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Practicing Concrete Universality;
Psychoanalysis as a Political Method

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Abstract

Lacanian psychoanalysis, embodied in contemporary thought by Slavoj Žižek's dialectical materialist rehabilitation of universality, enables a form of political analysis based on the possibility of structural change. Many political theorists argue that because psychoanalysis stresses the negative ontological base of the social (the Real) it is fundamentally conservative and nihilistic. Conversely, the very political value of psychoanalysis lies in its accent on the Real. However, there are two separate psychoanalytic perspectives on the Real. The idealist approach, which contends that every social construction is essentially conditional, is politically and theoretically limited. In contrast, Žižek's materialist perspective emphasises the fundamental fixity which lies in the necessary exclusion from a universal horizon. Thus, the main political insight of Lacanian psychoanalysis is not to reveal the contingency of the social, but rather the disavowed foundation on which these constructions are based; the concrete universal. This thesis argues for a Žižek-inspired psychoanalytic approach to the political which 'practices concrete universality'. Conversely, while Žižek himself considers his own theoretical endeavours as an application of this task, his work can appear to be at times abstract and obscure, such that the reader is not sure exactly what it is that Žižek is arguing. As such, this thesis seeks to develop a methodological position that practices concrete universality, taking on the fundamental insights of Žižek's position whilst grounding them in a methodology which can be applied for political intervention. The methodology analyses both the manner in which universal imaginaries domesticate the effect of the symptom (that which represents the concrete universal) and the possibilities for practicing concrete universality and in doing so evoking radical structural change. These possibilities are considered against global capital, which Žižek describes as a modality of the Real. Capital has produced a paradoxical and pressing condition in humanity is living both well beyond and beneath its material needs and the finite capacity of the planet to provide for those needs. Rather than seeking an impossible utopian revolution (the removal of all lack), by evoking the concrete universal it is hoped that humanity can rid itself of that lack which is historical contingent; global capital.

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Introduction: Psychoanalysis and the Political

Lacanian psychoanalysis has a tense relationship with political philosophy. The Lacanian world of desire, fantasy, *jouissance*, and the Real¹ can appear quite divorced from contemporary politics. Indeed, Jacques Lacan himself was skeptical about the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics. This unease continues amongst contemporary readers of Lacan. Many regard Lacanian philosophy to be inherently conservative and nihilistic, based as it is on a fundamental lack which constitutes the impossibility of society and thus utopian politics. This impossibility has led some theorists, such as Elizabeth Bellamy, to suggest that psychoanalysis and politics do not mix (Bellamy, 1993). The central criticism appears to be that psychoanalysis relies upon ontological assumptions more than political theory (Robinson, 2004, p.259). Herein lies the fundamental misconception about Lacanian psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is political because it *is* ontological – psychoanalysis examines the manner in which inherently contingent social constructions are fixed. More than that though, psychoanalysis also exposes that which is not contingent in social constructions: the disavowed exclusions upon which social constructions are founded. Therefore, for both of these reasons, any use of psychoanalysis for social analysis is inherently political.

Centrality of the Lacanian Negative Ontology

Lacanian ontology positions ‘lack’ as the central element of the human condition, the notion of lack being at the root of psychoanalysis’s inescapably political implications. Lack is produced when the subject is ‘castrated’ upon entry into the symbolic order, that is, separated from themselves. Castration occurs because language creates a mediating barrier between the subject and the world of things. Any attempt at symbolisation creates a gap between the language used in that symbolisation and the object to which language

¹ Throughout this thesis the Lacanian term ‘Real’ shall be capitalised to distinguish it from the everyday conception of the term

refers. Lacan called this gap the Real. The Real is not only lack, it is also excess. The Real exists as excess because of the manner in which castration, the source of lack, is itself repressed. As a consequence of that repression, the subject is caught in a condition of seeking to regain the absent, but impossible fullness, which existed for them before entering language, 'before the letter'. Lacan called this state *Jouissance*. Like the Real, *Jouissance* is also a paradoxical substance. It results from an attempt to return to a state that is without lack. Because of the impossibility of that condition, a second-order modality of enjoyment becomes available for the subject, *jouissance*.

This alternative experience of *jouissance* emerges as a substitute for the impossibility of achieving pure *Jouissance*. As a consequence, *jouissance* becomes a troubling kind of pleasure; it represents both the possibility and impossibility of returning to the Real. This paradoxical state is maintained by the presentation to the subject of various objects that can operate as substitutes for the primal lack, known by Lacan as *objet a* or the empty signifier. In an alternative mode, rather than being presented as objects that can suture lack, a range of objects emerge that come to be postulated as being responsible for thwarting the subject's quest to achieve a condition that is without lack, as such they are posited as causing the negativity that is inherent in the social. These objects are antagonisms and symptoms, which, despite their presentation within the social as elements that are to be eliminated, are actually sites of enjoyment. We enjoy blaming the Other for our failures to achieve the fullness we sense we have lost.

Lacan established his system of thought, following Sigmund Freud, primarily for application in the clinical field. However, through the work of Slavoj Žižek in particular, but also Ernesto Laclau and Yannis Stavrakakis, Lacanian theory has become a vastly productive tool for analysis of socio-political formations. Its primary incursion into political theory is to recast the fundamental dualism of politics – the relation between individuals and social formations, between the subject and the object – as a false problem (Osborne, 1996, pp.32-33). Psychoanalytic political theory does not, therefore, begin with the question of how the social is able to incorporate individuality, treating the social as a patient who might, for example, be suffering from collective neurosis. Rather the two –

the individual and the social, the subject and object – are inseparable; the subject operates only through taking on the discourses of the social. As such, the lack that is inherent to the subject is also a constitutive feature of the social, which Lacan termed ‘the big Other’. Conversely, Lacan twisted this phrase to create the maxim ‘the Big Other doesn’t exist’. By this Lacan meant that the social/symbolic order is never complete, it is always characterised by a lack and is therefore inconsistent. In terms of political analysis, the lack in the social is the primary site of interest for Lacanian study. The operation of fantasy and *jouissance* is such that the lack in the Other cannot be revealed. It is only through subjects’ attempts to suture this lack that the social maintains its stability.

Objections to the politics of the negative ontology

A number of theorists, even those working within the Lacanian field, doubt the relevance or desirability of a translation of Lacanian ontology into a grounded political practice. Their doubt centres around the possibility of any benefits that can be developed from psychoanalysis’s emphasis on the social’s negative ontological base, that is, lack. Many commentators, such as Sean Homer, Elizabeth Bellamy, Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey, consider Lacanian theory – particularly that embodied by Žižek, the most influential contemporary Lacanian theorist – to be essentially conservative, pessimistic and ineffective. Essentially, they argue that because the Lacanian negative ontological stance reveals the impossibility of fullness and thereby subverts the possibility of the ideal society, Lacanians have given up on the prospect of improving social life. Indeed, Tormey and Robinson contend (in relation to Žižek’s adherence to a negative ontological position) “(T)his sums up what is wrong with Žižek’s position: for all his radical posturing, he restores the same kind of oppressive logic which operates in the present system” (Robinson & Tormey, 2003, p.15). Similarly, in observing that “Lacanians urge that one reconcile oneself to the inevitability of lack”, Robinson argues that “Lacanian politics is therefore about coming to terms with violence, exclusion and antagonism, not about resolving or removing these” (Robinson, 2004, p.260).

Furthermore, Homer contends that although psychoanalysis has a critical role within the

polito-ideological field, through revealing the contingency of symbolic constructions, this role itself is not a productive factor influence on progressive politics. Instead, Homer argues that the seductive force that is at work within the ideological positions which battle to suture the lack in the social, constitutes the realm of politics proper. Thus, any political movement that does not postulate an ideological position is doomed to impotence. Therefore, if Lacanian theory is to be influential in its interaction with politics, psychoanalysis has to develop an ideological position. Because the development of such an ideology is, however, beyond the realms of psychoanalytic theory, Homer reasons that psychoanalysis has no direct role in politics, only in a “critical dialogue with political and social theory” (Homer, 1996, p.109).

The Role of Psychoanalysis in the Political

These criticisms of the role of psychoanalysis in politics are in many ways reasonable. Because of its orientation around a negative ontological orientation, psychoanalysis has no role in the direct production of a positive imaginary, that is, in politics per se. On the other hand, this limitation is precisely the factor which makes psychoanalysis inescapably *political*. Because, as Lacan reveals, all reality is a social construction and social constructions are essentially contingent, any partial fixation of meaning that occurs is political in nature. Through its critical analysis of the social, which variously reveals the stabilising influences, the limit points, and the symptoms of the social, Lacanian theory is inherently political and is thus capable of direct interventions into politics. These interventions do not seek, however, to present positive ideological positions, such as liberalism, socialism, feminism, and so on. Rather, they identify the elements whose exclusion is required in order for an ideological formation to be secured, to expose the reliance of those formations upon foundations that they must disavow.

This thesis supports the use of psychoanalysis as a discipline of the political. The goal of this thesis is to help establish the role of psychoanalysis in relation to the political and to develop this approach into a methodological position to be applied in the name of radical structural change. Žižek’s development of psychoanalysis as a theoretical and political tool, upon which this thesis builds, follows a rehabilitated notion of universality and a

Hegelian/Lacanian take on dialectical materialism. Additionally, Žižek, in a Marxist manner, positions the economy at the centre of political analysis. Through the integration of these elements, Žižek produces what he labels a ‘short-circuit’ analysis. A short-circuit examination occurs when the analyst attempts to reveal the limit points of an ideological discourse, that is, to disclose those elements upon whose exclusion an ideology relies, that are not readily evident within the existing terms of that ideology. It is only through the dialectical notion of totality that such an analysis is possible; to see two sides of the same object.

Dialectical Materialism and Universality

Of the Lacanian psychoanalysts, it is Žižek who has developed the notion of dialectical materialism furthest. He does so through his concept of the ‘parallax view’ (Žižek, 2006a). The parallax view combines the issues of universality, dialectics and the materialism of *jouissance*. Žižek argues that there are several different modalities of the parallax, but the two most appropriate to this thesis are the ‘political parallax’ and the parallax of ‘ontological difference’. A parallax – that is, an optical illusion – occurs between two perspectives of an object that appear in the same frame but which have no common ground between them. An example of this might be liberal and socialist politicians together musing on the relation between social and individual rights. In a political parallax, these discourses are not structurally hierarchical; rather they are structured around a fundamental antagonism which prevents a translation between the terms. While political parallaxes will be investigated throughout the thesis, the parallax of ontological difference is the central parallax that informs the methodology being developed here.

The ‘ontological parallax’ best reflects Žižek’s thinking on universality. The notion of parallax, in dialectical fashion, splits the idea of totality into an abstract and a concrete form (producing an *abstract* universal and a *concrete* universal). The abstract universal provides hegemonic imaginary horizons that people use to guide their actions – e.g. individual freedom or 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*. As an 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. What is important is the structural form that allows 'freedom' to stand in for the presence of absence and structure the ideological field of liberal democracy. In turn, the abstract universal extends this horizon as an ideological formation, taking on further signifiers in what Laclau terms a 'logic of equivalence' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The condensation of particular elements around a central imaginary horizon through a logic of equivalence offers the prospect of a return to fullness and *Jouissance*.

In contrast to the condensing effect of the abstract horizon, the universal exception acts as a dislocating factor again this horizon. The exception, known as the concrete universal, lies on the 'flip-side' of the ontological parallax, being 'the other' to the abstract universal. In this sense, of it being the 'flip-side' of the coin, there is no connection between the abstract and concrete universals, no symbolic point of translation between them. Vitality, however, they nevertheless remain linked as a totality. Although the concrete universal exists as the singular exception to the universal horizon, at the same time this exception comes to exceed that horizon; it is necessary for the continued functioning of the abstract universal. Because abstract horizons rely for their stability on the exclusion of particular elements (they being 'the exception' to those abstract horizons), strong tension exists between them. However, as no means exist for translating between the two, this tension comes out through the effect that the Real has upon the abstract universal.

The irresolvable nature of the difference between the two modalities of universality gets enclosed within, and thus occluded by, a particular element, the symptom. The symptom is an embodiment of the concrete universal (the element that must be excluded in order for the abstract universal to appear coherent), sitting within the abstract universal and within the broad imaginary horizons that establish the identities of social groups,

societies, global formations and so on. Its potentially disruptive effects must therefore be domesticated so as to ensure the continuing stability of the universalising discourses. Conversely, a symptom that is left unchecked can dislocate those horizons. An example is illustrative. One version of the abstract universal horizon of global capital is the sustainable advancement of humanity – ‘progress’. In contrast to this imaginary, the concrete universal is the increasing degradation of the global environment. The unsustainable exploitation of natural resources is an exception to the abstract universal, yet necessary for the continued existence of capitalism. The symptom (of the failure of the universal imaginary) is felt through the reporting and effect of climate change itself.

A variety of mechanisms exist within ideological formations that can domesticate the effect of the symptom, just as each universal horizon is vulnerable at many points to the symptoms (the ‘unbearable examples’) that they must repress in order to sustain their appearance as legitimate statements about social life. These two separate, but vitally related aspects, constitute the torsion around which pivots the methodological position created in this thesis. The challenge in constructing that methodology is to identify and examine both the techniques that are used for maintaining an ideological position (that occurs through the domestication of symptoms) as well as the potential for achieving radical structural shifts.

Constructing a Methodological Position

Here I closely identify with Žižek’s approach to discourse analysis and philosophy in general as outlined in *The Parallax View* (2006a). Žižek describes his approach as being a ‘short-circuit’. By a short circuit approach he means a critical reading of a political power apparatus such that the hidden underside of its discursive expression is revealed, through which the apparatus functions. Hence “(T)he reader should not simply have learned something new; the point is rather to make them aware of another – disturbing – side of something they knew all the time” (Žižek, 2006, p.ix). Žižek believes, and it is the position adopted in this thesis, that Lacanian psychoanalysis is the privileged instrument of the short-circuit approach, although it is necessary to note that a short-circuit relies heavily on Hegelian dialectical logic.

The ‘short-circuit’ approach aims to ‘practice’ concrete universality by confronting a universal with its ‘unbearable example’ (p.13). This is the core orientation at the heart of this thesis; the identification of the internal fault points within a political formation. These internal limit points – symptoms – can be revealed as being vital for the constitution of universal horizons and, thus, their most concrete aspect (giving rise to their naming as ‘concrete universal’). In order to achieve this task, one cannot simply interpret the discursive field. Rather, as Stavrakakis suggests (Stavrakakis, 1997, p.129), the role of critical discourse is to deconstruct the fantasmatic background that sutures the social and to find the symptomatic elements that signal the internal point of failure – the limit point – of the abstract imaginary. Similarly, Žižek suggests that “(T)he aim of the critique of ideology is the analysis of an ideological edifice, is to extract this symptomatic kernel which the official, public, ideological text simultaneously disavows and needs for its undisturbed functioning” (Žižek, 1996, p.3).

As a consequence of the fantasmatic background of a universal edifice, ideological critique comes to involve two important moves. The first is to reveal the contingency of each and every construction, to demonstrate that reality is neither natural nor positive. This purely interpretative approach is, however, insufficient for analysis. Instead, the manner in which an ideology grips its subjects needs to be considered. The substance that achieves this outcome, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, is *jouissance*. As will be developed throughout this thesis, the power of *jouissance* is such that the subject can be aware of the contingency of their situation and the symptoms inherent to this construction, yet continue to act as if they are unaware of this circumstance. Thus Žižek states, ‘(I)t is not enough to convince the patient of the unconscious truth of his symptom; the unconscious itself must be induced to accept this truth’ (Žižek, 2006a, p.351).

The abstracted ‘short-circuit’ method through which Žižek has interpreted Lacan has much potential for analysing the political domain. This potential has, however, been obscured somewhat by the abstract, baroque nature of Žižek’s theorising. While this has proven excellent for the discipline of political philosophy, Žižek’s work remains at times a little too divorced from the concrete, grounded world in which the political occurs, that is, politics. This has enabled a certain misinterpretation of Žižek’s political position to proliferate, centred around a critique that suggests that Žižek has no stable political

position (Homer, 2001, p.12; Laclau, 2000a, p.289). My aim in constructing a methodological approach from Žižek's psychoanalytic political philosophy is to develop a portable method for concrete political interventions without losing the theoretical insights that are central to psychoanalytic theory. Herein lies the problem in achieving this task. Any reification of methodological form and content defies the politics of any political methodology – it needs to also be contingent. Therefore, while it is submitted that the methodology suggested by this thesis provides a settled form for analysis, it cannot suggest any concrete content. Rather this must, by definition, change with every application.

Global Capital

The methodology developed through this thesis seeks to understand how apparently contingent social formations such as 'global capitalism' come to enjoy fixed and stable form, and to identify the possibilities that might exist for breaking open these fixed discourses through that disavowed element of them which is not contingent, that is, the concrete universal. To illustrate the potential for such an approach, the method will be applied to the realm of global capital, in particular to two discourses that exist as its disavowed symptoms: poverty and environmentalism. The choice of global capital, as a point of analysis, is political in itself: this thesis takes capital, or more specifically the symptoms of capital, to be a major challenge to the future of humanity. These issues provide a, if not *the*, major motivational factor behind this endeavour. Nonetheless, this is not a position that needs necessarily be adopted by the reader. Rather, I invite the reader to consider how radical change can be achieved, using the analysis of global capital as an example.

Conversely, at the same time it is important to reiterate that the choice of capitalism as a point of analysis is not arbitrary. Žižek has increasingly sought to posit capital as a modality of the Real. Capital is not the Real in terms of an ahistorical, structural lack, but rather the 'symbolic Real', the background for all symbolisation and the point to which all symbolisations must return. In this sense, capital has hegemonised the very grounds of

hegemony (Žižek, 1999, p.4; 2000a, p.223; 2000b, p.319). Capitalism is not seen as simply one struggle amongst many, as is the trend in post-modern politics, but rather the struggle of our times. This emphasis is what gives Žižek's work – and by extension this thesis – a Marxist orientation (Žižek & Daly, 2004, pp.146-148).

At this point it is important to establish what it is that is meant in reference to capitalism throughout this thesis. Capitalism is both a particular form of economic structural organisation as well as a universalising discourse. Capitalism has become an extraordinarily powerful organising force. It is, however, a very unstable one. The main strength of capitalism is that it is a dynamic dialectical process. Where most systems are destroyed because of their inability to deal with their own irrationality, the strength of capital is that it is able to reincorporate its own exception (Žižek, 2006b, p.174). Indeed, the 'logic of the exception' is the process which drives capitalism: what appear to be structural shifts away from capital are brought back into the system as new opportunities for profit. Capitalism requires an ever-increasing rate of profit in order to survive. Profit takes the place of the Lacanian *objet a*: what appears to be an obstacle is actually the very condition of possibility. Because profit is never fully satisfying, it is lacking, it gives rise to an excess. Capitalism thereby requires an 'over-accumulation' of profit (Arrighi, 2005a, p.36; 2005b, pp.84-86). For this reason, leftist attempts to 'tame' capital in a manner which would simply reduce its rate of profit or the incentive to produce profit – such as a 'Green' economy, or market socialism – are doomed to fail (Žižek, 2005b).

Žižek also rejects the common perception that there is a limit to the extent to which capitalism can develop. Rather, any external limits that are encountered are simply turned into opportunities for profit (Žižek & Daly, 2004, p.152). The internet is a salient contemporary example of this: it once constituted an obstacle to the continued hegemony of private property but is now a hugely profitable market place. Rather, Žižek suggests that the weakness of global capital lies within itself; he repeats the Marxist maxim that the only obstacle to capital is capital itself (Žižek, 2001b, p.18). As such, this thesis argues that the strongest possibility for the dislocation of capital lies in the forces unleashed by capitalism itself. Žižek identifies those forces as the concrete universal of

the abstract universal, that is, of global capitalism. It is by exposing the concrete universal, by confronting capital with its disavowed foundations, that radical structural change is possible.

Practicing concrete universality, however, is not a matter of simply presenting the evidence of the concrete universal, of the irrationality of what is considered rational and of waiting for change to occur. Rather, the core insight of psychoanalytic dialectical materialism is that interpretation is only part of the process. A traversal of the fantasmatic core which produces *jouissance* is also required. This can be achieved through using as a lever the anxiety that is caused by the incommensurability that is internal to each and every universal position, of each position's non-coincidence with itself, an anxiety caused by the proximity of the Real. The most efficient manner to generate this anxiety is for the concrete universal itself to place pressure upon the universal horizon. We see this effect in environmental discourse, where the concrete universal (actual climate change) is exerting pressure upon the idea that the high levels of production and consumption associated with capitalism are normal. The concrete universal itself (such as actual climate change) is, of course, not accessible within an academic thesis. Instead the political potential of a text such as this thesis is at best to hold open the place of the symptom in the anticipation of active concrete universals that can produce the dislocations sought.

Thesis Structure

This thesis seeks to develop a line of argument based around the value of Lacanian psychoanalysis for political intervention. The following chapter introduces and outlines the fundamental concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis that are relevant to the thesis and the manner in which these concepts will be used. Most notable are discussions around the different modalities of the Real and of *jouissance*, as well as the operations of ideology, fantasy and desire. Additionally, Žižek's concept of universality is introduced further. Furthermore, in order to establish the context in which the thesis operates, the theorists

that are salient to the thesis are outlined, most prominently Žižek but also Laclau, Lacan, Marx and Hegel.

Chapter three builds on the perspectives established in the initial foray into psychoanalysis by reviewing the work of Laclau and Žižek. This chapter is formed around the debate between the interpretive and (psycho)analytic positions, as has been staged in the differences between Laclau's and Žižek's theoretical orientations. Laclau is a major contributor to the argument developed in the thesis. He works within the Lacanian perspective, although, as I shall develop in chapter three, Laclau's work does not prove as productive as Žižek's because of the former's limited conception of the Real. Conversely, Laclau's 'Discourse Theory' does provide an interesting alternative to Žižek, particularly as it appears to offer a more grounded methodological perspective. Nonetheless, the concluding position of this chapter is that it is the psychoanalytic position (taking on the concepts of *jouissance* and fantasy through an extended notion of the Real) that best explains the grip that ideology exerts upon subjects.

Chapter four introduces the central theoretical insights of the thesis, following on from the discussion of the importance of *jouissance* for socio-political analysis. The focus of this chapter is the materiality of universality – the influence of *jouissance* on the universal. In particular, it introduces Žižek's notion of dialectical materialism, the parallax view, especially in its relation to abstract and concrete universality. As such, the chapter also features discussions on the nature of dialectics and the fundamental role of the symptom.

Chapter five extends discussion on the role of the symptom in a manner that develops the core of the thesis: the construction of a methodological approach to supplement Žižek's psychoanalytic political philosophy. The chapter details the basic defence mechanisms that come to be used, within the context of an abstract universal, against the symptoms upon which the abstract universal relies but must disavow. Additionally, consideration is given to the possible discursive strategies that can be used to dislocate the universal imaginary via the symptom and the concrete universal.

This methodology is then applied to two separate areas of discourse that form the next

two chapters. These areas of discourse, Green ideology and global poverty, represent two of the most salient symptoms of global capital. As such, the application of the methodological position seeks to further develop understanding of the manner in which the symptom is domesticated within a universal horizon. Additionally, the possibilities for generating a radical structural shift via the symptom are considered, particularly in regard to global capital. The thesis concludes with a review of the possibilities that arise from the discursive analyses and returns to the ultimate question of the thesis, the political prospects of Lacanian theory.