Four. Not only are the exigencies of the body difficult to reconcile with those of the interactions of bodies but an ethics which takes its guidance from the Real makes little distinction as to the content of shared social life; the basic form of politics. Waging war or saving the poor could be equally justified, the former more easily

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<sup>94</sup> As well as Alain Badiou in his related notion of the event BADIOU, A. 2003. *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

than the latter. The question is how this form can be transposed into the context to which I speak and in particular Marxist politics.

In addition to this normative lack, another of the central reproaches against the act and Žižek in general, is the apparent blindness to strategic opportunities for action outside of total revolutionary transformation. Critics contend that Žižek creates his own deadlock against which the act is the only solution (see Devenney, 2007: 59). In doing so, they argue, Žižek is ignorant to all the strategic opportunities that arise that do not require the risk of evil and creation *ex nihilo*. Although there is some validity in this criticism – in the sense that the direction of Žižek’s work is not towards the kind of political reforms which are so often immensely beneficial to so many people – this reading ignores Žižek’s patient construction of the ontic contours of capitalist political economy and increasingly explicit demands to move beyond capitalism. For Žižek, progressive policy platforms are beneficial in themselves, yet they hold no radical potential.

Perhaps the more pertinent point concerns the possibility that Žižek’s politics are restricted by his limited conception of the act itself. It is clear for Žižek what the act is not; however, it is not clear as to what conditions or actions might produce an act. Instead, the act appears as a random event outside of politics and history. Sarah Kay, for example, claims that Žižek’s understanding of the act is “incompatible with political calculation” (2003: 154). It is unclear how a political movement might utilise the logic of the act. In particular, in regards to our question of global sustainability and surplus labour, it becomes unclear how an act might occur, or be forced into occurring.

The concern about the limitations of the act extend also to the identity of given political initiatives. Does, for instance, Hardt and Negri’s demand for a social wage and global citizenship constitute an act? I have previously dismissed these ideas as impractical because they contradict the logic of capitalism. Nonetheless, this is the very gamble of the act – if a social wage were to be ‘somehow’ instituted an act would have occurred, as the very rules of the game would have changed. For Žižek, however, such demands move away from the away the act because they come with a political guarantee: they are already understood as part of an established political matrix. This fantasmatic location takes away from the radical impetus

required to produce an act, even though the content – a impossible demand – may remain the same. The political difficulty, therefore, is the attempt to invoke a revolutionary act without any sense of what is to follow.

Is, however, the act such a crazy intervention? Žižek denies this accusation, claiming that we can distinguish a genuine act from the kind of example given in the previous paragraph. We can make a distinction between the good terror of the French Revolution and the bad terror of the Nazi Germany by a purely formal reference to the structure of fantasy and the symptom. For Žižek, a true act occurs at the point of symptomal torsion, such that the underlying fantasmatic structure of either the subject or ideology is radically disturbed. As such, the September 11 attacks were not an act because they did not invoke a suspension of fantasy, of either the attackers or the attacked but, rather, cemented existing relations (see Žižek 2003). Thus, while the act cannot prescribe an ideological position to come – indeed such a position would act as a ‘guarantee’ that which subvert the operation of the act – it will always be radical, rather than conservative.

Let us consider the structure of an act in terms of the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference. There are two clear sides in this debate, each with their own underlying ideological fantasy. The first, which can be considered to be politically conservative, remains sceptical of the consequences of human activity upon the climate. The underlying ideology here is of an infinite capitalist cornucopia, whereby human activity has no impact upon the environment. On the opposite side of the debate are the environmentalists who firmly believe that science has proven beyond doubt that human activity is having a negative impact on the environment. The fantasy at play here is that carbon emissions are the key factor in climate change and these emissions can be reduced through technological measures which do not fundamentally change the structure of the economy.

In the first case, what would account for an act would be an acknowledgment that human activity has to be altered in order for human civilisation to continue. Such recognition would not allow this conservative discourse to continue in the same fashion; an admission from a prominent member of the Republican party – Sarah Palin, for instance – would be cause for a momentary rethinking of the movement. It is quite possible that in this circumstance Palin

would be divorced from the ideological structure but as Žižek has repeatedly stated (in contradistinction to the appeals of his opponents) what is important here are the moments after the act, how the act is able to create its own conditions of possibility (Žižek, 2008a: 307).

In terms of the second ideological position, an act might well occur were a prominent actor (such as Al Gore) or organisation to state that environmental problems cannot be solved within capitalist political economy. Here we can imagine that the political dislocation from such an acknowledgement from the United Nations would be significant. Equally, however, a recanting of belief in 'climate science' would also have the effect of an act. The point here is that the act is not a overwhelming or infinite action that changes everything but can be quite limited in its scope – as long as it stems from a symptomatic point. Moreover, an act can occur with strategic timing but not with guarantee – we can plan how to upset the pie cart but not how those pies might fall.

In regards to our climate example then, the effect of an act is always radical in terms of its relationship to fantasy – it is always disruptive, rather than cohesive – but it does not have any fundamental political positioning. Instead it remains strategic, if not ethical in Lacanian terms. Moreover, Žižek keenly insists against his critics that the act is not simply crazy – although it may appear to have this form at its time – but, rather, retrospectively creates its own conditions of possibility such that what is of utmost political importance is the day after.

Nonetheless, the biggest problem with the act is that it does not suggest the tools for the kind of transformation it suggests. Particularly in regards to the complex power matrix of capitalism, the theological madness of the act appears entirely unsuitable. If we return to the symptomatic axis of capital (surplus labour) then an application of the act appears to invoke a Marxist revolutionary narrative, except without either the support of history or political calculation. Although there is no predestined relationship between the act and the proletariat, as the symptomatic point within global capitalism, the proletariat appears to be the most likely point of transformation. It is not, however, a point of revolutionary calculation: there is nothing scientific about the revolutionary narrative. Instead, an act would occur when those in the position of excess in regards to the wage-labour system disregarded that they had

nothing to lose but their chains and took on the task of revolution anyway. Although the proletariat come from a strategically operable position, without strategic consideration this attempt at the act appears entirely impotent. A subjective act can only break down internal barriers but such a transformation may not have any effect upon the structures of the symbolic world. For this reason a properly *political* sense of action must involve a strategic – and normative – imperative from start to finish. The problem is that both the strategy and the normativity suggest a fantasmatic apparatus wholly at odds with the miraculous risk inherent in the act.

Yet, from what I have thus far discussed, what is required to produce the kind of political action which would count as a meaningful response to the pressing problematic of global sustainability is radical action which produces systematic change. The question is how this might occur, as Žižek's notion of the act does not considerably further our understanding of this question. It provides a formal matrix of what counts as an act and in doing so suggests how this might be achieved, largely by discounting that which does not fit into its category. In response, the remainder of this chapter shall consider two strategic positions which reproduce the formal aspects of the act and its political direction but perhaps provide a stronger methodological basis. The first of these is 'subtractive politics'.

### **Subtractive Politics**

Žižek began to develop subtractive politics with *The Parallax View* (2006d), later in *In Defence of Lost Causes* (2008a) and, finally, in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009a). Subtractive politics was initially characterised by the stubborn ethics of 'Bartleby', the central character in Herman Melville's novella, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*. Žižek's considers Bartleby's disciplined refusal to do his duty – 'I would prefer not to' – as a model for a withdrawal from the political co-ordinates of the capitalist matrix, one that has a potentially devastating effect. Žižek holds that taking no position, actively not-participating, or perhaps un-participating in the capitalist order, is the most powerful position possible.

Because capitalism has proven remarkably able to combine resistance and power, Žižek's solution is to withdraw from visible forms of resistance-as-participation in order to provide a

different kind of subversion. Consequently, Žižek's subtractive politics reverses Marx's famous Eleventh Thesis; "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point, however, is to change it". Instead Žižek argues:

the first task of today is precisely not to succumb to the temptation to act, to intervene directly and change things (which then inevitably ends in a cul-de-sac of debilitating impossibility: 'What can one do against Global Capital?') but to question the hegemonic ideological coordinates. (2006e: 238)

The goal of subtractive politics is to question these coordinates in a manner which exposes and produces a crack in their disavowed foundations. This is not a matter of inactivity but, rather, a more strategic withdrawal. For Žižek (2008a: 388-391) as well as Johnston (2007) this is best achieved by identifying and exposing the symptomatic element of ideology, the part that does not quite fit, which, once disturbed, provides the potential to be the catalyst for major change. The hope of this 'active quietism' is that "this minimal measure, while in no way disturbing the system's explicit mode of functioning, effectively 'moves underground', introduces a crack into its foundations" (Žižek, 2008a: 391). The proper task of subtraction is not simply to refuse to participate in ideology but, rather, attempt to subtract the ideological defences away from the symptomatic point such that it is without fantasmatic support.

Thus, in contrast to the act, subtraction focuses on the relationship between ideology and its symptom. The basic formula of subtraction is a rejection of the fundamental dualism that rules our spontaneous ideological consciousness. Following the example given previously of Levi-Strauss' interpretation of the split representations of the tribal village, the first step in the politics of subtraction is to reject the hegemonic dualism as an obscuration of the true point of antagonism. Subtractive politics thus becomes an interpretative practice of initiating a space from which a radical transformation could occur.

In the Copenhagen climate conference example given above, for example, the primary dualism is between sceptics and techno-environmentalists. What this apparent contradiction elides as a disavowed antagonism; that climate change is caused by the scale of the economy, a scale which cannot be reduced within capitalism. The practice of subtraction is withdrawal

from this opposition to reveal the antagonism upon which it is constituted (Žižek, 2008a: 384).

We might conceive of environmentalist debate to be itself structured around the exclusion of surplus labour. That is, on one side of the discourse are the ‘developmentalist-technologists’ who argue that the global economy needs to go on developing and climate issues can be dissolved through the use of ‘green’ technology which becomes a market in itself. On the other side are the more radical ‘anti-consumptionists’ who advocate reducing consumption as the only way to mitigate against climate change. What both these discourses must exclude is the position of surplus labour; the first fails to note that those who suffer the most from climate change are the extreme poor who will remain in this position through the developmental narrative, the second elides the effect of a reduction in production would have on the global poor.

The emphasis on subtraction and minimal difference appears quite divorced from the grandiose politics of the act but the aim remains the same; radical political change. What is different is the strategic positioning of the Real. By contrast to the ‘miracle’ of the act, subtractive politics appears a much more subtle affair. The difference – a minimal one – is that the Real no longer exists as a bewildering exterior but, rather, an excessive absence within the existing.

In addition, the politics of subtraction allow the naming of the Real as the excluded third term, the antagonism holding ideology together as one. By contrast, the act rejects any such naming. What this naming of the point of symptomal torsion allows – in stark contrast to the common place critique of Žižek’s work – is a more subtle and strategic politics that takes into account not only the subversive tension inherent in a particular point but also the complex ideological procedures through which this tension is kept in check. Politics is not a crazy risk but, rather, deliberative ideological critique which seeks to withdraw the correct ‘peg’ to make the structure collapse. The risk remains – the politics of subtraction do not predict the future any more than the act – but the form of analysis is more political than theological.

Moreover, Žižek’s turn to subtractive politics is a response to the changes he identifies in the form which contemporary takes. He states that in today’s ‘post-ideological’ world, ideology



has more of a fetishistic shape than its traditional symptomatic form. The symptomatic form of ideology is structured by repressed symptoms which threaten ideology as the embodiment of the lie around which it is structured. By contrast, the fetish is an accepted lie which allows for the continued functioning of ideology (Žižek, 2009a: 65). Žižek states,

That is to say, symptom is the exception which disturbs the surface of the false appearance the point at which the repressed other science erupts while fetish is the embodiment of the lies which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth (Žižek, 2007b: 251)

In the case of the symptomatic functioning of ideology, when the symptom can no longer be repressed, ideology comes face to face with its disavowed truth and collapses. In terms of fetishism, ideology collapses when this fetish is no longer able to hold – a collapse which is often more total. It is not that 21<sup>st</sup> century subjects are somehow more able to hold onto grizzly truths – it remains the wager of psychoanalysis that “the subject *cannot* openly admit and really assume the truth about what s/he is doing” (ibid.: original emphasis) – but the structure of ignorance has changed. For Žižek, it is the fetishistic mode that is more prevalent in today’s cynical society. We know very well of the corruption of our political system and the false promises of consumerism, yet we act as if we do not. Instead, we withdraw to the safety of fetishistic *jouissance*, whether through cultural identity process of commodity consumption. The cynic truly believes but acts as if they do not. As a consequence, speaking Truth to knowledge and power has lost its efficiency – the journalist exploration of the likes of Noam Chomsky, John Pilger and Naomi Klein may reveal previously hidden Truths but they has lost the ability to shock and disturb. We are no longer shocked by political corruption or poverty, or, if we are it has no effect of our actions. Marx may have believed that knowledge of their exploitation would be enough for the proletariat to throw off their chains but today, not only is objectivity considered impossible but truth itself appears to have lost its efficiency. For Žižek, awareness no longer automatically leads to transformation, although the possibility still remains.

The everyday case of bottled water example is a pertinent case of this cynicism at work. We all *know* that bottled is no better than tap water, in developed areas at least yet continue to

purchase this product at increasing rates, all the while aware of our stupidity yet apparent powerless to change. A more powerful political example comes from American imperialism and torture. When the presence of Guantanamo Bay and other images of the consequences of the 'War on Terror' emerged in the public domain, there was a degree of shock at the distance between these images and the official ideology of the American global project; the spread of justice, freedom and democracy. At one stage of the second term of George W. Bush's presidency, there appeared to be a genuine shock to the system, as hearings were held and debate raged about the role of torture and American global exceptionalism (New York Times, 2008). At some point, however, the debate changed. The occurrence of these elements were no longer denied but, rather, cynically endorsed, as if there were no other option – this being the fetish that allowed the American public to largely accept the administrations sins against itself.

Perhaps the most salient exemplar of the cynicism of social life today is the television show, *The Simpsons*. Produced by the notoriously conservative Fox television network, the show regularly satirises many aspects of contemporary society, from religion, to politics and popular culture. One of the most prevalent subjects of mockery is the Fox network itself, along with its arch conservative owner, Rupert Murdoch. Rather than taking umbrage at this subversion, the network turns a blind eye. Whilst *The Simpsons*' subversive satire is taken to be a healthy – almost radical – aspect of American democracy, it holds no radical potential. Instead it signals the limitations of subversive politics today. Ultimately, the show is a source of profit for the network, who are content to be made fun of, so long as money is made. Moreover, it signals the strong cynicism of the viewing public, who are aware of the failure of their institutions – it is not shocking to have *The Simpsons* openly display corrupt politicians or evil corporations, as we all *know* that this is the case. Žižek's point in regards to this cynicism, is that whilst we know of this failure, we continue to act as if we do not know. Furthermore, the kind of social commentary provided by *The Simpsons* – produced in the name of profit – allows the contemporary subject to believe that they are resisting

(post)modern life, without having to change their compliant behaviour – it is as if the Other provides the critique for us<sup>95</sup>. The question, for Žižek, is how to subvert this process.

The only time dislocation has any affect is when it begins to threaten the efficiency of profit. No global problem is too big to ignore, except when it begins to threaten profit itself. No one expects aid promises to be delivered on, or climate treaties honoured (it is the promising, not the delivering, which provides the required servicing of ideology) but once the financial sector was threatened, an infinite amount of money was instantly found and used. As such, Žižek comes to suggest that we can no longer rely upon traditional ideological critique – in which the symptom is presented to ideology – but instead enact a form of subtractive politics which attempts to remove our ideological fetishes. In doing so ideological critique takes aim at the fetishes which structure our defence against the contradictions of our society. As a political practice, Žižek's subtractive politics actively seeks to avoid these fetishistic points, refusing, for example, to engage in charitable aid. Here we can see why Žižek's politics are so often displayed as conservative – not only does his reading of the structure of capitalism often conform with its apologists (the operation of markets, the need for business to consider profit as the primary driver of its activities) but he refuses to posit any form of activity which would mediate against the harshest elements of capitalism. This form of quiteism is not far removed from any number of apologists for capitalism. There is a subtle, minimal difference, however, between the different forms of 'doing nothing'. Here we again return to the distinction between activity and the act.

Daly calls this political art 'the subversion of subversion';

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<sup>95</sup> Another interesting example of the Other changing for us comes from the recent rise of McDonalds restaurant. Coming under increasing attack at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the embodiment of both 'Big Corporations' and the fast food industry posited to be the cause of an increase in levels of Western obesity, McDonalds responded by introducing a new range of 'healthy' alternative foods. Recently, it was announced that McDonalds profits had been restored to pre-crisis levels not, however, on the basis of increases in sales of these healthy alternatives. Instead, it seems that these alternatives have allowed the consumer to believe they are engaged in healthier eating practices, without actually having to eat the alternative products themselves. It is as if the Other is eating healthy for us. ADAMS, G. 2010. Golden Times for Global Food Chain. *New Zealand Herald* [Online]. Available: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=3&objectid=10645043&pnum=0](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=10645043&pnum=0) [Accessed 19th May 2010].

the development of forms of subversion that do not condone or comply with existing logics of subversion but which seek rather to undermine and repudiate the latter and to thereby open up new spaces of political possibility and creativity (2009: 294).

Nonetheless, Žižek remains concerned that in searching for minor gestures with the potential to produce grand results, subtractive politics risks the perpetual postponement of the act (Žižek, 2008a: 391). He is still committed to radical change and the scale of the act – it is just that subtractive politics changes the form of intervention. Žižek states in this regard:

In other words, one should not forget that, in politics, “major repercussions” do not come by themselves: true, one has to lay the groundwork for them by means of patient work but one should also know to seize the moment when it arrives’ (ibid.: 392).

The question in relation to both subtractive politics and the act is whether successful action depends on identifying points from which this overwhelming action might occur or a more critical task of forcing open cracks within ideology itself from ‘below’, from the point of exclusion. The first appears to draw us back into a Marxist-communist revolutionary narrative in which the surplus of labour will eventually overwhelm the system in which it is contained. Not only can we reject the historical naturalism inherent in this approach but as I have previously emphasised in some detail, the state and power of capitalism is such that any ‘naturally’ arising resistance is already countered within the system. The act will not just suddenly occur without warning (although it might on ‘their’ side). We will not awake to the overthrow of the White House and a communist utopia. Rather, any form of political intervention that insists upon revolutionary change must consist of a strategic reading of both sides of the symptomatic knot. Any political strategy which seeks to unravel its grip upon shared social life must untie the ideological knot which holds global capital together. The act does not undertake this task. Ironically, it is the active quietism of subtractive politics which appears to avoid the political passivity – waiting for the miracle – which troubles the politics of the act.

Nonetheless, subtractive politics has attracted as much criticism as the notion of the act. It does so for opposite reasons, however. If the act appears too radical, asking for too much to be done, to Žižek's critics, subtractive politics, and in particular the image of Bartleby, appears overly patient at best and just lazy, ineffective and ultimately conservative at worst. If Žižek's work reminds us of the urgency of acting against capitalism – and this appears to be the central injunction of his demand to *act* – Žižek's suggestion of withdrawal seems quizzical. As we have constructed in this section, the politics of subtraction do not involve a mere refusal to engage but, rather, active attempts to expose the ideological foundations around which we engage, in the hope that this minor measure will invoke major change. The goal is the same as the act but the method quite different.

The question linking the act, subtractive politics and the practice of concrete universality (to which we shall turn) remains that of how the Real foundation of capitalism might be exposed, that of surplus labour. If the act relies too heavily upon the Real in its pure form and a revolutionary process that requires a miracle, subtractive politics focuses upon the shape of contemporary ideology that holds back the destabilising effect of the Real. If the act relies on the collective and miracle intervention of a crazy risk, subtractive politics is too patient, almost cynical in itself. Whilst both these strategies may be effective in other political circumstances, against the material contradictions of capital they do not appear to offer much cause for hope.

Subtractive politics does not focus on the symptom itself but itself attempts to attack the fetish which prevents its full affects. This strategy is much easier to apply to environmental problems than surplus labour, as the former appears to hold on a much stronger fetishistic structure. The central fetish in environment debate is technology; political responses to ecological degradation tend to focus upon technological solutions even if there is political debate around the appropriate and effective means of their deployment. Here the subtractive strategy is not to posit an alternative approach, such as suggesting that technology is the root of the problem but, rather, actively attempting to undermine and subtract from the proposed solutions to remove the efficiency of the nodal fetish. When a government announces the development of a new wind farm, a subtractive approach will critique this development but not posit an alternative, the goal being to expose the Truth behind the fetish. This may be a

particularly effective approach for Green politics. It is clear that any truly sustainable approach to the material reproduction of society will require the total overhaul of our way of life on a scale that no progressive or technological solution is currently feasible. Indeed, the strength of capital is such that any solution of this kind, such as a radical reduction in levels of consumption, can only be understood through the lens of capital, and considered unfeasible – and rightly so.

When the focus shifts from environmental issues to that of the capitalist economy, surplus labour appears to have retained a symptomatic tension within capitalism. Although the presence of extreme poverty has been documented on a level well beyond cynicism, its link to global capitalism, consumption, and environment problems remains disavowed. Importantly, Žižek signals this point in his consideration of the four antagonisms which currently haunt capitalism. Not only does he identify political exclusion of surplus populations as holding the most radical potential but Žižek places the emphasis on the *exclusion* of these populations through the production of new walls (whether physical or ideological). That these populations have to be excluded – rather than openly accepted by way of a fetish – suggests that tension remains.

Indeed, we see this structure in the symbolic deadlock over refugees and illegal immigrants. As noted earlier in this thesis, Australia has seen these migrants become an increasingly emotive political issue, one that is discussed primarily in terms of keeping ‘them’ away from ‘here’. The most successful solution in this regard has been the Rudd governments’ establishment of a ‘processing’ centre on Christmas Island, at the furthest extent of Australian territory, to detain would be migrants. Such a desire to exclude and separate these populations suggest that there remains something Real about their presence. More fetishistic – and cynical – in this regard is the previously noted treatment of inmates at Guantanamo Bay. Here the American public *know* that many of the prisoners are not terrorists, nor enemy combatants, and their treatment is largely unjust. Nonetheless, until it was threatened by the Obama administrations’ attempt to shut down the camp, a strong fetishistic commitment to the security of the ‘American way of life’ remained.

The issue, therefore, is whether this ‘active quiteism’ is the horizon for anti-capitalist politics today or if there is something more to be said about the relationship between capitalism and its inherent contradictions. In response, I turn to the final Žižekian political strategy, that of ‘practicing concrete universality.’

### **Practicing Concrete Universality**

Chapter Three established concrete universality as occurring at the point at which the universal exception, the other side of the abstract universal horizon comes to intrude within that horizon. The abstract universal is the point at which ideology creates a sense of universal applicability, of cohesion and fullness; it is the empty mediating point around which various particular elements battle for ideological hegemony. By contrast the universal exception embodies the distance between the abstract universal and its particular elements and is the element which features (by way of its exclusion) in every attempt to constitute the abstract imaginary. As Žižek states in regards to Lacan:

not only is universality based upon an exception; Lacan goes a step further: universality *is* its exception, it “appears as such” in its exception...the exception (the element with no place in the structure) which immediately stands for the universal dimension. (Žižek, 2006d: 30)

The universal exception is thus the embodiment of the Real: it is the (necessary) point of impossibility that cannot be included within the set. As such, this exceptional point maintains the status of the Real – it has a presence only as an absence from ideology – but nonetheless exists. What is important in this conception of universality, however, is that universality is neither this point of exclusion nor the abstract universal but is rather constituted by the tension between the two; the battle – not of particular signifiers to become the master signifier which dominates ideology – between the abstract universal and its symptomatic lie embodied in concrete universality is universality itself.

Thus far in this thesis I have identified the universal exception of capitalism as surplus labour – the part with no part within global capitalism. Therefore universality in capitalism is a battle between this exceptional point and its ideological masking. As was noted in Chapter Six in regards to economy, this ideological mask – the abstract universal – is not economic in

nature but, rather, a socio-political response to the impossibility of class struggle. The ideological universal takes a political or cultural form, with reference to freedom, equality or progress. It is not as if we can label a singular signifier which embodies capitalism, rather the ideological approach of capitalism and liberal democracy is constituted by the struggle over its meaning<sup>96</sup>. This is the error Devenney (2007) – in response to Žižek’s call to ‘traverse the fantasy’ in identifying with the symptom – makes when he demands that Žižek identify the fundamental fantasy of global capitalism. Capitalism is now the impossible background to which ideology responds; one cannot identify a singular ideological fantasy of capitalism anymore than capitalism can be considered a form of civilisation. Instead, political hegemony and the structure of ideological fantasy – around whatever nodal point it might be based, whether freedom, justice or any number of other empty notions – must always be interpreted in relation the existence of the exception.

The practice of concrete universality involves the identification of the universal exception and attempts to force its intrusion around its point of exclusion. This position has been best considered in *The Parallax View* (Žižek, 2006d). Through the notion of the parallax, Žižek suggests that we can ‘practice’ concrete universality by “confronting a[n] [abstract] universality with its ‘unbearable’ example” (ibid.: 13). This unbearable example is, of course, the universal exception which has an existence, although it is not a positive one within the hegemonic domain of abstract universality. Rather, it appears as the Real; a gap within the order of being. Nonetheless, by taking a parallax view – a view in which both the exception and its point of exception are kept in view, such that the gap between them is revealed – the presence of this excluded exception becomes clear.

What is important about the parallax view is not the positive existence of the exception. The exception always finds expression within the ideological form of the abstract universal in a palpable form. Poverty, for example, does exist within the ideological formations that support capitalism. Indeed its re-presented presence is often excessive, taking the form of meaningless statistics and images over-ridden with super-ego guilt – in this form it can be

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<sup>96</sup> Nonetheless, a basic analysis can see that notions such as ‘liberty’, ‘progress’ and national identity are the most common signifiers.



cynically dismissed. What makes surplus labour into a constitutive exception is the relationship with contemporary political horizons. The excess of labour are ontologically excluded not because their presence cannot be acknowledged but, rather, because they cannot be acknowledged as an intimate (or rather, extimate) part of universality itself.

Although Žižek has not significantly developed this identification with concrete universality – his interest quickly turned to subtractive politics – it holds much in common with his earlier notion of ‘identifying with the symptom’. This is the political equivalent of identification with the *sinthome*, the final stage in Lacan’s approach to ethics as introduced in Chapter Four. Illustrative of this approach was the ‘We are America’ campaign in the United States, initially a protest movement which began as a response to a backlash against illegal, ‘alien’, immigrants. Against their representation as intruders, the groups protest emphasised their status as constitutive of the nation and its economy. Not only is the United States an immigrant nation but illegal immigration forms the backbone of the economy, operating as surplus of labour which takes the ‘dirty’ jobs that citizens are unwilling to take on. Without this labour, the US economy and in particular the service and agricultural sectors, could no longer function – not only would wage prices rapidly increase but the underground economy of cleaning, maintenance and other such menial jobs would collapse.

This movement, however, signals the danger inherent in such protests. Rather than remaining as a dislocatory point, the tension inherent in their protest was disabled by liberal ideology which integrated the protest into a human rights discourse. It now exists as a ‘get out and vote’ alliance, well integrated into the system which keeps them at bay<sup>97</sup>. A more radical approach would have stemmed from a combination of subtraction and concrete universality. The protestors could have refused any such integration into the system, instead calling into question the system itself by way of their exclusion from it. This would have been a radical approach, one that could well have failed – as much by state violence as anything else – and actually left the ‘aliens’ in a worse position than when they started. In these circumstances, we cannot blame individuals for taking pragmatic decisions. When it comes to capitalism and its symptoms, however, we are well past pragmatism.

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<sup>97</sup> See [www.weareamerica.org](http://www.weareamerica.org)

The case of the ‘We are America’ campaign highlighted another important issue: the possibility of violence suggests that some tension remains in the gap between surplus labour and its managerial function in capital. It may be that a cynical acknowledgement of poverty is possible but at this stage it appears as a last taboo – along with the inalienable link between capitalism and climate change – of global capitalism. We can acknowledge all sorts of political corruption, cultural and commercial imperialism but the blood of production is yet to fall at the feet of consumers. For this reason we can suggest that in response to the global sustainability problem, the practice of concrete universality appears the most effective response from within Žižek’s politics.

This practice, one not far divorced from subtractive politics, or the act, involves actively insisting upon the repetitive presence of the exception, thrusting it into the face of ideology as an example of its failure and accepting no alternative, no positivisation, of the problem. In this regard, Žižek has previously suggested that

This identification of the part of society with no properly defined place within it (or which rejects the allocated subordinated place within it) with the Whole is the elementary gesture of politicization, discernible in all great democratic events from the French Revolution (in which *le troisieme etat* proclaimed itself identical with the Nation as such, against the aristocracy and clergy) to the demise of East European socialism (in which dissident “fora” proclaimed themselves representative of the entirety of society against the party *nomenklatura*). (Žižek, 2008a: 415-416).

In regards to surplus labour, every articulation of ideology and progress in the West should be strategically met with its remainder, of the exclusion that occurs in surplus labour, without any sense that such surplus can be included in the global economy. The problem might be exclusion but the solution is inclusion only in the sense of the impossible intrusion of this point into ideology. The art of this practice, therefore, is to mobilise the point or exclusion whilst retaining the anxiety of the Real.

It is this anxiety, as caused by the presence of the Real, which offers the best prospect of destabilising capitalism. The power and structure of capitalism is such that not only is the global economy fundamentally unsustainable within capitalism but no form of alternative

society is currently available. We cannot simply rally behind a new signifier, hoping in vain that a new world is possible. Nor can capitalism be bent in a new direction through a hegemonic battle for a new mode of being. Not only is there no alternative mode of subjectivity but capitalism hits a hard limit with the impossibility of class structure such that any form of politics tackling the question of global sustainability must address the ideological knot of capitalist class relations. It is this task that we have taken on in this chapter.

The Žižekian translation of Lacanian ethics into strategic political responses to capitalism reveals the following. The act – although forming the background for Žižekian political engagement with capitalism – does not translate well to the collective sphere. The ‘crazy’ risk of transforming subjectivity found no equivalent outside of the kind of all-out revolutionary approach rejected long ago. Second, and alternatively, subtractive politics offers a more subtle approach to politics. Although the hope of grand transformation is not lost, it suggests that this can be achieved through smaller – more strategic – gestures. In particular, subtractive politics responds to the cynicism evident in ideology today. This response attempts to withdraw the fetishistic object to which we cling to prevent the anxiety of the Real. As such it is an effective approach but because it does not speak directly to the Real, it is an approach with limitations.

Thirdly, in relation to the act and subtractive politics, practicing concrete universality – an active contrasting of exception with the system it constitutes – emerges as potentially the most effective strategic response to the contradictions of global capitalism. This approach embodies much of the wisdom of subtraction – the withdrawal from political action, the breakdown of fetishism – but seeks to utilise the tension provoked by concrete universality in a more productive manner. Constructing the Real through the lens of universality allows for such a reading.

Nonetheless, although this position is a powerful form of critique, it retains a negative form. This reading of Žižek’s politics suggests that Žižek has been unable to reconstitute a form of Marxist politics and is instead stuck within a reconsideration of the politics of psychoanalysis

within the Marxist tradition. Not only is there nothing in Žižek's work which would excite policy wonks but there is nothing that would inspire those on the street.

For much of Žižek's work this position appeared to be the limit of his work; a powerful critique of capitalism but nothing more. Žižek himself suggested that this was the necessary condition of both politics under capitalism and the work of a Lacanian philosopher; he conceived the limitations of his practice to be the provoking of new questions, not providing the kind of answers that would both satisfy his critics and provide a new horizon for the radical left. As we have seen in this chapter, this has not made his work conservative but neither has it provided a response that has much life beyond academia.

Recently, however, Žižek has begun to identify, following Badiou, with the communist hypothesis. Here he has begun to explicitly identify the 'communist hypothesis' as the political horizon of our time. We must consider, however, how this approach is different from any of the political positions Žižek has previously rejected; in the following chapter I shall consider how Žižek has been able to hold this idea as a reconstitution of Marxist politics without falling prey to the traps inherent in any normative expression of the good. Firstly, I draw on the notion of the communist hypothesis and Žižek's interpretation. In doing so I will suggest that Žižek's understanding of the communist hypothesis does provide a new horizon for the Left – not through its explicit content but, rather, by reference to Fredric Jameson's notion of utopia. This reference to utopia has the potential to not only allow the communist hypothesis to be used in a manner which avoids the difficulties of holding on to such a 'big idea' via the universal exception that produces concrete universality but, in doing so, provides the possibilities of going beyond critique and offering the kind of affective identification which avoids the cynicism which dominates politics today.



## 8. The Communist Hypothesis: Impossible Utopia or Utopian Impossibility?

The past seven chapters have constructed a response to the incommensurability between regional underdevelopment and global overconsumption, a response which is also a reflection upon the kinds of political action that might stem from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and from Žižek's work in particular. Moreover, although this consideration of politics – or rather the politics of the political – is a contextual response, it also reflects on the state of Marxist politics today. This construction has produced a strategic approach based upon an identification of the primary antagonism haunting capitalism today: surplus labour. In response to the status of surplus labour, I have suggested that Žižek's reading of the Lacanian (ethical) dialectic produces a number of possible positions in relation to the anxiety and tension of the Real as embodied by surplus labour.

These positions, however, remain purely strategic in the sense that they suggest no future normative conception of shared social life in themselves: one cannot attempt to institutionalise the practice of subtractive politics in same manner as Laclau suggested that contingency might become a form of radical democracy. This strategic positioning resonates with both the impossibility of transposing Lacanian ethics into a substantive form of collective normativity as well as with Žižek's insistence upon the historical limitations of productive politics.

Yet, whilst I have come to argue that this approach to politics is an effective response to global capital, the interpretation of Žižek's work as being a kind of political strategising also appears confluent with the accusations directed at Žižek by his critics. Geoff Boucher, for example, argues:

Žižek has been able to create a remarkable new social theory ... but the conclusions towards which Žižek is driven, apparently on the basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis, are nothing less than extraordinary and tend to undermine any confidence we might have in his complex theory. (Boucher, 2004: 1)

Whilst we might disagree with Boucher's conclusion in regards to the consequences of Žižek's work, thus far this text has not done much to dispel the contention that whilst Žižek's work is a productive form of theory – and this theory has been put to use in analysis of the structure of capitalism and politics today – Žižek's reliance upon Lacanian principles posits a structural limitation to his political approach. This is certainly Laclau's contention when he states that “Žižek's thought is not organised around a truly *political* reflection but is, rather, a *psychoanalytic* discourse which draws its examples from the politico-ideological field” (Laclau, 2000a: 289, original emphasis). Thus, while Žižek utilises psychoanalysis as a mode of political intervention and a study of politics itself, his theoretical commitments do not provide a sufficient base from which to construct a radical leftist political imaginary.

As such, both Boucher and Laclau's rejection of Žižek's work as a political force is based upon Žižek's refusal to enter into debate about the shape of the future. Despite its avowed allegiance to the cause of the globally downtrodden, along with a faith in the tenets of anti-capitalist discourse and of Marxism as necessary elements of this allegiance, this thesis has thus far used Žižek's work in a similar manner. I have suggested that whilst Žižek may also share similar points of identification, nothing exists in his work that might suggest that Žižek offers a different image of the future.

This somewhat tragic account, however, has suspended two vital elements of Žižek's work. One of these has been apparent from the start of his publishing career, the other emerging only recently. The first relates to the matter of normativity. Although Žižek's approaches towards politics, as constructed in the previous chapter, remain strategic in the sense that they are means rather than an end, they still serve a political commitment to material equality that is seemingly elided in both Žižek's work and this text. In this sense Žižek's normative positioning can be regarded as similar to that attributed to Marx in Chapter Two: Žižek does not engage in abstract moralising but rather produces a critique based open existing

conditions. Nonetheless, like Marx it is apparent that Žižek is strongly opposed to the conditions produced within capitalism. This disavowed commitment becomes apparent when we engage with the second element of Žižek's work that has thus far been suspended: that of Žižek's recent references to the communist hypothesis. Such a notion returns to the question of Marxist politics. If Žižek's work engages with the domain of the political, rather than politics itself, it nonetheless works towards a particular end. Thus far I have re-presented this goal as *anti*-capitalism but the reference to communism appears to strike a more positive position.

Although Žižek's work has always had a Marxist flavour and has cheekily hinted at an affinity with communism<sup>98</sup>, he has been reluctant to take positions outside of an avowed anti-capitalism, certainly nothing that would have allowed Žižek to speak of 'our side' as he does in his 2009 text *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*. In this chapter, I shall consider three factors in relation to this orientation and do so in the context of my response to global capitalism. The first pertains to Žižek's use of the communist hypothesis as an historical form of politics. If I have previously rejected alternative interventions, such as Hardt and Negri's, because they would immediately be drawn into the logic of capital, how is it that this 'hypothesis' is able to avoid the same fate?

The second factor relates to the question of normativity and Marxist politics to which I previously alluded. Although Žižek clearly holds a commitment to Marxist politics, this allegiance appears more explicitly theoretical than political. Indeed, whilst Žižek has battled to restore the salience of Marxism today, he has rejected contemporary attempts to rehabilitate (post) Marxist politics, including the politics of Laclau as well as Hardt and Negri. Moreover, Žižek has also dismissed those alternative – in the sense that they do not currently exist – approaches to the question of ethics and normativity, such as Stavrakakis' conception of partial *jouissance*, thereby implicitly holding that we are struck within a masculine construction of politics.

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<sup>98</sup> This affinity is often signalled through references to Lenin and Stalin.



Moreover, Laclau's and Stavrakakis' works have been cast aside because of their commitments to what might be deemed a 'democratic' hypothesis (which, incidentally, restricts the dialectical reading of Lacanian ethics that Stavrakakis seeks). Given his rejection of both Marxist and Lacanian readings of political normativity, we must ask how Žižek is able to hold to a *communist* hypothesis that is congruent with his commitment to Lacanian theory. How is it that Žižek is able to hold to this position – what we might deem a 'big idea' – without falling prey to either the essentialism of traditional Marxism or the impotence of the non-utopian Left?

Here I wish to suggest that the communist hypothesis marks an advancement in Žižek's work rather than a contradiction because he does not seek to fill out the hypothesis with the presence of a specific future but, rather, indexes the existence of a communist hypothesis to contemporary conditions of possibility – specifically, the exclusion of surplus labour which allows for the continued functioning of capital. This, however, does not take us much beyond Žižek's current work. It is his standard Marxist reading of capitalism in the name of the new signifier: the communist hypothesis. In order to produce a new horizon, the direct contours of Žižek's work need to be surpassed in order that its inherent utopianism might become apparent. The reference to a disavowed utopianism may not surprise Žižek's critics, who appear convinced that Žižek is, in Laclau's words, "waiting for the Martians" (Laclau, 2005: 232).

In this chapter, however, and as a manner of concluding the argumentation, I will suggest that a utopian reading of the communist hypothesis not only adds to the strategic impetus identified in the previous chapter but also returns to the question of the shape of the future to Žižek's work. Here I refer to utopia not as an impossible place – one that could be identified with the fantasmatic fullness of *jouissance* – but, rather, as a process that hinges upon the impossibility of the utopian itself. In doing so, I will again have cause to return to the question of impossibility, representation and of exclusion in late capitalism.

This brings us to the final question of this chapter, and indeed the thesis itself. Returning to my original concern – that of global poverty and environmental degradation – I will discuss what it means to practice politics in this manner: if within capitalism there are any number of

administrative programmes that could reduce the suffering of many without having to risk a revolutionary refashioning of history, why is it that we should hold to the impossible utopianism of the communist hypothesis as *the* form of politics today? In responding to this question, I reach towards the heart of the normative commitments that underwrite this text. Let me first begin by introducing the idea of the communist hypothesis.

## The Communist Hypothesis

Žižek's reference to the communist hypothesis begins in earnest in *How to Begin from the Beginning* (Žižek, 2009b) and *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* (Žižek, 2009a)<sup>99</sup>. Here Žižek introduces the hypothesis by way of reference to Badiou who has argued that,

The communist hypothesis remains the right hypothesis and I see no other ... if this hypothesis is to be abandoned, then it is not worth doing anything in the field of collective action. Without the perspective of communism, without this kind of idea, nothing in the historical and political future is of such a kind of interest to the philosopher. Each individual can pursue their private business and we won't mention it again ... (Badiou, 2008: 115)

Žižek (2009b) repeats Badiou's argument without contention, adding that one should not read the hypothesis as a 'regulative idea' of the kind that might lead to an ethical socialism with an *a priori* norm<sup>100</sup>. Rather the communist hypothesis must be referenced to actual contradictions within capitalism. As Žižek states:

To treat communism as an eternal Idea implies that the situation which generates it is no less eternal than the antagonism to which communism reacts will always be here. From which it is only one step to a deconstructive reading of communism as a dream of presence, of abolishing all alienating representation; a dream which thrives on its own impossibility. (Žižek, 2009b)

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<sup>99</sup> We can also witness the development of this idea in the concluding chapters of *In Defence of Lost Causes* (2008).

<sup>100</sup> See Žižek's previous debate with Geoff Boucher BOUCHER, G. 2004. The Antinomies of Slavoj Žižek. *Teleos*, 129, 151-172, ŽIŽEK, S. 2004a. Ethical Socialism? No, Thanks! Reply to Boucher. *Teleos*, 129..

Instead, Žižek argues that we use the communist hypothesis in order to contest the contradictions of capitalism, as identified at the beginning of the previous chapter: environmental degradation, digital property, biogenetics, and politico-economic exclusion. It is this last antagonistic point, which has been identified as surplus labour, which provides the key structuring point to capitalism and is the basis of Žižek's reference to the communist hypothesis.

The only way to break our historical deadlock is by reference to the communist hypothesis, a hypothesis which itself can only come into being against a horizon of the contradictions of capital. Perhaps more accurately, although the presence of the communist hypothesis is necessary to generate a utopian demand, it is not the content of a communist discourse that will provoke change but whether capitalism is able to contain its own contradictions. The task of this thesis, and any form of politics which attempts to invoke such a hypothesis, is to practice a form of analysis that exposes the constitutive contradictions of global capitalism. It is these contradictions, rather than any sense of a new radical imaginary, which opens up the prospect of utopian demands and a history beyond capitalism.

Another way of framing this point is to highlight that Žižek's reference to the communist hypothesis appears to operate only by way of an identification with the contradictions of capitalism: it is the inability to integrate surplus labour into capitalism, such that we might have full employment and the genuine possibility for material equality, that justifies a specific reference to communism rather than to democracy or to fascism. Communism is not guaranteed by history, rationalism, or the big Other to be *the* form of political being but, rather, signals the point of impossibility within capitalism. In this sense, the communist hypothesis, along with the utopian demand to which we shall soon refer, is an extension of the strategic practice of concrete universality.

In response to our first question, therefore, Žižek is able to posit the communist hypothesis at this time in history because it is a response to the contradictions of capitalism rather than an abstracted ideal position in itself. We must consider, however, why he utilises the specific reference to communism rather than a negative (in the sense of their positioning within capital) reference to the proletariat.

This position becomes more evident when we consider Badiou's reading of the hypothesis (Badiou, 2008: 105-117). Badiou is more implicit in his identification, claiming that there have been two previous sequences of the hypothesis: the first from the French revolution to the Paris commune (its establishment) and the second – its first attempt at realisation – running from the Russian revolution to the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. For Badiou, our task today is to determine the yet to be constructed content of the third sequence.

Nonetheless, the communist hypothesis that might emerge for this current period is not without inherent content. Communism, Badiou suggests, would eliminate both inequality of wealth and the division of labour. Moreover, distinctions between manual and intellectual labour will disappear, along with differences between town and country. Naturally, the state itself will become unnecessary. Thus, although Badiou does not specifically identify the shape of the programme that will come to embody this hypothesis, his emphasis is on the value of the signifier 'communism' and its relationship to equality and economy rather than the epistemological and ontological concerns that have pre-occupied the Left after the discursive turn.

*Ergo*, whilst Žižek's reference to the communist hypothesis as a utopian impossibility is confluent with his earlier work, it is still haunted by the productivism suggested by Badiou and the history of communism. Moreover, Žižek's specific reference to surplus labour as *the* contradiction of capitalism that justifies this reference to communism suggests a grander normative commitment than is explicit in his work. Let us take one issue at a time. First, I shall consider the utopian demand that is part of the strategic embodiment of the communist hypothesis in some detail, with particular reference to the work of Fredric Jameson on utopia, before returning to the question of the normativity that drives such a hypothesis.

## **Utopia: Demand the Impossible!**

Utopia is an impulse, a desire for something different from the existing. In this sense, utopianism has been referenced to the prospect of radical political change in the name of a perfect future society. The utopian urge, however, does not necessarily take the form of a desire for a radically different form of being. Rather, today the elementary utopian demand is

embodied in the conservative hope that, ultimately, society does exist – that life can be managed in such a manner that nirvana is possible within existing structures. In this sense, we can regard the utopian desire as the desire for *jouissance*, a desire for the impossible to exist.

At first glance then, utopia – despite its radical pretensions – is a counter-intuitive position for any form of politics taking its orientation from a Lacanian-inspired psychoanalysis. Conversely, a separate modality of utopia can be posited in a way that relates to the Real rather than to *jouissance* (if one can momentarily abstract from the dialectic of lack and excess which defines social life). This focuses on the impossibility of realising utopia as the key to the utopian demand.

Here we can consider that utopian thought is not radically divided from Lacanian theory but, rather, at its heart. This is so both in the sense of a Lacanian critique of fantasy and of its reading of the conditions of possibility in relation to radical political change. It is this possibility – of utopia as the very suggestion that another mode of being is possible without the imaginary coherence of the development of that mode – that makes Žižek's politics a radical (rather than the conservative, or nihilistic) position that many of his critics have suggested. In particular, as we shall develop, the rehabilitation of the image of communism by way of a reference to the constitutive contradictions of capitalism rather than the *jouissance* of the ideal provides a potentially effective and reasoned political intervention beyond that imagined by his critics. However, the notion of utopia has appeared to receive little critical attention within Žižek's work, often being swiftly rejected. Conversely, the development of the communist hypothesis suggests a utopian element underdeveloped in Žižek's work thus far. For this reason, in this next section I shall expand on the notion of utopia, with particular reference to Jameson's work.

## Contemporary Utopian desires

Today, as Jameson contends (2004:35), utopia appears to be an unnecessary term. Our civilisation is characterised by the existence of two distinct worlds<sup>101</sup>, neither with much use for the concept. In the first, unprecedented wealth and pleasures – both real and virtual – have made dreams of utopia appear redundant. In the other, in which the material realities of everyday life remain overwhelming, utopianism appears equally unnecessary or perhaps unfeasible. Yet, it is because of this split that utopianism is required today more than ever.

As Eagleton has come to suggest (2000: 174-175), the true utopians today – here he uses the term in a negative, idealistic sense – are those who believe that the future will be essentially the same as the past, although for those with a multi-cultural bent, more options may be available in the food court. For the Fukuyamaist apologists of capital, explicit reference to utopianism suggests a dangerous misrecognition of historical progress; the end (of historical struggle) is near and we have arrived at the salvation of the earth. Yet, for those whose existence consists of too much earth and precious little salvation, this declaration may appear to be premature. In regards to history, then, utopianism today stands in firm opposition to the kind of instrumental ‘common sense’ of political movements which cannot consider their own historical conditionality and which limit themselves to movements that appear feasible and reasonable – Sachs’ work at the beginning of the thesis being a prime example (Moylan, 1998: 2). Today, this is not the kind of thinking that is required and for this reason we must invoke the dormant beast that is utopia – the pertinent question being, which type of utopia?

Despite believers in the end-of-history thesis arguing that the age of utopian thinking is over, paradoxically we can identify this as the primary mode of utopian thinking today. As Žižek argues in support of Jameson, today the most apparent point of utopianism – and the most illusionary – is the belief that the invisible mechanisms of the market can bring about the

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<sup>101</sup> While we can reasonably conceive of these worlds – that of Western capitalism and the globally disposed – throughout this thesis I have insisted that these worlds are both parallel and interconnected such that the existence of one allows for the presence of the other. Moreover, increasingly we are witnessing the uneasily mixing of these worlds as economic restructuring has brought Third World living conditions into the West and concentrated areas of wealth to the developing world.

‘optimal state of society’. Additionally, Žižek adds that the most ideological position today is the rejection of ideology itself. As a corollary it is anti-utopianism that forms the strongest ideological position in our civilisation and forms the primary blockage or point of closure which prevents the development of a radical imaginary (Žižek, 2000e: 324). Nonetheless, despite the utopian demand in anti-utopian practice of (cynically) administrated politics, utopia still appears to be an outdated concept.

The apparent impotence of utopia can be indexed to the general ‘crisis of representation’ brought on by postmodernity (Jameson, 2005: 212). It is no coincidence, Jameson suggests, that the rise of postmodernity, with its rejection of representation and the prospect of any anchoring guarantee for social or political life, has coincided with the dismissal of a utopian demand for an alternative and the corresponding conservative era of the Washington consensus. Moreover, as we shall see in the debate that follows, the question of the representation of impossibility itself deeply informs the prospects of rehabilitating utopian politics today.

Much of the debate amongst theorists of utopia rests upon the dichotomy between the possible and the impossible, between utopia as the image of the ideal society and utopia as that which reveals the limits of our imagination or situation. The work of the supporting characters in this thesis (Žižek excluded) in effect take the impossibility of representation, and hence, utopianism as their starting point: Laclau’s rejection of the possibility of society; Stavrakakis’ hope for a society structured around partial enjoyment and Madra and Özsalcuk’s attempt to rearticulate class struggle. At the same time, however, all these theorists posit a certain utopian appeal for an alternative mode of being: a different form of representation that is itself an articulation of an unexpressed utopian demand. In this sense, whilst the particular articulations of utopianism presented by these theorists have been the subject of critique throughout this thesis, it is only once utopianism as the fantasy of full *jouissance* is dismissed that the political potential of utopia in our time can be unleashed. Perhaps the point to which these movements best speak is that utopianism cannot take a singular form but, rather, is an expression of a grander transcendental movement.

This transcendental effect can be instantiated in an infinitive number of particular expressions, none of which speak to a singular truth about utopia but are rather an expression of the subtextual form of the utopian demand. Because of this effect, particularly amongst those who study utopian thought from a positivist bent (or those who critique such a bent within a utopian lens), much emphasis is placed upon subtle delineation of the various instantiations of utopia. Jameson, for example, defines two different approaches to the imagination of utopia: the removal of the ‘root of all evil’ and the ‘anonymous bliss’ of the patient blueprinting a utopian society. These Jameson calls the ‘model railroads of the mind’ taking various written forms including the manifesto and the constitution (Jameson, 2004: 40). Leopold (2007) extends these options, adding intentional communities (which, despite their limited range, may contain elements of both of Jameson’s approaches) and literary/imaginary utopias. This plethora of positions, however, can all be considered responses to the same sense of impossibility, that society (and utopia) does not exist.

These forms can be considered to be a response to the operation that Ruth Levitas (2007: 290), following Ernst Bloch (1986), identifies as the fundamental utopian expression: that utopia is at its core ‘the expression of the desire for a better way of being’, a principle that Bloch designated as ‘hope’, a desire for something that is missing. Here Bloch, in terms not far divorced from Lacanian theory, contends that human experience is defined by lack and longing, a negativity that cannot be expressed in any way other than through the imagination of its fulfilment. In this sense utopian thought does not require the wholesale imagination of new worlds, although this construction is an articulation of the utopian desire. Instead, these constructions are an expression of a larger demand for *jouissance* (Levitas, 2007: 291).

Indexing utopia to *jouissance* suggests that, rather than taking the form of elaborate visions, a utopian urge appears in the everyday performance of social life. In this sense, utopia cannot be juxtaposed against ideology – utopia seeking to change society, ideology to maintain it – as Karl Mannheim contended (Mannheim cited in Levitas, 2007: 289). Instead, in this sense utopia is entirely ideological; utopia is an expression of *jouissance* that lies at the heart of ideology. The everyday performance of utopia, therefore, is the performance of *jouissance* in its many forms; the elementary demand of the utopian/ideological position is that, contra-Laclau, ‘society does exist’.



It is the critique of this mantra that forms the basis of psychoanalytic criticism of utopianism. Indeed, this thesis itself has largely entailed an undermining of the concept; that the universal does not exist, enjoyment and the class relationship are impossible. This analysis has suggested that attempts to attain the fullness of *jouissance* or utopia must violently exclude a dystopian element that cannot be named (Alexander, 1998). Theodore Adorno has stated in this regard, as part of his rejection of an abstract understanding of utopia, that;

It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces, and there is a straight line of development between the gospel of happiness and the construction of camps and extermination so far off in Poland that each of our countrymen can convince himself that he cannot hear the screams of pain. That it is model of an unhampered capacity for happiness. (1974: 62-63)

Thus, for many, and not limited to psychoanalytic theorists, utopian politics can be deemed unrealistic at best, dangerous at worst (c.f. Gray, 2008). As has been discussed, however, utopia does not just exist in what we might deem ‘grand’ ideological meta-narratives. Rather, like *jouissance*, the utopian urge continues today, even in our apparently post-ideological society – the ‘end of history’ is *the* articulation of utopianism today. The main form of utopia today is not nostalgic Leftists or religious extremists but, rather, the ideology of the market and of ‘democratic freedom’. Here utopian desire is not expressed through belief but, instead, the actions of the commodity fetishists who require just one more item to achieve the promised *jouissance*.

Moreover, the utopian impulse does not exist only within capitalist discourse, nor does it correspond only to a singular or transcendental sense of the good (Kenny, 2007). As I have illustrated so far, both Laclau and Stavrakakis, in postulating versions of the ideal society, have produced a form of anti-utopian utopianism, or, to paraphrase ‘partial-utopianism’. The emphasis here, as Žižek would suggest, should be on the utopianism, rather than the partial. The problem, for Žižek, is that any form of utopian/*jouissance* that remains within existing understandings of shared social life is destined to remain utopian only in a limited sense. Moreover, the strength of capitalism is such that any alternative form of imaginary can only become another supplement to the capitalist ‘utopia’.

This distinction can perhaps be designated as the difference Jameson posits between utopian fancy and utopian imagination (2005: 214). Although both correspond to the same utopian urge, fancy and imagination signal vitally different articulations of utopia. Utopian fancy corresponds to the detail and particulars upon which utopia becomes attached. As such, it remains a conservative form, even if its content contains a radical demand. By contrast, utopian imagination consists of the form of utopia that allows for the articulation of fancy. Although the dualism, like all dichotomies, is subject to occasional oppositional reversals, it is this distinction which marks the changing orientation in this chapter; from fancy to imagination, or rather the limitations of imagination.

## **The Utopian Impossibility**

An alternative mode of utopia is suggested by Jameson, and implicitly by Žižek, that is vitally different from that just discussed. Both argue that the utopia we require today is the utopia of the impossible. While identifying this position as emblematic of the utopian urge, Jameson suggests that the true utopia emerges at the very limits of our imagination. Here I take reference from Thomas More's original conception of utopia, using Greek terms to bring together 'no place' and 'good place'. This suggests both a tragic and comedic face to utopia. Utopia can be tragic – a place we will never reach – or comedic – the utopia lies in the very impossibility of its realisation.

Jameson's utopia, therefore, does not cling to an alternative conception of society but, rather, relies upon the build up of energy around the very limits to our imagination. In this sense, it changes the emphasis from the content of utopia to the form of utopia. Here the impossibility of utopia does not relate to the practical impossibilities of political life but, instead, to the limitations of our imaginations. Imagination, of course, is not limited to the fancy of the individual. Rather, as Jameson himself has developed, imagination is always a social creation. Thus the limitations of our imagination are always a political limit, it is the limit of what exists within the political order. In this regard, Jameson's oft-quoted remark that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism signals a failure of imagination that marks the presence of an orthodox, or positive, utopia.

Thus, the utopian text invokes our constitutive inability to imagine utopia itself (Jameson, 1982: 153). In this sense, utopia appears only as an absence and any attempt to name this absence produces an ideological closure that converts the utopian demand for an anticipatory appeal into a reactionary state. Thus, for Jameson, utopia is at its most effective when it cannot be imagined;

Its function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but, rather, in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future – our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity of futurity – so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined (2004: 46).

Utopia then suggests a complete overhaul of society, one that will produce much anxiety and repression of the utopian imagination (Jameson, 1998: 75). Although this anxiety can cause us to continue to grasp at the illusions which cohere our sense of being and hold us to the limitations of our current order, anxiety itself presents an energy from which to move forward (ibid.: 51-53).

A profound difficulty presents itself at this point: of finding a way to imagine the prospect of an alternative future without foreclosing the possibility of it coming into being. What we require is not a utopian urge to fill out the failure of capitalism, either through capitalism itself or its cultural supplements but, rather, a desire to move beyond capitalism to a society which is yet to be imagined. This desire constitutes not only an approach to the Real but the *jouissance* of impossibility itself. That is, the impossibility of imagining utopia does not bring an end to *jouissance* but, instead, persists in the form of *jouissance*. This form of utopia does not dismiss *jouissance* as an illusion but, instead, suggests that *jouissance* drives every attempt to imagine utopia. The vital difference between the forms of utopia is that positive forms attempt to locate this utopian place whereas the impossible utopia plays upon the urge to go beyond the existing. As such, Žižek does not suggest an alternative form of enjoyment but, rather, posits a strategic manipulation of this utopian *jouissance*. The key difference here is between the fantasy of full *jouissance* provided by utopia-as-content, and the subversion of alternative political imaginaries through utopia-as-form.

Whilst this form of utopianism leads itself to accusations of negativity, positive forms are easily subverted. Jameson argues that the designation of specific points of protest is contrary to the effectiveness of utopianism. When the specific contradictions become apparent, the tendency is to focus political demands upon these points. At this point, however, the utopian imagination becomes limited and what might have been a revolutionary demand gives way to practical political programmes (2004: 45). A salient example of this process in these times is the Green movement. Although Green ideology at times suggests energy for widespread change that might be considered utopian, it has become too easy to divert this enthusiasm into smaller scale processes that only serve to supplement the interests of capital and escalate ecological collapse. A utopian urge certainly existed at the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference but it was openly submitted to legislative demands which subverted the possibility of radical action.

Nonetheless, Žižek's sense of utopianism takes its form from the expression of actually occurring antagonisms with capitalism. Whilst he acknowledges that capital is able to include and pacify most of its symptoms, he designates the excluded or hungry populations of the world as the specific contradiction which holds a vital, and thus, utopian status. The difference between the identification of surplus labour as the antagonism within capitalism and other specific points of protest is that the former is unable to be included within capitalism. That is, while the utopian demand inherent in this necessary exclusion can be subverted in various ideological measures, such as charitable aid or the displacement of the antagonism to an exterior cause, the concrete universality of surplus labour cannot be integrated within capitalism and for this reason remains the impossible point of a utopian demand.

Nonetheless, a political battle remains to identify this point as impossible. As such, the central contention of Jameson's work around utopia appears to be that the utopian urge is at its strongest when it cannot be imagined: utopia appears at those points at which a political demand emerges which is incommensurable with the established horizon of understanding. To refer back to examples which have run throughout this thesis, if an immigrant protest forces the intrusion of the necessity of the surplus of labour which it provides and upon the wage-labour system in a manner that cannot be easily subverted, we are experiencing utopia.

Under late capitalism, however, these demands tend to be met with administrative solutions whether by those in political power, or the protestors themselves. Indeed, the most common critique of Žižek addressed in this document is that he does not suggest a manifesto style approach to be followed. Instead, subverting this kind of subversion, as Daly (2009: 274) puts it, is the aim of Žižek's work. Žižek – as constructed in this thesis – attempts to force out the inherent contradictions of capitalism, not that they can then be addressed but precisely to show that they cannot be taken into account. Indeed, the purpose of the previous chapter was to consider the strategic possibilities for enacting this kind of politics.

In this chapter I have expanded upon these possibilities, considering the addition of the communist hypothesis and its inherent utopianism. This demand appears entirely confluent with the practice of concrete universality that I identified as potentially the most effective strategic approach in terms of mobilising the ideological 'presence of absence' against global capitalism. I have not yet considered, however, how the communist hypothesis relates to this position. Certainly, Žižek's instantiation of the hypothesis, based upon the contradictions of capitalism and in particular the exclusion of surplus labour, suggests a strong similarity with the strategic intent identified. What does not fit, at least with the Jamesonian approach to utopia, is the specific naming of communism.

Jameson is clear in stating that the place of utopia occurs at the limits of our imagination. To try to imagine utopia itself – even in its own impossibility, say by labelling it the communist hypothesis – is to extend the limits of our imagination and circumvent the utopian urge by presenting an imaginary horizon for *jouissance*. In this case, under Jameson's conception, a utopian position could not become a new horizon for the Left but, rather, an urge which initiates a number of possibilities. In this regard, Jameson suggests that

this clearly does not mean that even if we succeed in reviving utopia itself, the outlines of a new and effective practical politics for the era of globalisation will at once become visible but only that we will never come to one without it. (Jameson, 2004: 36)

If this is the question that Jameson poses – and he considers this dilemma throughout his work – we need to consider Žižek's response to the epistemological dilemmas of negative

ontology. In doing so, we perhaps need to go beyond Žižek's work so as to suggest that his Hegelian reading of universality enables more to be said about the impossible Real than he allows himself to do. That is, if Jameson suggests that the limits to our imagination cannot be signified but only experienced as a momentary effect, I have suggested throughout this thesis that the impossible can be represented because what is unrepresentable in one discursive universe is not in another. Indeed, this point is at the heart of the argumentation around political strategy. To reiterate, an element which remains unsymbolisable within a discourse, and can thus be considered an embodiment of the Real, does not necessarily produce the same anxiety in an alternative discourse and thus is not unsymbolisable in itself. This process has been understood through Žižek's conception of universality, whereby the function of an imaginary horizon is only cohered at the expense of an exceptional exclusion. This exclusion cannot be symbolised within that imaginary discourse and as such a strong tension threatens to dislocate this horizon. Viewed awry, however, this exceptional point comes into view. Such an identification offers the possibility of mobilising the tension between the abstract and concrete mode of universality, such that the hegemonic imaginary understanding becomes dislocated and new forms of political practice become possible.

As an illustration, a point of exceptionality might be experienced as a point of incommensurability within dominant readings of global capital but can be a strong element of a Marxist discourse. In this case, whilst a utopian demand inherent in surplus labour might be experienced as impossible within capital, an alternative understanding of capital – such as that constructed in this discourse – is able to identify this point as the universal exception holding together capital.

Thus, Žižek is able to identify this utopian impossibility because it is not an abstract or ideal formulation but, rather, a reaction to existing conditions. That is, he is only able to take this position because the antagonism is not a particular one that can be integrated within capitalism but, rather, speaks to the universality of the system. In regards to Jameson's concerns around the possible subversion of utopian energy caused by the naming of this point, the communist hypothesis does not suggest a 'filling' out of the utopian space but, rather, signifies that point which cannot be filled out. In this sense, through the impossibility of including surplus labour, the communist hypothesis does open up a new horizon for the Left

but not one that will please many of Žižek's critics – it does not produce a new point of imaginary identification but, instead, opens up new space for these identifications to be formed. Here, in a manner which links together with Badiou's sense of this hypothesis and that begins to display a normative aspect to Žižek's work, it is worth considering the link between universality and politics, a link Žižek reports to be the dream of the young Marx: “to bring together the universality of philosophy with the universality of the proletariat” (2009b: 54-55).

For Žižek, universality and democracy are intimately intertwined, albeit with a characteristic twist. The category of the excluded stands for universality precisely because of those who are the ‘part with no part’, the element whose exclusion constitutes the order. That is, the capitalist empire – both as an ideological system and symbolic/Real logic – must produce an exclusion in order to constitute itself as a set. That exclusion of the unruly masses with no official place in the private capitalist order is what makes the totality of capital universal. The universal is not the failed attempt of any given set to constitute itself but, rather, the set and its failure constitute the domain of universality. Žižek links this form of universality to what he deems to be a Grecian sense of democracy to signify the intrusion of the excluded into the socio-political space. Here, Žižek subverts the dualism between ‘true’ democracy and the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ by contrasting ancient Greek democracy with Western-style liberal democracy.

Liberal democracy seeks to include but only those who are already symbolised within the current order. That is, liberal democracy is already formed on the basis of the exclusion of class struggle, the main instantiation of which is the masses of urban slums that act as the reserve army of labour for capitalism. Moreover, democracy is not contingent in itself but, rather, requires the dictatorship of the democratic institution. By contrast, the Grecian form of democracy is based upon the inclusion the group(s) excluded from society – the part with no part in the established order or the *demos* – into the polis. Such a move cannot be established by the *demos* themselves but, rather, must come from an internal rupture of ideological coherence within that order. Thus ‘communist’ democracy is universal in the sense that it includes that which is outside of itself, yet necessary for its own constitution (Žižek, 2008a: 412-415). Nonetheless, this form of democracy is not a permanent state.

Rather, it is more like the transitional dialectic of Lacanian ethics, whereby the established order is disabled for a moment and wherein history lies open.

The obvious question here is the content of this future: Does Žižek's work suggest any preferred form of the future? More particularly, given the reference to Marxism that has run throughout this thesis and Žižek's work, does the commitment to communist hypothesis restore any sense of prescriptive Marxism? Žižek is certainly unwilling to enter into debate over institutional forms of politics. Nonetheless, a prescriptive element does exist, both in the sense of identifying a *correct* political response to capitalism and an assumption as to the kind of outcome that would make this response the right one. Moreover, this approach is a specifically Marxist form of politics – here prescription relates not to the shape of what will follow but of how we are to get there.

By utilising class struggle, materialism, the plight of the proletariat, and the communist hypothesis, this thesis has documented a form of Marxist politics today, one that takes explanation and ontology as a form of politics in itself. That is, in this thesis, having rejected both essentialist and discursive variants of Marxism, I have come to argue that psychoanalysis can inform the practice of Marxist politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through a theory of enjoyment and ideology that continues to emphasize the causal role of class struggle and the economy. This form of politics is not without normative commitment but the primary focus is not upon transposing this position into an alternative form of society. Instead it considers how space for potential new societies might be kept open. Such an approach stems not from a transcendental vision of politics but, rather, the structure of the political in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As such, Žižek's work is not an empty treatise on political strategy but, instead, is dedicated to moving beyond capitalism. From this, we can only assume that Žižek takes there to be something fundamentally abhorrent about capital. Yet, his reference to democracy does not signal his preferred form of the future. Rather, the previous reference to democracy as a form of intrusion of the part-with-no-part signals the content of this statement: democracy is a momentary experience. Tellingly, Žižek states:



The problem is thus: how to regulate/institutionalize the very violent egalitarian democratic impulse, how to prevent it from being drowned in democracy in the second sense of the term (regulated procedure)? If there is no way to do it, the “authentic” democracy remains a momentary *utopian* outburst which, the proverbial morning after, has to be normalized. (ibid.: 417, emphasis added)

The communist hypothesis does, however, signal an underlying commitment in both Žižek’s work and this thesis in particular. This commitment forms the basis of the ‘communist’ hypothesis rather than any reference to democracy as the driver of the future. Žižek justifies the use of communism as the named signifier of the transition from capitalism to the future by reference to the surplus labour within capitalism itself. This identifies not only a belief that those extimately excluded within capitalism who do not enjoy the benefits of this system but, also, that this is a problem in itself. That is, by utilising communism and surplus labour as the primary reference point to the end of capitalism, Žižek is signaling more than just a strategic intent to move beyond capitalism. He is implicitly suggesting an ethical commitment to egalitarian justice to which there is no requirement for further justification<sup>102</sup>. Inherent in this is a minimal demand, most beautifully articulated by Adorno in his *Mimma Moralia* (1974: 155): “There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand; that no one should go hungry any more”.

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<sup>102</sup> Indeed, in the final page of *In Defence of Lost Causes* (2008a: 461), Žižek trumpets the idea of ‘strict egalitarian justice’ as one of the four elements that would prevent ecological catastrophe.



## 9. Conclusion

Adorno's demand for the end of hunger defines the ultimate purpose of this text. My final position, however, as laid out in the previous chapter, has established some distance from this initial concern. The argumentation has moved from the limitations of confronting hunger within capitalism, to the plight of Marxism, before turning to the application of psychoanalysis to politics, and finally, to producing a Žižekian response to the problematic. This response is not straightforward in the sense of establishing a direct argument between the final premise and the initial concern: it is not a matter of re-establishing trade justice or even considering a new form of economy but, rather, a theoretical consideration. For this reason, along with summarising the journey I have taken through this thesis, the final task to be undertaken in this conclusion is to consider the consequences of responding to global capitalism – and subsequently the plight of the global poor – in the Žižekian manner constructed in this thesis.

Perhaps the most salient task of my argument has been to signal the value of Žižek's work today. His theory is often the subject of stern critique – as has been documented throughout – on the basis that whilst it makes for intriguing theory it does not suggest a feasible form of politics. Thus far I have attempted to reveal the potential for a Žižekian response, the origins of which cannot be established *a priori* but, rather, is a reaction to our historical conditioning within global capitalism.

It is these historical conditions that formed the basis of this thesis. The problem to which I have responded is the identification of a moral unease with the simultaneous gross underdevelopment of populations of the world, combined with a practical anxiety that the scale of economic activity on the planet is degrading the environment to a point that not only threatens the status of human life on Earth but also places a very real limitation on the possibility of reducing global material deprivation. Moreover, through a critique of liberal capitalism, exemplified by the work of economist Jeffery Sachs, I suggested that these problems – those of environmental degradation and global poverty – could not be meaningfully resolved within capitalism but were indeed caused, or at least maintained, by

global capitalism. As such, concern at the plight of the world's poor has been transferred to a rejection of capitalism – if the initial, abstract, concern has been with the poor themselves, my analysis has suggested that these subjugated populations can be considered as surplus labour, a concrete element of global capitalism – the status of the hungry today cannot be considered outside of capital, such that a response to hunger must also be a response to capitalism.

I have insisted that capital is a system that requires a continual revolutionising of its own conditions to produce future growth. Although increases in efficiency resulting from improved technology, or a willingness to tackle the effects of consumption upon the environment are of benefit, they are an inadequate response to the continued growth of the world economy. Indeed, as this growth is compounded by the large predicted increases in the global population, it is clear that the size of planetary economic activity is going to rise well above the carrying capacity of the planet. What is required, it appears, is a wide-scale reduction in consumption, particularly from those consuming the most. As noted, calls for a reduction in consumption in the 'post-industrial' economy are a strong element of the mainstream Green movement. What this position elides, however, is that such reductions in consumption will necessarily result in a fall in employment for those most in need: the Third or developing world (under capitalism at least). For this reason, I have argued that a widespread lifting of material standards of living for the poorest citizens of the planet was not environmentally possible – within the current mode of production.

If this concern is of a practical, historical nature – a limit only being reached now – a second factor preventing the emancipation of the world's poor within capital has an ahistorical structure. For the capitalist wage-labour system to operate – the system in which the owners of capital employ the labour power of those without the means of production – an excess of workers must exist in order to coerce workers to sell their bodies for this labour. As has been seen in previous historical examples – the colonisation of Australia, for example, in which the ready availability of land produced difficulties in the establishment of a labour force during the early years of settlement (Pappe, 1951: 90, Marx, 2007: 839-840) – without the compulsion to work for the profit of others, the wage-labour system does not function

efficiently. What provides this compulsion is an excess of supply of workers such that a worker who refuses to accept work at market prices is easily replaced by another.

To some degree, this operation is subverted by the existence of minimum-wage and welfare laws in Western nations, so that not only do wage prices not drop to the market price determined by supply but the unemployed are afforded some protection. The displacement of large elements of production – whether in manufacturing ‘sweatshops’ or cash-crop farms – to the developing world, often attracted by the absence of these conditions and the massive surplus of labour, produces a different result. Not only do wage prices often fall to subsistence levels but those in the position of excess to the labour force suffer extreme material deprivation. The necessary consequence of the capitalist wage-system which produces Western wealth and an increasing culture of consumption is the death of those ‘extimately’ placed within the system.

This tragedy is not a contingent aberration – it is not a matter of extending Western protections (many of which were demanded in *The Communist Manifesto*) to the developing world – but is rather caused by a structural oversupply of workers caused in large part by the massive development of urban slums in the developing world over the past half century. Moreover, it is also caused by the structural requirement within capital for only a minority to own the means of production. I have suggested that surplus labour is extimately located within global capitalism in the sense that it is necessary for the functioning of capitalism yet not ideologically included with capital. That is, for the apologists of capital and the official ‘measurers’ of the system – whether the United Nations, IMF or the World Bank – the global poor are outside of capitalism. My analysis has suggested, however, that this exclusion is vital for the functioning of capital.

As a result of both this structural limitation and the former practical restriction, global capitalism is not able to establish an egalitarian justice that applies equally to all humanity. It is able to produce unprecedented levels of wealth for a minority of the population, a level of wealth that corresponds to previously impossible life-expectancies and a potential for freedom from material need. That said, it is constitutively unable to extend these privileges across the globe. Capitalism may not actively create (absolute) poverty in the majority of

cases but it does maintain it. For this reason, assuming this status to be inherently unacceptable, the problem of establishing these conditions (of egalitarian justice) forms the basis of this thesis: how to produce a form of economy in which a reasonable degree of equality and opportunity is available for all populations across the planet, in a modality which is fundamentally sustainable for the environment of our planet.

## **The Theoretical Problematic**

In responding to this problematic, I have had cause to move away from any of the practicalities which come from a consideration of the mode of production. This thesis argues that, today, what is required is a return to politics and theory, a return to history and a fundamental questioning of the horizon of global capitalism. This call does not arise abstractly but, rather, from the situation in which we find ourselves. We do not require theory simply for the sake of theory<sup>103</sup> but, instead, because our current conceptions of the material contradictions facing humanity are inadequate. We simply have no way of responding within the current horizon.

In the turn to theory, I had cause to consider Marxism as the primary historical alternative to capitalism and a discourse with a specific appeal to the globally dispossessed. Although other models of the economy exist, both within and outside capitalism and socialist-communist modes (see Wall, 2005, Barratt Brown, 1984), none have achieved anything like the hegemony of Marxism, or indeed, capitalism. The history of the application of Marxist theory to actually existing economies, however, has not proved any less destructive to the environment and in many cases to the poorest citizens. Indeed, socialist and communist economies have often been even more environmentally destructive, although this is not necessarily so: unlike capitalism and 'the market' there is no structural requirement within most forms of socialist or communist economics for continual expansion. Moreover, the excesses of totalitarian politics have meant that, as a reference point, Marxism has not provided any more hope for the globally subjugated. Finally, the widespread collapse of

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<sup>103</sup> Although, as Ernesto Laclau argues, a fundamental questioning of the foundations of society is the site of political freedom. Certainly theory has a value in and of itself but that is not the specific scope of this project.

actually-existing socialist states at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century revealed a range of structural failings in their construction. These limitations had been previously identified in a number of philosophical movements which sought to reconsider Marxist theory in light of the continued functioning of global capitalism and the struggles of the socialist-communist state.

As such, in turning to Marxist theory, it is these philosophical difficulties that have formed the basis of my argumentation in this thesis. Considering Marxist discourse to be the potentially most effective resource for responding to the deadlock created by global capitalism, I have suggested that Marxism became associated with the rejection of grand narratives, essentialism and determinism which came with the discursive turn and postmodernity in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The turn to culture and language largely occurred as an attempt to explain the failings of Marxism but has largely come to reject the discourse altogether. These forms of discourse remained focused primarily upon the role of culture and ideology rather than upon materialism, class struggle and the economy. If traditional forms of Marxism had placed too much emphasis upon the historical unfolding of the economy and the destiny of the proletariat, then the new forms of cultural or discursive Marxism appeared entirely impotent in response to the challenges posed by global capitalism.

Therefore, the question of how to respond to the problematic posed by surplus labour and capitalism became a question about the restoration of the political efficacy of Marxist theory. In response to this breakdown of Marxism as both a descriptive and prescriptive device, I turned to psychoanalytic theory and to the work of Žižek as a return to materialism and the economy. This turn has provided the question to which this thesis has been a reply: in what manner can Žižekian theory be used to respond to the material symptoms of global capitalism?

As such, my thesis stands not only as a reaction to global poverty, and by analytic extension, capital but also to Žižek's work. Here, I located Žižek as working within the Marxist problematic, although his primary reference is to Lacanian psychoanalysis. Although psychoanalysis has often been combined with Marxism, Žižek's Lacanian reading of Marxism is strongly critical of the historical materialism which has dominated traditional Marxist politics, as well as the cultural forms of 'post-Marxism' which have followed. In

order to respond to this critique, I turned to the ethics of psychoanalysis and in particular, Lacan.

The ethics that Lacan identified as being at the core of his psychoanalytic discourse suggested, following Freud, that attempts to find a transcendental form of the Good led only to the guilt of the super-ego – a guilt that Lacan branded a form of *jouissance*. Regarding the Good as ultimately pathological, Lacan established his ethics as a response to the guilt provided by the super-ego. Instead, his ethics postulated a renewed relationship to the *jouissance* that remained possible within the symbolic order. This relationship, however, was not a permanent state but, rather, a transitory dialectic which moved the subject out of a deadlock and into new forms of *jouissance*.

Whilst these ethics provided an intriguing reading of the prospects of the Good and of shared social life, they proved to be incommensurate with the production of an imaginary notion of shared community which would match that suggested by Marxist communism. Through a critique of Stavrakakis and Laclau, I have suggested that the Lacanian dialectic cannot be institutionalised but, rather, that it offers an insight into the political that was best exemplified in the works of Žižek. Although I have rejected the postulation that there exists a singular form of ‘Žižekian’ politics, I advanced a reading of Žižek which suggests that his work provides a strategic form of politics based upon an alignment with the dislocating possibilities of the Real.

Moreover, I came to identify Žižek’s construction of the ontology of the economy as at the core of his political work. Here, capital and class struggle could be productively interpreted as articulations of the Real, such that – in relation to capital-as-the-Real – the strength of capital means that no alternative is currently possible: capital has hegemonised the place of hegemony. Class struggle as a modality of the Real causes every instantiation of the economy to be based around the impossibility of class struggle – that there is no class relationship. This identification, however, brought me no closer to an alternative form of political practice, despite the efforts expended in this vein by Madra and Özsencuk, as well as by Hardt and Negri.



Instead of this alternative, I have suggested that a number of strategic positions emerge from Žižek's work, each of which are an interpretation of the dialectics of Lacanian ethics and as such are response to *jouissance* and ideological fantasy. These strategies produce a potentially different analysis of capitalism and, in particular, of surplus labour. Here I considered the act and subtractive politics, as well as the practice of concrete universality. Finding the first two strategies to have a limited appeal, given the circumstances in which they are to be applied, I turned to the practice of concrete universality as the most effective strategic interpretation of Žižek's work in relation to the problematic of global poverty.

By practicing concrete universality and forcing a (discursive) intrusion of an exceptional element into the field of ideology that shields politics from the existence of that universal, I am suggesting that capitalism could potentially be dislocated in such a manner that a space would open for new forms of political practice. Specifically, I recognised a recent development within Žižek's work – the identification with a communist hypothesis – as a guide to the shape of the future. This hypothesis does not suggest a particular discursive content for such a movement but, rather, holds the place of a utopian demand. This demand is not for a perfect society but, instead, for a recognition as to the current impossibility of imagining such a society. In this regard, the communist hypothesis acts as an extension of the strategic positioning constructed in Chapter Seven – an attempt to thrust the exclusion of surplus labour to the ideological surface of capital.

The question that has been largely foreclosed from this analysis thus far has been of the value judgements inherent in Žižek's work and this thesis. If I began with an assumption of egalitarian justice then the remainder of the argument in this thesis has tended towards the rejection of normative positions, in particular those based upon the transcendentalism of a moral signifier. Moreover, as well as the inherent commitment to the hungry of this world, as held in Adorno's emblematic quote which ended the penultimate chapter, I have hinted that Žižek's location of the communist hypothesis as *the* form of politics today suggests a normative positioning which is yet to be addressed. It is to this point that I shall now turn.

## The Consequences of Žižekian Politics Today

The horizon opened up by the communist hypothesis allows for a new identification – with the impossibility and injustice of the capitalist system – and a new direction for embodied political ambitions (but without a programmatic political statement). Not only is such an approach incompatible with the politics of utopia, it is too much to expect from Žižek's work. Žižek is not the master but, rather, a philosopher who has been able to open up a new direction for political thought.

Nonetheless, we must carefully consider the consequences of practicing this form of politics. Our age is not without proposals for responding to the symptoms of capitalism. There are a number of administrative approaches to poverty and environmental change that will potentially reduce the suffering of human populations in a very tangible manner. Programmes such as micro-finance for women in the Third world should be celebrated for the very real benefits they bring. Nonetheless, one of the primary assertions of this argument is that these movements will never be enough to relieve the suffering of all, or even the majority. It is not that we should dismiss or discourage these moves but that we must be weary of their fantasmatic effects.

Yet, if I have posited a position that is too optimistic, inferring that change will arise through the correct application of strategic theory, then this has not been my intention. Circumstances are dire and our paths forward will be difficult. There are some very real restrictions upon any movement for radical change. We cannot simply overthrow governments in this current state as their power – whether military, monetary or ideological – is such that this kind of move would be instantly crushed. Rather, this time is cause for a different kind of politics, a shifting of the ideological terrain by means of reconsidering the disavowed foundations upon which that power is based, such that overthrowing governments in the name of an egalitarian justice appears to be the only thing to do. It is only by confronting these unbearable foundations that a new imaginary energy will come into being, one that will push history beyond capitalism.

Thus, whilst we might admire the pragmatism of the likes of Jeffery Sachs, or the moral imperative at the heart of Peter Singer's demands for justice, the circumstances of our time mean they are ultimately ineffective if, however, easy, solutions. If the Žižekian path outlined in this thesis appears to be a ridiculous risk – to demand a shift from a global society in which a part of that society is experiencing unparalleled wealth, life-expectancies and freedom from direct want, to an undistinguished beyond identified only by its current impossibility – then this risk can only be justified by reference to the miserable plight of those who have no stake in the order, yet remain as its foundations. For this surplus of humanity, such a demand is not a risk but, rather, their only hope.

Conversely, if I have illustrated the need to move beyond capitalism, an equally demanding alternative exists from those who are willing to assert an ideological opposition to capital. Indeed, both these positions illustrate a utopian demand. I have also been careful to illustrate, however, that these ideological demands cannot successfully rearticulate the path of the future, such is the power of capitalism. This does not mean, however, that they will not occur. Indeed, the very notion of *communism* in the communist hypothesis is far from innocent, carrying with it the weight of a largely ghastly ideological history. Any form of politics which seeks to engage with this signifier will face battles on both sides: an administrative dismissal of communism as a failed and dangerously utopian ideology and attempts to fill the signifier with ideological meaning in the name of *jouissance*.

Furthermore, the power of capital is such that it is likely to continue for some time, despite our interventions. The shape of capital and its symptoms will morph and our responses must change as well. As urban slum populations increase and economic growth continues to pressure the climate, it is likely that these symptoms, and the consequences of the capitalist mode of production, will become more apparent. Most particularly, it is likely that these symptoms will themselves become intrusions as climate change comes to the fore – increasing struggles over scarce resources – and the geographical distance between 'the haves' and the 'have-nots' lessens. This shift will occur not only through the spreading of slums – or the development of slums on the edge of previous wealthy cities – but through the

increasingly prevalent trend toward illegal migration into the West<sup>104</sup>. The strategic challenge moving forward is to avoid a reactionary hegemony, in which open power conflicts over resources and the dehumanisation of refugees and migrants becomes the norm. Rather, we must insist upon the contradiction between the consequences of capital and any remaining moral sense of ourselves. It is perhaps at this point that my wager that humans are ‘Good’ animals will be put to the test.

Nonetheless, at this time in history, in which capitalism reigns darkly supreme yet is plagued both by its own non-existence and the tormenting presence of symptoms which prove its existence, Žižek’s form of negative ontological politics is *the* kind of approach which provides the most hope for the kind of radical change which would drastically improve the material circumstances of the hungry by giving them a presence beyond their mere biological being.

## Future Possibilities

If this thesis began with an explicit Marxism posturing, this reference has been increasing marginalised in favour of debate over the role and possibilities of psychoanalytic politics. Yet, the value of Marxism as an intellectual and political resource should not be doubted and it is in this manner that Marxism ultimately informs Žižek’s work and the argument developed in this thesis. I believe that this is the most productive articulation of Marxist politics today – not as an explicit ideological position but, rather, as part of a renewed political practice which insists upon the excluded presence of the traumatic foundations of capitalism. Whilst the content of this political practice is distinctly Marxist – referring as it does to conceptions of class struggle, of exploitation and of communism – the form of its practice is dominated by a Lacanianism which over-rides the traditional expression of these concepts. Whilst I have discussed this difficulty throughout the thesis, it is worth noting here that this is not the final word on Marxist politics. Although I have suggested here that the most productive form of politics in response to capitalism is informed more by psychoanalysis than Marxism –

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<sup>104</sup> It is this topic which will form the basis of my future work.

without dismissing the restrictions on Marxist political practice after the signifier – it is quite possible that a future beyond capitalism will bring greater reference to the Marxist tradition.

On the other hand, neither should the lessons learnt in understanding of the negative ontological structuring role of language be dismissed: these are not limitations of capital but, rather, the ahistorical conditions of possibility for shared social life. Nonetheless, politics based upon a negative ontology, such as Žižek's, do appear to have a limited functionality, operating as a form of political intervention rather than suggesting any institutional content. These forms do speak to that institutional content but whether an ethics of negativity can become the basis for community, and indeed the material reproduction of that community, remains an open question. What I have suggested in this thesis is that these forms of politics are essentially political and, through Žižek's reading of the politics of the political, can form the basis for radical movements. Conversely, the conditions of capital are such that there is no possibility for these alternative forms to gain the kind of traction which would allow any autonomous expression.

Rather, more than ever today we are provided with an opportunity to practice an active politics of the negative that operates through the deliberate exposure of the disavowed foundations of our order. These foundations offer the prospect of a dynamic and unsustainable disturbance in the prevailing socio-political order through the forced and embodied acknowledgement of the excluded as the foundations of our mode of being. To practice concrete universality is thus to cross the mode of fantasy that coheres the imaginary horizons of our civilisation, leaving ideology with no defence against that which must become unpalatable – if we have any sense of ourselves as a species of 'good animals'. This is Žižek's 'utopian impossibility'; the practice of concrete universality such that we (as a people) are forced to imagine a new mode of being. This is utopia.

We must remember, however, that this political intervention remains academic. Not only is this thesis confined to the discourse of the university but the kind of political intervention which I have discussed relates to the advancement of ideas, which, while a mode of political practice in themselves, are unlikely to resonate with the public as they are currently articulated. Instead, any movement which has the potential to evoke and carry through

widespread change must engage with popular ideology, whether through ever evolving forms of media or on the streets. Nonetheless, whilst there are limitations to the political reach of academic work, this work can and does play a vital role in informing various modes of political practice. Whilst the application of the strategies abstracted in this thesis would no doubt be rougher and more concrete, the identification of these approaches suggests a beginning to these processes.

Thus Žižek's answer to Thomas Brockelmann's (1996: 205) question "What, after all does it mean to be 'against' capitalism if that suggests nothing about what one would change in it or substitute for it?", or to Laclau's almost hysterical demands for Žižek to reveal his alternative form of economy or radical imaginary (Laclau, 2000a: 206), is not the production of an alternative horizon. It is, instead, to identify the exceptional and symptomatic points upon which ideological formations rest. Moreover, Žižek does not only seek to identify such points but, as I have discussed in Chapter Seven in relation to political strategy, to consider how the Real gap between ideology and its exception can be exposed.

Thus, in terms of the shape of the future, in this thesis I have not come to any conclusion except to state that if we are to have any true sense of egalitarian justice and global sustainability a new future is required. Moreover, following Žižek I have come to suggest that that the most effective strategy to open up space to forge this future is by practicing the intrusion of the concrete universality, a utopian practice which relies upon the communist demand of surplus labour. As such, Žižek's work is certainly not conservative, nor without a political basis.

But what form will the future hold? There can be no guarantee but politics will continue. Thus, as Buchanan (1998) notes, the practice of generating a new world is a utopian urge. There is, however, nothing utopian about the resulting society, which will be, like any other instantiation of human community, profoundly complicated. Utopia – in the sense of the fullness of being and the arrival of *jouissance* – will not occur. Instead, the future may well take the shape of one of the approaches critiqued in this text, a version of Laclau's radical democracy or of the communicative cooperation of the multitude but Žižek provides no suggestion as to what that might be. This is not to suggest that we are resigned to a masculine

sense of ideology and enjoyment, whereby the ontological negativity inherent to social life is disavowed in favour of the powerful positive alternative. This thesis has spoken primarily to the conditioned possibility of radical action under the reign of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism. I have come to suggest that an alternative sense of *jouissance* is not readily available and Lacan's dialectical ethics are not compatible with institutional forms. This does not rule out other forms coming to the fore. The consideration of these possibilities, however, are beyond the scope of this text and more pertinently, beyond our current political horizon. Instead, what is required is that at this time in the history of humanity, when the morbid deadlock caused by global capitalism is becoming increasingly apparent, is the utopian practice of Žižekian psychoanalysis. The rest shall be history.

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