

# **Slavoj Žižek's Dialectical Materialist Marxism**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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# Summary

This thesis offers a systematic account of Žižek's dialectical materialist Marxism that follows the development of his work from his initial Lacanian critique of Marxism and Stalinist totalitarianism, to his attempt to develop a new form of Communist politics including a conception of a Communist utopia. The core and overarching argument of this thesis is that Žižek develops his positions in response to three challenges that he confronts after the limitations of his previous radical democratic politics become evident. These are: an alternative to traditional Marxism and liberal democracy that continues to protect against repeating the errors of the former; an analysis of late-capitalism at libidinal, political and economic levels to explain new forms of ideology, the limitations of liberal democratic politics, and the continuing role of capitalism and class in our contemporary world; and, the reformulation of the Lacanian category of the Real in order to overcome the deadlock of the opposition between *das Ding* and lack and the political conservatism it produces. In the analysis of Žižek's response to these challenges, I examine the tension that emerges between the Lacanian and Marxist dimensions of Žižek's dialectical materialism and how he manages this tension in order to avoid returning to the problems associated with traditional Marxism.

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## Abbreviations

### Major Books and Essays by Slavoj Žižek

1988	<i>The Most Sublime of Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan</i> [English translation (2014)]	SH
1989	<i>The Sublime Object of Ideology</i> [2 <sup>nd</sup> edition (2008)]	SOI
1990	“Eastern Europe’s Republics of Gilead”	“Eastern Europe’s Republics of Gilead”
1991	<i>For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor</i> [2 <sup>nd</sup> edition (2008)]	FTKN
	<i>Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture</i>	LA
1992	<i>Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out</i> “Eastern European Liberalism and its Discontents”	EYS! “Eastern European Liberalism,”
1993	<i>Tarrying With The Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology</i>	TWN
1994	<i>Metastases of Enjoyment</i> [Second edition (2001)] “The Spectres of Ideology”	ME “Spectres”
1996	<i>Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters</i> [2 <sup>nd</sup> Edition (2007)]	IR
1997	<i>The Abyss of Freedom</i> “Multiculturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism” <i>Plague of Fantasies</i> “Desire : Drive = Truth : Knowledge”	AF “Multiculturalism” POF “Desire”
1998	“From ‘Passionate Attachments’ to Dis-Identification,”	“Passionate”
1999	<i>The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology</i>	TS
2000	<i>The Fragile Absolute; or, Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?</i> <i>Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left</i> [with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau] “From <i>History and Class Consciousness</i> to the <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment</i> ...and Back”	FA CHU “HCC”
2001	<i>Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion</i> [2 <sup>nd</sup> edition (2011)] <i>On Belief</i>	DSST? OB
2002	“Lenin’s Choice” <i>Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates</i> [2 <sup>nd</sup> edition (2012)]	“LC” Desert

2003	<i>The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity</i>	<i>PATD</i>
2004	<i>Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences</i> [2 <sup>nd</sup> edition (2012)]	<i>OWB</i>
	<i>Conversations with Žižek</i> , (authored by Glynn Daly)	<i>CWZ</i>
2005	<i>Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle</i>	<i>Iraq</i>
2006	<i>The Parallax View</i>	<i>PV</i>
	“The Fetish of the Party”	“Fetish”
2008	<i>In Defence of Lost Causes</i> [2 <sup>nd</sup> edition (2009)]	<i>IDLC</i>
	<i>Violence</i>	<i>Violence</i>
	“Lacan’s Four Discourses: A Political Reading”	“Four Discourses”
2009	<i>First as Tragedy, Then as Farce</i>	<i>FATTAF</i>
	“How to Begin from the Beginning”	“from the Beginning”
	"Philosophy is not a Dialogue"	“Dialogue”
2010	<i>Living in the End Times</i>	<i>LITET</i>
	“A Permanent Economic Emergency”	“Permanent”
2012	<i>Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism?</i>	<i>LTN</i>
	<i>The Year of Dreaming Dangerously</i>	<i>YDD</i>
2014	<i>The Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation for Dialectical Materialism</i>	<i>AR</i>
	<i>Trouble in Paradise: From the end of History to the end of Capitalism</i>	<i>TIP</i>
	<i>Demand The Impossible!</i>	<i>DTI</i>

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1. Dialectical Materialism

In 1994, in the book *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (2005[1994]), Slavoj Žižek announces a remarkable change of political and theoretical allegiance. Towards the end of the book in what at first might have appeared as a rather innocuous passage<sup>1</sup> that is subsequently expanded upon in a clarificatory footnote,<sup>2</sup> Žižek declares that his work should be understood as a return to the project of dialectical materialism, the much maligned philosophy of Marxism. In addition to this, in the “self-interview” that forms the appendix to the book, Žižek outlines the political contours of this new theoretical project, positioning his own work as a return to the problematic of a psychoanalytically informed Marxism.<sup>3</sup>

Why was this remarkable? Žižek had entered the English speaking world in 1989 with the path-breaking work on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Hegelian dialectics and ideology critique, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (2008[1989]). An influential dissident and a part of the movement for democracy in Socialist Yugoslavia, Žižek uses the theoretical positions he develops in *Sublime Object* to critically diagnose the destructive dynamics inherent to “really existing socialism” and Stalinism, and to make a powerful argument *against* Marxism and

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<sup>1</sup> Žižek, *ME*, p.126.

<sup>2</sup> Žižek, *ME*, p.135-6, n.18.

<sup>3</sup> Žižek, *ME*, pp.181, 182-4.

other radical political positions on the ground that they are forever haunted by a totalitarian potential. On the basis of his Hegelian-Lacanian ontology, Žižek responds to this danger by building a case for a novel form of liberal democracy informed by psychoanalysis as the only legitimate mode of political power and the only way that, at a political level, these totalitarian dangers could be definitively escaped. Five years after committing to this liberal democratic position and making theoretical alliances with other “radical” democrats such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe this all changes, however.

Žižek’s change of position in *Metastases* is remarkable, in other words, because it marks the point of an abrupt volte-face, in which Žižek explicitly abandons his previous democratic political commitments and endorses a return to a Marxist philosophical and political project, as well as a name — dialectical materialism — that was indissociable from the Stalinist totalitarianism that he initially criticised as not only untenable but as disastrous. Since his announcement of his change of position, Žižek has steadily repositioned, developed and expanded his work in a number of ways. Žižek now understands his attempt to develop Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics as a part of a project to rejuvenate the philosophy of dialectical materialism. The terrain of his philosophical engagement has also shifted towards other contemporary revolutionary philosophers, the most prominent among which, Alain Badiou, now influences Žižek’s work far more than any other political philosopher. Žižek’s political analyses have also moved significantly, going from the critique of radical politics and totalitarianism to the development of a critique of liberal democracy, capitalism, and the kind of subjects and politics that they have engendered in our contemporary period. Žižek now dismisses the “fetish” of democracy and the “Fukuyamian” position that characterises, he contends, our contemporary world, while arguing for a revolutionary politics that must fight to realise the Idea of Communism. And finally,

alongside this, Žižek's conception of political practice has expanded significantly to include a conception of a "Leninist" Act, class struggle, and a collective politics based on the fidelity to a Cause.

The central aim of this thesis is a critical exploration of Žižek's dialectical materialist Marxism that attempts to understand the trajectory that his work has taken and the positions he has developed against the backdrop of the dramatic about-turn that he announced in *Metastases*. The exploration will attempt to answer why Žižek embarks on this change of position, how his earlier critique of Marxism and socialism continues to inform his position, and how, via his dialectical materialism, he navigates the challenges of returning to a Marxist philosophy and politics given their failures during the twentieth century.

## **1.2. Why is a Critical Exploration of Žižek's Dialectical Materialist Marxism Important?**

The focus of this thesis reflects the importance of dialectical materialist philosophy and Marxist critique in Žižek's work. Since his break from a radical democratic position the return to dialectical materialism has resided at the very core of Žižek's theoretical project. Moreover, Žižek's most recent work suggests that its importance is unlikely to abate any time soon. Žižek has made dialectical materialism the subject of his three most recent substantial philosophical works – *Parallax View* (2006), *Less Than Nothing* (2012) and *Absolute Recoil* (2014) – while in recent years he has continued to place a form of Marxist critique and associated modes of practice at the core of his more explicitly political writings. In these philosophical and political works Žižek's project has also shown signs that it is continuing to develop. Among other advances and shifts, Žižek has enlarged his dialectical materialist

engagement with the contemporary sciences and developed a conception of a Communist political practice and utopian Idea. Žižek's Marxism has also continued to be one of the most debated aspects of his work in a continuously expanding secondary literature that has produced a wide-range of responses to a theoretical and political project that evidently continues to perplex.

It is impossible to talk about the importance of an exploration of Žižek's Marxism without also acknowledging the unique public interest in him and his writing. Not many philosophers who claim that their main research interest is reviving the legacy of G.W.F Hegel get cited in national legislatures as a warning to other parliamentarians of the necessity of serious political reform.<sup>4</sup> Or, for that matter, become the subject of a seven minute discussion segment on Fox News after rumours emerge of a dalliance with Lady Gaga.<sup>5</sup> It is safe to say that Žižek is unique. No other public figure today can organise a sell-out conference on reviving the Idea of Communism and write for publications and media outlets that range from *the Guardian* to *Playboy Magazine*. As a result, he is arguably one of the most famous radical public intellectuals and the most famous living Marxist of our time. And he has demonstrated his radical credentials frequently, connecting with some of the most important political movements of recent years, including Occupy in the US,<sup>6</sup> SYRIZA in

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<sup>4</sup> "Michael D Higgins making his last speech in the Dail," 16:04 *Youtube.com*, posted by Irish Labour Party, uploaded on Jan 26 2011, [Online] Accessed from: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJJ5q1\\_5jX8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJJ5q1_5jX8) accessed on: 2.10.2013.

<sup>5</sup> Fox News, "Red Eye Gregalogue," *Youtube.com*, [Online] accessed from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NowMOwl-Q44> Accessed on: 2.10.2013. It would seem that the rumour began after a London-based political collective known as the *De-territorial Support Group*, who formed around the 2010 and 2011 student movement, faked an essay by Žižek on Lady Gaga. See Deterritorial Support Group, "Žižek/Gaga: Communism knows no monster," *DeterritorialSupportGroup.wordpress.com*, published 21<sup>st</sup> March 2011 [Online] accessed from: <http://deterritorialsupportgroup.wordpress.com/2011/03/21/Žižekgaga-communism-knows-no-monster/> accessed on: 15<sup>th</sup> October 2013 (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Transcript: Don't fall in love with yourself," *imposemagazine.com* published 10<sup>th</sup> October 2011 [Online] accessed from: <http://www.imposemagazine.com/bytes/slavoj-Žižek-at-occupy-wall-street-transcript> accessed on: 15.10.2013. (2011).

Greece,<sup>7</sup> and Pussy Riot in Russia.<sup>8</sup> Given this unique status, and the upsurge in interest in radical politics as a result of the crises and revolutions that have seemed to continuously shake the world since 2008, there is also considerable extra-academic imperative to engaging with Žižek's Marxism.

### 1.3. The Žižekian Field

This critical exploration of Žižek's Marxism and dialectical materialism will offer an original contribution to what has been called "the Žižekian Field."<sup>9</sup> This messy, unevenly developed, and diverse grouping of work mirrors the breadth and width of Žižek's own interests. As well as countless introductions, and a multi-lingual journal — *The International Journal of Žižek Studies* — a survey of this terrain finds applications and dissections of Žižek's work in media studies,<sup>10</sup> political and critical theory,<sup>11</sup> theology,<sup>12</sup> and philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Žižek's work has also been important in reviving the importance of Lacanian psychoanalysis in political and cultural analysis and for political theory.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Speech in Syriza M J Event," *Left.gr* published on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2012 [Online] accessed from: <http://left.gr/news/slavoj-Žižeks-speech-syrizas-event> accessed on: 15.10.2013 (2012).

<sup>8</sup> See the exchange of letters between Žižek and Nadya Tolokonnikova, Nadya Tolokonnikova and Slavoj Žižek, "Letter from Nadya Tolokonnikova to Slavoj Žižek," *Lacan.com* [Online] accessed from: [http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?page\\_id=2380](http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?page_id=2380) accessed: 15.10.2013. (2012).

<sup>9</sup> Chris Mcmillan, *Universality and Communist Strategy; Žižek and the Disavowed Foundations of Global Capitalism*, PhD Thesis, School of Social and Cultural Studies, Massey University, Albany, New Zealand (2010)

<sup>10</sup> Paul Taylor, *Žižek and the Media*, Cambridge: Polity Press (2010)

<sup>11</sup> Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics*, London: Routledge (2006); Heiko Feldner and Fabio Vighi, *Žižek: Beyond Foucault*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Mcmillan (2007); Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, London: Continuum (2008)

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Brockelman, *Žižek and Heidegger: The Question Concerning Techno-Capitalism*, London: Continuum (2008).

<sup>14</sup> Todd McGowan, *The End of Dissatisfaction*, New York: SUNY Press (2003). Todd McGowan, *Enjoying What We Don't Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis*, London: University of Nebraska Press (2013). Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2007).

With regard to the reception of Žižek's Marxism, in the secondary literature there is a broad and messy split between those who argue that it, or certain aspects of it, has valuable import for radical critique and practice, and a far more critical group who have raised questions not only of its value and its suitability<sup>15</sup> but, in certain instances, whether it is anything more than rhetorical provocation.

Within the group that have defended Žižek's Marxism in certain respects we find Jodi Dean's *Žižek's Politics* (2006), which outlines the use of Žižek's work on Lenin and the Party form as a powerful response to the limitations of identity politics, *Žižek's Dialectics* (2010), in which Fabio Vighi outlines the dialectics of refusal and sublimation and argues that it offers a potential solution to our inability to move beyond the ideological, libidinal and political deadlocks of our present, and Chris McMillan's *Žižek and Communist Strategy* (2012), which constructs a case for Žižek's "Utopia of the Real" as the basis for a viable Communist political strategy. Alongside these there is also Matthew Flisfeder's "Dialectical Materialism and 'the feminine sublime'" (2013), which argues that Žižek's dialectical materialism can be considered as a critico-revolutionary method, and, as such, aligns Žižek with a tradition of Marxist philosophy that was inaugurated by Georg Lukács's understanding of Marx's dialectic. Within this project I build upon a number of these accounts, critically defending Žižek's revolutionary dialectic as a core aspect of his dialectical materialism and a utopian mode of thinking as central to his conception of Communism. Nevertheless, I will go beyond these accounts of Žižek's work by addressing a number of their limitations and blind-spots. At the centre of these is the tendency within this broad grouping to focus on specific aspects of Žižek's dialectical materialism in isolation from the wider project that characterises his Marxism. As such, we can identify a definite lacuna in the reception of

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example: Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction*, London: Pluto Press (2004)

Žižek's work in this regard. There has yet to be an account of his work that understands his Marxist project from the perspective of the specific conditions and core problems that have driven its development. The partial nature of many of the engagements with Žižek's work is reflected in their tendency to simply ignore more problematic aspects of Žižek's dialectical materialist Marxism, including his engagement with the sciences and a dimension of his work that has been labelled by certain critical accounts as the "second Žižek."<sup>16</sup>

As a result, despite the centrality of the project of rejuvenating a dialectical materialist Marxism in Žižek's work, this project offers what is only the second sustained book-length engagement with the topic, and the first defence of this project. The only other work to engage with Žižek's Marxism as a whole at this length and detail is Matthew Sharpe's *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real* (2004). While critically powerful in a number of ways, and highly insightful insofar as to the originality of several aspects of Žižek's work, Sharpe's detailed engagement is limited by the approach that it takes, aligning and positioning Žižek within Western Marxist critical theory, the broad theoretical tradition that sought to offer an alternative to "classical" Marxism with the project of a total immanent critique. The limitation of Sharpe's analysis can be seen in how Žižek's work sits uncomfortably with this tradition. As well as the fact that he is from Eastern Europe and belongs to a later generation, Žižek also explicitly rejects the premises of Western Marxist critical theory.<sup>17</sup> Surveying his work, Žižek privileges dialectical materialism over historical materialism and while Hegelian critique plays a pivotal role in his work Žižek is far more indebted to Jacques Lacan and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In some sense, Žižek is also closer to the orthodox or classical dialectical materialism of Engels and Lenin insofar as he attempts to engage positively with the empirical sciences. Without acknowledging these and other differences, Sharpe's account

<sup>16</sup> For the clearest division between the "two" Žižek's see Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe, *Žižek and Politics A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2010).

<sup>17</sup> See Žižek, "interview," p.118.

overlooks the specificity of Žižek's Marxism, the problems that it is developed in order to address and the particular problems it has in doing so. It leads to Sharpe largely dismissing Žižek's Marxism as a failure on the grounds that it is unable to resolve the problem of the unity of theory and practice that Western Marxism sought, according to Sharpe, and as a result repeating a number of its antinomies.

Insofar as it fails to give due attention to the specific conditions and aims that inform Žižek's project, Sharpe's account repeats a general trend in the critical discussion of Žižek's work that is especially evident in a number of the highly critical accounts of his Marxism. The problem is also found in Geoff Boucher's *The Charmed Circle of Ideology* (2010) which conflates Žižek with the problematic of post-Marxism and its problematic break from Althusserian Marxism. However, its most extreme example in the secondary literature is found in Ernesto Laclau's critique of Žižek's work in a joint dialogue with Judith Butler and Žižek in *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality* (2000). Here, Laclau criticises Žižek's Marxism, claiming that it is little more than a series of rhetorical flourishes that obscure what is otherwise a 'psychoanalytic discourse.'<sup>18</sup> On this basis, Laclau concludes that Žižek's Marxist concepts 'mean absolutely nothing.'<sup>19</sup> The limitation of Laclau's critique can be located in his view that Žižek's Marxism is not 'organised around a truly political reflection.'<sup>20</sup> This, as we will see, is simply not true. Žižek's Marxism emerges from specific political problems, is informed by the historical situation of its emergence, and is guided by a number of political and theoretical problems that it tries to resolve.

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<sup>18</sup> Laclau, *CHU*, p.289.

<sup>19</sup> Laclau, *CHU*, p.206.

<sup>20</sup> Laclau, *CHU*, p.289.

## 1.4. Aims and Methodology

The original contribution of this thesis resides in its response to these limitations in the secondary literature. This project will offer a critical defence of Žižek’s dialectical materialist Marxism as a broadly unified project attempting to understand its development and its different aspects in the context of its emergence, announced by Žižek, as we have seen, in *Metastases*. With regard to Laclau’s critique, I accept that Žižek’s dialectical materialist Marxism is primarily psychoanalytic in tenor, informed primarily by a hybrid Lacanian-Hegelian understanding of the dialectic, but I contend that this does not mean that it is not also based on a “political reflection.” It is in identifying that which informs and conditions the development of Žižek’s dialectical materialist Marxism that I am able to make the argument that resides at the core of this thesis:

Žižek’s dialectical materialist Marxism is a response to three challenges that Žižek confronts when coming up against the limits of his radical democratic position.

- First, an alternative political theory and practice to traditional Marxism and liberal democracy that continues to protect against repeating the errors of the former given its disastrous failures during the twentieth century.
- Second, an analysis of late-capitalism at a libidinal, political and economic level to explain the new forms of ideology and *jouissance*, the limitations of liberal democratic politics, and the continuing role of capitalism and class in our contemporary world.
- Third, a reformulation of the Lacanian category of the Real in order to overcome the paralysing deadlock of the opposition between the Thing and lack, which almost inevitably produces a political conservatism.

I contend that Žižek realises the necessity of addressing these challenges during the period of democratisation in Eastern Europe, at which point the limitations of his previous analyses and democratic politics were exposed. A dialectical materialist Marxism is Žižek's response to these challenges.

While making this argument and outlining Žižek's project in these terms, this thesis also pursues several secondary goals. Given the breadth of Žižek's work and its constantly developing character several areas remain severely under-examined in the secondary literature, including the aforementioned topics of his engagement with the sciences and his recent conception of Communism. In this thesis I will dedicate substantial space for an engagement with these areas of Žižek's work in the context of his return to dialectical materialism. I will also offer an analysis of the troubling figure of the "second Žižek" that is found primarily in his writing shortly after his Marxist turn, usually associated at a philosophical level with Žižek's reading of F.W.J. Schelling, and at a political level with a conception of political practice in terms of a destructive, suicidal Act. Rather than ignoring this figure, or using it to dismiss Žižek's Marxism entirely, I aim to identify and locate its errors in order to cleave a gap between it and Žižek's dialectical materialist position.

With regard to the strategy that informs my critical exploration of Žižek's work, I focus primarily on his philosophical and political writing. Where I draw on Žižek's books on theology or cinema, for example, I do so only to inform the pursuit of specific topics. It does mean, however, that I take seriously some of his political writing, which has been dismissed as "journalistic" by some.<sup>21</sup> While Žižek's work does sometimes veer in this direction, it is much overstated as a critique. Even when Žižek writes for a popular audience his dialectical

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<sup>21</sup> See Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek*, pp.196, 206.

materialist approach informs his analysis. This will be demonstrated in the later chapters of this project. In terms of the problem that any Žižek researcher faces — the sheer breadth of subject matter and the amount he has produced in such a short time — I have focused primarily on certain themes and problems that Žižek returns to repeatedly, rather than a few selected books. This strategy has been necessitated by the way that Žižek himself develops his position, returning to a topic across several works to construct and revive certain ideas through layers of interpretation and analysis.

More specifically, I pursue the evaluative and critical dimension of this thesis using a form of immanent critique that begins with Žižek's own terms and postulates, conscious or otherwise, and judges his work on them. In the case of this project, the immanent mode of evaluation allows us to produce a critique of the "second Žižek" and his problematic engagement with the sciences. It also allows us to identify the tension in Žižek's project between the position of the analyst and that of the master that reflects the tension that results from the primarily critical position necessitated by his Lacanian critique of Marxism, and a minimally programmatic position that is necessitated by attempting to answer the question that all Marxist theory ultimately confronts: "What is to be done?"

## 1.5. "Marxism"

Within this introduction I have referred to Slavoj Žižek's position as that of a dialectical materialist Marxist. In the history of Marxism, the phrase "dialectical materialism" was first used by German socialist, philosopher, and friend of Marx, Joseph Dietzgen.<sup>22</sup> While neither Karl Marx nor Friedrich Engels ever use this name in their writing — materialist dialectic,

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<sup>22</sup> Tony Burns, "Joseph Dietzgen and the History of Marxism," in *Science and Society*, vol.66, no.2. (2002) pp.202-227. Rather than as sometimes assumed, Grandfather of Russian Marxism, Georgi Plekhanov. Žižek makes this mistake in *Parallax View*. See p.391, n.40.

was the closest the latter came — the term became indissociable from their philosophical positions and from Marxist philosophy more generally. While Jacques Lacan also uses this term to describe his own meta-psychology in philosophical terms in one of his later seminars<sup>23</sup> and Adrian Johnston (2008) uses the term to describe the dynamic that operates at the two levels of a Lacanian derived transcendental materialist theory of the subject,<sup>24</sup> this should not raise any doubts as to the political implications of the appearance of the term in Žižek's work. When he first describes his project as the re-articulation of dialectical materialism Žižek ties his philosophy to its traditional other, the Marxist science of historical materialism<sup>25</sup> and also suggests how the lessons of the Engelsian, Stalinist dialectical materialism have informed his own position.<sup>26</sup> Yet, given that some contest whether Žižek's work can be considered Marxist at all<sup>27</sup> it bears asking on what grounds we can claim that his dialectical materialism belongs to this tradition. That is to say, before we go any further we need to pause to consider the peculiar nature of the combination of theory and practice that is called Marxism.

It is my contention that Žižek's dialectical materialism can be considered Marxist because it retains a connection to the aim of all Marxist philosophy insofar as it recognises that the role of philosophy is not merely to interpret but also transform the world. With regard to the many fundamental differences between Žižek's position and this or that tradition of Marxist thought, to dismiss Žižek on these grounds is a gesture that

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<sup>23</sup> Lacan describes his own philosophical position as a dialectical materialism in the unpublished *Seminar 18*; it is clear that this is only a secondary consideration for Žižek, despite the importance of Lacanian psychoanalysis to his philosophical project. Žižek, *LTN*, p.780.

<sup>24</sup> See Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press (2008).

<sup>25</sup> Žižek, *ME*, p.126.

<sup>26</sup> Žižek, *ME*, p.136, n.18.

<sup>27</sup> Parker, *Slavoj Žižek*, p.2.

misrecognises both the transformations in Marxism over its recent history and the nature of the tradition as such.

The most recent “crisis of Marxism” can be understood to have destroyed the very notion of Marxist orthodoxy, not least because at the heart of the crisis has been the destruction of the authorities and institutional powers that were able to pass judgement on what differentiates orthodoxy from heresy. Along with the end of orthodoxy, as Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis (2008) argue, in its most recent history the ‘[t]he old lines of demarcation have in the main ceased to operate.’<sup>28</sup> Whereas thirty years ago we might have been able to more or less clearly delineate Western Marxism from its traditional counterpart, and within each grouping see variations and disagreements over certain matters, the “crisis of Marxism” ‘has released a variety of more or less fleeting currents, schools, groups and unique individual trajectories, translated into shifting reclassifications in the theoretical field.’<sup>29</sup> Yet, if anything, this splintering far from destroying the very category of Marxism in our contemporary period could be said to, in fact, merely reveal an essential truth: that Marxism has never been a pure tradition, or isolated from heretic revision and remodelling. That is to say that Marxism has always ‘lived off incessant restructuring and innovation, constantly finding in the surrounding culture, in perspectives generated outside its conceptual space and through the breaks that their integration involved, the conditions for its renewal.’<sup>30</sup> What defines Marxism, thus, is not a group of essential features but merely a ‘special relationship to certain ideas derived from Marx’ and a willingness to reinterpret them

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<sup>28</sup> Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis “Introduction: Marxism, Post-Marxism, Neo-Marxisms” in *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism* eds. Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis Netherlands: Brill (2008) p.xii.

<sup>29</sup> Bidet and Kouvelakis, “Introduction,” p.xii.

<sup>30</sup> Bidet and Kouvelakis, “Introduction,” p.xii. On similar grounds Alain Badiou has claimed that Marxism “does not exist” in the sense of a homogenous unified tradition. See Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker, London: Verso (2005) p.58

according to demands of different situations and the possibilities offered by different theoretical traditions.<sup>31</sup>

I take Žižek's work to be one particular example of the "thousand Marxisms," to use Bidet and Kouvelakis's term, that have emerged from this "crisis." As I will argue, Žižek's Marxism can be understood as a product of a unique conjuncture consisting of the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics and the challenges that I have outlined. This is not to say that Žižek represents a total break with the past, however. He certainly has some commonalities with Freudo-Marxism,<sup>32</sup> he also, as has been well documented, has several common concerns with Althusserianism.<sup>33</sup> There are overlaps with Georg Lukács insofar as one side of his dialectical materialism is a critical mode of knowing that locates and exposes the moment of consciousness in a totality, although, through Lacan rather than Hegel, this does not produce a reconciliation in the traditional sense of the term, as we will shortly see. And, surprisingly, despite Žižek's attempt to reclaim dialectical materialism from its Stalinist history, Žižek's work shares several similarities with classical dialectical materialism. It does mean, however, that Žižek's Marxism radically alters classical Marxist categories from class struggle to the proletariat, despite these points of overlap. For this reason, we might prefer the term neo-Marxism to describe Žižek's position. Although, personally, I think that this wrongly suggests there might have been something like "original" Marxism to begin with. Any survey of "Marxism" over the last one hundred and fifty years will demonstrate a multitude of different Marxisms, with a pre- or post-fix. If we were to continue *this* tradition and give Žižek's work an appropriate label, then, we would want to

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<sup>31</sup> Bidet and Kouvelakis, "Introduction," p.xii.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek, *ME*, pp.181, 182-4.

<sup>33</sup> Several articles explained this relationship and its various facets, theoretical and political. Rastko Močnik, 'Ideology and Fantasy' in *The Althusserian Legacy* edited by E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker, London: Verso (1993); Mladen Dolar "Beyond Interpellation" in *Qui Parle*, vol.6, no.2 (Spring/Summer 1993) pp.75-96; Slavoj Žižek and Renata Salecl, "Lacan in Slovenia" in *Radical Philosophy*, no.58 (1991) pp.25-31.

emphasise its primarily philosophical bent. With this in mind I have described Žižek's position as a Dialectical Materialist Marxism.

## 1.6. Plan of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into three sections. In section one, "Political and Theoretical Foundations," I outline what will eventually become the foundations on which Žižek returns to the project of a dialectical materialist Marxism. In chapter two, I consider Žižek's critical analyses of "really existing socialism" as a form of university discourse, before turning to his understanding of the specific character of Stalinist totalitarianism in terms of the Party's role as a Fetish and the perverse character of the Stalinist Communist. What defines these positions is the mistaken belief that a particular element can embody or occupy the place of universality. For Žižek, we see that it is this structure, acting within the university discourse that characterises "really existing socialism" that produces the violence and terror that characterises the most shocking phenomena within Stalinism. In the final section of the chapter we will reveal the second key dimension of Žižek's critique, which locates the foundation of the Stalinist position in an error inherent to traditional Marxism as a result of Marx's incomplete critique of utopianism. Žižek contends that Marx's mistake resulted in the persistence of a fantasy of the Other, which continued to define Marxist politics, its dialectics of transformation and its conception of Communism.

In chapter three, I continue to outline the conditions of Žižek's return to Marxism. I argue that despite initially appearing as a promising response to the dangers of totalitarian politics, Žižek's conception of a (radical) liberal democratic politics confronts serious challenges at a conceptual and political level. Examining how the experience of the democratisation of Eastern Europe altered Žižek's views on the effectiveness of a democratic

politics, I argue that the challenges he meets here become the impulse that drives his turn to dialectical materialism and Marxism. In this chapter, I conclude by outlining the political, analytical and theoretical tasks that Žižek's dialectical materialism has to confront.

Section two, *Dialectical Materialism*, explores Žižek's philosophical response to these deadlocks and the development of his dialectical materialism. Chapter four outlines Žižek's dialectical materialism as a mode of revolutionary dialectical critique. I demonstrate that through his Lacanian understanding of Hegel Žižek is able to avoid the problems of classical Marxist philosophy by conceiving of the role of dialectical practice in terms of the analyst, who occupies the lack in the Other. After outlining the critical goal of the dialectic as a "totality with failures", this chapter turns to consider how Žižek's dialectics escape from the deadlock that characterised his democratic phase. I argue that there are three key features of the dialectic. First, the dialectic operates primarily to produce the conditions of transformation in the form of a shocking moment in which the smooth surface of an ideological or political totality is denatured through a confrontation with the symptom. Second, I argue that Žižek's dialectical materialism is able to break free from the disabling binary that characterised his democratic period through a re-conceptualisation of the Real as a rupturing gap. Third, I argue that with this new conception of the Real, Žižek is also able to think historicity and, as a result, overcome a certain ahistorical limit that was evident in his democratic phase. I end the chapter with a discussion of the potential limitations of Žižek's dialectical method, noting how there are questions with regard to whether the dialectic can function as Žižek intends to produce the form of change that his Marxism demands.

Chapter five, turns to consider how Žižek responds to this last problem. I argue that Žižek's controversial "politics of Truth" should be understood as an attempt to address the gap between theory and practice that appears as a result of the dialectic's limitations. I

consider Žižek's relationship to Alain Badiou's work as crucial in this regard. Charting Badiou's influence, I focus on a significant advance in Žižek's work. Badiou's notion of subtraction allows Žižek to develop a symptomal politics, which, connected to a conception of feminine subjectivity, allows an escape from the political dead-end of his democratic phase. However, highlighting a slight shift in the function of dialectical materialist philosophy with the "politics of Truth" I question whether it is possible for the philosopher to maintain the place of the lack in the Other associated with the analyst. I argue that the tension between dialectical materialism as a revolutionary practice and as the "politics of Truth" reflects that of the Lacanian critique of classical Marxism and Žižek's return to Marxist philosophy, which seems to necessitate a minimally prescriptive role for philosophy that risks returning it to the place of the fetish.

In chapter six, I turn to consider the properly traumatic point of the Žižekian field: the "second Žižek." After considering the notion of the abyssal, suicidal (other) Act, I connect its absolute character to Žižek's Lacanian re-reading of Schelling. From the perspective of his dialectical materialist position, I examine the consequences of the positions associated with the "second Žižek" at the levels of epistemology and politics. Through a comparison of Žižek's reading of Democritean and Epicurean philosophy with that of Marx's I argue that locating the source for change in an ahistorical motor or abyssal contradiction can only end in disabling political paralysis. At the level of politics and ideology, I argue that the (other) Act is a deeply ideological figure, reflecting a deadlock that is characteristic of "the end of History" and, as such, appears to operate to displace political analysis through a fantasy of immediate and total transformation.

Chapter seven considers one of the most neglected areas of Žižek's dialectical materialism: the return to a dialectical materialist science. I argue that the neglect of this area

of Žižek's work is surprising given its immediate resonance with the failures of the classical dialectical materialism of Engels, Stalin, *et al.*. After delineating and clarifying the multiple approaches to the sciences in Žižek's work I take critical aim at Žižek's engagement with quantum physics and his attempt at a Lacanian-Hegelian interpretation. Building on Adrian Johnston's (2013) critique of Žižek's position, I argue that the under-appreciation of the historical failures of a dialectical materialist science has led Žižek to repeat many of the same errors.

Section three of the thesis, "Communism and Capitalism", turns to the practice of dialectical materialism. In chapter eight, "Capitalism and its Symptoms", I outline Žižek's account of the transformations in contemporary subjectivity, Žižek's renewed effort at understanding liberal democracy, and how Žižek connects these to an account of the contradictions of capitalism. I conclude by reflecting on the limitations of Žižek's dialectical mode of knowing at the socio-political level, arguing that it largely fails to produce the result that the dialectic aims to: the shock of the Real. I suggest that a recent turn towards describing his dialectical practice in terms of "cognitive mapping" is symptomatic of this limitation. I argue that, while problematic, it does not wholly negate the force of his dialectical practice, since it continues to identify spaces of struggle and potential transformation.

Chapter nine, "Communism," looks at the most recent innovation in Žižek's work. In this chapter I offer an alternative perspective on Žižek's conception of a Communist politics and Communist utopianism that addresses a number of insufficiencies in the current literature. First, I outline how Žižek conceives of Communism as a Cause that allows a form of collective identification and subtractive politics. Second, I uncover a utopian hermeneutic in Žižek's most recent work that successfully navigates the problems of traditional Marxist

utopianism. Demonstrating the potential of this utopian practice I outline Žižek's own "Idea of Communism" as a socio-political discourse of the analyst. In the final and concluding section of the thesis I return to the problem of a "politics without the Other" in the context of Žižek's Communism. I argue that Žižek successfully manages the tension inherent to his project – identified in the conclusion of chapter 5 – by continuing to limit the role of the theorist and emphasising the political and subjective moment of transformation.

# **Political and Theoretical Foundations**

# Chapter 2: Žižek's Lacanian Critique of Marxism and Stalinism

## 2.1. Introduction

Throughout his work, Žižek identifies many flaws in orthodox and unorthodox forms of Marxism, but the problem that seems to have perturbed him more than any other, especially in his earliest work, is its general dual-failure to offer a sufficiently critical explanation of Stalinism and a convincing account of the relationship between Stalinism and Marxist theory.<sup>1</sup> For Žižek, the initial critical importance of a Lacanian psychoanalytical approach is its ability to explain and account for the nature of “really existing socialism,” including the dynamics that led to the crises of Stalinism, and the relationship between Stalinism and Marxist theory.<sup>2</sup> Using a Lacanian approach, Žižek develops a critical theory of the social structure of socialism, the types of subjectivities it relies on and produces, and a critique of Marxist theory that indexes its flaws to the failures of “really existing socialism.” As such,

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<sup>1</sup> Žižek, “HCC” p.113. Žižek’s critique is somewhat misplaced given that while, as he argues, the Frankfurt School did not offer many focused analyses of Stalinism there were nevertheless a welter of attempts to account for really existing socialism in Western Marxism. For a detailed survey of the major approaches and their successes and limitations, see Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates Since 1917*, trans. Jurriaan Bendien, Leden, NL: Brill (2007).

<sup>2</sup> More generally, it was the ability of Lacanian psychoanalysis to provide an insight into and solution for several problems inherent to Marxist theory and critical analysis that convinced Žižek to become a fully paid-up Lacanian. Žižek, “Interview,” pp.181-2.

Žižek can be seen to address a problem that Marxism has long struggled to answer: how its own theory and practice led to the disaster of Stalinism and “really existing socialism.”<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to outline Žižek’s critical analysis of socialism and Marxism, and thereby indicate the challenges that Žižek’s own Marxist dialectical materialism will also subsequently have to confront. I begin by demonstrating Žižek’s critical analysis of socialism and Stalinism as manifestations of what Jacques Lacan called the discourse of the university. I will then turn to Žižek’s political critique of Stalinism in section 2.3. before connecting this critique of Stalinism and the account of socialism as a university discourse with Žižek’s critique of Marxism, demonstrating how the latter contained the seeds for the former. It is my contention that these critiques are pivotal in the development of Žižek’s work, as his later turn to Marxism is conceived on the basis that it must avoid these past mistakes.

## **2.2. "Really Existing Socialism" as a University Discourse**

For Žižek, socialism was a paradigmatic instantiation of what Jacques Lacan calls the university discourse. In *Seminar XVII* (2007) Lacan outlines the discourse of the university as one of four possible “discourses” — the master, the analyst, and the hysteric being the other three. For Lacan, a discourse is a form of social and inter-subjective relation that emerges as a result of our linguistically structured social world. Lacan calls discourses our “social links” or, ‘social bonds, founded in language.’<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This was the centre of the “Crisis of Marxism” declared by Louis Althusser in 1977. For Althusser, this meant yet another tarrying with the classics of Marxism, this time, albeit without the illusion of pure sources of untainted truths waiting to be uncovered. Louis Althusser, “The Crisis of Marxism” in *Marxism Today*, July (1978) p.218.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink, London: W.W Norton (1998) p.21.

## The Discourse of the University

$$\frac{S^2}{S^1} \longrightarrow \frac{a}{\$}$$

Locations

$$\frac{\text{agent}}{\text{truth}} \longrightarrow \frac{\text{other}}{\text{product}}$$

As transindividual structures, these “social links” describe the social role and function of core elements such as knowledge (S2), authority (S1), our libidinal materiality (*a*), and the subject (\$) in different societies, situations and institutions. The respective role that each of these elements plays within a discourse is defined by the place it occupies in the discursive structure. Lacan designates the top-left-hand corner of the matheme as the place of the agent, the top-right the place of Other, the bottom-left as the position of truth and the bottom-right position as that of production. What is unique about the university discourse is that “knowledge”, S2 in Lacan’s mathemes, occupies the position of “the agent.” ‘Knowledge is the king’ as Lacan puts it.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Lacan, Jacques Lacan *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Russell Grigg London: W.W. Norton & Co. (2007) p.238.

In identifying socialism as a mode of university discourse, Žižek follows Lacan's brief suggestion on the matter in *Seminar XVII*: 'What reigns in what one calls the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics is University.'<sup>6</sup> As a form of university discourse, Žižek argues that neither socialism nor Stalinism can be considered a regression to a form of pre-modern, barbaric political rule. Rather, based on knowledge and assuming its universality for all subjects, socialism and Stalinism were thoroughly modern phenomena and part of the Enlightenment tradition.

Through utilising this Lacanian critique, Žižek is able to demonstrate how, far from being deviations or disasters, phenomena like the purge and the show trial were the "truth" of socialist societies given that they represented the logical end point of its internal dynamics. There are, of course, limitations to using the university discourse to explain these specific phenomena. Indeed, these models are open, flexible, giving a sense of possibilities and tendencies, rather than offering an account of the particularities of any single case. What it does offer however is an outline of a set of structural possibilities, not dissimilar to the way that a semiotic square works for ideological analysis. It also demonstrates the immanence of certain tendencies and their potential consequences.

### **2.2.1. The Malevolent Truth of Knowledge**

In Soviet Socialism, the knowledge, S2, that acted as the agent was the pseudo-scientific philosophy of dialectical materialism and the endless plans and quotas that were drawn from it in order to coordinate and structure the creation of a society that sought to maximise and increase productivity in its race to catch-up and finally overtake capitalism. Underlying this knowledge, however, was the power of the Party, S1, who were supposedly armed with this

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<sup>6</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, p.237.

knowledge, which served to form the basis of a scientific socialism. The Party's role, however, was forever split between mere interpretation, determining the applicability and precise nature of what this objective knowledge meant, and the altogether more extensive function of creating and sustaining the conditions for the applicability of this knowledge. For Žižek, the relationship between knowledge production and its interpretation is crucial in understanding the nature of the university discourse. While in the university discourse knowledge appears as a neutral and objective set of propositions, these are always subject to one particular interpretation. The "truth" of objective knowledge is thus always the master's gesture, which tellingly resides hidden under the bar, beneath knowledge, in Lacan's visualisation of the university discourse. Consequently, pure authority and power, S1 in Lacan's formulation, always lurks underneath knowledge. Formally, S1 stands for the decision, the interpretation, the way that neutral knowledge is deciphered before it is presented as objective and neutral. As Žižek writes, "[t]he "repressed" truth of this discourse is that behind the semblance of neutral "knowledge" that we try to impart, we can always locate the gesture of the master.'<sup>7</sup>

In socialism, we see the repressed role of the master emerge in the wild factional struggles that went on behind the unified appearance of the Party. These factional disputes were always, ultimately, about Power over who controlled or determined what this neutral "knowledge" was about, what it meant, what it demanded of subjects and society. This tension between neutral knowledge and power is also present at the very core of the founding document of Stalinism. In the opening sentence of Stalin's "Dialectical and Historical Materialism" (2008) we find dialectical and historical materialism described as the "world outlook" of the Communist Party. The document, in other words, describes dialectical

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<sup>7</sup> Žižek, *LA*, p.131.

materialism as an ideology, one that constitutes an alternative outlook to that of bourgeois ideologues and, as such, is partial and particular. Nevertheless, while admitting this partiality, Stalin also claims that the data of Marxist science regarding such things as the laws of development of society has ‘the validity of objective truth.’<sup>8</sup> The tension between objective knowledge and its ideological nature in Stalin’s essay reflects the tension inherent to the university discourse between S2 and S1, knowledge and truth. The key question in this instance concerns what occupies the position of truth and the extent of its power. In the case of Stalinism, it was only the Stalinist Party that could determine the objectivity of knowledge or be objective towards society, due to its unique position as a mediator between the Other of History and the proletariat.

For Žižek, this is the pivotal problem with the university discourse. It is never neutral knowledge that decides the fate of the subject but always the master whose role is hidden from view, or at least is not openly admitted at the level of explicit communication. As Žižek argues, the master ‘is the constitutive lie of the university discourse’ insofar as it presents ‘what effectively amounts to a political decision based on Power as a simple insight into the factual state of things.’<sup>9</sup> This problem is not merely an epistemological one. The relationship that the discourse of the university outlines between knowledge and truth does not only suggest that “neutral” knowledge obfuscates some particular interest or ideological bias beneath it; rather, the role of the master is far more extensive than this. Its decisions can be thought to have a performative effect in certain instances, because it does not only decipher objective knowledge, but, rather, gives knowledge its objectivity through its centrality and power.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, New York: Key Press (2008) p.22.

<sup>9</sup> Žižek, “Four Discourses,” p.88.

<sup>10</sup> Žižek, “Fetish,” p.76.

For Žižek, like Lacan, the authority and power of the master has the structure of the logic of the signifier — in Lacanian ontology, the logic of the signifier is the basis of all cultural and social structure.<sup>11</sup> This logic describes how the intervention of a particular signifier retroactively structures the set of other signifiers so that ‘the thing in question becomes [...] *what it already was*.’<sup>12</sup> To cite one of Žižek’s favoured illustrations of the performative nature of the signifier’s structuring effect: there is nothing *a priori* “King-like” in the figure of the monarch; however, he becomes “King-like” when subjects treat him as such. In other words, things appear as what they are performatively as a result of the structuring effect of S1.

This performative power means that the Party not only decides on which line or interpretation to take, but in doing so gives to those interpretations an objectivity that determines the relationship of others to this knowledge. In the case of the subject, the knowledge addresses it as an object, *objet a*, that has no being beyond its determination by knowledge — hence, the subject is reduced to a pure negative, a barred subject, \$, in the place of production. In the case of socialism, knowledge was revealed to have a violent character insofar as it demanded subjects to reach productivity targets, or transform themselves into the new men and women of socialism.

In Stalinism, Žižek shows how this relationship reaches a perverse apogee as a result of the Party’s almost unparalleled power over every aspect of social life and its accordant belief that it was both tasked with and able to pursue the total reorganisation of society given its Power and the universality of its knowledge. Žižek refers to the ideological distortion that created this relationship as ‘the totalitarian misrecognition of the performative dimension.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Trans. Russell Grigg, London: Routledge (1993) p.184.

<sup>12</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.24.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, pp.164-5.

That is to say, along with the belief that the Party's knowledge was All, this perspective reduced everything that was other to the "objective" knowledge of the Party to a meaningless, subjective "scrap" or "waste" that could be dispensed with, since, from the perspective of this knowledge, it was worthless. We can see the effect of the emergence of a totalitarian misrecognition in the pure unfalsifiable circularity of Stalinist reason. In the political sphere Žižek draws attention to this circularity in the relationship between the Party and the People.<sup>14</sup> The People's support for the Party is taken by the Party to be an objective fact, guaranteed by the laws of History. The Party, then, takes the position that anyone who does not support the Party, is a "waste," a mistake, something that can be discarded because it does not fit into its objective knowledge of History and, as such, is superfluous in the grand scheme of History. The truth of this reasoning is the performativity that it overlooks. The relationship between the Party and the People is not guaranteed by the Other of History, which the Party supposedly has knowledge of; rather, it is the Party that defines both what counts as History and the People. What it overlooks, in other words, is that 'the People are only the People because the Party refers to them as such [...]'<sup>15</sup>. The misrecognition of this performative dimension is highly problematic, because it means that those who do not support the Party, 'those who work against its rule,' are "objectively" no longer part of the People but, rather, its "enemy."<sup>16</sup> As such, they can be dispensed with, imprisoned and even destroyed, given that they have no positive worth according to the Party's objective knowledge of History.

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<sup>14</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, pp.164-5.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.190.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.165.

### 2.2.2. The Cynical Mode of Subjectivity

For Žižek, the dominant mode of ideological subjectivity in socialism takes the form of ideological cynicism, although, as we will shortly see, in its revolutionary phase the Stalinist misrecognition also produces a different form of ideological perversion. When we look at how the relationship between S1 and S2 functions in socialism, we can see why the university discourse is likely to be especially conducive of an extremely cynical political culture. As the role of the master, S1, demonstrates, the underlying political character of the moment of the decision is still present in the university discourse. At a public level, however, it is repressed and represented as merely the result of a neutral-objective knowledge about the state of society. As such, the university discourse describes a political system in which individuals are likely to realise that these political decisions are contingent on the ideological whims of those in power, but are nevertheless unable to raise this point in public given that the nature of these decisions continues to be hidden at an ideological level. As a result, the relationship between S2 and S1 appears likely to produce the disenchanted political subjectivity of the modern cynic at the level of both those in power and those who are left powerless under socialism.

For Žižek, what characterises the cynical mode of subjectivity is its apparently post-ideological character. Whereas ideology is traditionally conceived as ‘a lie experienced as truth’<sup>17</sup>, the nature of the master’s gesture in the university discourse distorts the function of ideology so that it is no longer taken seriously, even by those who wield power. For Žižek, this happened in Stalinism with dialectical materialism which became an ideology that ‘was not to be believed in’ but, rather, ‘*ritualistically enacted*’ to legitimate the irrepressibly political nature of the Party’s power and its decisions.<sup>18</sup> As this power overran any sense of

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<sup>17</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.27.

<sup>18</sup> Žižek, “HCC,” p.110.

the neutrality of the knowledge on which it was supposedly based, its ideological character was such that it no longer pretended to be a “lie that is taken seriously,” even by its authors. As a result, S2, knowledge became mere ideology, a pure ‘means of manipulation.’<sup>19</sup>

For Žižek, a similar form of ideological cynicism was found among the general population who knew all too well that the official ideology was a lie, that the system was highly exploitative and that the Party ruled only for the benefit of the higher echelons of a highly stratified bureaucracy, even as it “feigned to rule” in the name of the People.<sup>20</sup> The catch for Žižek, and the reason why the system did not collapse under the weight of its own perverse character, was that, despite this knowledge, subjects continued to act *as if* they supported the Party and were enthusiastic about the cause of building socialism.<sup>21</sup> For Žižek, this logic defined socialist societies far beyond Stalinism through to the stagnant, post-totalitarian, late-socialist societies.

Žižek explains the structure of this mode of socialist ideology as a form of perversion that took the form of a “fetishistic disavowal.” Clinically, disavowal is a form of denial. The paradigmatic case in Lacanian psychoanalysis is the denial of the trauma of castration, whereby the male child confronts his mother’s lack of a penis.<sup>22</sup> The fetishistic disavowal, however, does not lead to this knowledge being wholly rejected. Rather, it is displaced onto another level or object – the fetish – which functions to make the knowledge of the trauma bearable.<sup>23</sup> The result of this fetishistic disavowal at the level of the subject is a disjunction between otherwise contradictory ideas that come to be held and continue to operate side by side. For Žižek, the fetishistic disavowal describes the psychical structure of the form of

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<sup>19</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.27.

<sup>20</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.226.

<sup>21</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.225.

<sup>22</sup> Žižek, “Fetish,” p. 70. See also: Jean Laplanche and Jean Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, London: Karnac Books (1973) p.118.

<sup>23</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.66.

“dual consciousness” that Lesek Kolakowski identified as a particular feature of socialist societies.<sup>24</sup> The subject is thus split between the level of enunciation and enunciated content and is able to fully acknowledge this split: “I Know Very Well, But All the Same...” as the title of Octave Mannoni’s (2003) essay on the subject of fetishistic disavowal puts it.<sup>25</sup> For Žižek, the subject of socialism accepts the untruth of ideology in the same way that one might accept a traumatic perception through disavowal: “I know very well” the lie of ideology “but all the same” I will act as if I do not know it. As Žižek describes apropos the subject of the cynical mode of ideology and the fetishistic disavowal: ‘[t]hey know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know.’<sup>26</sup>

For Žižek, the cynical subjectivity of socialism furnishes us with a key lesson about ideology. As Žižek writes in what is now a well known passage from *Sublime Object*:

The illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. [...]

The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the *ideological fantasy*. [...] The fundamental level of ideology [...] is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lesek Kolakowski, *The Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P.S. Falla, London: W.W. Norton (2005) p.864.

<sup>25</sup> Octave Mannoni, “I Know Very Well, But All The Same...” in *Perversion and the Social Relation* eds. Molly Anne Rothenbery, Dennis Foster, and Slavoj Žižek, Durham: Duke University Press (2003)

<sup>26</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.30.

<sup>27</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, pp.29-30.

On the basis of this Žižek identifies the limitation of the cynical position, describing it as a form of “enlightened false consciousness.” What subjects fail to confront in their self-distancing from the lie of ideology is how that ideology, in the form of fantasy, can continue to unconsciously structure social relationships and the effectivity of power. As Žižek puts it in the context of the commodity fetishist: ‘What they “do not know”, what they misrecognize, is the fact that in their social reality itself, in their social activity [...] they are guided by the [unconscious] illusion.’<sup>28</sup> For Žižek, this is why late-socialist societies continued to operate effectively despite the knowledge of its ideological character among its subjects. Its continual functioning relied not on what subjects thought they knew about ideological social reality but how they continued to act as if they did not know its ideological character. That is to say, the conscious ideological beliefs of socialist subjects existed alongside the continuing operation of the fantasy which structured and secured socialist social reality at the level of the unconscious.

### **2.2.3. The Political Psychoses of Stalinism**

At the core of Žižek’s Lacanian analysis of socialism is an account of the most violent and destructive moments of Stalinism. While the purges and the show trials might have seemed anomalous, the result of some personal excesses or historical aberrations perhaps, for Žižek these seemingly exceptional events represented the ‘immanent possibility’ of Stalinism, and displayed ‘the truth of the fundamental position itself.’<sup>29</sup> We can call this the “psychoticization” of the university discourse that results in a form of “political psychosis.” Here, I depart from Dean’s (2006) understanding of Žižek’s account of Stalinism. Dean argues that Žižek’s socialism is “split” between the university discourse and a “pervert’s

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<sup>28</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.28.

<sup>29</sup> Žižek, “Fetish,” p.88.

discourse.”<sup>30</sup> While a form of perversion does, indeed, play a large role in this breakdown – as we will see in the section that follows, it is a feature of the fetishistic position of the Party – I argue that this transformation is immanent to the structure of the university discourse and does not require the complication of an additional discursive structure. Moreover, Žižek has warned against the “liberal” mistake of conceiving of Stalin as ‘a perverse master [...]’<sup>31</sup> and elsewhere openly speaks of Stalinist subjectivity as being ‘closer to the psychotic position [...]’.<sup>32</sup>

For Lacan, psychosis results from the destruction — the precise mechanism is the form of refusal known as foreclosure — of certain key symbolic nodes, or “quilting points,” which are needed to structure reality and the subject. For Lacan, ‘when they are not established, or when they give way’ the result is psychosis.<sup>33</sup> Žižek argues there is an equivalent political and social form of psychosis. Although Žižek does not offer a precise chain of events, he suggests that at some point the Party’s ‘ritualistic discourse broke down’ resulting in an orgy of violence and terror that characterised the highest period of the purges, when the Party began to “devour” itself as well as society. These purges were a consequence of its total incapacity to ‘govern the country through normal executive measures.’<sup>34</sup> What this means is that Stalinist society during this period lacked the necessary secure quilting points that allow a discourse to function ordinarily. We can point here to the role of the Party as the performatively empowered master. This incredible power, however, eventually comes back to haunt it. By demanding that ever more new truths be accepted and that subjects erase even

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<sup>30</sup> Dean, *Žižek's Politics*, p.79.

<sup>31</sup> Žižek, *DSST?*, p.119.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.186. With due respect to Dean, Žižek’s position was a relatively obscure before the translation of Žižek’s *Sublime Hysteric*, which only became available after the publication of Dean’s work. In this work Žižek directly refers to “political psychosis” in the title of chapter 10.

<sup>33</sup> Lacan, *Seminar III*, pp.268-9. Žižek discusses this as a possible way towards the onset of psychosis in *Sublime Object*, see p.78.

<sup>34</sup> Žižek, *DSST?*, pp.118-9.

the memory of what only yesterday had been true, in turn, destabilises the whole structure of the university discourse. The Party's actions eventually collapse the stable and formal set of rules needed to order and structure society when reality becomes merely what the Party demands of the subject at any single moment.<sup>35</sup>

Just as subjects loses its symbolic bearings with the foreclosure of these formal nodal points, their absence at a social level results in a disintegration into a maelstrom of political psychosis. For the subject, the end result of this lack of symbolic divisions and established differences is the proliferation of aggressive rivalries and libidinal attachments to imaginary others.<sup>36</sup> Žižek sees something similar happening at the political level in Stalinism with the explosion of rivalries, tensions and endless cycles of accusations. Referencing Freud's (1979) reading of the case of Judge Schreber, Žižek argues that the search for enemies from all social classes was a kind of paranoid construction that formed part of a desperate attempt to *recover* some kind of order and a minimal form of cognitive mapping out of the chaos.<sup>37</sup> However, given that these accusations were directed against the remaining figures of authority and power — party bosses, even figures within the security services — they only furthered the dissolution of the social link and exacerbated the cycle of destruction.<sup>38</sup> The imaginary, immanent logic of aggression characteristic of paranoid psychosis, thus, drove political actors to 'violence directed towards an enemy.'<sup>39</sup>

For Žižek, the second key feature of the psychoticization of Stalinism is that the social law begins to function like the superego.<sup>40</sup> As Žižek tells us, the fundamental feature of the

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<sup>35</sup> Žižek, "Fetish," p.79.

<sup>36</sup> Russell Grigg, "From the Mechanism of Psychosis to the Universal Condition of the Symptom: On Foreclosure" in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. Danny Nobus, New York: Other Press (1999) p.57.

<sup>37</sup> Žižek, *DSST?*, p.119, *IDLC*, pp.29-250.

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, *DSST?*, pp.120.

<sup>39</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.155.

<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.160.

superego 'is an impossible injunction that makes the subject feel guilty.'<sup>41</sup> For Lacan, this injunction is always an injunction to *Jouis!*, "Enjoy!"<sup>42</sup>. This enjoyment does not mean pleasure as such, but, rather, refers to a kind of "deadly" *jouissance*, that is prohibited upon entry into a universal order of language. Paradigmatically, the superego is the other side of the public or social law, marking the irrationality of our acceptance of it.<sup>43</sup> In the case of the subject, it is the link between the symbolic Law and the maternal Thing that was prohibited upon entry into the symbolic order of language.<sup>44</sup> Its obscene dimension resides in how it enjoins us to do something that is impossible. It might demand that we sacrifice all enjoyment, while mocking us when we find that this very renunciation produces a *jouissance* of its own.<sup>45</sup> Alternatively, it might directly demand that we "enjoy" knowing that we can never satisfy this itch. In Stalinism, the social law itself begins to function like the superego because it takes a similarly paradoxical form of demanding something that is inevitable, that we have no escape from. Žižek articulates this logic as follows: '*you must because it is objectively necessary!*'<sup>46</sup> In a nod to the superegoistic character of Kant's categorical imperative and the universal nature of the dialectical laws of History, Žižek describes the 'Stalinist "categorical imperative"' as "it is your duty to realise a process governed by laws that are independent of your will!"<sup>47</sup>

The superegotisation of the social law results from the position of the Party within the university discourse. As the point of intersection between S1 and S2, total authority and the total knowledge of reality, the Party has the power to define the contours and limits of social

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<sup>41</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.160.

<sup>42</sup> 'Nothing forces anyone to enjoy, except the superego. The superego is the imperative of *jouissance* – Enjoy!' Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p.3.

<sup>43</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.160.

<sup>44</sup> Žižek, *LA*, pp.150-2.

<sup>45</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.160.

<sup>46</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.160.

<sup>47</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.160.

reality. As we have seen with the category of the People, it can decide who is included and excluded from the social body. The result is that it leaves any particularity — *objet a* in the position of the other in the Stalinist university discourse — in an impossible position, totally subordinated to the All as defined and described by the Party. This perverse logic culminates in the Stalinist show trials where the Party constituted all necessity and operated like the superego imperative.

For the accused, it was as if there was no “reality” outside the superego of the Party, outside its obscene and malevolent imperative; the only alternative to this superego imperative was the void of the abominable Real, the confession that the Party demanded was the only way for them to avoid the “loss of reality.”<sup>48</sup>

The obscene impossibility of this demand on the subject achieves its purest form with the subject who decides to confess, demonstrating its adherence to the Party’s reality, only to find that in doing so they are also excluded as a traitor. The psychotic structure in operation here is revealed more patently when this logic is confronted from the perspective of the individual subject. Where does this leave the subject outside of the decision of the Party? Precisely, in the non-space of nowhere. There is only the inescapable, suffocating, all-encompassing Other of the Party, simultaneously demanding every fibre of the subject’s being, even as that subject is deemed worthless. Žižek calls this the post-tragic character of the Stalinist victim.<sup>49</sup> The accused of the show trials were not even given the dignity of retaining their own authenticity, their own being, *a*, but, rather, were reduced to a pure substanceless scrap, \$.

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<sup>48</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.161.

<sup>49</sup> Žižek, *DSST?*, p.97.

### 2.3. The Party as Fetish, the Subject as Pervert

The crucial political insight that Žižek draws from his analysis of socialism and Stalinism as the discourse of the university is the problematic position and power of the Party. Its extraordinary role can be viewed insofar as it sustains the central dynamics of the discourse of the university. As we have seen, the Party is both legitimated by its access to this knowledge at the same time that it also operates to constitute this knowledge and its objectivity in its role as the master, S1. With regard to its relationship to subjects, the Party not only has the power to deprive them of everything, reducing them to the “waste” of History, but also, as we will see shortly, legitimates their actions.

What gives the Party this incredible political and social force is its position. For Žižek, the Party occupies the role of the fetish in its relationship to the Other in the precise analytical sense of a signifier that operates as the repudiation of castration at the same time that it stands in for the Other. What differentiates the fetish from a “normal” master-signifier can be revealed by drawing a comparison with the phallic signifier. The phallic signifier also functions as a point of universality. It is the paradoxical point that both stands for universality — in the discursive context, “meaning” — at the same time that it indicates a lack — a point of emptiness, or nonsense. As such, the phallic signifier is, in the last instance, always a signifier without signified.<sup>50</sup> The fetish is a similar phallic element, however, the crucial difference between it and the phallic signifier is that it disavows this castrative dimension and stands for the Other without lack or absence. That is to say, the empty place that the phallic signifier indicates is lost when the fetish occupies this position. As such, the fetish enacts a direct “short-circuit” to the Universal without passing through the lack. As Žižek puts it: ‘[i]n fetishism, the phallic signifier, is immediately established as *All*.’<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Žižek, “Fetish,” pp.70-1.

<sup>51</sup> Žižek, “Fetish,” p.71.

For Žižek, then, the Party is a fetish insofar as it is a particular that is “immediately” the Universal, rather than the stand-in for the absent universal. Žižek contends that this is clear when we consider the political function of the Party and its relation to the elements that it represents and embodies.

[N]ext to and other than classes, social strata, social groups and subgroups, and their economic, political and ideological organizations, that constitute in a group the different parts of the socio-historical universe ruled by the objectives of social development, existed, furthermore, *the Party* — the immediate and individual incarnation of these objective laws, the short circuit, the paradoxical intersection between the subjective will and objective laws.<sup>52</sup>

The position of the Party as a fetish is reflected at an epistemological level insofar as its members are assumed to have access to the perspective of what Žižek calls “metalanguage,” a form of “god’s eye view,” a “view from nowhere” inasmuch as the subject of the Party is conceived to be exempt from the universal substance of differences and able to preside over and pass judgement upon them, overlooking their own inherently ‘partial position of enunciation.’<sup>53</sup> The Party, then, is thought to have a similar status to the traditional conception of the Hegelian philosopher since it is believed to be the embodiment of the universal that also knows the totality of the objective state of social reality. In other words, it is the self-knowing pinnacle and embodiment of the objective laws of History.<sup>54</sup>

The crucial political point stemming from Žižek’s critique of Stalinism is that this amounts to the fundamental position, and mistake, of every totalitarian politics. As Žižek puts it, totalitarianism ‘does not draw its legitimacy from some extra-societal body, but by

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<sup>52</sup> Žižek, “Fetish,” pp.67-8, *SH*, p.186.

<sup>53</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.125.

<sup>54</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.186.

granting an element of society itself (class, race, or even religion in the form of a force of society) the role of the immediate embodiment of the universal interests of Society.’<sup>55</sup> In the case of Stalinism, this particular element is the fetish of the Party. While Žižek will later draw back from the critique of totalitarianism as he is sceptical as to its value as anything other than part of a liberal democratic blackmail, he nevertheless continues to hold that the fetishistic position of the Party, or, for that matter, any other political actor or organisation, is inherently problematic and must be avoided by any future radical political project.<sup>56</sup>

At this point, one might be asked what produces the totalitarian position? That is, why does a particular element think it can stand-in for the All? Ultimately, for Žižek what causes this misrecognition is the emergence of an all encompassing socio-political fantasy. Indeed, as Žižek writes in *The Most Sublime Hysteric* (2014[1988]), in totalitarianism it is the social fantasy ‘that is in power.’<sup>57</sup>

Following Lacan, Žižek argues that the purpose of fantasy is to fill out the lack in the Other. In terms of the sexual relationship of individuals, the fantasy would function to realise sexual *rapport* between two individuals, while concealing the impossibility of a wholly harmonious relationship.<sup>58</sup> At the level of political ideology, social fantasy functions in a similar manner. Its primary function is to cover over the Real of antagonism — the essential rupture that characterises all socio-symbolic orders. To put it in different terms, in the ideological field socio-political fantasies realise the utopia of a *class rapport*, in which each group and element have a defined and specific place within a harmonious social totality. In Žižek’s paradigmatic example, the social fantasy of fascism realises the relationship of a

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<sup>55</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.191.

<sup>56</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.380.

<sup>57</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.155.

<sup>58</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.152.

corporatist society by way of the displacement of antagonism onto the figure of the Jew, which in turn becomes a knot of obscene *jouissance* within the fascist community.<sup>59</sup>

The Party's fantasy works in a similar manner. It functions as the realisation of the impossible Other that legitimises the Party's position. That is to say, the fantasy of the Party is the totality of History articulated as the objective laws of development that dialectical materialism describes, or, in a different context, the fantasy of the People that the Party embodies. What differs in the case of the Party's fantasy in comparison to other social fantasies is that it does not only cover and obscure the lack, but, rather, through the Party's position as a fetish comes to directly rule all aspects of society. As such, the Party's fantasy is a perverse fantasy, which Lacan describes as a fantasy with an "inverted" form.<sup>60</sup> The inversion that Lacan speaks of can be seen with regard to how the subject relates to fantasy. With the perverse fantasy, the subject does not see itself as a subject but 'determines [itself] as object.'<sup>61</sup> For Žižek, the political implications of the perverse fantasy can be seen in how the subject determines itself as the instrument of the fantasy of the Other and, as a result, is ready to sacrifice all for the Cause. As a result, the Stalinist Communist is ready to undertake all kinds of otherwise horrible acts for the sake of the Other. As Žižek argues, the Stalinist Communist 'adopts the position of the pure instrument of the big Other's Will: it's not my responsibility, it's not I who am actually doing it, I am merely an instrument of a higher Historical Necessity.'<sup>62</sup> The obscene *jouissance* of its sacrifice can be sustained and tolerated by the subject precisely because it is not *their* enjoyment; rather, it is displaced onto the fantasmatic Other.

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<sup>59</sup> see Žižek, *SOI*, pp.140-4, *IDLC*, pp.260-2.

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* London: Norton (1998) p.185.

<sup>61</sup> Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.185.

<sup>62</sup> Žižek, *DSST?*, p.112.

For Žižek, the perverse fantasy empowers the Party to take the fetishistic position which leads to the disastrous character of Stalinism as a university discourse. With regard to its misrecognition of its performative function and its metalinguistic perspective, the fantasy operates to justify the Party's position. On the basis of the fantasy, it is said that '[w]hen the communist speaks and acts as a communist, it is the objective necessity of history itself that speaks and acts through his body.'<sup>63</sup> In both cases, fantasy thus provides a form of "ontological cover" justifying the Party's horrific acts and its superegoistic demands on the basis of its supposed insight into historical necessity. Moreover, it gives to the Party what seems to be its extraordinary character, admitted by Stalin when he writes, citing Lenin: "We Communists are a people of a special mould. We are made of a special stuff."<sup>64</sup> From Žižek's Lacanian perspective, this special stuff is *objet petit a*, the fantasmatic stuff that allows it to become the impossible incarnate of the non-existent Other.<sup>65</sup> That is to say, as *objet a*, the Stalinist communist is the object misperceived as the Thing, as Žižek defines the sublime object of an ideological system.<sup>66</sup> For Žižek, Stalin's admission is not merely ideological propaganda or a matter of political aesthetics. Rather, it describes the fantasmatic support that enables the disasters of Stalinism.

## 2.4. Marx's Fantasy

For Žižek, the socio-political role of fantasy is pivotal for understanding Stalinism as an ideological phenomena and a discursive structure. As aforementioned, according to Žižek's

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<sup>63</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.188.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph V. Stalin, *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik): Short Course*. (1939) [Online] accessed from: <http://marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1939/x01/ch04.htm> accessed on 29.3.11. Last accessed on: 13.2.2015.

<sup>65</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.234.

<sup>66</sup> Žižek, *FA*, p.30. The logic of the *objet petit a*, as Žižek writes, is 'the original lost object which in a way coincides with its own loss, it is precisely the embodiment of this void,' Žižek, *SOI*, pp.178, 54.

Lacanian analysis, its centrality to the Party's power and the inverted form it took worked to produce some of the great tragedies of emancipatory leftist politics in the twentieth century. If Žižek is going to return to this tradition, then, it is crucial to identify the source of its previous errors. It is for this reason that an engagement with the work of Marx is vital for Žižek. He argues that the fantasmatic legitimacy of a revolutionary politics can be traced back to his work. While this does not mean that Stalinism can be wholly reduced to the texts of Marx, or Engels or Lenin, as some of Žižek's contemporaries have argued,<sup>67</sup> Žižek nevertheless thinks that Marx's errors played a significant role in the disasters of Stalinism. Essentially, while Žižek has several issues with Marx's work there is one error that results from Marx's incomplete critique of Utopianism that is central to Žižek's critique. We will call this "Marx's fantasy."

For Žižek, Marxist theory is defined by its metapolitical character. Žižek takes this category from Jacques Rancière's typology of political forms in *Disagreement* (1999).<sup>68</sup> For Rancière, "metapolitics" is a deficient form of politicisation because it legitimises and limits the political moment on the basis of some objective knowledge. For Žižek, as with Rancière, metapolitics is deficient because it does not allow the politicisation of this knowledge. As a form of metapolitics, Žižek argues that "scientific socialism" politicised a whole field of previously apolitical relations, but, nevertheless, also limited this politicisation insofar as it reduced politics to merely the determined superstructure of an economic base. As such, Žižek argues that it was characterised by a "cancellation" of politics at the very point at which it limited the political moment to an effect of certain objective socio-economic processes. As

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<sup>67</sup> See for example, Michel Foucault, "Power and Strategies" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper, New York: Pantheon (1980) pp.134-145.

<sup>68</sup> For Rancière's discussion of metapolitics within the typology of politics proper, archepolitics and parapolitics see Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, London: University of Minnesota Press (1999) pp.81-93.

Žižek argues, Marxist metapolitics reduced the political moment to a ‘shadow theatre for events on another scene.’<sup>69</sup> A prime example of the repression of the political moment can be seen in how classical Marxism attempts to discredit the supposedly partial gaze of ideological knowledge — limited by class position or role in the economic processes — with a revolutionary knowledge supposedly based upon an objective knowledge of the totality of socio-economic processes.<sup>70</sup> The metapolitical thrust of Marxism was also reflected in the very premise of a “scientific socialism” which, as Žižek argues, aimed for ‘the transformation of the “administration of people” into the “administration of things” within a fully self-transparent rational order of collective will.’<sup>71</sup> While Marxist theory did not directly institute the socialist university discourse, as we can see from its metapolitical character, its political form was wholly amenable to it.

For Žižek, this metapolitical form was the result of the specific form of fantasy that was at its heart: the big Other of History. This fantasy can be traced back to a theoretical error that resulted from the incomplete critique of utopianism in Marx’s work. Rather, according to Žižek’s critique, the error of Marx’s work occurs at precisely the point at which the latter attempted to escape the idealism of utopian socialism. Marx’s critique of utopianism remains incomplete because it focuses upon only one form of utopianism. In the *Communist Manifesto* (2002) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argue that the mistake of utopian socialism resides in its failure to fully comprehend the historical tendencies that direct and set the parameters of the form and goal of political action. As a result of this mistake the utopians conceive of socialism as the realisation of a “true Idea,” some eternal and universal basis that is common to All humankind. As Marx and Engels put it, utopians attempt to realise

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<sup>69</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.224.

<sup>70</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.227.

<sup>71</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.224.

socialism not on the basis of 'true requirements, but the requirements of Truth; not the interests of the proletariat, but the interests of Human Nature, of Man in general, who belongs to no class, as not reality, who exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy.'<sup>72</sup>

For Marx and Engels, then, the problem with utopian socialism is a result of an epistemological and political error at its centre.<sup>73</sup> Their failure to conceive of socialism on the basis and as a consequence of already existing historical transformations and socio-political struggles leads utopian socialists to rely on a metaphysical truth as the basis of the future. As well as making it difficult to conceive of the transition to socialism, other than as a society created by some great parental figure and handed down to the people, the utopian position seems likely to base this future society on some historical bourgeois element that is misrecognised as eternal truth.

For Žižek, however, Marx and Engels do not push the critique of utopianism far enough. He argues that in their response to the utopian socialists there are two equally problematic forms of utopian thinking inherent to their own conception of socialism. The first form of problematic utopianism in Marx and Engels's work is found in the dialectics of revolutionary transformation that they employ to conceive of the passage to socialism. The passage that Žižek most frequently refers to in this instance is Marx's necessitarian and evolutionist claim that Mankind 'inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since close examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.'<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore, London: Penguin (2002) p.249-250. See also Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *MECW*, vol.5, New York: Progress Publishers (1976) pp. 455-7.

<sup>73</sup> See Avineri Schlomo, *Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1968) pp.148-9, 67-68.

<sup>74</sup> Karl Marx, "Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*," in *MECW*, vol.29. New York: Progress Publishers (1987) p.263.

In this particular understanding of revolutionary transformation, Marx and Engels conceive of the forces of production as the drivers of historical development and the determinate factor of the form of the relations of production. In what was to become the basis of the base-superstructure relationship that characterised the position of orthodox Marxism, increased productive capability was assumed to produce a conflict between the forces and the relations of production found in the contradiction between private property and already-socialised production, which produces the conditions for revolution and the basis for socialism, the social formation that resolves this problem by establishing the relations of production proper to the development of the forces of production. If the capitalist form of private ownership is responsible for capitalism's crisis riven nature, then socialism will deliver a society which is rational, productive, without crisis or waste.

For Žižek, Marx and Engels's conception of socialism is problematically utopian insofar as it assumes a big Other of History, in the form of some extra-historical logic that is presumed to work to produce the revolution that leads to socialism and determines its form. We have already seen the faith in this logic emerge in the fantasy of the Party as one aspect of the knowledge that operated in "really existing socialism" *qua* university discourse and as the basis of the perverse misrecognition of the communist revolutionary. According to Žižek, conceiving of socialism in this way is also problematic insofar as deriving socialism from the symbolic contents of capitalism produces an ideological utopianism by virtue of the fact that they are conceiving of the form of socialism on the basis of a central aspect of capitalism. As such, Žižek argues that the Marxist conception of socialism was ultimately a capitalist fantasy. We have already seen that fantasy describes an imaginary scenario that realises a totality without its necessary "impossibility" *qua* the Real of its antagonism. For Žižek, socialism was precisely such a fantasy insofar as it was conceived as the capitalist forces of

production without the fetters of private property. That is to say, as conceived by Marx, socialism was capitalism *minus* its “impossibilities,” the productive forces that guaranteed the ‘incessant development’ of productive capability without their contradictions.<sup>75</sup> As Žižek writes:

in a way, the critics of Communism were right when they claimed that Marxian Communism is an impossible fantasy — what they did not perceive is that Marxian Communism, this notion of a society of pure unleashed productivity outside the frame of Capital, was a fantasy inherent to capitalism itself, the capitalist inherent transgression at its purest, a strictly ideological fantasy of maintaining the thrust towards productivity generated by capitalism, while getting rid of the “obstacles” and antagonisms that were - as the sad experience of “actually existing capitalism” demonstrates - the only possible framework of the actual material existence of a society of permanent self-enhancing productivity.<sup>76</sup>

The consequences of this fantasy were pervasive and lasting. In “Dialectical and Historical Materialism,” Stalin develops Marx’s standard schema, legitimating Soviet Socialism by arguing that it is ‘free from exploitation’ and the irrationalities and absurdities of capitalist crisis and waste as a result of the accelerated rates of development now that the capitalist fetters to growth have been removed.<sup>77</sup> Of course, the image presented by Stalin is an attempt to both justify and obscure the reality of oppression, waste, exploitation and alienation that was all too patent in socialism. But it also confirms that “really existing socialism” did not represent a break from capitalism but, instead, an attempt to realise its own fantasy.<sup>78</sup> This becomes all too evident when we look towards its productivity obsessed developmental

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<sup>75</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.53.

<sup>76</sup> Žižek, *FA*, pp.18, 19.

<sup>77</sup> Stalin, “Dialectical and Historical Materialism,” p.39.

<sup>78</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.188.

policy, and the fetishisation of Stakhanovite figures, the work camp and the five-year plan. For Žižek, as a result, socialism was based on a fantasy that was little more than the symptom of capitalism.

The second form of utopian thinking that Marx and Engels failed to identify and overcome in their work is perhaps even more problematic insofar as it laid the ground for the totalitarian misrecognition of the Party. For Žižek, the problem with Marx's utopianism was not only that it was a capitalist fantasy. Rather, Žižek argues we must also call into question Marx's utopian thinking insofar as its very *form* was fantasmatic due to the fact that it conceived of the future society of socialism as a rational, harmonious whole, a society *without a symptom*.<sup>79</sup> This fantasy is found, for example, in Marx's belief that the end of capitalism will inaugurate a qualitatively new stage of history.<sup>80</sup> For Žižek, on the contrary, it is impossible to overcome the dimension of the Real *qua* antagonism because all societies are characterised by a point of historical excess and contestation. The belief that this Real can be abolished or that some social reality can escape from it is always the taking hold of fantasy in the subject. For Žižek, the conception of socialism within Marx's work that formed the utopian imaginary of orthodox Marxism and, ultimately, Stalinism exemplifies such a fantasy. Moreover, it was this form of fantasy of an All that was wielded by the Party to legitimate its rule and justify its position as a fetish. Only on these grounds could the Party conceive of itself as the direct embodiment of the interests of the People. As a result, Žižek conceives of the violence of Stalinism as, in part, a result of this initial mistake in Marx's work. As Žižek rather dramatically puts it: "Real Socialism" is the price paid in blood for misunderstanding the dimension of *phantasy* in scientific socialism.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.137.

<sup>80</sup> Marx, "Preface," p.264.

<sup>81</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.153.

## 2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter we have outlined Žižek's Lacanian critiques of Stalinism and Marxism, and have demonstrated the connection between Marxist theory and the social order it played a part in creating. Žižek's analysis is not only important in terms of understanding Stalinism, however. Given Žižek's subsequent return to Marxism and Communism, this critique should also be understood as part of the political conditions on which this return is based. In terms of the Party, Žižek argues that its fetishistic character results in the destructive logic of Stalinism on the basis that, like the fetish, it attempted to deny the antagonism that constitutes every social order. In his critique of Marxism, Žižek finds its theoretical error in a fantasy of a big Other that resulted from Marx's incomplete critique of utopianism. For Žižek, as we will eventually see, any future Marxism must avoid these errors. Indeed, after Žižek's Marxist turn, his critiques remain in place, as does much of its Lacanian conceptual architecture. As such, Žižek will have to address and navigate around these problems if his work is to be taken seriously alongside his critique of Marxism and Stalinism. Given the disaster of socialism and the failures of Marxism in the twentieth century there can be no return to Marxist orthodoxy, according to Žižek. Žižek's Marxism, thus, will have to find a way to offer a political vision that does not delimit the political moment in the way that metapolitics does, and he will have to offer a conception of an alternative society that does not think its primary purpose is the rational management of the whole. Moreover, Žižek will have to conceive of a theory and practice of revolutionary critique and transformation that operates without the reliance on fantasy, and that accepts the lack and antagonism of every social order.

# Chapter 3: Žižekian Radical Democracy and its Discontents

## 3.1. Introduction

In the conclusion to the previous chapter we positioned Žižek's critiques of Stalinism and Marxism as part of the conditions for his later return to and rejuvenation of Marxist philosophy and politics. I argued that any return to Marxism would have to navigate these problems if it was committed to avoiding the repetition of this emancipatory political tradition's failures during the twentieth century. Yet, Žižek has not, strictly speaking, always been committed to this project of renewal.

Prior to his Marxist-turn, Žižek's Lacanian critique of Stalinism and Marxism was a key component of his argument for a "radical" democratic politics, which, he argued, was suitably equipped to resolve these problems. In *The Most Sublime Hysteric* and *The Sublime Object of Ideology* Žižek developed a theory of radical democracy that offered a way beyond the fantasmatic politics of totalitarianism. In these works Žižek argues that the great strength of democracy is that it is a form of political organisation that accepts and foregrounds the impossibility of occupying the position of universality and abolishing the antagonism that

characterises all social structures, the positions that Stalinism destructively attempted to realise through the Party's position as a fetish.

The question that this chapter attempts to answer is why this radical democratic position proved unsatisfactory for Žižek? Writing in the years shortly before the victory of the movements for democracy within the socialist bloc, in these early works Žižek presents democracy as the final solution to our political troubles. But yet, by 1991 doubts begin to creep into his work. *For They Know What They Do* (2008[1991]) and *Tarrying With The Negative* (1993) both indicate an increasingly sceptical view about whether a radical liberal democracy really is the final and only form of the organisation of political power, and, indeed, Žižek begins to suspect that democracy might be complicit in new forms of destructive political enjoyment and far less able to ensure that the lack in the Other is maintained than he initially thought.

In this chapter I will consider Žižek's radical democratic politics and explore why it became only a temporary solution to conceiving of an alternative mode of political organisation to totalitarianism. After outlining Žižek's theory of radical democracy as a potential solution to the temptation of totalitarian politics, I explore the conditions for and reasons that lead Žižek to his stark political volte-face and return to a form of Marxism and the philosophy of dialectical materialism, which he announced initially in *Metastases of Enjoyment*. In order to achieve this I will trace the development of Žižek's increasingly critical stance with regard to democratic politics in light of the limitations of really existing democracy and the political challenges that emerged in the post-socialist world. Alongside this, I will identify a certain deadlock in his own Lacanian position that characterises his early work. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to outline the historical and inter-theoretical challenges that provide the additional conditions of his change of political allegiance and

philosophical re-framing. In doing so, I will address one of the central aims of this project by demonstrating that, far from a mere whim on Žižek's behalf, his Marxism, and the subsequent development of a Marxist dialectical materialism was, *contra* Laclau (2000), based on a series of clearly locatable "political reflections" which guided and subsequently shaped the development and deployment of his dialectical materialism and new modes of critical analysis and political strategy.

### 3.2. Žižekian Radical Democracy

In *Sublime Object* Žižek claims an allegiance to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's radical democratic political project articulated in their highly influential work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001). The support is reciprocated by Ernesto Laclau who writes an enthusiastic and complementary introduction to Žižek's book. Žižek's democratic politics demonstrates several points of overlap with that of Laclau and Mouffe's, including the conception of the necessity of antagonism in every construction of social structure, the dismissal of the totalitarian position of a unified and singular conception of the good, and the critique of Marxist class essentialism in which it plays the role of the transcendental signified of all ideology.

However, there were always clear and crucial differences between Žižek's and Laclau and Mouffe's radical democracy. Most important among these was Žižek's apparent scepticism with regard to the strategic pluralism of radical democracy proposed by Laclau and Mouffe. For Laclau and Mouffe, radical democracy was an attempt to deepen and expand<sup>1</sup> the egalitarian and equivalential logics that characterise liberal democratic politics by multiplying its spaces of contestation and by creating hegemonic blocks of diverse groups

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<sup>1</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p.167.

and interests.<sup>2</sup> By way of contrast, Žižek retains a much more classically liberal democratic conception of democracy privileging the electoral process and its reduction of subjects to atomised individuals deciding the fate of society at the ballot box. The great strength of democratic politics, according to Žižek, is that it ensures that the place of power is rendered empty.

In this sense, Žižek's radical democratic position seems to be closer, in fact, to Claude Lefort's conception of democracy than Laclau and Mouffe's conception of radical democracy. In *The Political Forms of Modern Society* (1985) Lefort argues that the recognition of the empty space of political power by democratic peoples can be considered as the pivotal political shift in modernity. In democracy, every occupant of this space is a temporary and contingent incumbent whose power and authority has no transcendent guarantee.<sup>3</sup> As Claude Lefort puts it: 'The legitimacy of power is based on the people; but the image of popular sovereignty is linked to the image of an empty place, impossible to occupy, such that those who exercise public authority can never claim to appropriate it.'<sup>4</sup> The Lefortian conception of democracy proves eminently useful to Žižek because it directly addresses what his critique of totalitarianism found problematic within it. Democracy ensures that no one, not even the People, can occupy the place of Power. Re-purposing St. Just's famous quip, Žižek argues democracy is the society in which "one cannot rule innocently"<sup>5</sup> whereas the function of the notion of "the People" in the "People's democracies" of the socialist states was precisely to ensure that the Party could "rule innocently." In these states, as Žižek writes, 'Power is exercised in the name of the People as a positive, existing entity, which means that the person wielding Power no longer occupies a necessarily empty

<sup>2</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, pp.105, 133.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Lefort *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. J.B. Thompson, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (1985), pp.303-4.

<sup>4</sup> Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, p.279.

<sup>5</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.192.

position.’<sup>6</sup> According to Žižek, the pivotal feature of actual existing democracy, on the other hand, is that the person who occupies the place of power is no more than a “place-holder” of an empty, open space.

It is here that genuine open elections become a pivotal part of Žižek’s conception of democracy. Their function is to ensure that the empty place of power remains empty and demonstrate the non-existence of the People as a homogenous, unified mass. How is this so? For Žižek, while there is a sovereign moment in democratic elections the way that they are conducted means that we do not get “the People” but its dissolution in to a ‘dispersed collection of “citizens,” atomized individuals.’<sup>7</sup> “The People” of a democratic society, thus, retains a negative moment even as it expresses a certain sovereign will. As a result, while elections coordinate and ensure the legitimacy of a particular body and set of interests by giving them the right to occupy the place of Power, they also demonstrate that the occupant’s legitimacy is contingent, incomplete and temporary.

For Žižek, the key feature of democratic society is this moment of legitimation-dissolution. Democratic society names ‘a society that has an institutional structure whose “normal,” “regular” cycle of reproduction includes a moment when symbolic ties disappear, and therefore when the Real erupts: elections.’<sup>8</sup> Žižek conceives of this moment of eruption as the intervention of pure chance, contingency, a fundamentally irrational awakening when society puts itself at risk. That is to say, compared to the totalitarian suppression of the Real, which we have seen Žižek criticise at a number of levels, the key strength of liberal democracy is that it has found a way to ensure that this Real is foregrounded in the

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<sup>6</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.192.

<sup>7</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.192.

<sup>8</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.193.

institutional arrangement of a society. From his Lacanian perspective, liberal democracy is a far more effective political system.

Žižek's focus on liberal democratic elections, however, raises a question as to why he considers his position "radical" in any usual sense of the term? That is, why is Žižek's Lacanian conception of democratic elections considered "radical," as opposed to a mere variation of the standard liberal democratic kind? Žižek does not address this question directly, but as he develops his position it would seem that two aspects of his conception of democracy could plausibly be considered as candidates for his claim that it is "radical." First, Žižek argues that the "risk" inherent to liberal democracy is necessary. We must have the most liberal and open forms of elections possible so that this moment of "irrationality" can be fully felt, and power left to the absolute whim of isolated individuals.<sup>9</sup> To do this, Žižek suggests that regulation of the democratic moment must be minimalised as much as possible. Second, Žižek makes an argument for the propagation of a certain radical democratic attitude and ethics among subjects. We might call this Žižek's "democratic imaginary", that is, the acceptance at an ideological level of the constitutively irrational and contingent nature of the democratic moment as well as the empty space of power. As Žižek argues with regards to the danger that the democratic imaginary is set up to combat, we must accept that 'we always live in an interspace and in borrowed time; every solution is provisional and temporary, a kind of postponing of a fundamental impossibility.'<sup>10</sup>

### **3.2.1. The Totalitarian Temptation and the Democratic Imaginary**

The democratic imaginary is important within Žižek's radical democratic theory, because it combats what Laclau and Mouffe describe as the Jacobin Imaginary *qua* the belief in

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<sup>9</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.193.

<sup>10</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.xxix.

realising the illusory prospect ‘of a perfectly unitary and homogenous collective will that will render pointless the moment of politics.’<sup>11</sup> For Žižek, this belief also characterises the metapolitical tendency of Marxism and is at the root of the efficacy of Marx’s fantasy that also characterised Stalinism. More generally, Žižek characterises the Jacobin position as a belief that ‘the global solution-revolution is the condition of the effective solution of all particular problems.’<sup>12</sup>

We can address here a question regarding Žižek’s concern about the political efficacy of socio-ideological fantasy. We have already seen the disastrous results that occur when this fantasy takes hold at a political level, but it bears asking why precisely this fantasy is so attractive to subjects? Whereas for Laclau and Mouffe the political fantasy that characterises the “Jacobin Imaginary” was a kind of political naiveté, a miscalculation of past pre-deconstructive Reason, for Žižek it is a constant danger because it has a connection with the fundamental structure of subjectivity. The subject is always tempted to embrace a fantasy of wholeness or unity because of their fundamental libidinal structure.

Thus far, we have associated the subject and the signifier with castration and its disavowal through fetishism. At a libidinal level, however, castration describes the “loss” of *jouissance* — *qua* the substance of the subject’s being — that the subject is forced to forego upon becoming a “*parlêtre*”, a being of language. Following Lacan’s account of the subject, Žižek argues that the subject emerges only through the evacuation of their libidinal substance. As Žižek puts it, access to life ‘is paid for with the loss of enjoyment.’<sup>13</sup> Upon entry into the symbolic order, the subject must accept the impossibility of *jouissance* as substantial pre-symbolic Real *qua* Thing. In the paradigmatic example of the male child’s entry into the

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<sup>11</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p.2.

<sup>12</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.xxix.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, pp.73, see also p.136-8.

heteronormative family unit, the maternal Thing is prohibited, along with other female family members, thereby ending the subject's pre-symbolic unity with the Mother. The upshot of "successful" castration is that the initial "loss" is partly compensated for at the level of desire. In the same way that if the prohibition of incest is accepted the male child has access to all other females as objects of desire, the subject is compensated for the prohibition of the 'Thing-*jouissance*' by certain substitute objects, *objet petit a*, so that enjoyment is 'regained on the ladder of desire.'<sup>14</sup> These objects are the embodiment of the subject's lack, and function as a kind of absent Cause that delivers to the subject some modicum of "surplus-*jouissance*." However, as Žižek emphasises, despite this compensation the subject is always haunted by this original loss which persists in the form of a 'traumatic kernel' a dimension in the human subject that, following Lacan, Žižek names the "death drive." The death drive is a form of repetition of this initial loss and emerges as 'a fascination with a lethal Thing.'<sup>15</sup> The death drive can be associated with death because embracing the promise of the lethal Thing leads to the destruction of the subject at a symbolic level. If the subject of the signifier is based on the initial castrative process, then reversing this process leads to the return to the pre-symbolic, a-social state that is understood in psychoanalytic terms as psychosis. Žižek describes the Thing in terms of a horrible and horrifying plenitude of *jouissance*.<sup>16</sup> At the level of the subject it leads to catastrophe, 'radical self-annihilation,'<sup>17</sup> and the destruction of 'the symbolic texture through which so-called reality is constituted'<sup>18</sup>

For Žižek, this fascination with the Thing has a political correlate in the Jacobin Imaginary. We can see here how Žižek goes beyond Laclau and Mouffe's critique of

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<sup>14</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.170.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.204.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.146.

<sup>17</sup> Žižek, *LA*, p.64.

<sup>18</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.147.

totalitarianism, and why he conceives of the totalitarian temptation as one that always stalks the political realm. This “imaginary” is not just a mistaken political calculation or a result of a faulty pre-deconstructive rationality, but, rather, a consequence of the constitutive nature of desire in the human subject that results in the death drive *qua* fascination with a deadly, full enjoyment or *jouissance*. For Žižek, in other words, the desire for utopia is always the desire for the *utopia of desire* as the satisfaction and resolution of the constitutive loss that characterises the subject.

To return to Žižek’s critique of Stalinism, he suggests that the psychotisation of the Stalinist discourse and the disaster of “really existing socialism” was a result of a similar lust for the Thing. Within Stalinism this attraction to the lost Thing can be seen most clearly in the incestuous structure of the relationship of the Party to the People through the rejection of lack. The incestuous logic of Stalinism is highlighted by Žižek in the following passage in *The History of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course* (2008) where Stalin refers to the People as the Mother from which the Party obtain their power and their legitimacy.<sup>19</sup>

I think that the Bolsheviks remind us of the hero of Greek mythology, Antasus. They, like Antasus, are strong because they maintain connection with their mother, the masses, who gave birth to them, suckled them and reared them. And as long as they maintain connection with their mother, with the people, they have every chance of remaining invincible.<sup>20</sup>

In *Mastering Bolshevism* (1945), the pamphlet from which the quote comes from, Stalin recounts how the only threat to Antasus was the separation from his Mother. In the mythological tale, this was achieved by Hercules who deprived Antasus of the possibility of

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<sup>19</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.190.

<sup>20</sup> Stalin, *History of the Communist Party of The Soviet Union (Bolshevik)* n.p.

touching the Earth — of which his Mother was Goddess — by raising him up in the air.<sup>21</sup> The passage is “incestuous” not only in the choice of terms but in the structure between the All — of Earth, the Mother — and the subject. Moreover, the allusion to “invincibility” suggests an access to the All in the form of a plenitude of *jouissance* that the subject lacks. For Žižek, in other words, the totalitarian temptation realised in the totalitarian fantasy and the structure of Stalinism is a political attempt to overcome the lack that is constitutive of subjects at both an individual and collective level.

We can now understand with greater clarity why democracy was so important to Žižek. The great strength of democratic politics, in comparison to totalitarianism, is that it is a form of political organisation that maintains the ‘distance toward the Thing.’<sup>22</sup> For Žižek, democracy is the only social order that achieves what Žižek outlines in *Sublime Object* as the necessary task of all political theory: finding a ‘*modus vivendi*,’<sup>23</sup> with the death drive as a constitutive element of the human condition. At the level of political organisation this is achieved through democratic elections. This is reflected at the ideological level by the democratic imaginary, which, emphasising the lack and the empty nature of the space of political power, fosters the acceptance that the Thing ‘is “too hot” to be approached closely.’<sup>24</sup> In other words, by emphasising lack the democratic attitude accepts the impossibility of *das Ding* and, as such, is seen by Žižek as providing an effective defence against the temptation that leads to totalitarianism by relinquishing the lust, at a political level, for the maternal Thing.

Žižek’s equation of the political aims of certain ideologies with the libidinal dimension of the subject brings into sharper focus the role of the democratic imaginary in

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph Stalin, *Mastering Bolshevism*, New York: New Century Publishers (1945) pp.43-5.

<sup>22</sup> Žižek, *LA*, p.169.

<sup>23</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.xxvii-xxviii.

<sup>24</sup> Žižek, *LA*, p.169.

Žižek's conception of democracy. The democratic imaginary, in fact, is not only a political ideology but an attempt to address the fundamental deadlock of subjectivity. It raises the question as to whether the democratic imaginary is really capable of achieving this task. In fact, when we consider the democratic imaginary in Žižek's work more closely, we see that it clearly mirrors nothing less than the post-fantasmatic perspective of the subject after successful psychoanalytic treatment. In terms of psychoanalytic practice within the clinical setting "traversing the fantasy" has two aspects. First, confronting the symptom, those exceptional objects of desire that point towards some underlying non-knowledge structured by fantasy. Second, "going through the fantasy," where the subject realises 'how the fantasy-formation just masks, fills out a certain void, lack, empty place in the Other.'<sup>25</sup> The post-fantasmatic subject, then, can assume the non-existence of the Other and the impossibility of resolving the constitutive loss of libidinal substance. If the democratic imaginary is to guard against this libidinal danger at the political level, it would seem that it would have to achieve what Lacanian psychoanalysis has long conceived to be the result of clinical practice.

### **3.3. The Trouble With Democracy...**

While Žižek's theory of democracy seems to effectively address the problems inherent to totalitarian politics as well as offer an alternative to them, after 1991 the term radical democracy disappears from his work altogether. Alongside this, even in the works that immediately follow *Sublime Hysteric* and *Sublime Object*, we find Žižek waver and take an increasingly critical stance with regard to actually existing liberal democracy. For example, while still advocating a democratic position in *For They Know Not* Žižek nevertheless wonders aloud, after reflecting on the process of democratisation after the defeat of socialism

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<sup>25</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.80.

in the German Democratic Republic, whether the Left is ‘condemned to pledge all its forces to the victory of democracy?’<sup>26</sup> That said, our task for the remaining sections of this chapter is to attempt to answer the question: why did Žižek find the democratic position he adopted in *Sublime Object* so problematic? In essence, I contend that there are two sets of problems with Žižek’s conception of radical democracy that are important for understanding both Žižek’s change of political allegiance and the re-framing of his Lacanian-Hegelian project as a re-articulation of dialectical materialism. The first set of problems are internal to his own Lacanian-Hegelian understanding of democracy, and touch on some of the conceptual and practical difficulties of an effective “Žižekian” radical democracy. The second set emerge as a result of Žižek’s reflection on what happened in the new liberal democracies of Eastern-Europe, which undermines his faith in democratic politics.

### **3.3.1. The Theoretical Issues With Radical Democracy From a Lacanian Perspective**

At a theoretical level, the primary problem with Žižek’s theory of radical democracy is its equation of democratic elections with the category of the Real. This notoriously tricky category has two dominant uses within Žižek’s writing, which he draws attention to when speaking of ‘a certain fundamental ambiguity’ that pertains to the notion of the Real.<sup>27</sup> As he describes this ambiguity: ‘the Real designates a substantial hard kernel that precedes and resists symbolization and, simultaneously, it designates the left-over, which is posited or produced by symbolization itself.’<sup>28</sup> Clearly, democratic elections cannot be conceived of as Real in either of these two senses of the term, because they, albeit in different ways, indicate

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<sup>26</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.270.

<sup>27</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.36.

<sup>28</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.36, see also, *SOI*, pp.xxvi, 74, 86, 195.

something that resists or lies beyond the symbolic. The Real of the elections instead is something that *happens*, something that *is* Real. There is a third sense in which Žižek conceptualises the Real which, as we will see in the following chapters, is integral for Žižek's project to think through revolutionary political practice, where the symbolic itself *is rendered Real* as dispersed, open, inconsistent and without the support of the Other. That is to say, where the symbolic rather than an All, is rendered not-all. It would seem this would allow a much clearer understanding of what Žižek means when he describes elections as Real and in terms of a “dissolution of symbolic ties.” When understood according to this conception of the Real, elections would bring about a severing of the connections of structured political power and the hierarchy of differences that characterise a social order when the place of Power is emptied of its temporary occupants.<sup>29</sup> However, to what extent do elections really function as Žižek suggests? In the liberal democratic mode that Žižek seems to be alluding to with his conception of radical democracy, far from a moment of dissolution, elections are always part of a stable set of institutions and social arrangements. Moreover, democratic elections work because they are bound by certain symbolic rules and regulations. If these also dissolved we would no longer be talking about electoral democracy — although a “purer” form of democracy might be conceived in this sense. While certain sections of authority and power are replaced with each election the wider set of institutional interests and structures inherent to democratic societies most certainly still remain in an effective democratic society. Indeed, Žižek suggests as much when he describes democratic society as “a society that has an institutional structure whose “normal,” “regular” cycle of reproduction includes a moment when symbolic ties disappear.” As such, it is very difficult to see how Žižek can describe elections as Real in the sense that we have suggested — the dissolution of social ties — if this

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<sup>29</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.192, 194.

Real also relies on maintaining certain social ties. Approaching the problem from another angle, when Žižek describes democracy as Real he might mean it in a more normatively inclined manner, as in elections should be *more like* the Real. However, here problems still remain. If democracy is supposed to maintain an empty place of power, it is not certain how, when understood as a more extensive dissolution, the Real protects the empty seat of power becoming occupied permanently. As a result, it becomes very difficult to see how the empty place of power is maintained in any meaningful way by an evocation of the Real.<sup>30</sup>

The second problem with Žižek's theory of radical democracy concerns the connection of the democratic imaginary with the subject after "going through the fantasy." As I suggested above, the connection between the democratic imaginary and the subject's libidinal deadlock seems to suggest that the former resolves the latter at a political level. However, given that Žižek suggests that the libidinal deadlock is crucial in the emergence of totalitarian fantasies it would seem that the effectiveness of the democratic imaginary could only be ensured if it was accompanied by the subject's successful clinical treatment. The effectiveness of the democratic imaginary would require the clinical treatment of the masses. If this is what democratic society requires to be successful, it would seem a highly unworkable system.

Alternatively, Žižek might be suggesting that democracy itself serves to institute the kind of post-fantasmatic subjectivity that the democratic imaginary is supposed to cultivate. But, once again, this seems highly unlikely. In fact, if we consider the relationship between political power and political enjoyment, it seems that Žižek's conception of radical democracy has overlooked a key facet of liberal democracies. Far from producing the dissolution of socio-political libidinal attachments, in really existing democracies democratic

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<sup>30</sup> See also Adam Kotsko's excellent critique in *Žižek and Theology*, pp.14-6.

elections frequently operate to produce and encourage them. Politicians wield fantasies of “Nation” or “People,” or their “Enemies,” for the purpose of winning elections. Similarly, far from rational debate and the freeing of irrational attachments to political actors, democratic elections seem to foster these libidinal attachments in the “political tribalism” and “personality cults” that they encourage. On this level, it seems that Žižek is too closely wedded to the primarily symbolic conceptions of democratic practice that characterise Lefort’s and Laclau and Mouffe’s respective conceptions of democracy. For a Lacanian politics, surely there must also be a confrontation with the libidinal dimension of the subject’s relation to political power and authority. This seems to be absent in Žižek’s model of radical democracy.

### **3.3.2. Really Existing Democracy and its Discontents**

Žižek’s change in political position and his increasing scepticism towards liberal democratic politics was not only the result of the realisation of the theoretical limitations of a Lacanian conception of a radical democratic position, however. Žižek’s political reorientation was also the result of confronting the reality of “really existing” liberal democracy in light of the process of democratisation in Eastern Europe after the fall of socialism. As we have already seen, Žižek begins to question the limitations of democratic politics as this process occurs. Indeed, the context of the work in which he first raises these questions is telling. *For They Know Not* is composed from a series of lectures that Žižek delivered over the winter of 1989-1990 in Slovenia to an audience of radicals and academics during the drive for democratisation. Žižek raises the question with reference to what was happening in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) where he suggests that the greening of democracy

appeared as a mere ‘façade’ behind which lay the ‘grey flesh of capital.’<sup>31</sup> Citing the GDR once again, Žižek states that the democratic moment and the victory of the movements against socialism seemed to be only an interregnum for the integration of the territory of Eastern Europe ‘into the flux of capital.’<sup>32</sup> Reflecting on this process today, Žižek’s concerns, indeed, seem well founded. The IMF enforced a restructuring of much of Eastern Europe during this period, which led to a fire sale of public assets, mass privatisation, hugely favourable terms for foreign capital and the introduction of restrictive and repressive labour laws. Moreover, it has become evident that many of these decisions took place long before the democratic rights and structures demanded by the people had been assured, let alone the first elections held.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the hopes and optimism regarding what a liberal democratic politics might mean — a view that seems to have been shared by Žižek — has now been shown to have been wildly misplaced. Dean (2006) explains the situation as follows:

Democracy held out promises of hope and freedom, of arrangements that would enable people to determine collectively the rules and practices through which they would live their lives. But instead of collective governance in the common interest, people in the new democracies got rule by capital. Their political choices became constrained within and determined by the neoliberal market logics of globalized capitalism already dominating Western Europe, Great Britain, and the United States.<sup>34</sup>

With regard to Žižek’s previous optimism concerning the possibility held out by liberal democracy, the experience of democratisation in Eastern Europe could be said to demonstrate that, far from empty, the space of political power was already hegemonised by global

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<sup>31</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.271.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.271.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Williams and Geert Reuten “After the rectifying revolution: the contradiction of the mixed economy?” in *Capital and Class* no.49 (1993) p.81.

<sup>34</sup> Dean, *Žižek’s Politics*, p.103.

capitalism and its agents. Moreover, given the power of transnational capital's institutions and agents, this experience would seem to call into question the effectiveness of the democratic "dissolution" that Žižek had previously believed to be a key moment in democratic societies.

In the years that followed Žižek saw further limitations with democratic politics. As Žižek experienced first hand in the Balkan nations, the democratisation process saw the rise of nationalisms, ethnic hatred and interregional rivalry across former socialist states. This socio-political context seems to have focused his perspective on the limitations of liberal democratic politics. Writing about the situation in Yugoslavia in 1992 Žižek raises the question: 'Why does authoritarian nationalism overshadow democratic pluralism?'<sup>35</sup> Radically departing from his former position, Žižek highlights how anti-democratic forms of libidinally charged ideology were an effective, and frequently necessary supplement, to the formal universality of democratic rights.<sup>36</sup> In doing so, Žižek appears to confirm our previous concern regarding the neglect of questions of the libidinal dimension of politics in his prior conception of democratic organisation and practice.

In his subsequent analysis of Eastern European democracy, Žižek concludes that liberal democratic politics is not only insufficient in the face of the power of transnational capital, but that it also enables and encourages the mobilisation of "authoritarian" and "fundamentalist" forms of fantasy. For Žižek, democratic nations also produce and propagate fantasies of wholeness, unity and homogeneity, most commonly in terms of "the national Thing", that is, the fantasies of collectively practiced myths and modes of life that characterise the unity of the nation. Far from innocent, Žižek argues that it is the possession of the *jouissance* from the national Thing that plays a key role in the "ethnic tensions" and

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<sup>35</sup> Žižek, "Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead," p.59.

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.220.

rivalries in Eastern Europe. Revising his theory regarding the liberal polis, Žižek argues that the modern nation is not in fact able to institute the Real of the democratic process, even if liberal democracies successfully reduce individuals to abstract citizens, because the “nation” can never be reduced to a network of purely symbolic ties.<sup>37</sup> Rather, the nation is defined by ‘a kind of “surplus of the Real” that sticks to it’<sup>38</sup> and which gives to it its provisional unity. In Eastern European liberal democracies Žižek finds this “surplus” in a “national identity” coordinated around the national Thing that appeals ‘to the contingent materiality of “common root,” of “blood and social.”’<sup>39</sup> What Žižek’s analysis of Eastern Europe reveals is that liberal democracies, including radical democracy, overlook this at their peril. It also, however, calls into question his prior strict opposition between democracy and totalitarian politics. Far from opposites, Žižek’s experience of democratisation in Eastern Europe and the early years of democratic life in this region suggests that democracy includes an authoritarian moment in the forms of national unity that it evokes which has more than a passing resemblance to the totalitarian fantasy that characterised the most disastrous episodes under socialism.

### **3.4. Conclusion: Žižek's Theoretical and Political Deadlocks**

Žižek proposes his return to the Marxist project of dialectical materialism in 1995 shortly after reformulating his position on liberal democracy. Why did he make this move? It is my contention that it was precisely a response to the theoretical and political deadlocks that his own work faced at this point given the relative failures of his attempt to construct a theory and argument for a radical democratic politics.

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<sup>37</sup> Žižek, “Eastern European Liberalism,” p.38.

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, “Eastern European Liberalism,” p.38.

<sup>39</sup> Žižek, “Eastern European Liberalism,” p.38.

Between 1991's *For They Know Not What They Do* and 1993's *Tarrying With The Negative* Žižek comes to the end of what appears to be a theoretical-political cul-de-sac. Žižek developed a democratic politics in order to escape the consequences of totalitarianism. Yet, after his critique of democracy that alternative is no longer available to him. At a political level, while he maintains the importance of the critique of Marxism, the radical democratic alternative no longer seems feasible. Moreover, his early analysis of democracy that justified his position now appears severely limited, while new issues seem to also emerge. Most patently, the explosion of new forms of authoritarian political enjoyment, experienced in the flourishing of nationalism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere flooded the political form that was supposed to limit them. The limitations of liberal democracy also brought with it questions regarding the nature of the liberal democratic state, and its relationship to capital and class, which were wholly absent from his analysis during his short-lived radical democratic phase.

Yet, if the failure of his radical democratic position meant it was necessary to imagine political alternatives — as Žižek himself put it: is the Left 'condemned to pledge all its forces to the victory of democracy?'<sup>40</sup> — at this stage of his work there seemed to be no way to imagine and formulate these. For Žižek, the point of democratic politics was that it accepted the lack of the Other against the totalitarian Thing. Yet, while he remains resolutely critical of classical Marxism, he is no longer able to tread a path away from the forever looming disasters of totalitarianism via a liberal democratic politics, since, as we have seen, it does not resolve the problem of the subject's deadly obsession with *jouissance* at a political level — rather, as we have also seen, democracy seems to manipulate it and even encourage it in some instances. The alternative to democratic lack, however, is equally problematic. There is, thus,

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<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.270.

a certain theoretical deadlock in Žižek's early work that seems to leave him unable to formulate any viable political alternative. At a theoretical level, the opposition between democratic lack and Thing appears insurmountable. The death drive, as the lethal dimension of subjectivity, appears the only alternative to the limitations of democratic lack but one that, as we have seen, is wholly unpalatable.

As a result, at both a theoretical and political level Žižek appears caught in an intractable deadlock. He is caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of lack and *das Ding*, that is, between limited democratic politics and a catastrophic revolutionism, liberal democracy and the fundamentalist *Thing, capitalism or catastrophe*. Can these positions end in anything other than conservatism or political quietism?

It is my contention that Žižek's choice of a third-option, a dialectical materialist Marxism, represents an attempt to escape from precisely these deadlocks. In doing so, however, Žižek sets himself a series of challenges that are staggering in scope. At a theoretical level, dialectical materialism would require a re-casting of the opposition between death drive and lack in order to overcome this paralysing binary, while he would also have to conceive of a new mode of political practice that escapes the opposition of conservatism and catastrophe that this binary seems to inevitably invoke. At an analytical and critical level, Žižek requires an analysis of late-capitalism at a libidinal, political and economic level to explain these new forms of *jouissance*, the nature of the liberal democratic state, and capitalism as such. And, at a political level, if he is going to argue that neither totalitarianism nor capitalist liberal democracy are tenable socio-political systems or forms of politics, then, Žižek will need to develop an alternative to them that will have to avoid repeating the failures of traditional Marxism. Moreover, Žižek sets himself these tasks in an era in which it is supposed to be impossible to imagine an alternative to capitalism. Far from lacking any

meaningful political reflection, Žižek's Marxism seems immediately overloaded by these political and theoretical challenges.

We have now come to the end of the first part of this thesis and in doing so have laid out the deadlocks and challenges that Žižek's Marxism is an attempt to respond to. The rest of this thesis is dedicated to considering these responses. The next section outlines his dialectical materialism, with a specific focus on how it addresses the theoretical challenges of the above deadlock by reinventing a form of theory and practice with these and the failures of traditional Marxism in mind.

# **Dialectical Materialism**

## Chapter 4: Žižek's Dialectical Materialism

### 4.1. Introduction

In the politically charged introduction of *Parallax View* Žižek outlines the role of his Marxist dialectical materialism with the suggestion that it has been left to philosophy to transform the recent fortunes of Marxism. Reflecting on Marxism's continuing travails, he argues that its cause has been undermined by a key philosophical deficit. "The crisis of Marxism" Žižek states 'is due not only to the sociopolitical defeats of Marxist movements; at an inherent theoretical level, the crisis can (and *should*) also be indexed through the decline (virtual disappearance, even) of dialectical materialism as the philosophical underpinning of Marxism.'<sup>1</sup>

Coming shortly after Žižek introduces his own strand of dialectical materialism while delineating its differences from the materialist "negative" dialectics of an Adornoian persuasion – subversive but not revolutionary – and brashly dismissing any associations with "classical" *diamat* – 'philosophically speaking, Stalinist "dialectical materialism" is imbecility incarnate'<sup>2</sup> – the suggestion that runs through these passages is the altogether

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<sup>1</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.6.

<sup>2</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.5.

provocative one that it is Žižek's *own* form of dialectical materialism that is capable of helping Marxism escape from its most recent failures.

In this chapter and the one that follows I will examine Žižek's dialectical materialism as a critical dialectical practice and a theory of revolutionary politics. My argument is that by developing a dialectical materialism Žižek is able to navigate out of the dead-end of the theoretico-political deadlock of his radical democratic period that I outlined towards the end of the last chapter. As a dialectical practice dialectical materialism is a mode of knowing that aims to produce a liberating *Tuche* with the Real that does not produce catastrophe but a shocking moment of insight that awakens the subject with a discomfoting insight into the inexistence of the Other. In the chapter immediately proceeding this one, we will see that this ambitious dialectical practice is supplemented by a politics of Truth inspired by Alain Badiou's work, that conceives of a politics of the Event, or Act, that similarly navigates the dead-end of lack and *das Ding*.

After outlining the conditions and challenges for the return to Marxist philosophy, this chapter outlines how Žižek's philosophy avoids the metalinguistic problem of classical Marxism by adopting the position of the analyst. I then turn to consider Žižek's dialectical practice as a mode of symptomal analysis, identifying three forms of symptom that are important in Žižek's work and the effect that he aims to produce with this practice. Finally, I turn to examine how Žižek's dialectical materialism breaks out of the deadlock of his radical democratic phase with a conception of transformation that does not involve a confrontation with the abyssal Thing.

## 4.2. Learning the Lessons of Marxism Past

Žižek's dialectical materialism returns to a number of old problems in need of new solutions. Even prior to its Stalinist transformations Marxist philosophy was besieged with problems. As I demonstrated in chapter 2, the metapolitical stance of Marxism demonstrated an unreconstructed presupposition of the continuing existence of the big Other that reduced political conflict to a "shadow-theatre" of economic processes.<sup>3</sup> In the classical dialectical materialism of Stalin and Engels this fantasy of the Other only takes a more explicit and wide-ranging form in the dialectical laws of nature and History.<sup>4</sup> The conclusion of Žižek's critique of Marxism and Stalinism is that philosophy must avoid the position of the fetish, in which a particular — the Party, Marxist theory — stands-in for and embodies the All.

In a similar way, Alain Badiou, Žižek's comrade in the attempt to rejuvenate dialectical materialist philosophy, concludes that a revolutionary politics can no longer be based on an "expressive dialectics."<sup>5</sup> In the conception of revolutionary action that this dialectic produces, each moment is a necessary expression of the All *qua* big Other, in the same way that Žižek conceived of the revolutionary pervert as someone who sees their practice as legitimated by, and as form of duty towards, the Other of History.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, for Žižek, the re-articulation of dialectical materialism must begin from a radically different understanding of Hegel, one that avoids conceiving transformation as an expression of the All of historical necessity.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, a dialectics that does not ground itself in the big

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<sup>3</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.224.

<sup>4</sup> As such, it has been argued that Marxist philosophy becomes a "political cosmology." See Z.A Jordan, *The Evolution of Dialectical Materialism: A Philosophical and Sociological Analysis*, New York: St. Martins Press (1967) p.394.

<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, *Philosophy For Militants*, London: Verso (2012) p.61-63.

<sup>6</sup> See also Alain Badiou, "The Idea of Communism," in *The Idea of Communism*, eds. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, Verso: London (2010) pp.1-14, pp.5-6. Badiou's and Žižek's critique of an "expressive" dialectics describes a problem with Hegelian politics that was noted, in a different form, by Nietzsche. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Random House (1967) p.233.

<sup>7</sup> Žižek, *AR*, p.36.

Other, whether in terms of socio-economic processes, “sublime dialectical materialist formulas,” or even “History” itself.<sup>8</sup> If a dialectics that conceives of historical transformation as an expression of the big Other is thus no longer possible given the history of Marxism, then, what is the alternative? For both Žižek and Badiou only a dialectics that has been combined with Lacanian psychoanalysis can offer an antidote.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.2.1. Dialectics without the Other: Hegel through Lacan

Long before Žižek returned to Marxism or framed his project as a re-articulation of dialectical materialism he placed the revival of Hegel, via an encounter with Lacanian psychoanalysis, at the very centre of his theoretical project.<sup>10</sup> As Žižek puts it in *Sublime Object* ‘the only way to “save Hegel” is through Lacan.’<sup>11</sup> Although the figure of Hegel that Žižek produces through this re-reading is not only heavily stylised but also highly particular, inasmuch as it breaks with nearly every Hegelian doxa, it is eminently useful for his reformulation of dialectical materialism.

While Žižek often suggests that his Hegel is the “true” Hegel, he talks elsewhere of a practice of philosophical “buggery,” which is a much more accurate depiction of the violence of his reading.<sup>12</sup> To extend the metaphor Žižek’s philosophical buggery produces a victim with some recognisable similarities to the figure we know but clearly bearing the scars of a significant trauma. When read through Lacan, the Hegel that emerges might be called a post-fantasmatic Hegel insofar as this new dialectics has no support in the Other. This is Hegel after he has “traversed the fantasy.” To put it in Žižek’s own words, this Hegel rejects ‘the fetish of “objective historical progress”’ and denies that there is any ‘underlying rational

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<sup>8</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.8.

<sup>9</sup> See Badiou, “The Idea of Communism,” p.6, n.1.

<sup>10</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.2, *SOI*, pp.xxx-xxxii; *FTKN*, p.3.

<sup>11</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.xxxii.

<sup>12</sup> Žižek, *OWB*, pp.41-42.

necessity which “runs the show” behind the subject’s back.’<sup>13</sup> Once this big Other has been dismissed, Žižek argues that the dialectic is a form of ‘radical anti-evolutionism’<sup>14</sup> that rejects all conceptions of “progress” and “development.”<sup>15</sup> In his new understanding of Hegel, Žižek conceives of these commonplace Hegelian positions as problematic precisely because they suggest hidden evolutionary or teleological logics that presuppose and rely on a form of big Other that oversees the process of change. In contradistinction to this perspective, Žižek’s Hegel confronts change by way of the point of negativity in terms of a form of contingency that can never be contained.

The basis of Žižek’s understanding of Hegel’s dialectic is the Lacanian logic of the signifier – Žižek recognises the same structure in Hegel’s logic of reflection, from the “Doctrine of Essence” in *The Science of Logic* (2010).<sup>16</sup> Like the emergence of the master-signifier, Žižek argues that for Hegel all necessity is contingent and always continually haunted by this contingency. Just as the signifier is always an attempt to plug an absence given the radically self-referential nature of language according to Lacan’s re-reading of de Saussure, Žižek argues that contingency can neither be contained nor sublated by necessity. Herein resides the political importance of Žižek’s Lacanian re-reading of Hegel. It allows Žižek to conceive of necessity as caught within a dialectic of in-erasable contingency, which means that every ordering, every totality, is viewed as a desperate attempt to prevent the realisation of this absence in the same way that signification operates to efface the Real. Indeed, on this basis, Žižek claims that for Hegel every order is a desperate attempt to avoid

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<sup>13</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.189.

<sup>14</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.162.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.162.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, *ME*, pp.47-49, *FTKN*, pp.xviii, 42-6, 165-6. *LTN*, Ch.9 especially pp.581-603. Peter Dews unpicks Žižek’s reading of Hegel, revealing how it does not move beyond the subjective moment of Hegel’s reading, thereby cutting off the dialectic before it reaches the point where the subjective moment is reflected back into the object, which for Hegel leads to a much more balanced end-point. See Peter Dews, “The Tremor of Reflection: Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian Dialectics” in *Radical Philosophy*, vol.72 (2005)

the fact that there is no substantial necessity “pulling the strings” behind the stage.<sup>17</sup> Without this necessity, Žižek can quite legitimately claim that this is a dialectic that is neither expressive of nor grounded by an Other. As a result, if we were to be directed in our political practice by this post-fantasmatic conception of the dialectic, we would be guided, not by necessity, but its failure, that is to say, the points at which contingency erupts given the insufficiency of every order.

Comparing Žižek’s Hegel to the famous Marxist “reversal” of Hegel — Žižek holds little back in his dismissal of this ‘(in)famously stupid’ position<sup>18</sup> — one does not separate the revolutionary rational kernel from the mystical shell by conceiving of transformation as a result of contradictions inherent to material reality, rather than as the result of the Idea.<sup>19</sup> As Žižek points out in *Less Than Nothing*, this “reversal” of Hegel’s dialectic might seem to free it from an idealist form, but, in fact, it only produces a form of proto-idealism in the *guise* of materialism since the idealist logic of necessary development is now transposed into material reality.<sup>20</sup> Instead, for Žižek, the truly “revolutionary kernel” of Hegel’s thought resides in how it recognises the limitation of every idealist logic, of how every articulation of necessity is not only historical but founded on a Real that indicates its radically contingent emergence.

### 4.3. The Dialectical Materialist as Analyst

Here however we need to take care not to mistake Žižek’s reading of Hegel for his own dialectical materialism. While the former is certainly a condition of the latter, they are nevertheless not quite the same thing. This is because Žižek’s dialectical materialism is not a

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<sup>17</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.217.

<sup>18</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.260.

<sup>19</sup> See Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* in *MECW*. Vol. 26. London: Lawrence and Wishart (1990) p.383.

<sup>20</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.260.

philosophical doctrine in the traditional sense of an ontology or metaphysics but a form of practice. In the introduction to *Absolute Recoil* Žižek tells us as much, reminding the reader that the book is not a book “on” dialectical materialism but “of” dialectical materialism. It ‘is not the book’s topic; it is, rather, practised, within these pages.’<sup>21</sup> Žižek makes a similar point in *Parallax View* regarding universality when he says that “concrete universality” is the practice of the dialectic.<sup>22</sup> As a result, the dialectic does not “represent” contingency but *produces it* in its ‘becoming’ from within and against necessity.<sup>23</sup> As Žižek puts it, dialectical materialism does not function to ‘close the gap, but, on the contrary, *to open up a radical gap, in the very edifice of the universe.*’<sup>24</sup>

Žižek understands dialectical materialism as a philosophical practice akin to that of the Lacanian analyst. As Žižek describes the latter in the context of the clinic, the analyst does not offer positive knowledge to the subject, telling them what their words really mean. Neither, for that matter, do they attempt to contain or limit the subject. The role of the analyst is to embody or stand-in for the lack in the Other. As such, the analyst’s act consists in ‘showing the [...] positive side of symbolization’s failure [...].’<sup>25</sup> In terms of the difference between the successful speech act and the analyst’s act:

[...] he [sic] presents a negative act, an act that coincides with the non-act and in this way fixes the location of the foreign body *inside “speaking” itself*. As such, the analyst’s act is the opposite of the performative gesture, of the “successful” speech act.<sup>26</sup>

For Žižek, the dialectical materialist occupies a similar position and attempts to produce a similar result. It operates at the intersection of universality and its failure, the point of the

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<sup>21</sup> Žižek, *AR*, p.1.

<sup>22</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.13.

<sup>23</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.6.

<sup>24</sup> Žižek, *OWB*, p.x-xi. *My Italics*.

<sup>25</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.220.

<sup>26</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.220.

universal singular, the element that demonstrates the failure of a specific universality. Žižek calls this the ‘place of displacement.’<sup>27</sup> From this site, philosophy does not offer answers, but, rather, reveals the site of a burning question: the deadlock of the Real that an order or necessity is grounded on and attempts to efface. The dialectic, then, is something like the “analyst’s act”, politicising a totality by producing its remainder, the “foreign body” within it. The most important difference is found in how this is practiced. While the analyst achieves this “end” through occupying the place of the symptom, the dialectic confronts the subject with the symptom by way, as we will see in the next section, of a practice that consists of bringing together two elements that for structural reasons are radically incommensurable.

The difference between the analyst and the master demonstrates why the dialectic that Žižek develops escapes being grounded in the Other. While the master and the analyst both occupy the place of the Other they do so in wholly opposed ways. Whereas the master occupies and attempts to fix the lack in the Other by offering a signifier that stands in for that lack, the analyst, on the contrary, stands for the lack as such.<sup>28</sup> Žižek’s dialectical materialism, as a result, is characterised by what Lacan calls “the desire of the analyst.” For Lacan, the analyst seeks neither to cure,<sup>29</sup> or to produce a point of positive identification<sup>30</sup> — that would bring the analyst back into the domain of the master — but, rather, to produce a confrontation with the Real. With this in mind, we can understand the role of the philosopher in terms of the distinction between Truth (*vérité*) and knowledge (*savoir*). For Lacan, Truth is incompatible with knowledge insofar as it is opposed to the communicable and quotidian. In terms of the subject, Lacan argues that it is not always advantageous for the subject to learn the Truth<sup>31</sup> since it is something that the subject frequently cannot bare to confront. Why is

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<sup>27</sup> Žižek, “Dialogue,” p.71.

<sup>28</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.211.

<sup>29</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p.218.

<sup>30</sup> Dylan Evans, *Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge (1996) p.57.

<sup>31</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, p.122.

Truth uncomfortable for the subject? Truth marks the confrontation with a certain “non-knowledge” or lived ignorance that exists on that other scene which is the unconscious. This non-knowledge must remain there if the subject’s identifications and pleasure is not to be disrupted. The confrontation with Truth, thus, has the effect of “boring” a hole in the consistent and smooth surface of what we know given that it is based upon the exclusion of that “non-knowledge.” Here, however, we have to be careful to assert the non-representational and non-hermeneutic nature of Truth. The type of Truth that the dialectic produces is beyond meaning, not only because it is revealed by way of something that we do not yet know, but also in the sense that we cannot know it without it having a radical effect upon us. Truth, then, is the “unbearable” effect this confrontation has, as when we are made to admit some dumb fantasy or some discomfoting tick.

The claim that Žižek makes of his dialectic as a mode of critical knowing is that it is possible to produce a similar effect at a socio-political level when public discourse is made to confront its inherent irrationality, its injustices, or some “unbearable” historical trauma that cannot be admitted. Žižek equates the effect of this to a shock that activates the contingent nature of a socio-historical totality and disturbs the subject’s previous identity with it. For Žižek, then, dialectical practice has the same end as that of analysis: ‘a momentous insight into the abyss of the Real.’<sup>32</sup> Or, in other terms, the disturbing realisation for the subject that a particular hegemonic power or socio-political totality is not-all, that it is sustained only through the repression, disavowal or foreclosure of its contingent basis.

Žižek’s dialectical materialism, thus, is different to a traditional Hegelian Marxist dialectic in one crucial way. Far from overcoming the gap between being and consciousness, re-uniting the subject with their historical substance, which is the purpose of the dialectic for Georg Lukács (1971), for example, Žižek’s dialectical materialism attempts to open up this

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<sup>32</sup> Žižek, “Four Discourses,” p.81.

gap as a gap in the Other itself. This difference can be explained in terms of how Žižek understands Hegel's conception of the relationship between "Subject and Substance." Reflecting on the passage from the "Preface" of *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) where Hegel states that 'everything turns on grasping and expressing the True; not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*'<sup>33</sup>, Žižek argues that this does not mean reconciliation in the normal sense of the term. What the analyst wants to produce in the subject, and the dialectic aims at in a socio-political context, is the realisation of the very inconsistency of its social substance. In this way, while Žižek's Hegelianism has the same aim as that of Lukács's insofar as the dialectic indicates the moment of consciousness in theory and practice — for Lukács, revealing to the subject their historical role and how, with this recognition, they transform from a reified worker to a practical revolutionary proletarian — there is nevertheless a pivotal difference: the analyst's historical materialism does not attempt to "bridge" the gap between being and consciousness, but, rather, wrench it open, revealing the gap in being, the empty place in the ruptured structure. If in the clinical setting the analyst attempts to embody the possibility of freedom and autonomy in the form of the lack of the Other, the historical materialist dialectic attempts to demonstrate the possibility of social and political freedom at specific points within the system where its smooth functioning splutters and it reveals its excessive and overtly political nature. As Žižek argues, reconciliation occurs not through a subsumption or re-unification but an opening in the very core of substance. "Substance as Subject" ultimately means that a kind of ontological "crack" forever denounces as a semblance every "world-view," every notion of the universe *qua* totality of the "great chain of being."<sup>34</sup> Despite these differences, however, Žižek's dialectic shares the same proposed end of Lukács's dialectic: freedom and the possibility of transformation. In

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<sup>33</sup> G.W.F Hegel *The Phenomenology of Spirit* translated by A.V. Miller Oxford: Oxford University Press (1977) pp.9-10.

<sup>34</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.26.

Žižek case, the purpose of the dialectic is to demonstrate ‘the inaccessibility of the Thing is a positive condition of our freedom.’<sup>35</sup> In this regard, Žižek frequently cites Herbert Marcuse’s quip that “Freedom is the condition of liberation,”<sup>36</sup> which is to say that in order to liberate yourself you must already be, in a sense, free. It is this freedom that dialectical practice attempts to produce.

#### 4.4. Totality and its Failures

Žižek’s dialectical practice is underpinned by a methodological postulate. In *Parallax View* (2006), evidently aware of the historical precedent of describing “laws” of dialectical materialism, and with a good dose of irony it would seem given that a “law” is the anti-dialectical figure *par excellence*, Žižek describes the “law” of dialectical materialism as ‘the inherent “tension,” gap, non-coincidence, of the One itself.’<sup>37</sup> This “law” informs Žižek’s dialectical practice, which in this particular text he calls the parallax. What it consists of is an attempt to try to produce the inconsistency of an order by connecting it to its “unbearable” other, its symptom.<sup>38</sup> To use a different name for this practice, one that connects it to certain forms of Marxist-Hegelian practice, it can be understood as a producing a “totality with failures”.<sup>39</sup> For Žižek, the wager of Hegelian epistemology is that totalisation and failure are irreducibly connected. In attempting to make a “rational totality,” then, Žižek’s dialectical practice consists in “making a system” out of the contents of a totality and a point within it that “sticks-out” and, thereby subverts the rational whole.<sup>40</sup> By way of this seemingly aberrant excess, Žižek posits that we stumble upon the existence of an antagonism that can

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<sup>35</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.195.

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.290, *IDLC*, p.343.

<sup>37</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.7.

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.13.

<sup>39</sup> Žižek uses this name in the section “How to do a totality with failures” in *For They Know Not*, p.99.

<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.99.

never be resolved within that totality.<sup>41</sup> For Žižek, then, the purpose of producing a totality is that we find a point that indicates the very limits of collective experience.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, “rational totalisation” must be understood as a reductive synthesis. The process of “downward synthesis” aims to isolate some kind of disturbing, unfathomable X, within a socio-political totality or an ideological system that will eventually reveal the contingency of that order. What it produces, thus, is not multiplicity and complexity but the confrontation with a certain deadlock within a given ideological system.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4.4.1. Socio-Political Symptoms

What this reductive process ultimately attempts to isolate is the symptom. When Žižek describes the symptom of a totality he is referring to the Lacanian sense of the term, rather than the traditional Left-Hegelian understanding. The latter views the symptom as the incomplete realisation of Reason and, by implication, evidence that the world is still to realise the advances that have been revealed to rational thought. The Lacanian symptom, on the contrary, is demonstrative of what we might think of as the failure of Reason *tout court*. Žižek describes its formal character in *Sublime Hysteric* as such: ‘the “symptom” is an exceptional element [...] that subverts the Universal of which it is part.’<sup>44</sup> Žižek’s favoured example is that of Marx’s analysis of the universality of bourgeois freedoms.<sup>45</sup> It finds that the “rational totality” of this field is only achieved through an anchoring and closure performed by something that, while seemingly part of that totality, stands out and disturbs it.

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<sup>41</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.100.

<sup>42</sup> Žižek, here, even risks returning to Hegelian absolute knowing to indicate this totality structured around a historical limitation on the basis of understanding absolute knowing as ‘the explication of this historically specified field that *absolutely limits our horizon*.’ Žižek, *FTKN*, p.218.

<sup>43</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.102.

<sup>44</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.136.

<sup>45</sup> Following Lacan, Žižek provocatively claims that Marx invented the symptom, as is evident in his analysis of the universality of bourgeois freedom. Žižek, *SH*, p.136, *SOI*, p.3.

In terms of bourgeois freedom, its particular species — freedom of speech, consciousness, political freedom, etc. — have as their basis the freedom of the worker to sell his labour, which as Marx demonstrated is, in fact, the *opposite of freedom*: it reveals, in fact, the workers enslavement to capital. From the perspective of S1, then, bourgeois freedom, the freedom to sell one's labour, is just a particular form of freedom, one among others. Looked at askance, however, we see that it, simultaneously, is also something that undermines all the other freedoms while also being constitutive of those freedoms and bourgeois society as such. By identifying this symptom, the dialectic demonstrates a pathological imbalance that characterises a totality. What is key, however, is that these symptomal points also function to effect the closure of a totality. Within Žižek's work we can see two further varieties of symptoms.

#### 4.4.2. Vanishing Mediators

The constitutive limit points of a totality can be viewed from the effect of the vanishing mediator, a term that Žižek borrows from Fredric Jameson's (1973) account of Max Weber's theory regarding the role of Protestantism in the rise of Capitalism.<sup>46</sup> In essence, the vanishing mediator functions as a kind of fulcrum in the passage between two synchronously structured series. After its work is done, this point of mediation vanishes, or perhaps more accurately, is 'erased from memory'<sup>47</sup> through a process of gentrification whereby it is given an acceptable form within the contents of a totality.<sup>48</sup> Žižek cites the process of expropriation and enclosure that characterised the emergence (and continued existence of) capitalism as an exemplary form of vanishing mediator. Marx ironically refers to this process as "primitive

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<sup>46</sup> Fredric Jameson, "The Vanishing Mediator: Narrative Structure in Max Weber," in *New German Critique*, no.1, Winter (1973)

<sup>47</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.3. Jodi Dean very carefully emphasises that it is still always present, even if indiscernible. (Dean, *Žižek's Politics*, p.111.)

<sup>48</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, pp.179-193, *OWB*, p.100.

accumulation” given that it was ideologically designated as just that: a primitive accumulation by some diligent, hard-working, self-sacrificing individuals who accumulated capital before capital existed.<sup>49</sup> The vanishing mediator disappears because, to put it in technical terms, while an “external presupposition” within a totality it is “re-positing” as an inherent moment of a totality. In this case, primitive accumulation takes an “ideal form.” Its effect is that the traumatic origins of a totality disappear from sight. What disappears with them are the contingent nature of the process of totalisation, as well as the forces that made it possible. For example, Žižek writes of the “primitive accumulation” of democracy in Eastern Europe where the actors who triggered the process — the new Left, new social movements — ‘became invisible the moment the new system established itself’ usurped and deceived by the present order. The structure of the totality is erected through a process in which its “detonators” are buried.<sup>50</sup> In doing so, the totality can normalise these practices into an appropriate form. The direct democratic power of the new Left and new social movements — wielded in occupations, protests, direct action committees — are all institutionalised so that this power is mediated and reallocated through the state apparatuses. This “re-positing” does not only “de-fang” this power, it also transforms it into part of the system itself. As the example of primitive accumulation demonstrates, while this process of expropriation and violence was revealed by Marx in all its horror, the true horror is arguably that it is now part of the very fabric of capitalism as a set of processes that are continuous and legitimised by the State and in Law.

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<sup>49</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin (1990). one could also see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times*, Boston: Beacon Press (2001).

<sup>50</sup> Žižek, “Eastern European Liberalism,” p.27.

### 4.4.3. The Law and its Obscene Undersides

The closure of a totality can also be understood by way of what appears at first sight to be a form of transgression. Žižek refers to this as an *inherent transgression*. If we take the example of Law, Žižek argues that it always relies on a form of enjoyment that denotes its point of fundamental irrationality. Alongside the public side of the Law there is what Žižek calls the “spirit of the community” that violates and goes beyond the Law but acts as its support.<sup>51</sup> We have already seen one example of this with “irrational” Nationalism which appears as if it is a pre-modern remnant of the universal realm of abstract, bourgeois rights. As we saw with Žižek’s critique of liberal democracy, this irrational remainder functions to anchor what is otherwise a precarious ideological structure. To demonstrate how these two seemingly opposed levels operate to support one another, Žižek frequently refers to the military where the obscene practices of “hazing” function as a pivotal point of identification alongside the explicit military code. While seeming to go against it, the function of the irrational ritual reinforces the community relationship to the law, even if it appears to go beyond or, on occasion, break the military codes as such.

For Žižek, the key to the inherent transgression is that it denotes a symptom that demonstrates an ideological system that has been able to incorporate its own antagonism or split to such an extent that it reinforces that system. To cite an example that is perhaps more commonly acknowledged, the function of debt in contemporary society demonstrates a very similar logic in which the self-proclaimed objective of the debtor-creditor relationship — that the debtor pays the creditor back — is effectively supplemented by its opposite — the “extend-and-pretend” strategy — where the debt is not expected to be paid back but continually extended. Moreover, this perverse logic functions to reproduce and reinforce the system of debt and the debt-creditor nexus. As Žižek writes, ‘the true aim of lending money

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<sup>51</sup> Žižek, *ME*, p.54.

to the debtor is not to get the debt reimbursed with a profit, but the infinite continuation of the debt which keeps the debtor in permanent dependency and subordination.<sup>52</sup> As is well known to anyone who has had the misfortune of missing a credit-card payment only to subsequently find themselves bombarded with offers for increased credit limits and new credit cards, the debt-creditor relationship is one that is reinforced by what it also claims to prohibit.

To understand a totality, then, Žižek argues that we must be aware of how what may seem like a subversive activity can, in actual fact, function to support the hegemonic power of a system. Žižek describes this as the superegoistic dimension of power. Alongside the explicit set of ideological norms and rules, there exists an “unofficial,” “unacknowledged” support in the form of a paradoxical “permitted prohibited.”<sup>53</sup>

#### 4.4.4. The Infinite Judgement

What differentiates the symptom from its otherwise diverse contents is that it demonstrates ‘a point of *breakdown* heterogeneous to a given ideological field and at the same time necessary for that field to achieve its *closure*, its accomplished form.’<sup>54</sup> In the symptom, then, we find universality in ‘the form of its opposite,’<sup>55</sup> or the point of totalisation of an ordering. The wager of Žižek’s dialectical practice is that in locating this element we can potentially effect the dislocation of a socio-political totality and open up a space for the subject’s freedom. For Žižek, the “infinite judgement” names the practice of bringing together the incommensurable opposites of an ideological structure to produce this effect. The infinite judgement is not only ‘the last secret of dialectical speculation’<sup>56</sup> because it demonstrates the completion of the

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<sup>52</sup> Žižek, *TIP*, p.46.

<sup>53</sup> Žižek, *ME*, p.54.

<sup>54</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.16. *My italics*.

<sup>55</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.17.

<sup>56</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.234.

practice of a totality with its failure. Rather, Žižek prioritises this moment because of the devastating effect it might have on the totality and its subjects.<sup>57</sup>

Confronting an ideological order with its symptom reveals the limits of explicit and conscious ideological knowledge. In the case of our first example, the bourgeois conception of freedom, the infinite judgement – “bourgeois freedom as destitution” – reveals the unacknowledged support of bourgeois values in the destitution that the “freedom” to sell one’s labour creates. The effect of the infinite judgement is not limited to epistemology, however. What it demonstrates is not only a prior limit to the horizon of knowledge but, also, the disruption of the smooth consistency of a socio-political field. This consists in demonstrating that, as constitutive, the exception can be ameliorated but never overcome – bourgeois freedom will always produce this disastrous consequence for certain individuals. By bringing this aberrant element into contact with the other particulars within a field, the totality becomes perforated, inconsistent. To continue with the previous example, in the infinite judgement the subject glances upon the unsettling knowledge of the nature of capitalism before realising this initial unease is ineradicable because its violence is structural. The system itself is founded on an exploitation and oppression which continues to haunt its existence. The smooth surface of the totality is ruptured when the violence on which it is founded becomes visible.

What this practice does is deny to the symptom its exceptional position. If this symptom has to be displaced in some way – repressed, foreclosed, disavowed – in order for the system to operate, despite the constitutive nature of the symptom, then, by thrusting it in to view, that is, denying it its external position, dialectical practice awakens the trauma that it indicates. For Žižek, this practice can have a shattering effect upon the subject whose previous sense of a secured and integrated self was based upon an ignorance of the symptom

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<sup>57</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.208, *ME*, pp.135-6, n.18.

and their ideological enjoyment in it. In terms of the subject's knowledge, Žižek argues that confronting the failure of a totality 'brings about a dizzying experience of how [a] given positivity exists and retains its consistency only insofar as somewhere else [...] some fundamental non-knowledge insists.'<sup>58</sup> Žižek outlines how, like the confrontation with their own symptom, confronting a socio-political symptom is unnerving. In *Parallax View* Žižek describes this as the 'unpleasant' and 'weird' effect that results from connecting two elements that were previously kept apart on the basis of the boundaries of an ideological system that structure the subject's expectations and identity.<sup>59</sup>

Žižek understands the disruptive effect of this confrontation with the symptom in terms of the symptomal torsion it creates between the excessive element and its given place in the system.<sup>60</sup> Žižek uses this term in his more recent work, seemingly in reference to Alain Badiou's *Theory of the Subject* (2009). There, Badiou develops a notion of torsion as the discontinuity in the structure. What is crucial for Badiou is that the subject also emerges in this break.<sup>61</sup> In Žižek's understanding of the symptomal torsion the two features overlap. It indicates a form of inner discontinuity that dislocates a totality at the point of closure. But far from being an inert blockage to the structure, the symptomal point is the very inner fracture of a system that also indicates the place of the subject. The subject experiences *itself* as the lack in the Other. For Žižek, the "real effect" of the shocking and reductive nature of the contradiction produced by the downward synthesis is a political discord that cuts through the Other and the subject that was previously anchored within it.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.73.

<sup>59</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.13.

<sup>60</sup> See Žižek, *IDLC*, p.389.

<sup>61</sup> see, for an example of Badiou's use, pp.149-151. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bostells, London: Continuum (2009)

<sup>62</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.103.

## 4.5. Breaking the Theoretical Deadlock I: Transformation, The Real, Historicity

For Žižek, as a dialectical practice dialectical materialism has a key political role. Locating the symptom and thrusting it into view through the practice of the totality with failures dislocates the structure and renders visible the potential for transformation on the basis of the resulting inconsistency. While not strictly a unity of theory and practice, Žižek argues that the role of dialectical materialism and revolutionary practice “overlap” for a brief moment in social and political transformation, when a particular socio-political necessity is dislocated and the structure is opened. In *Tarrying With The Negative* (1993), the work that stalks out the initial territory of his post-democratic position prior to his embrace of the dialectical materialist Marxist problematic, Žižek refers to the overthrow of Ceaușescu in Romania as an example of the coming together of theory and practice. Žižek argues that despite the violence of Ceaușescu’s removal and the limited political ends that were achieved — the Communist secret police were the ones who ultimately grabbed power — ‘what really matters is that the masses who poured into the streets of Bucharest “experienced” the situation as “open,” that they participated in the unique intermediate [...] when, for a brief, passing moment, the hole in the big Other, the symbolic order, became visible.’<sup>63</sup> The overlap between the role of philosophy and the masses become clear with the example Žižek uses to explain the result of rendering the hole in the Other. He argues that the political openness that resulted from the revolt was reflected in the image of the ‘rebels waving the national flag with the red star, the Communist symbol, cut out.’<sup>64</sup> Understood in Žižek’s terms, the subject’s freedom is correlative to the confrontation with the inadequacy of the symptomal element. In this case,

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<sup>63</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.1.

<sup>64</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.1.

that symptom was the ‘organising principle of the national life,’<sup>65</sup> *objet a qua* the irrationality of the Communist symbol. Once this element had been dislocated, confronted and removed from its structured place, the whole socio-political edifice became inconsistent and the subject glimpsed a moment of freedom. At the point of realising the total inadequacy of the symptom, the absurdity of the Real, the subject could render open the structure of the totality and thereby create the conditions of possibility for transformation. As Žižek argues, ‘[t]he enthusiasm that carried them [Communist rebels] was literally the enthusiasm over this hole, not yet hegemonized by any positive ideological project [...]’<sup>66</sup> The over-lap with dialectical materialism resides in a similar enthusiasm for the “hole.” To refer to the subjective position of the analyst, at a socio-political level this is what the “desire of the analyst” means. It is this internal reflexive distance from the master-signifier, a desire for the displacement enacted through the pursuit of the symptom. In terms of the image of the flag, the gap within it where the Communist symbol used to reside demonstrates the space of the symptomal torsion, the dislocation that results from confronting the exceptional element.

As I have demonstrated, Žižek’s radical democracy also advocated a certain openness in the socio-political field. What has changed in between Žižek’s democratic position and his dialectical materialism in this regard? In a certain respect, very little it must be said. We have seen a similar position in Žižek’s democratic period in terms of the role that he thought elections could play in dissolving the symbolic ties of a social order. There, I argued that this conception of change was ultimately flawed on the grounds that liberal democracy simply did not work like this. We see a return to this conception of the Symbolic as Real with Žižek’s dialectic; however, it is here not understood as an institutional arrangement. It emerges instead as the result of a rebellion over and rejection of the way that society is organised, a

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<sup>65</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.1.

<sup>66</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.1.

position that Žižek worried about the implications of for totalitarian politics. Here, however, we see a democratic explosion that interrupts the texture of the socio-political totality through the rejection of the role of the symptom.

What has allowed this change of position? Why does Žižek argue that his original warning against this position was misplaced? In dialogue with Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler in *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality* (2000), just as the full extent of Žižek's break from his radical democratic past was coming to light, Žižek argues that there is an "illegitimate" short-circuit in the radical democratic position. Whereas Žižek previously argued that "ideology" consisted in offering an image of post-revolutionary society as an impossible fullness — like Marx's fantasy — he now argues that the opposite gesture, of offering an image of the impossibility of every revolutionary politics, might be equally "ideological" in the sense that it blocks all radical change and prevents radical politics that continues to acknowledge the inescapability of antagonism. As Žižek writes apropos the limitation of Laclau's position, and also his own earlier radical democratic position:

the basic operation of ideology is not only the dehistoricizing gesture of transforming an empirical obstacle into the eternal condition [...] but also the opposite gesture of transposing the a priori closure/impossibility of a field into an empirical obstacle. Laclau is well aware of this paradox when he denounces as ideological the very notion that after the successful revolution, a non-antagonistic self-transparent society will come about. However, this justified rejection of the fullness of post-revolutionary Society does not justify the conclusion that we have to renounce any project of a global social transformation [...]<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Žižek, *CHU*, p.101. See also: Žižek, *CWZ*, pp.70-71.

What Žižek has in mind is the problematic conservative implications of his previous Lacanian position, which appeared increasingly as an argument for the status quo given the limitation of democratic politics. Alternatively, Žižek's concern with this illegitimate short-circuit might be viewed in Laclau and Mouffe's "renunciation" of the category of the Universal. If society is already disorganised and fragmented, the pluralist democratic response is a conceivable political project; however, if society, as Žižek contends, is still dominated by general or universal structures, this renunciation risks barring the possibility of a collective contestation of those structures. Ultimately, the difference between Laclau and Mouffe and Žižek is at a descriptive level as well as a theoretical level. Žižek's recognition of its limitations within capitalism demonstrates that capital and class still had a central role in "organising" society. On this basis, questions regarding universal and global social transformation become pivotal once more. It is, thus, necessary to be aware of the opposite ideological gesture in which this general level is obscured.

However, the transformation in Žižek's position ultimately comes down to a small but crucial theoretical modification. How can Žižek now conceive of a politics of transformation, revolution, of a liberating and exciting form of freedom akin to that found in the example of Romania and which in his disagreement with Laclau he suggests remains possible? Or, phrased differently, why do we get the symptomatic torsion and the possibility of openness by isolating *objet a*, where previously Žižek's position was defined by inert hard-rock of the Real, *das Ding* in all its horror? What underlies these transformations is a pivotal theoretical shift in Žižek's work outlined in the foreword to the second edition of *For They Know Not* in a section called "the Hard Road To Dialectical Materialism." There, Žižek writes of his attempt, subsequent to his earliest work, to 'identify and liquidate [...] dangerous residues of bourgeois ideology'<sup>68</sup> in his Hegelian-Lacanian philosophy, his understanding of democracy

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<sup>68</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.xii.

and his conception of the Act — the topic of the next chapter. At the centre of these is a reconceptualisation of the Real and its connection to the abyssal dimension of the *objet*. Žižek pin-points the theoretical weakness of his earliest work as a ‘quasi-transcendental reading of Lacan, focused on the notion of the Real as the impossible Thing-in-itself.’<sup>69</sup> As he explains in the same foreword, this misreading led to the political dead-end that we identified in the previous chapter, and, as he puts it, ‘the celebration of failure.’<sup>70</sup> For Žižek, the flaw in this position is that it misses the ridiculous inadequacy of the object,<sup>71</sup> which is not a ‘pre-reflexive reality’ but something that is forever lost.<sup>72</sup> The Real is no longer then a confrontation with an abyssal Thing *qua* materialisation of the thicket of horrifying *jouissance*, but, rather, a certain insubstantiality. In the same foreword, Žižek continues on to describe the reformulation as one of moving from a Kantian conception of the Real — although given the substantiality of the Real, it is perhaps closer to Schelling, as we will see in chapter 6 — to a Hegelian one. Whereas for Kant the noumenal dimension was that which was beyond phenomena, Žižek argues that for Hegel the noumenal dimension is immanent to and produced within the phenomenal realm itself. Translated into Žižek’s Lacanian terms, Žižek goes from a Kantian position to a Hegelian one by moving from the Thing as pre-symbolic maternal plenitude that persists beyond the symbolic to the Thing as a fantasy that emerges from the inconsistency of the symbolic itself.<sup>73</sup> As a result, the Thing is reconceptualised as an immanently produced threat, an ideological impossibility grounded in the fear of confronting the true “horror”: that there is nothing preventing social transformation, that there is nothing beyond the fragmentary, fragile, inconsistent symbolic

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<sup>69</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.xii.

<sup>70</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.xii.

<sup>71</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.xvii.

<sup>72</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.xvii.

<sup>73</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.xxix.

order that constitutes the horizon of our experience. Or, as Žižek puts it with regard to the role that dialectical materialism plays in his work

“dialectical materialism” is a negative reminder that the horizon of historical -symbolic practice is “not-all”, that it is inherently “de-centred”, founded upon the abyss of a radical fissure - in short, that the Real as its Cause is forever absent.<sup>74</sup>

When reformulated in this way, Žižek is now able to rethink the nature of the subject's confrontation with the void. Previously, Žižek warned of the psychotic experience emerging out of an embrace of the Thing, posing it as beyond the subject and “too hot” for them to touch without risking symbolic death. The void in this case was a total limit, one that must be avoided at all costs. According to the democratic Žižek, it was to democracy's great credit that it did this. Seemingly referring to his prior position he now dismisses the ‘old notion of phenomenal objects disappearing/dissolving in the vortex of the Thing.’<sup>75</sup> Instead, the Thing is an illusion that emerges from the fissures of the symbolic. Žižek argues that by confronting the void, we find that phenomenal objects ‘are nothing but the Void of the Thing embodied [...], objects in which negativity assumes a positive existence.’<sup>76</sup> I understand this as the realisation of the not-all, of the radically de-centred nature of the symbolic itself that emerges when we interpret the symptomal torsion as the effect of the absence of the hard-Real.

For Žižek, this is key to understanding dialectical *materialism*. The materialist experience is not one with some noumenal core or some hard-rock that warns the subject of a socio-political impossibility. Rather, the materialist experience is one in which the subject realises that there is no security, no ultimate guarantees to the structure of society. At a political level, materialism means that there are no limits to the possibility of change and no

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<sup>74</sup> Žižek, *ME*, pp.135-6, n.18.

<sup>75</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.xxx.

<sup>76</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.xxx.

object that can ultimately prevent this change. As Žižek summaries the materialist position in *Parallax View*

for the idealist, we experience our situation as “open” insofar as we are engaged in it, while the same situation appears “closed” from the standpoint of finality, that is, from the eternal point of view of the omnipotent and all-knowing God who alone can perceive the world as a closed totality; for the materialist, the “openness” goes all the way down, that is, necessity is not the underlying universal law that secretly regulates the chaotic interplay of appearances — it is the “All” itself which is non-All, inconsistent, marked by an irreducible contingency.<sup>77</sup>

Formulating the difference between idealism and materialism in terms of the difference between religion and atheism, Žižek argues that ‘religion is the Real as the impossible Thing beyond phenomena, the Thing which “shines though” phenomena in sublime experiences; atheism is the Real as the grimace of reality — as just the Gap, the inconsistency, of reality.’<sup>78</sup> He continues: ‘the experience of this Void is the original *materialist* experience, and religion, unable to endure it, *fills it in* with religious content.’<sup>79</sup> By implication, the materialist position must accept the non-existence of the All, must prevent at all costs “filling it in” with some content or substantiality that it perceives to prevent or effect change. The materialist “wager”, then, is that large-scale transformation is possible and is without limit.

The final consequence of this re-formulation of the void is the re-introduction of the possibility of historical thinking. Prior to this dialectical materialist reformulation, Žižek had bound History to the Thing as a substantial beyond that resisted every historical transformation. In this regard, Žižek compared historical thinking to a form of hysteria,

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<sup>77</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.79.

<sup>78</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, pp.xxviii-xxix.

<sup>79</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.xxix.

which, within the Lacanian context, consists of a constant questioning of every authority on the basis of its ahistorical Real. Hysteria, however, never makes the leap from this critical position to the revolutionary position in which the lack in every authority is also considered the positive condition for freedom from that authority. In Žižek's early democratic position, the conception of Real as a hard-rock prevented this realisation. Genuine historicity was, as a consequence, not possible given that every historical formation was characterised by the same rock of the ahistorical Real. As a result, Žižek was unable to conceive of the historicity of antagonism and the different forms that it might take. At the level of the subject, this problem was repeated in an inability to conceive of the confrontation with this ahistorical core of History in any way other than through the destruction of the symbolic and psychosis, which stands for the absence of any symbolic structure.<sup>80</sup>

By reconceptualising the Real Žižek introduces the possibility of historicity. If the Real is a mere void, attached to the particularity of certain symptoms, norms, prohibitions or vanishing mediators, the possibility of genuine historical change becomes a legitimate political question once again. The example of the end of socialism in Romania is illustrative in this respect. The dislocation of the socio-political totality upon the realisation of the hole left by the insufficiency of the organising principle of society is not limited by some material beyond that persist and defines every socio-political totality. Like the materialist experience, we find that contingency runs "all the way down", which is to say that there are no limits to historical change, no ahistorical core that will return in every socio-political ordering. The void might be conceived as an extra-historical place but it is one that is literally nothing more than the inherent instability of a particular historical formation and, as such, not an index to some prior determining ahistorical limits.

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<sup>80</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.101.

Indeed, in a set of interviews with Glyn Daly published under the name *Conversations With Žižek* (2003) Žižek's discussion of historicity and dialectical materialism indicates how his position has changed. Žižek argues that the ultimate power of a Lacanian-Hegelian dialectics resides in how it carves a space between the 'false opposition' of universal History and historicist relativisation of the other. In the symptom we find an overlapping of universality and history insofar as this constitutive excess is the *internal* limits of a historical order. As such, while it might appear ahistorical, as an inevitable feature of our social life, the dialectic functions to historicise it. If every totality is grounded by the specificity of its contingent symptom as the element that gives to it its unique character, Žižek now conceives of every totality as specific and particular on the basis of this symptom. Žižek, as it were, can claim that 'each specific epoch [...] has its own ontology.'<sup>81</sup> The most powerful aspect of this position is that by politicising a totality through this failure we gain an insight into the historicity of that order. As Žižek puts it: the dialectic works to 'historicize these so-called eternal questions [...] to introduce historicity into the absolute itself.'<sup>82</sup> By politicising this external aberration we therefore deny it of its universal, ahistorical character and, as a corollary, posit that 'concrete historical struggles are at the same time struggles for the absolute itself.'<sup>83</sup> In this, we find a mode of critique that aims at 'overcoming eternity' by 'opening up the dimension of temporality/historicity.'<sup>84</sup> Moreover, it does this without reference to productive contradiction or bestowing a fate onto certain political agents. Instead, historicity is conceived as a point of contingency in and against a historical order on the basis of the dislocating effect of the symptom's insufficiency. Here, antagonisms are no longer that abyssal thing, that Real which is "too hot" to touch, but an immanent dislocation

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<sup>81</sup> Žižek, *CWZ*, p.88.

<sup>82</sup> Žižek, *CWZ*, p.88.

<sup>83</sup> Žižek, *CWZ*, p.88.

<sup>84</sup> Žižek, *FA*, p.94.

that can be transformed. To refer again to Žižek's "materialist" thesis: contingency goes "all the way down."

## 4.6. Conclusion

In this chapter we have outlined Žižek's dialectical materialism as a dialectical mode of knowing, and discussed how, via a Lacanian reading of Hegel, Žižek addresses the challenges that the failures of traditional Marxism present to us. Finally, we have also seen how Žižek recasts a series of theoretical problems that were specific to his previous Lacanian position to overcome certain aspects of his prior theoretical deadlock. To conclude, however, I want to raise a set of questions as to the appropriateness and effectivity of Žižek's dialectical materialism as a philosophy for Marxism.

In this regard, the most important aspect of Žižek's dialectical materialism is clearly what it produces. The "totality with failures" is a mode of knowing that not only produces a form of knowledge — the limitations of a particular historical-political horizon — but, so Žižek claims, a practical effect in the subject, which I have outlined in terms of the difference between knowledge and Truth. The value of Žižek's dialectical materialism rests on the nature of this effect and its plausibility at a socio-political level.

First, as we have seen, Žižek's Marxist philosophy has its theoretical basis in Lacanian psychoanalysis and, in particular, an understanding of the role of the analyst in clinical treatment. How plausible is such a practice at the level of large-scale social structures? In the clinical setting the subject's symptom is conceived of as singular in the sense that it is a result of the unique mediation of the subject with their world as they enter into language. Parental expectations, specific traumas, the difficulties in coming to a workable solution when the child is faced with the deadlocks of desire, all indicate a highly

complex and highly individual relationship between the subject, the analyst and the symptom, which resists generalisation and simple prescriptive treatment. However, at the level of the analysis of socio-political structures, much of this nuance and specificity is not possible. It is implausible to imagine a form of Marxist analysis that focuses so specifically on the particularity of the subject's relationship to its symptoms at an individual level. This is not to say that Žižek's dialectical materialism will necessarily fail in identifying certain key socio-political symptoms but that it might prove far from effective in terms of its specific practical goal. In the same way that the effectiveness of psychoanalytic treatment relies on the clinical setting and the delicate relationship between analyst and analysand so that the subject cannot self-analyse or resolve their dissatisfaction by, for example, reading about the general structure of subjectivity and the symptom, it seems likely that, for all their merit, Žižek's socio-political analyses might not provide the disruptive effect that he hopes. As a result, the dialectic becomes another form of ideology, a variant of knowledge.

Even if we assume that the dialectic has this effect, it is not out of the woods. The kind of transformation that a confrontation with Truth might produce remains open to question given that its political consequences remain uncertain. Given the momentary nature of this spark of cognitive dissonance, is this moment not likely to be missed or its potentiality left unrealised? The latter seems particularly likely if we reflect on how the subject experiences this moment. If dialectical practice works by demonstrating to consciousness what it cannot include within itself, disrupting the closure based on the expulsion of the symptom that all social structures rely upon, will the subject not immediately shy-away from this confrontation, or repress it once more in order to avoid uprooting their identifications with the social order which secures it? As we said regarding Lacan's conception of Truth, it is certainly not always advantageous for the subject. If this is the case, the subject will

certainly be made to make a decision about where they stand in relation to the totality, but it might not be the one that Žižek has in mind or that will serve as the precursor of transformation. Rather than igniting the fuse, it is plausible to imagine that it will be put out. The insight into the lack in the Other might even be reintegrated into knowledge and become something akin to the cynic's fetish, allowing the subject to adopt the position of the fetishistic disavowal that we saw in socialist ideology. As a fetish, the shock of truth that is supposed to produce a realisation of the "not-all" and the unstableness of our political and social order becomes the very thing that might prevent political actors from confronting the Real. The question, then, that looms large over dialectical materialism is how does one convert this momentary rupture into positive transformation? Žižek speaks of the possibility of an Act that arises from the confrontation with the points of impossibility but how this Act occurs in the context of dialectical materialism as a practice is not certain. The gap between the moment of political awakening and transformation cannot be bridged directly with this mode of knowing. We will address how Žižek attempts to resolve this apparent dead-end in the chapter that follows. For the time being, we can conclude that what is required is a way of thinking how this rapturous moment of freedom is, one, sustained, and, two, prevented from becoming an effervescent moment of aesthetic disruption.

## Chapter 5: The Politics of Truth

### 5.1. Introduction

In the conclusion of the previous chapter we raised several issues pertaining to the difficulty of conceiving how Žižek's dialectical practice might lead to revolutionary transformation. We argued that the shock of destructive insight, the dizzying experience that Žižek speaks of when the subject confronts the symptom, might quickly become part of the quotidian once again. As a result, Truth (*vérité*) might quickly be reintegrated into knowledge (*savoir*), Reason captured by Understanding, and the revolutionary transformation it is supposed to engender is contained or left unconverted. In each of these instances, a certain potentiality remains unrealised, and dialectical materialism, as a Marxist philosophy that aims to change the world not just interpret it, risks failure.

It is these concerns allied with a confrontation with the work of Alain Badiou that leads Žižek to pursue the risky position of a “politics of Truth” first proposed in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), a shift that has garnered much concern and contestation. For Žižek, Badiou is pivotal in developing a theory of political action on the basis of a Lacanian-Hegelian philosophy. It is in this context that Žižek refers to Badiou positively as ‘*the* theorist of the Act.’<sup>1</sup> If we recall the potential failure of dialectical materialism on the grounds that the

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<sup>1</sup> Žižek, *Desert*, p.128.

“gap” or “rupture” it is trying to induce is also a gap between theory and practice — in the sense that there seems to be no necessary connection between the effect of truth and transformation — in Žižek’s work the theory of “the Act” is an attempt to bridge this gap by outlining a form of political transformation that appears as an unpredictable practical moment. Put differently, the Act, then, indicates the possibility of a move from “Truth” to practice. Žižek develops this conception of the Act through an interpretation of Badiou’s work, with a specific focus on the notion of the Truth-Event. What emerges from this engagement with Badiou is a series of positions that move Žižek’s work beyond the dialectical materialism we have thus far considered.

At the point of the “gap” or the “symptomal torsion”, Žižek’s theory of the Act outlines a risky, ungrounded event in which transformation is produced by doing something that is considered impossible within the current socio-political coordinates. In terms that we are already familiar with, the Act means identifying with the symptom, breaking a prohibition, ratcheting up the tension within a totality to breaking point by asserting something that cannot be admitted or conceived within it. Here, “Truth” can be considered on the side of the Act insofar as it is directly through the Act that a totality is ruptured and something emerges within it that was perceived to be impossible from the perspective of the ruling order. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that thinking politics in terms of Truth not only rubs against spontaneous liberal, pluralistic sensibilities but also evokes a history populated by political disasters, some of the most recent of which Žižek knows only too well, Žižek’s “politics of Truth” has been the object of much criticism. In the secondary literature, the Act is frequently connected to a form of abyssal negativity<sup>2</sup> or a politics that equates to the

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Tormey and Andrew Robinson, “A Ticklish Subject? Žižek and the Future of Left Radicalism,” *Thesis Eleven*, Vol.80 (2005).

enforcement of a singular conception of good.<sup>3</sup> While the Act attempts to occupy the point of universality, and as such suggests a return to the insistence of the Other, we will see here that it in fact does not institute the Other but its lack, in the same way that the dialectic functions.

In this chapter we will critically consider Žižek's "politics of Truth" from the perspective of his engagement with Alain Badiou's work. We begin by charting the convergences and differences between Žižek's and Badiou's thinking on the Event before turning to consider Žižek's similarly Badiouian-inspired notion of subtraction, which develops more specifically the form of the Act. We will then go on to outline how this breaks with a common reading of Žižek's position that interprets it as a form of active nihilism. I will at this point employ Žižek's theory of feminine subjectivity to demonstrate the implications of subtraction for political practice and suggest that the negativity of subtraction is accompanied by a positive, creative labour. The final section of this chapter is reserved for a discussion about the nature of dialectical materialism as a philosophy after Žižek's engagement with Badiou. I will here draw attention to a contradiction in Žižek's project between the avowed role and function of philosophy, as addressed in sections 4.3 and 4.5 in the previous chapter, and show how Žižek's politics of truth runs counter to that.

## 5.2. The Event of the Not-All: Žižek and Badiou

While Žižek touches upon Alain Badiou's ideas sporadically in his early theoretical writings<sup>4</sup> it is not until *Ticklish Subject* that Žižek begins a detailed and sustained critical engagement with Badiou's philosophy.<sup>5</sup> After *Ticklish Subject*, Badiou becomes a constant feature in the Žižekian theoretical armoury, central to his dialectical materialism, and arguably as important

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<sup>3</sup> Geoff Boucher "An Inversion of Radical Democracy: The Republic of Virtue in Žižek's Revolutionary Politics" in *International Journal of Žižek Studies* vol.4. no.2 (2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Žižek, *FTKN*, pp.188, 270, *TWN*, see the introduction.

<sup>5</sup> See Žižek, *TS*, pp.146-70.

to his positions, certainly politically, as Hegel or Lacan. Žižek begins his ongoing dialogue with Badiou's philosophy through a critical reading of Badiou's theory of the Truth-Event, the central theoretical figure of his work *Being and Event* (2007). Žižek employs his usual Lacanian and Hegelian modifications to Badiou's work to produce a theory of revolutionary practice that operates without grounding in an expressive dialectic or an Other of historical necessity. It is through this work, and the conception of the Act that is developed in conjunction with it, that Žižek expands beyond the dialectical materialist mode of critique.

Badiou's work proves fertile ground for Žižek because of its shared allegiance to Lacan's separation of Truth and knowledge.<sup>6</sup> In Badiou's conception of this separation there is a similarly rupturous dialectic at work. However, rather than merely the "shock" or "Tuche" of that non-hermeneutic moment of recognition, for Badiou Truth is discernible through and constructed by the subject's fidelity to the Event.

Žižek chooses to conceive of the Event as an equivalent to the Act, as we will see shortly. For Badiou, the Event is an exceptional occurrence, one that is radically separate from the quotidian reality of Being. Badiou builds his notion of the Event and outlines its relationship to Being by way of a complex meta-mathematical ontology. The essential relationship between Event and Being can nevertheless be articulated relatively simply. The Event's existence is reliant on an "evental site", which is characterised by certain elements — Badiou calls them "multiples" — that are part of a situation but not represented or included in that situation.<sup>7</sup> Badiou conceptualises this relationship as one between the "state of the situation", a philosophical correlate to the political State, and Being. The State's function is to count or structure Being in a more-or-less defined manner. The multiples of the evental site

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<sup>6</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, London: Continuum (2007[1988]). See pp.525, 431-435.

<sup>7</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p.174.

are elements that are not counted or structured by the State but are inherent to the situation.<sup>8</sup>

We can think of these multiples in a number of ways, but in the political context the examples which speak loudly are those of the excluded, the illegal, *sans-papiers*. Badiou describes these elements as residing at “the edge of the void,” which means that they are not represented but, rather, exist only for themselves. It is for this reason that Badiou describes these multiples as “foundational.”<sup>9</sup>

Badiou conceives of the Event as the inscription of these elements and the Event itself into the situation.<sup>10</sup> Among other things, the inscription of the Event marks the beginning of the subject’s fidelity to it and generates a process of discerning its consequences and connections. For Badiou, the non-hermeneutic character of Truth derives from how the Event is neither representational nor verifiable, but, rather, is Being that declares itself and the Event itself as such. It is self-authoritative and is unrecognisable from the perspective of the Order of Being or the State.

We can see the connection with the essential theoretical conditions of Žižek’s work immediately. The Event is a rupturous, anti-hegemonic occurrence that is neither guaranteed nor grounded by an Other. It is contingent, risky, and beyond the possible, at least from the position of the status quo. Žižek conceives of the Act in very similar terms. It is grounded, ultimately, by a risky ‘subjective wager.’<sup>11</sup> Against the backdrop of Badiou’s work and Lacan’s conception of the Impossible Real<sup>12</sup> he argues that the Act is something that is not reducible to “objective conditions” nor can it be judged on any ‘neutral “objective”

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<sup>8</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p.175.

<sup>9</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p.175.

<sup>10</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp.180-2.

<sup>11</sup> Žižek, *DSST?*, p.168.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. London and New York: Norton (1998) p.167.

criteria.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, given that it breaks from all the conventions or expectations of the status quo it appears from the interstices of order, passing through the torsion of the symptom, and as if something that was impossible has happened.<sup>14</sup>

We will return to a fuller elaboration of the consequences of Badiou’s positions on Žižek’s work in terms of the Act in 5.3. We should also signpost here that when Žižek first develops his conception of the Act — prior to his engagement with Badiou — there are a series of problems with his position. This will be the subject of the next chapter where we will outline what has been described in the introduction as the “second Žižek.” Here, however, we can delineate Žižek’s position from that of Badiou’s in several ways that will enable us to see the precise contours of the basis of Žižek’s theory of political action.

### 5.2.1. Truth and Materialism

The most important aspect of Žižek’s disagreement with Badiou concerns the precise status of Truth. Even after his commitment to Badiouian politics Žižek steadfastly refuses naming the positive dimension of the consequences of the event as Truth, instead arguing that they remain mere symbolic fictions.<sup>15</sup> What Žižek does preserve from Badiou’s position is the notion of the exceptional event *as* Truth. The event *is* True inasmuch as it is a moment of transformation that forces the passage from the old to the new through the point of universality at the symptomal site. The subject intervenes in the order of Being through a risky Act that both undermines and forms the basis of a new ordering.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Žižek, *HCC*, p.119, *DSST?*, p.175-6, *PV*, p.167.

<sup>14</sup> Žižek, *OB*, pp.83-4.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.lxxxviii.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.397.

The second key disagreement with Badiou concerns the precise nature of a *materialist* Event.<sup>17</sup> Žižek argues that Badiou remains stranded in a “Kantian” opposition between Being and Event.<sup>18</sup> Citing Badiou’s Platonism, Žižek argues that his notion of Truth fails to escape the representational problematic since, ultimately, Truth is no more than the translation of multiplicity into the order of Being.<sup>19</sup> As has been argued, Žižek’s critique is limited in several respects.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, if we are attentive to Žižek’s position we can see how this misunderstanding of Badiou’s position — Badiou is not as Kantian as Žižek argues — is a productive one. How so? In Žižek’s attempt to avoid the problems that he accuses Badiou’s position of suffering from, Žižek implicitly problematises and moves beyond certain aspects of his initial dialectical materialist position.

As was noted in the previous chapter, Žižek’s dialectical practice made conceiving of transformation difficult on the grounds that while the production of a punctual confrontation with the Real produced a shattering effect in the subject in no way could we guarantee that it would also produce lasting change as a result. In *Ticklish Subject* Žižek identifies two problems that result from conceiving of the Event in such a stringently punctual way. Žižek argues that the strict opposition between Being and Event is akin to reifying the order of Being into a big Other. Žižek calls this the ‘self-obliteration’ of the Truth-Event.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, Žižek argues that, like the symbolic, the order of Being is already perforated by Events and marked by the continuing presence of former Acts. To refer to an example from the previous chapter, there I made the claim that one form of symptom that the dialectic

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<sup>17</sup> A question that has regularly motivated Žižek’s reading. See *CWZ*, pp.137-8, pp.214-6, *PV*, p.186.

<sup>18</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.196.

<sup>19</sup> See Žižek, *OB*, p.125, *FTKN*, pp.lxxxiii-lxxxiv.

<sup>20</sup> Adrian Johnston has carefully delineated the problems with Žižek’s accusations of the Kantian division of Being and Event in Adrian Johnston, “There is Truth, and then there are truths — or Slavoj Žižek as a Reader of Alain Badiou,” in *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, volume 1, issue 1 (2007). Žižek’s opposition is largely constructed by him against Badiou’s immanentism with which the most authoritative accounts agree. Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, London: University of Minnesota Press (2003) p.272.

<sup>21</sup> Žižek, *TS*, pp.286-7.

might uncover and thrust into view was the vanishing mediator as the point of mediation between two series that is subsequently gentrified but nevertheless continues to exist in spectres of violence or some Utopian point of alterity. As such the vanishing mediator attests to the continuing existence of an Event within Being. As Žižek puts it in *Ticklish Subject* ‘[...] the gap of the Act is not introduced into the Order of Being afterwards: it is there all the time as the condition that actually sustains every Order of Being.’<sup>22</sup> In the same sense that we have seen Žižek describe the not-all as the position of materialism he argues that ‘[t]here is no Order of Being as a positively consistent Whole.’<sup>23</sup> Towards a similar end, Žižek argues that if we insist on conceiving the Event as something external or beyond the order of Being we risk falling into the trap of elevating the Event to something that is not only impossible from the point of view of the current order but impossible as such. The consequence of this would be to reduce the Event to a miraculous intervention over which the subject has no control. Žižek, then, insists upon a strictly materialist conception of the Event which rejects any sense of a dualism between Being and Event. An Event is not the preserve of some subterranean Real beyond the order of Being; rather, the Event ‘explodes out of the gap in/of the order of Being.’<sup>24</sup>

Žižek’s critique of Badiou results in a slight but pivotal alteration in his position that requires further attention. By describing the materialist Event on the basis of the not-all there is a slight but crucial change of perspective to Žižek’s dialectical materialism. Whereas previously the not-all was something that was to be realised by the dialectic and was only revealed in its affect on being; here, Žižek does not attempt to reveal or realise the not-all but position the not-all as the basis for an evental practice. Faith in the possibility of an event

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<sup>22</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.287.

<sup>23</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.287.

<sup>24</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.166, see also *OWB*, p.107.

rests on the belief that ““All there is” is the interstices, the non-self-coincidence, of Being – that is, the ontological nonclosure of the order of Being.’<sup>25</sup> Why is this difference important? Certainly, it could be argued that the dialectic and the “politics of Truth” intersect neatly on the same point, both grasping the same problem but from opposing sides. What this overlooks, however, is the change in the function of Žižek’s dialectical materialism. To put it succinctly: no longer is it the dialectic of the analyst, but something closer to a traditional form of philosophy with all the accordant risks undoubtedly accompanying it. We will return to this question in the conclusion of this chapter.

### 5.2.2. The Event and The Subject

Žižek’s reformulation of the relationship of Being and Event also enables us to discern how his work resolves some of the problems inherent to Badiou’s position. Namely, Žižek’s staunch Lacanianism allows him to avoid one of the central pitfalls of a politics based upon a Badiouian ontology. In *Being and Event* Badiou argues that the subject is always a subject of Truth in the same way that for Althusser subjects are always a subject of Ideology — as Althusser famously outlines in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1995). For Badiou, we cannot conceive of pre-evental subjectivity in any meaningful or practical sense. This has a series of consequences, first among them is Badiou’s inability to account for the emergence of the Event in anything other than terms of a miracle. While the Event relies upon the subject’s fidelity to it — in terms of its inscription, its naming, and the fidelity to its consequences — it also brings the subject into existence.<sup>26</sup> There is, thus, a certain circularity to the logic here: the Event is prior to the subject but emerges only through the subject that it also brings into existence. Badiou only partially resolves this through a differentiation

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<sup>25</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.167.

<sup>26</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p.433.

between pre-evental animality and post-evental subjectivity proper that comes into being with the emergence of the event.<sup>27</sup> The result of this is that there is little room to conceive of the mediation between the site of the Event — the pure multiplicity at the edge of the void — and the Event itself. In other words, the subject *qua* animality has no role other than to ignorantly wait in pre-evental stasis for the Event to grab hold of it. As Critchley states, ‘[f]or Badiou, we are simply the sort of animals who are claimed by circumstances to *become* a subject.’<sup>28</sup> From the perspective of the subject, the Event is inconceivable other than as a miraculous occurrence. While the Event will always be “miraculous” from the perspective of the situation and its statal structure, one must enquire as to whether there really is no space for an anticipatory pre-evental subject and practice? This question is all the more urgent considering that in Badiou’s work the pre-evental subject names a point of paralysis rather than possibility.<sup>29</sup>

The anterior motive of Žižek’s recasting of the relationship between Being and Event is to provide a way to conceive of the relationship between the pre-evental and the evental by placing the subject as the key point of mediation. That is to say, he proposes that the subject is both the operator of the Event’s *conditions* and responsible for the Event’s symbolisation in the symbolic order or the order of Being.<sup>30</sup> ‘The subject is, both at the same time, the ontological gap [...] as well as the gesture of subjectivization which, by means of a short circuit between the Universal and the Particular, heals the wound of this gap [...]’<sup>31</sup> Yet, through opening a possibility of pre-evental practice, Žižek evokes a different danger and an equally deleterious circularity. This seems to reach a breaking point the moment one

<sup>27</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, London: Verso (2000) p.41.

<sup>28</sup> Simon Critchley “Demanding Approval: On the Ethics of Alain Badiou” in *Radical Philosophy*, No.100 (2000) pp.21-22.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Daniel Bensaïd, “Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event” in *Think Again: Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, eds. Peter Hallward, London: Continuum (2004).

<sup>30</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.lxxxvi.

<sup>31</sup> Žižek, *TS*, pp.185-6.

confronts the above passage in *Ticklish Subject*. If in Badiou's account of the Event there was a debilitating circularity with regard to the Event-subject relationship from the perspective of the Event, by introducing the subject as prior to the Event Žižek re-sets this circularity but now from a different site. By placing this much emphasis on the subject — both instigator and extrapolator of the Event and its consequences — there is a danger that Žižek disables political possibilities. If the subject now carries the full weight of responsibility for evental transformation it potentially loses its grounding in the particular tensions and symptoms of a situation. In addition, there is also a danger that on the basis of this circularity Žižek's subject returns to a form of Hegelian subject-substance, whereby the subject is assumed to be able to refound and recreate the whole totality of the substantive Other.

Žižek, therefore, needs to carefully conceive of the relationship between subject, Being and Event. How does the subject relate to and enact this transformation? And, what relationship does it have with the current order of Being in this transformative modality?

### 5.3. The Act

Žižek conceives of the Event as an Act that consists of changing the coordinates of the possible and impossible in a given situation by doing something that is beyond the current designated set of possibilities. Žižek's key Lacanian reference in this respect is Lacan's notion of the Real as Impossible in *Seminar XI* (1981), where Impossible does not mean impossible as such — it is not the opposite of possibility — but, rather, Impossible within the reign of the pleasure principle.<sup>32</sup> For Žižek, this structure pertains to all Acts, even at a socio-political level. As he puts it:

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<sup>32</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XI*, p.167.

The impossible happens: not impossible in the sense of religious miracles, but in the sense of something we don't consider possible within our coordinates. This is why Lacan's formula for overcoming an ideological impossibility is not "everything is possible," but "the impossible happens."<sup>33</sup>

Crucially, it means that the Act is always mediated historically in a very specific way.

Because the Act is related to the distribution of the possible and impossible within a given socio-ideological context it must be conceived as emerging within and acting upon those historical coordinates. As such, the Event will occur on the basis of certain possibilities that are presented as impossible, or possibilities that are supposed to be impossible but yet are realised all the time. The Act, then, will arise from within and utilise these inconsistencies.<sup>34</sup>

As Adrian Johnston (2010, 2009) has extensively detailed, the Act requires a delicate balance between political flexibility and militant insistence in order to navigate the possibilities of the impossible. Following Žižek, we might call this "the Art of the Impossible." The term refers to — and bastardises — what Lenin described as "the Art of Insurrection" in a defence against accusations of Blanquism and voluntarism.<sup>35</sup> For Žižek, a similar navigation of possibilities is required, always dependent on the particularities of a concrete situation. For Žižek, theory must constantly probe and theoretically assess an order of being for sites of potential inconsistencies that might be radicalised. Given these inconsistencies, however, Žižek argues that we must remain open to the possibility of intervening into a situation at one of many sites, even ones that might initially appear insignificant. For example, in various examples Žižek emphasises how seemingly moderate demands can lead to substantial change if they pass through the symptomal point.<sup>36</sup> If we

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<sup>33</sup> Žižek, *DTI*, p.143.

<sup>34</sup> Žižek, *Iraq*, pp.39, 80-81.

<sup>35</sup> V.I. Lenin "Marxism and Insurrection," A letter to the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P.(B.) Sept, 13-14, 1917. In *Lenin Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, vol.26 (1972)

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, pp.133-4.

recall the example of the Law and its obscene underside from the previous chapter, Žižek argues that by making specific demands at points at which the system is unable to follow its own explicit rules the subject can pull the whole system into crisis. ‘[T]o insist on consistency, i.e., on the principles of the system itself, at strategically selected points at which the system cannot afford to follow its principles, leads to a challenge to the entire system.’<sup>37</sup> Certain political demands, thus, while entirely realistic can disturb the very core of an order if those demands cannot be incorporated into the system without radical overhaul. ‘A measure (say, the defence of human rights) which is in general a liberal platitude, can lead to explosive developments in a specific context.’<sup>38</sup> The key to “the Art of the Impossible,” as Žižek writes of the Lukácsian-Leninist manner in which he understands Badiou’s notion of the Event, is ‘seizing the right moment, of aggravating the conflict *before* the System can accommodate itself to the demand.’<sup>39</sup>

However, for Žižek, there can be no guarantees when it comes to the Act. Because it is based on the inconsistencies of the Other, the balance between possible and impossible, and actuality and potentiality, can rapidly shift. Similarly, the ends of an intervention can never be known in advance since the nature of the symbolic order means that there is always a gap between the intention and the outcome of an utterance. For this reason Žižek argues that the Act is always accompanied by a “radical risk”: it is ‘a step into the unknown, with no guarantee about the final outcome.’<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, despite this risk, the Act cannot be thought of in isolation from the context of its emergence. In response to our concern in the previous section with regard to whether Žižek’s reformulation of the relationship between subject and Event/Act produced a dangerous subject-centric circularity we can here respond

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<sup>37</sup> Žižek, *TIP*, p.111.

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, *TIP*, p.111.

<sup>39</sup> Žižek, “HCC,” p.119.

<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *Desert*, pp.152-3.

by insisting that despite the subject's primacy it nevertheless must always be conceived of as secondary in relation to the historical contexts in which it intervenes. The subject, thus, should not be thought of as a pure ground for the Act. As Žižek writes in *Less Than Nothing*: the subject 'should never be directly elevated into the grounding Principle of all reality [...] The Subject is always already related to some heterogeneous substantial content, it always comes second, as the negation or mediation of the content [...]'<sup>41</sup>.

## 5.4. Subtraction

However, there remain problems with conceiving of transformation solely on the basis of Žižek's conception of the Act. Primarily, these problems concern the unpredictability of the outcome of the Act and how it appears to contribute little to one of the principle aims of a Marxist politics, which is to create lasting structural change rather than merely the momentary Event of disruption.

It is to Badiou's credit that his conception of the Truth-Event speaks to this need insofar as it conceives of a militant fidelity to the Event that constructs and articulates its consequences. Initially, Žižek does not have a response to the question of what happens after the Act/Event, although he does highlight the conceptual space of the problem in his first engagement with Badiou in *Ticklish Subject* when he writes:

the test of the true revolutionary, as opposed to this game of hysterical provocation, is the heroic readiness to endure the conversion of the subversive undermining of the existing System into the principle of a new positive Order which gives body to this negativity – or, in Badiou's terms the conversion of Truth into Being.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Žižek, LTN, p.379.

<sup>42</sup> Žižek, TS, p.286.

In *Parallax View* Žižek finally resolves this problem through the notion of subtraction, a term that Žižek borrows, along with much of the conceptual architecture, from Badiou's *The Century* (2007). Indeed, in "Philosophy is not a Dialogue" (2009) Žižek announces this as a significant change of direction:

[I]n my latest book [*Parallax View*] [...] I've taken the radical step that leads away from my usual position, a step that was very painful for me. Up until now, I've held on to the idea that the authentic experience as such, to say it simply, is that which Lacan once called *going to the end of the analytic process*, and I told myself with doubts that this process is political, even that any political activity correlates with it. I've now abandoned that. I don't believe any more that the conclusion from psychoanalysis is, if I can say it like this, the authentic form of political engagement.<sup>43</sup>

We should not quite take Žižek wholly at his word here since this new position exists in addition to — expanding rather than replacing — the Lacanian repertoire of political interventions and, as such, still has a certain connection to them. However, the emergence of subtraction does amount to a significant sea-change in Žižek's thinking, albeit not quite the complete break from the Lacanian problematic he suggests.

In *Parallax View* Žižek describes subtraction as a form of Evental withdrawal that rejects the positive order of knowledge, as well as its possibilities, demands, and explicit points of identification. As we will see in his political articulation of the logic of subtraction in his reconceptualisation of the Party as the organisational form of Communist politics, Žižek suggests that the consequence of subtraction is adopting the position of the analyst. In this context, however, we can explain Žižek's understanding of subtraction on the basis of a crucial literary reference. Žižek's understanding of subtraction in *Parallax View* is informed

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<sup>43</sup> Žižek, "Dialogue," p.103.

by a reading of Herman Melville's short-story "Bartleby, The Scrivener" (2012). Bartleby's enigmatic rejection of the requests of authority is exemplary of the kind of antagonistic rejection that Žižek has in mind. What gives Bartleby's gesture its exceptional quality is that, as well as a refusal of the given, it marks an embodiment of positivity. Žižek argues that what is key to the disturbing effect of Bartleby's act is that it affirms a non-predicate: "I would prefer not to"; 'He does not say that he doesn't want to do it; he says that he prefers (wants) not to do it.'<sup>44</sup> As an Event, subtraction is exceptional because it rejects what at first seems not only sensible but inevitable at the level of the order of Being. However, it goes beyond the Act insofar as this disruption also creates a space that sustains the beginning of a new ordering. Bartleby's act is negative in the sense that it refuses, but at the same time Bartleby does not just disappear. By affirming the non-predicate, then, Bartleby simultaneously produces something that is, simultaneously, ineffable within the terms of the question and persists against it: Bartleby's being, his will, some heterogenous autonomy. As such, it appears as a disturbing intervention into the symbolic. This is why Žižek argues that Bartleby's Act is violent: 'There is no violent quality in it; the violence pertains to its very immobile, inert, insistent, impassive being.'<sup>45</sup> To extrapolate somewhat: by asserting this impassive Being against the terms of the choice put to him, Bartleby is saying "I reject your choice not because I want you to offer me a different one but because I reject the very idea that it is you that proposes the choice at all." Bartleby's rejection, then, is a self-affirmation, in the same way that the Event announces and registers itself as an Event, without the reliance on the authorisation of the State. "I exist for myself."

Žižek returns to the notion of subtraction in a slightly different guise in *In Defence of Lost Causes* (2008). The major issue with Žižek's account of Bartleby's subtraction is that

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<sup>44</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.381.

<sup>45</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.385.

there appears to be no necessary connection between the act of refusal and its violent effect other than as a rejection of authority. As a result, Bartleby's gesture might be seen to result in a mere shrug of the shoulder from those in power: "go ahead, rot in the interstices, see how long you last!" Rather than being antagonistic, then, in this instance subtraction would be mere external autonomy. Indeed, Alain Badiou certainly seems to accept this position when he takes his notion of subtraction into the political realm.<sup>46</sup> Perceiving this problem, Žižek argues that true subtraction exists only at the points of symptomatic torsion. Bartleby's rejection, then, is at the same time an identification with the abject, the remainder, the symptom that renders the order of being not-all. This is significant because, as such, subtraction is not only a rejection which persists beyond the dominant political order, but one that antagonises that order by virtue of striking at its weakest and most fragile point. We can here, once more, address our previous concerns regarding whether Žižek's conception of the subject meant a return to the kind of mega-subject that has proved to be so disastrous for Marxism. First, the importance of the symptomatic torsion as an evental site means that the subject's subtractive practice is always historical and locatable.<sup>47</sup> As such, its power resides in how it forces open a space for proper divisions to emerge. As a function of the symptomatic site it asks: "for or against?" "Are you for the normal flow of the everyday or are you standing with its excluded or the oppressed that are ignored?"<sup>48</sup> It also indicates how Žižek's "politics of Truth" is not about the imposition of a universal conception of the Good, which as we have seen was central to Žižek's critique of totalitarian politics. Identifying with the symptom, then, is not a new conception of the Good but an identification with a point of antagonism. Given the antagonistic nature of the subtractive refusal, it does not impose a new

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<sup>46</sup> Alain Badiou "We need a Popular Discipline": Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negation" interview by Filippo Del Lucchese and Jason Smith in *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008) pp.645-59.

<sup>47</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.409.

<sup>48</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, pp.410-1.

universal but functions so as to split the current universal by running through the point of symptomal torsion. The “universality” of the Truth, then, derives from the split that it enforces and which results in two universalist positions. In Žižek’s Hegelian terms: the abstract universality of the order of Being and the concrete universality of the division of the Truth-Event, which is unaccountable within the order of Being.<sup>49</sup> The effect of the subtractive position is to initiate a struggle: ‘not simply between the particular elements of the universality: not just about which particular content will “hegemonize” the empty form of universality, but a struggle between two exclusive forms of universality themselves.’<sup>50</sup> In classical political terms, we can think of this division between two universalities as one ‘between Society as a hierarchical structure and a Society for which the excluded (demos, the third estate, dissidents) stand.’<sup>51</sup>

Thinking of Bartleby’s subtraction in this way means that we can conceive of the Event, not as an abstract negation but as one that creates and sustains the possibility of the New through a constant antagonistic disjunction within the order of Being. As Žižek argues:

in its political mode, Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” is not the starting point of “abstract negation” which should then be overcome in the patient positive work of the “determinate negation” of the existing social universe, but a kind of arche, the underlying principle that sustains the entire movement: from “overcoming” it, the subsequent work of construction, rather, gives body to it.<sup>52</sup>

The logic in operation here is that of retroactivity. That is to say, Bartleby’s gesture is always a risk whose effects will only be judged *apres-coup*, depending on how its meaning is later

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<sup>49</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.227.

<sup>50</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.285.

<sup>51</sup> Žižek, *OWB*, p.59.

<sup>52</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.382.

inscribed, which, in turn, sustains the initial force of this antagonistic refusal. We will shortly turn to the nature of the creative side of subtraction but before this we need to carefully delineate the nature of subtractive negativity.

#### 5.4.1. Active Nihilism and Purification

Before we outline the particular type of political subjectivity that a subtractive politics suggests, we must first address a common concern with Žižek's politics that it is little more than what Raoul Vaneigem (2001) describes as "active nihilism," a politics of destruction and suicide conceived as revolutionary action.<sup>53</sup> As well as Tormey and Robinson's (2005) specific rebuke, variations of this critique can be found among many of Žižek's interlocutors. For example, Peter Hallward argues that there is a morbid fascination with death at the heart of Žižek's work.<sup>54</sup> While this is certainly present in Žižek's earliest writing regarding the Thing — and, as we will see, this dimension does persist in some of Žižek's formulations of revolutionary politics — subtraction, nevertheless, navigates a course around it. Indeed, one could even consider it as a direct attempt to avoid this form of nihilism.

When Badiou fashions the outlines of subtraction in *The Century* he does so by differentiating it from a different form of "passion for the Real", that of "purification." Badiou argues that purification has been the dominant radical attitude of the Twentieth Century, consisting in an obsession with the removal of semblance, the escape from representation to the Real, and the attempt to reduce being to its contingent absoluteness as a form of test of authenticity.<sup>55</sup> "Purification," then, is the violent discarding of deceptive

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<sup>53</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. David Nicholson-Smith. London: Rebel Press (2001) p.178.

<sup>54</sup> Hallward, *Badiou*, p.150.

<sup>55</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano, Cambridge: Polity (2007) pp.52, 56.

appearance until the Real is revealed in its awful, violent contingency. Following Badiou,<sup>56</sup> Žižek connects the logic of purification to Ernst Jünger's celebration of military combat,<sup>57</sup> and the Stalinist logics of the purge and the New Man.<sup>58</sup> What defines purification is its mistaken presumption that if the layers of appearance and semblance are stripped back far enough '*something will remain*,' some "sublime" remainder will be revealed to lie in wait behind the deceit of appearance.<sup>59</sup> It is this search for a form of authentic newness — the "New Man", some pure ethical position, etc. — that leads to purification resulting in a cycle of destructive infinity. Since appearances are constitutive of every Real, purification is 'doomed to incompleteness.'<sup>60</sup>

Active nihilism, then, is a paradigmatic form of purification. Its claim to authenticity through destruction is always indexed to a form of violence that ends in horror or self-annihilation. Subtraction is of vital importance to Žižek because it allows him to conceive of a form of practical negativity that is neither destructive nor doomed to end in failure. What it aims to produce is negativity as a minimal difference, which, as Žižek explains, is the gap within the All. The negativity that it names, then, is that of the symptom, an element that "destabilises" the natural functioning of the All when it is denied its exceptional external place.<sup>61</sup> Here, we do not get the destruction of purification but the opening of rupture within and against the All. Bartleby's act, then, is the equivalent of dialectical critique at the level of political practice. His subtraction similarly attempts to open the All, through antagonising it and sustaining a place both within and against it.

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<sup>56</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, pp.39, 53.

<sup>57</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.lxxiii.

<sup>58</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.lxxv.

<sup>59</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.lxxv.

<sup>60</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, p.52.

<sup>61</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.lxxvii-lxxvii.

To see how the logic of subtraction effects the way that Žižek conceives of negativity, it is illustrative to look at how it re-purposes the most obvious and abyssal figure of negativity in his work, the death drive. We saw previously how Žižek conceived of the drive as *das Ding* the abyssal, thicket of traumatic maternal *jouissance*, a kind of pre-reflexive materiality which destroyed the subject upon contact. Through the logic of subtraction, Žižek's notion of drive and its relation to desire significantly alters in form. Žižek now conceives of desire along the lines of purification in the sense that its constant search for something that is impossible produces the same "bad infinite" given the constitutive lack that characterises *jouissance*.<sup>62</sup> As such, desire is 'driven by the "impossible" quest for the lost object.'<sup>63</sup> Drive, on the other hand, is now conceived of by Žižek in a manner similar to the minimal difference; it does not confront a fullness, or even search for one, rather it 'circulates around a hole, a gap in the order of being.'<sup>64</sup> The purpose of drive, then, is also that of subtraction: it aims to disturb, open-up and assert a point of non-coincidence. As Žižek writes in *Parallax View*, the work that was so important for this reconception of his position in line with Badiou's idea of subtraction: drive is '*a push to enact "loss" — the gap, cut, distance — itself directly*.'<sup>65</sup>

#### **5.4.2. Breaking the Theoretical Deadlock II: Between the Democratic and Totalitarian Political Subject**

The idea of subtraction allows Žižek to reformulate the nature and form of the political moment of his Lacanian-Hegelian dialectical materialist philosophy. It means that he is able to break out from the disabling opposition between democratic lack and authoritarian *das*

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<sup>62</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.61.

<sup>63</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.62.

<sup>64</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.61.

<sup>65</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.62.

*Ding*, which, as I argued in 3.4., required addressing as one of the key challenges of Žižek's Marxism. To draw out its implications more fully, here I will connect subtraction to another key theoretical figure in Žižek's work, feminine subjectivity. Although Žižek does not explicitly make this connection himself, feminine subjectivity can be regarded as the form of political subjectivity that best matches the politics of subtraction. In addition, making this connection allows us to draw out some of the less explicit positive and creative dimensions of subtraction.

For Lacan, the difference between the masculine and feminine subjects derives from their different relationships to castration, or, in more general terms, the set of exclusions and prohibitions on which a socio-symbolic order is grounded.<sup>66</sup> While the masculine subject takes seriously the exclusions that ground an order, the feminine subject rejects their exceptional status and the *jouissance* that they engender.<sup>67</sup> To translate this into terms that we are more familiar with, the masculine subject does not want to know about the symptom and is happy to repress or disavow its consequences in favour of its fantasmatic re-coding. For example, the bourgeois subject would be a masculine subject insofar as they take no notice of the symptomal status of the freedom to sell one's labour, and instead choose to accept the fantasy that by selling their labour they really can become free, wealthy, secure, and full citizens. In libidinal terms, this is the fantasy of what is constitutively impossible. The feminine subject, however, rejects the fantasmatic status of the symptom, refuses the terms of the promise of *jouissance*, and instead, as with subtraction, identifies with the symptom as the impossibility and inconsistency of the Other's promise. The feminine subject, then, can be

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<sup>66</sup> Despite Žižek's numerous arguments I still have reservations about Žižek's defence of Lacanian Phallogocentrism, given that it continues to confirm and propagate common prejudices, even if these are given a positive valence. However, due to limitations of space, we are unfortunately unable to pursue this further here. For Žižek's defence see *ME*, p.145, and a more detailed discussion see Vighi and Feldner, *Žižek: Beyond Foucault*, chapter 15.

<sup>67</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XX*, pp.79-80.

thought of as the proletarian who challenges the political order by drawing attention to the violence, poverty and destitution that is obfuscated by the promise of freedom.

Identifying with the symptom, then, is not the Abyssal confrontation with the stupid insistence of maternal *jouissance* but, rather, the acceptance of its lack. This is evident in the new relationship to *jouissance* that feminine subjectivity engenders.<sup>68</sup> Whereas Phallic *jouissance* is an economy based upon an impossible satisfaction in an acetic world of benign pleasures, feminine *jouissance* is an enjoyment in this lack. As Žižek writes in *Less Than Nothing* '[i]n feminine *jouissance* the absence itself is sexualised.'<sup>69</sup> In this sense, feminine subjectivity is also of the drive: it pushes this lack, it cuts into Phallic *jouissance* and the smooth, self-assured ideological edifice of a hegemonic power. What is so disturbing about this enjoyment is its otherness. It is a *jouissance* not based upon the fantasy of the Other, but, rather, an enjoyment in its lack. That is to say, it is *jouissance* that demonstrates 'the ultimate form of autonomy' compared to the dominant socio-political structures.<sup>70</sup>

This relationship to the not-all also explains why the feminine subject *qua* subtractive subject is creative and far freer than the masculine subject. The feminine subject opens up a series of opportunities and possibilities that are absent from the masculine perspective. In terms of their relationship to prohibited content, the masculine subject accepts prohibition and thus does not want the smooth, consistent order of being disturbed by the symptom, but for the feminine subject, who no longer accepts the prohibition, there is nothing that 'one should not talk about.'<sup>71</sup> With regard to the feminine subject's relationship to love, Žižek writes, it is 'without restraint or reserve.'<sup>72</sup> What feminine subjectivity thus allows us to

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<sup>68</sup> Žižek, *ME*, p.161, Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p.111.

<sup>69</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.751.

<sup>70</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.752.

<sup>71</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.748.

<sup>72</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.749.

glimpse is a political practice that is both autonomous and creative insofar as it is no longer wedded to the fantasy of an impossible *jouissance*, but able to “autonomously” enjoy and operate fully within the symbolic with all its inconsistencies and fractures. In this sense, Žižek describes the feminine position as ‘immersed in the symbolic more wholly than a man — without restraint, without exception.’<sup>73</sup> In terms of our prior example, then, what we could say is that the bourgeois subject remains ignorant of the symptom on the basis of its fantasmatic promise of freedom, whereas the proletarian subject fully identifies with the symptom and thereby renders the totality not-all.

As a result, feminine subjectivity allows us to illuminate some of the more obscure aspects of the subject’s relationship to the Event. Žižek talks of a political practice without rules, that suspends ethical norms, and takes risks that are not covered or designated as possible by the Other. As the feminine subject demonstrates, this does not mean a total exit or lawlessness but, rather, the ability to decide and create norms in the very practice of autonomously applying them, given that the ultimate norm that sustains them has been rejected: the prohibition of the symptom. As a result, like the autonomous evental-practice which is at odds with the order of Being, the feminine subject suggests a practice that has to be ‘an immediate index of its own truth.’<sup>74</sup>

Subtraction and feminine subjectivity thus allow Žižek to escape the political dead-end of his pre-dialectical materialist position. From the perspective of subtraction and feminine subjectivity the errors of Žižek’s democratic position are now clear: caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of accepting limit and the dystopian reaching for the prohibited Thing it remained in the masculine economy of prohibition and exception. As such, the democratic position was not a true negation of the Stalinist one but rather its obverse: both

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<sup>73</sup> Žižek, *PATD*, p.68.

<sup>74</sup> Žižek, “LC,” p.260.

conceive of the Real beyond lack as a substantial fullness. The feminine subject and subtraction overcomes this binary. The inconsistency of the socio-symbolic order that is revealed to the feminine subject, thus, demonstrates the possibility of a political practice that reaches beyond the opposition of complicity and catastrophe.

## **5.5. The Tension at the Heart of a Marxist-Lacanian Dialectical Materialism**

In the introduction we described Žižek's "politics of Truth" as a risky and controversial position since to invoke Truth in the political field brings with it resonances of totalitarianism and other forms of politics which enforce a single conception of the Good. In this chapter I have demonstrated that Žižek's "politics of Truth" does not signal the return to a totalitarian politics as some have argued, nor is it limited by a conception of an Act that is purely negative.

Žižek's "politics of Truth" does remain "risky" in another sense, however. When we compare the role of Žižek's "politics of Truth" with that of dialectical materialism as critical practice it soon becomes evident that they stand at odds to each other despite the fact that they seem complimentary. The most important opposition resides in how while dialectical materialism began by rejecting all ontology on the basis of a practice that sought to historicise all order, with the "politics of Truth" a minimal ontology returns. The problem can be clearly discerned with regard to the question of materialism in Žižek's work: is it a critical position or is the not-all a form of minimalistic ontology? With regard to the critical dialectic, the "law" of the not-all was a presupposition that had to be confirmed through dialectical practice. Insofar as it informed the dialectic, it could be said to function in a similar way to

how Fredric Jameson understands the term totality as functioning in the context of Marxism as a methodological postulate for critical practice.<sup>75</sup> In Žižek's case, the not-all was a similarly speculative presupposition that guided dialectical practice. This changes with "the politics of Truth," however. Here, the not-all becomes the basis for a conception of the Act and subtraction. He argues that Being already *is* not-all, in order to facilitate an engaged political position and an argument for the continuing possibility of eventual transformation. Here, the not-all is not a methodological postulate, but, rather, indicative of a return to ontology, however underdetermined.

Why is this seemingly minor modification in his position important? It is important because it indexes a transformation in the role of dialectical materialism as a philosophy and Žižek as a philosopher. On the one hand, the "politics of Truth" seems to compliment the dialectic and, as I have argued, overcome some of its limitations in terms of how the subject is supposed to move from the discomfiting shock of the Real to concrete political practice. On the other hand, however, Žižek is no longer presenting the philosopher's role as that of the analyst it would seem. While Žižek still maintains the gap in being, he is no longer merely attempting to "open" it through the dialectical critique of totality. The role of philosophy is now to inform how the subject must act to utilise this not-all for a revolutionary politics. Why is this problematic? With regard to Marxism, it is not a problem, strictly speaking. Traditionally, Marxism has always allowed philosophy, or theory, to occupy this role: to change the world, one has to also describe it and, on this basis, suggest the kind of change that might be possible. Marxist revolutionary theory is always premised on the role of the theorist and theory as the bridging point, the moment of consciousness, the point where the masses realise their role. However, Žižek's return to dialectical materialism was premised

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<sup>75</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London: Routledge (1983) p.31.

on a critique of Marxism, which did not only problematise Marxist philosophy at the level of content but also at the level of form. Žižek argued that philosophy could not stand in for the Other — that is, the philosopher could not take the role of the master, whether in its traditional or perverted guise. Žižek’s critique of Marxism, in other words, insists that we should avoid the traditional form of the relationship between philosophy and practice. Žižek initially avoids this, as we have seen, with a critical practice, akin to analysis, where Truth is produced *via negativia*. For Žižek, if philosophy was to remain antithetical to the master, the stand-in for the Other, it had to demonstrate the *failure* of the master-signifier. Žižek’s “politics of Truth” seems to indicate a move beyond this purely critical position, however, insofar as it suggests to the subject how to Act. That is, it tells the subject that they are the basis for the Act and that they have the power to carry it out. The return to an ontology, however minimal, would seem to risk positing the Other that the fetishistic position so desperately wants to embody. The riskiness of Žižek’s position, then, resides in how by making these minimally programmatic and prescriptive claims Žižek might return philosophy to the position of the master and offer the subject an Other, which, as we saw, was the basis of the failure of traditional Marxism and the disasters of really existing socialism. If Žižek is going to remain faithful to the Lacanian critique of Marxism, and on this basis offer a renewed Marxist theory, he will have to carefully navigate this potential danger. We will return to see how Žižek fares in this regard in the final chapter and analyse whether Žižek can maintain the position of the analyst while answering that old Chernyshevskyan-Leninist question, which all Marxist theory must eventually arrive at, “what is to be done?”

# Chapter 6: The (other) Act and the Absolute

## 6.1. Introduction

In the introduction to this thesis and at several points throughout I have highlighted and alluded to the existence of a “second Žižek.” The “second Žižek” is problematic, because not only does it stand awkwardly in his relation to the materialist not-all, and the risky underdetermined nature of the Act, but the theories and positions associated with it also appear wholly antithetical to Marxist theory and politics. This dimension of Žižek’s work is outlined most definitively by Boucher (2009) and Boucher and Sharpe (2010) but can be considered to be properly traumatic within the Žižekian field. With the exception of Adrian Johnston’s work perhaps, which I will return to shortly, the “second Žižek” is the dimension of Žižek’s work that critical accounts obsess over and Žižekian sympathisers repress in order to avoid its full consequences. In the previous chapter we qualified a number of the responses to certain criticisms with the caveat that this or that element of Žižek’s work did not necessarily carry the implications that they argued it did. We can say here, however, that elements of their critical readings of Žižek were nonetheless well founded. One of the many problems with the “second Žižek” is the political position which Žižek articulated on its

basis. From what I will argue are rather problematic theoretical foundations, Žižek derives political conclusions that are even more questionable, especially from the perspective of his Marxism. We have already touched upon several critiques of Žižek's work which align it with a violent, destructive nihilism and with spectres of totalitarianism. It is here where these criticisms find their ammunition.

This chapter will aim to bring to the surface and isolate these elements in Žižek's work and in doing so demonstrate how they are at odds with the political and theoretical positions that have been outlined above. The purpose of this critical confrontation with the "second Žižek" is, ultimately, to critically reflect on to what extent these positions — theoretical and political — have a place in a Marxist dialectical materialist philosophy. In order to approach the "second Žižek" we must make a number of decisions regarding Žižek's work. The "second Žižek" is neither a constant nor, strictly speaking, an isolated incident in Žižek's writing. The two key theoretical texts where much of the positions of the "second Žižek" are developed are *The Indivisible Remainder* (1996[2007]) and *The Abyss of Freedom* (1997), which attempt to read F.W.J Schelling's theory of the emergence of God as a theory of the genesis of the subject. To some extent, Žižek's most recent theoretical works *Absolute Recoil* and *Less Than Nothing* are also important as they return to some of the same themes in greater detail, expanding them into new areas. However, it is certainly not limited to these texts. In terms of the political positions associated with the "second Žižek" the *Ticklish Subject* and essays around the turn of the millennium are the most obvious examples of the presence of the "second Žižek." As Žižek's political critique has developed, he resorts less to the extreme positions taken in this period. They nevertheless continue to emerge at the very heart of Žižek's work. For example, and rubbing against the position of the materialist not-all, in *Parallax View* Žižek hints at a dimension that 'reaches over' the horizon of collective,

socio-political practice.<sup>1</sup> Whereas in the previous chapters this beyond was nothing but an effect of the internal limitations of the symbolic, here Žižek is indicating *a beyond* to the not-all. One of the definitive features of the “second Žižek”, then, is the continuing existence of a subterranean Real, which, as we shall see shortly, is associated with an Absolute and metaphysical power in the form of a transcultural, transnatural death drive.

Above, we briefly touched upon the work of Adrian Johnston, noting that his work was an exception to the norm. Johnston (2010) demonstrates a different way to deal with the “second Žižek” from the majority of the critical and sympathetic readers by integrating it into a theory of subjectivity. As a result, Johnston is able to limit its metaphysical character by connecting it to the bodily Real, while, at the same time, remain critical of those moments in Žižek’s work in which the metaphysical dimension becomes detached from the bodily Real as some beyond to both nature and culture. To be clear, my critique in this chapter in no way takes issue with the transcendental materialist account of the subject which Johnston is developing. Rather, I take issues with the subterranean dimension of the Real as a metaphysical absolute and the disastrous political consequences that accompany it in Žižek’s work.

This chapter begins by focusing on these political consequences, in turn, delineating a different, although related, version of the Act present in Žižek’s work in the form of an abyssal destructive, suicidal negativity. It proceeds to consider the metaphysical basis of this conception of political action in Žižek’s reading of Schelling. We turn to consider how this metaphysical materialism marks a return to an expressive conception of dialectics in section 6.4 through a reading of Žižek’s understanding of Democritean philosophy in comparison to Marx’s preference for Epicurean materialism. The final section of this chapter attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.5.

understand Žižek's error in the context of "the end of History" and in terms of the political function of his reading of Schelling.

## 6.2. The (other) Act

Žižek's conception of the Act as an abyssal rejection of the symbolic order emerges shortly after his declaration of allegiance to a dialectical materialist Marxism. This notion of the Act emerges prior to Žižek's engagement with Badiou and the resulting reformulation of his conception of political practice through an understanding of subtraction. In the striking but troubling conception of political and social transformation that this earlier conception of the Act indicates, the subject is encouraged to take a suicidal option of total withdrawal, and told to tear down the very fabric of their social universe and instead immerse themselves in a destructive and painful freedom. As such, this Act is an exemplary case of the problematic logic of purification.

The basic coordinates of the type of Act which Žižek describes are already familiar from our prior understanding of the concept in Žižek's work. Žižek imagines the possibility of a forceful intervention that challenges the status quo, while seeming risky, or even impossible, from within its perspective. What Žižek's alternative conception of the Act adds to this is that it must aim at a mode of self-destruction in which the subject goes through total *aphanisis* and embraces something close to a momentary madness, not by virtue of going against the grain of the current hegemonic order, but, rather, by virtue of touching the Thing, that maternal, pre-symbolic plenitude of *jouissance* that in his democratic phase Žižek told us was "too hot" to do anything but encircle. Žižek bases this conception of the act and the subject's freedom on a particularly violent understanding of "subjective destitution," one figure that Lacan uses to describe the end of analysis that was never fully developed but is

here used by Žižek to conceive of social transformation.<sup>2</sup> Only through this self-annihilation does Žižek think transformation can be enacted.<sup>3</sup>

The clearest account of this destructive act of self-inflicted violence in Žižek's work occurs shortly after his turn to Marxism, specifically at a point where he appears particularly eager to further differentiate Lacanian-Marxism from deconstruction and post-structuralism and their political positions. In a disagreement with Judith Butler's book *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) concerning the nature of identification, set out in the essay "From 'Passionate Attachments' to Dis-Identification" (1998),<sup>4</sup> Žižek develops a conception of transformation that re-articulates the 'entire symbolic field by means of an act proper, a passage through "symbolic death."<sup>5</sup> Rejecting the effectiveness of any directly symbolic re-articulation on the basis that it will only constitute a minor transgression within the symbolic order,<sup>6</sup> thereby overlooking the retroactively legitimated performative power of symbolic acts,<sup>7</sup> Žižek argues that only 'the intervention of the real of an *act*'<sup>8</sup> can provide the basis for political practice. Žižek describes the act as Real, not in terms of the fragmentation of the symbolic order, the rendering of it as not-all that we saw in the previous chapters, but in terms of the escape from the symbolic order as such.<sup>9</sup> To use terms that Žižek himself uses elsewhere in his work: the Act *qua* Real is conceived in this context as the subject throwing itself at the mercy of the

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Verhaeghe and Frédéric Declercq "Lacan's analytical goal: 'Le Sinthome' or the feminine way." in *Essays on the final Lacan. Re-inventing the symptom*, ed. L. Thurston New York: The Other Press (2002) pp. 59-83.

<sup>3</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.452-464.

<sup>4</sup> This essay is also present in *Ticklish Subject* as part of the chapter 5.

<sup>5</sup> Žižek, "Passionate," p.5.

<sup>6</sup> Žižek, "Passionate," p.6.

<sup>7</sup> Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformation: The Cadence of Change*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press (2009) see chapter three. See also: Geoff Boucher "The Law as a Thing: Žižek and the Graph of Desire" in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek* eds. Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos and Matthew Sharpe Aldershot: Ashgate (2005) p.39.

<sup>8</sup> Žižek, "Passionate," p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Žižek, "Passionate," p.14.

Vortex of the Thing.<sup>10</sup> Or, as Žižek describes this action in *Sublime Object*: ‘the total “wipeout” of historical tradition.’<sup>11</sup>

To be clear, Žižek conceives of this intervention, which at best can be thought of as self-transformation, as the basis for social transformation in his dialogue with Butler. That is to say, Žižek conflates two dimensions which have no necessary overlap.<sup>12</sup> On this basis Žižek is able to articulate a Lacanian Ethics of the Real as a counterpoint to the deconstructivist position of the finitude of socio-symbolic existence — a position that broadly characterised his prior democratic position. The Ethical Act in this case is the unlimited embrace of the Real. Extending this position he argues that radical evil is not the totalitarian position of the finite subject acting as if there were a God, but, rather, the disavowal of the divine power of the subject itself.<sup>13</sup>

Žižek draws his examples of the Act primarily from literary and filmic sources. For example, Žižek cites Sethe’s act of infanticide in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Keyser Soze’s shooting of his family in the *Usual Suspects*, Christ’s Crucifixion, and Antigone’s decision to go against the state to bury her brother and bear the consequences of being buried alive. With regard to the last of these, it is telling that in his later work Žižek uses the exact same example to demonstrate the position of purification.<sup>14</sup> Here, once again, Žižek’s Lacanian reference point is Lacan’s claim in *Seminar VII* that ‘the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire.’<sup>15</sup> It is on this basis that Žižek conceives of the Impossible not as that miraculous disruption of the status quo but an heroic acceptance of our ultimate desire, understood at the level of the subject as *das Ding*, and at

<sup>10</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.xxx.

<sup>11</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p151.

<sup>12</sup> See Žižek, “Passionate,” p.7, *TS*, p.375.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek, “Passionate,” p.17.

<sup>14</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.lxxiii.

<sup>15</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p.319.

the socio-political level as something akin to an ultimate political goal. Here, however, the suggestion that Žižek makes through his particular choice of examples is that regardless of any strategic consideration we must perform the Act, consequences, social or personal, be damned. Elsewhere Žižek describes the effect of the act's negativity as so total that it amounts to "wiping the slate-clean" and marks a new beginning as a form of immaculate conception at year-zero.<sup>16</sup> Žižek derives this notion from a conception of the end of analysis, where he insists on a particular violent act of subjective destitution that necessitates going to the end. This is one particular understanding of the end of analysis, albeit one that is transformed to an incredibly extreme and violent end; however, as he himself later acknowledges, there are several ways to conceive of this end, and several concerns that Lacan has with the confrontation with 'the terrifying Real in its blinding destructive power.'<sup>17</sup>

We can see here a series of differences between this conception of the Act and the mode of political practice that we considered in the previous chapter.

- The Act relies on abandoning language, thus presuming the symbolic is escapable. In this way, Žižek takes the nonexistence of the big Other to imply its rejection, rather than merely its fragility and unboundedness.
- Given this rejection of the symbolic, Žižek conceives of the Act as wholly asocial, unlike the subtractive practice which, while operating in the interstices of power to gain autonomy, did not constitute a rejection of sociality entirely.
- The focus on individual transformation, without mediation or the overdetermination of its consequences in the symbolic, suggests a return to the subject-substance model of reconciliation characteristic of a traditional understanding of Hegel.

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<sup>16</sup> Žižek, *FA*, p.127.

<sup>17</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, pp.511-513.

- The politics of alliances and divisions suggested by subtraction is here disavowed in favour of the single punctual, abyssal act of transformation.
- As presented here, the Act appears far closer to a mode of purification than subtraction. In this context, the Real is not the gap or fracture but a confrontation with an abyssal Real in all its traumatic horror.
- This version of the Act almost certainly will be subject to the kinds of problems we have already touched upon in discussing the difficulties of Žižek's politics. The extreme and destructive nature of the Act means that it is unlikely that this shock will be maintained or converted into positive structural change. Instead, it would seem most likely that it will lead to a quick return to ideological semblances to protect against this abyssal Real.

As well as these troubling differences, there is a further problem at the heart of Žižek's conception of the Act in this context that we need to focus carefully on. Rather than a considered and strategically measured action, Žižek describes the Act as "crazy" not only in the context of the socio-political order but crazy to the subject itself. He describes how the subject of the act becomes a 'lifeless puppet', how it 'surprises the agent itself',<sup>18</sup> that it demonstrates some other 'terrifying *violence* at work,'<sup>19</sup> and reduces the subject to an automaton.<sup>20</sup> It's unclear why Žižek is so keen to emphasise the unconscious nature of the Act. It has been suggested that he maintains a clear "split" in the subject so as to be able to prevent the conclusion that he is returning to a model of transformation that is akin to the subject as the creator-author of the entirety of the socio-symbolic contents.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of Žižek's intended aims, the consequences of this move is that all subjective agency is removed

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<sup>18</sup> Žižek, "Passionate," p.14.

<sup>19</sup> Žižek, *FA*, p.127.

<sup>20</sup> Žižek, *TS*, pp.374-5.

<sup>21</sup> Boucher, *Charmed Circle of Ideology*, p.173.

from the Act and it becomes incredibly difficult to imagine how this conception of the Act can inform political practice. Are subjects now supposed to just wait for the Act to happen through them? Should the subject attempt to judge the Act or just accept it as it occurs? If we follow Žižek's statements on the matter it would seem that the subject must simply bear the consequences of the Act as it works through them. Žižek describes the Act as something that "repulses" the subject, a foreign body within them that repels them.<sup>22</sup> If this sounds vaguely familiar it is because we have heard Žižek describe revolutionary political practice in similar terms previously when discussing the position of the pervert who disavows their own responsibility for the Act, and its repulsive consequences, on to the Other.

The unconscious nature of the Act raises several further questions when its connection with the revolutionary pervert comes to light. What is the nature of the "foreign body" that the subject experiences? What agency is at work in this Act if it is not the conscious subject? Žižek's allusion throughout is that this extra dimension is that of the unconscious — that dimension of the subject that the conscious subject cannot recognise as themselves. Yet, given the power and force of this intervention it is reasonable to highlight how this formulation of the unconscious goes far beyond anything elsewhere in Žižek's work. Indeed, Žižek describes the unconscious in this context as the intervention of the "divine." He argues that the lesson of the Act is that 'divine miracles occur.'<sup>23</sup>

Here, I want to propose that when Žižek refers to the divine nature of the Act in this context and describes how the Act totally overwhelms and eclipses the subject that he is actually referring to something far beyond the unconscious. This is not just the unexpected or the unknown, but a dimension that Žižek introduces in his work that secures for the subject a properly metaphysical power, connected to a theological Absolute. The problem can be

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<sup>22</sup> Žižek, "Passionate," p.14.

<sup>23</sup> Žižek, "Passionate," p.17.

approached by way of a symptomatic confluence in Žižek's conception of the Act that has led to seemingly contradictory interpretations of it. On one hand, Žižek's conception of the Act suggests a total negativity insofar as it is said to demonstrate the possibility of "wiping the slate clean" through the total rejection of finite reality. On the other hand, as Yannis Stavrakakis argues, the transformative power of the Act also demonstrates an 'unlimited (real) positivity' insofar as the Real in this context is without limit and able to effect a total transformation.<sup>24</sup> Žižek's conception of the Act can produce seemingly opposed interpretations because it carries both of these dimensions. It marks a point of pure destruction and creation, and the accordant possibility of a total re-beginning of socio-political reality. In other words, Žižek's conception of the Act here is not merely a figure of political practice but indicates a Power that is absolute in its scope and its force. That is to say, when Žižek describes the "divine" nature of the Act it would seem that he is not using the term metaphorically, but, rather, literally.

How can Žižek support such a position? What leads him to conclude that in political practice the subject might possess such an incredible power? It is my contention that Žižek's theory of the Act is supported by a set of philosophical positions that develop a conception of the subject that endow it with a divine Power.

### **6.3. The Short-Circuit of Man and God.**

Immediately after declaring his work to be a form of Marxist dialectical materialism Žižek peculiarly does not undertake an analysis of capitalism, nor return to the cannon of Marxist philosophy, but, rather, Žižek turns to F.W.J Schelling's *Weltater* drafts, in which Schelling attempts to account for the beginning of the universe inclusive of God. In the introduction to

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<sup>24</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2007) p.110.

*Indivisible Remainder* Žižek claims that he is reading Schelling's theogony as a metapsychology. But what we find, in actuality, is Žižek utilising Lacan to read Schelling in order to produce a cosmology with the subject at its centre.

According to Žižek's reading of Schelling's position: before the beginning of the world a lot occurred. There was an *Urgrund* as a form of proto-substance: a formless, contentlessness contradiction.<sup>25</sup> In this *Urgrund* there was also something akin to a proto-subject at work, although this subject was not activated. Together these constitute what Žižek calls the "abyss of pure Freedom" a form of absolute basis for all creation. The immobility of this absolute basis is eventually broken, so Žižek argues, when the proto-subject no longer wills nothing but *nothingness itself*. This leads to a radical contraction, which produces an expansive explosion<sup>26</sup> and, in turn, engenders a vicious cycle of pulsating drives: the 'vortex of "divine madness" that threatens to swallow everything.'<sup>27</sup> One level up from the "abyss of Freedom" then, Žižek describes the world of *Grund qua* drives which he characterises as a 'chaotic psychotic universe.'<sup>28</sup> It is against this background, Žižek argues, that phenomenal reality emerges through an intervention by God.

God's original Act is to announce the Word, Reason, *logos*, and repress the *Grund* of the pulsating, chaotic drives into the eternal past. Schelling calls this act the *Ent-Scheidung*, or primordial division. In this act of division, God creates temporality by differentiating between the past and the present.<sup>29</sup> God also determines the essential structure of the world. Žižek argues that the basis of God's Act remains in the persistence of the *Urgrund* within the *Grund*. That is to say, the abyss of Freedom empowers God's Act.<sup>30</sup> After this Act, the

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<sup>25</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.14.

<sup>26</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.23.

<sup>27</sup> Žižek, *AF*, p.16.

<sup>28</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.13.

<sup>29</sup> Žižek, *IR*, pp.13, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.79.

*Urgrund* is, like the *Grund*, also repressed into the eternal past remaining only in the form of a spectre that continues to link the world of present Reason to its chaotic and irrational past. As a result, Žižek describes the entirety of the structure of the Universe quite simply as *Urgrund—Grund—Existence*.<sup>31</sup>

Utilising this structure Žižek reformulates his understanding of the Lacanian subject. No longer does Žižek conceive of the subject as emerging through its constitutive alienation within the symbolic. Instead, Žižek suggests there is a dimension of the subject that persists beyond this alienation and through which it can “decide its eternal nature.” In this context, Žižek describes how the subject can determine their “fundamental fantasy,” which gives to the subject its “eternal” character, in an act akin to self-re-pre-destination.<sup>32</sup> The structure of the subject is, as a result, substantially transformed. Prior to the emergence of the subject in the symbolic order and persisting underneath the symbolic, there exists a certain power that allows the subject to wholly redetermine their being regardless of their symbolic determinations. Žižek characterises this power as the “indivisible remainder.”

We can here highlight the connection between the subject and the power of the Absolute. Žižek argues that the power of the subject located in the indivisible remainder is one and the same power that God possess in the *Ent-Scheidung*. As Žižek tells us: there is ‘a kind of short circuit, of direct overlapping, between man and the Absolute; this act of contracting being, of choosing one’s eternal nature, *has to be repetition of the same act of the Absolute itself*.’<sup>33</sup> With this “short-circuit” established Žižek can argue that ‘[M]an is not merely an epiphenomena in the universe, a negligible grain of dust [...] he is the only one to

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<sup>31</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.21.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek, *IR*, pp.17-18, *LTN*, p.177.

<sup>33</sup> Žižek, *IR*, pp.20-21.

possess the “power of the centre,” and stands as such in direct contact with the abyss of primordial freedom.’<sup>34</sup> As Žižek puts it: the subject can “Rejoin the Absolute.”<sup>35</sup>

To reiterate, it is here that Žižek recovers what he thinks is the pivotal political insight of Schelling’s work: emboldened with the resources of Schelling’s onto-theology, Žižek argues that the subject possesses this absolute ontological power with which it is able to ‘tear the chain of causal necessity asunder’ and recover ‘the primordial abyss-origin of all things.’<sup>36</sup> As Žižek makes clear, this is a properly metaphysical Freedom grounded neither in the subject’s natural being nor in its transcendental constitution. The subject can thus make or remake their world in a punctual moment of destruction and transformation.<sup>37</sup> To do so they have to go through the madness of vortex like *Grund* to reconnect with “the abyss of Freedom,” which Žižek praises Schelling for conceiving as ‘the most horrible thing.’<sup>38</sup>

The emergence and continuing existence of this metaphysical beyond in Žižek’s work can be charted through a number of conceptual figures. Žižek writes of an “unnatural” savagery in man that is different to animals in the form of a passion for freedom that nature and education attempt to discipline.<sup>39</sup> He describes a transcendental spontaneity that is neither phenomenal or noumenal but instead precedes them both.<sup>40</sup> This is what Žižek is referring to when he describes ‘some monstrous excess in the real’ that accounts for the emergence of our socio-cultural world.<sup>41</sup> It appears even in several of Žižek’s favoured Hegelian figures, such as “the night of the world” in which he explicates that far from indicating an immanent void,

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<sup>34</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.14.

<sup>35</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.20, p.31.

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.19.

<sup>37</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.20.

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, *CWZ*, p.166, Žižek, *IR*, p.24.

<sup>39</sup> Žižek, *AR*, p.65, *TS*, p.38.

<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *TS*, pp.24-5.

<sup>41</sup> Žižek, *FA*, p.92.

it instead describes its ‘exact opposite,’ a ‘primordial Big Bang.’<sup>42</sup> It is even present on occasion when Žižek describes dialectical materialism, going against the not-all to posit a dimension that “reaches over” the horizon of the collective *praxis*, in the form of the “inhuman” core of humanity.<sup>43</sup> What each of these have in common is that they name a realm that is “neither nature, nor culture.” That is to say, it is neither Real *qua* void nor symbolic, but the power that brings both into existence. In the Act, via Žižek’s understanding of the “indivisible remainder” and God’s abyssal Freedom, this figure gains an explicitly political function and becomes an Absolute power.

It is the presence of this Absolute power that facilitates the conception of political practice in terms of the Act at the centre of the “second Žižek” and all its problematic political baggage. It leads Žižek to dismiss the primacy of the symbolic order, now that the subject wields the power of God.<sup>44</sup> It allows a belief in epochal change without concern for the specificity of the antagonisms and injustices of the present, given that, much like Stalin (2008) conceived of it in fact, if one transforms the base — the fundamental fantasy, the eternal past — then superstructural change will occur automatically. Questions regarding organisation, social power, and strategy are no longer of interest, given that subjects no longer have to concern themselves with the intricacies and complexities of their particular socio-historical context. It means that political change is not just unexpected or “miraculous” in light of the fact that it works in and against current norms and knowledge, but, rather, that it is the intervention of the divine in-itself. Moreover, because this subject’s power is not immanent to the symbolic or grounded in its understanding of the situation, but, rather, by the Absolute itself it is emboldened by precisely the kind of legitimacy, i.e., the Other, that was

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<sup>42</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.35.

<sup>43</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.5.

<sup>44</sup> Žižek, *FA*, p.92.

at the heart of the failures of Marxism according to Žižek. When Žižek describes how the subject of the act *qua* Real experiences this transformation as if they were an automaton, he is dangerously close to describing the same kind of subjectivity, doing the duty of the Other and relieved of the consequences, that he suggests was catastrophic in the history of Communism.

How does this position alter what we have already highlighted in Žižek's work? It alters the position of the not-all that we have described in two significant ways. First, by adding in this third dimension, which works to account for the genesis of the structure as well as its transformation, Žižek contains the inconsistency and openness that the not-all indicated in an all-encompassing structure. Significantly, it also removes the importance of the tension between a totality and its symptom, the not-all and the evental site, where the genuinely new and contingent occurs. With Žižek's Schellingian subject there is no tension, no genuine contingency, no openness since it is God's original Act, that metaphysical abyss of Freedom, that intervenes to resolve and redeploy this opposition from without. We could say that if Žižek was attempting to secure the Act, Event or historicity through his reading of Schelling, what he in fact does is destroy their possibility. God's Act is not exceptional because there is no exception to it, all reality depends upon it. And by way of understanding the persistence and power of God's Act in these terms, Žižek places all change within a Universal History characterised by moments of punctual but total transformation that break the otherwise immobile order of Being. We can conceive of this difference as a change of emphasis in the nature of universality. Previously, we understood the singular universal as universal because it was a particular that stood for the very limitations of a universal order; conceived on the basis of God's abyssal Act the particular remainder is now universal on the basis of a metaphysical Absolute.

## 6.4. Democritus versus Epicurus

What happens when we prioritise this prior metaphysical dimension over symbolic reality? I want to think of the effects of the position of the “second Žižek” in terms of epistemology, contingency and transformation, while delineating the sharp divergence between the “second Žižek” and Karl Marx. We can approach this problem through an understanding of their respective differences with regard to Democritean and Epicurean philosophies. Karl Marx’s doctoral dissertation *The Difference Between The Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (1975) sought to discern a practical and modern materialism, free from spiritual idealisation, through a critical comparison of these two philosophical schools of thinking materialism. In his latest works *Less Than Nothing* (2012) and *Absolute Recoil* (2014) Žižek also turns to Epicurean and Democritean philosophy, in order to outline a modern, demystified materialism. However, he chooses a very different route to Marx. Rather than arguing for one position over another, as Marx does when he sides with the Epicureans, Žižek argues it is not necessary to choose between these two positions because they can be, in a sense, synthesised.<sup>45</sup>

As traditionally conceived, the relationship between Democritus and Epicurus relies upon a slight but significant difference. Democritus conceived of reality as consisting of atoms of an infinite number, too small to be seen, residing in a void with qualities of only size and shape. What Epicurus added to Democritus’s position was that the movement of these atoms did not occur simply in straight lines, along definite trajectories that were entirely deterministic, but that they also “swerved.” This “swerve” or *clinamen* was the element of indeterminacy and contingency. It is this that empowered Marx to suggest that Epicurean materialism was a modern and critical materialism. Marx cites the Epicurean *clinamen* as ‘the

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<sup>45</sup> Žižek, *AR*, p.385. Žižek borrows heavily from Mladen Dolar’s essay “The Atom and the Void — from Democritus to Lacan” (2013).

law of the atom' that 'breaks the *fati foedera*' and provides the space for transformation and freedom.<sup>46</sup> For Marx, the Epicurean critique of determinism was politically enabling insofar as it allowed man to reclaim freedom within nature. Marx argues that without the notion of the "swerve" materialism implies a form of bondage more severe than that of religion.

Quoting Epicurus:

*Necessity*, introduced by some as the absolute ruler *does not exist*, but some things are *accidental*, others on our *arbitrary will*. Necessity cannot be persuaded, but chance is unstable. It would be better to follow the myth about the gods than to be a slave to *heimarmene* of the physicists. For the former leaves hope for mercy if we do honour to the gods, while the latter is inexorable necessity.<sup>47</sup>

Much like the critique of religion relies on a critique of God, Marx argues that a critical, enlightened materialism must accept an openness to chance. That means ultimate or first causes in which the structure of change has already been decided must be rejected. '[I]t is chance, which must be accepted, not god, as the multitude believe.'<sup>48</sup> For Marx, change and transformation is only possible because of the immanence of contingency and chance. As Marx puts it somewhat poetically: '[t]he death of nature has become its immortal substance.'<sup>49</sup>

Žižek approaches Democritean and Epicurean philosophy with a similar objective in sight: how do we understand transformation and change? Just as Marx describes the openness of substance to transformation, Žižek argues that 'in its "normal" state' substance 'is

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<sup>46</sup> Karl Marx, *The Difference Between The Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* in *MECW*, vol 1. New York: International Publishers (1975[1840-1]) p.49.

<sup>47</sup> Marx, *Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy*, pp.42-43.

<sup>48</sup> Marx, *Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy*, p.43.

<sup>49</sup> Marx, *Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy*, p.62.

nothing,<sup>50</sup> seemingly indicating that far from being determined that substance is actually, in Žižek's Lacanian terms, not-all. However, when we turn to Žižek's argument and attempt to combine Democritean and Epicurean philosophy we discover that Žižek reduces this insubstantiality to a logically prior and ontologically deeper level: *Den*.

Žižek argues that Democritean philosophy has wrongly overlooked this concept in Democritus's writing. As a result, the relation between atoms and the void has been crudely simplified. What precedes the existence of Atoms and Void is *Den*, which Žižek follows Mladen Dolar in understanding as the 'derivative' of the split into Atoms and the Void.<sup>51</sup> In his synthesis of Epicurus and Democritus, Žižek proceeds to argue that *clinamen* are in fact only the obverse of *Den*. What appears to be the cause of change and transformation is as a result reduced by Žižek to a prior cause. The model Žižek has in mind here is that of Lacanian castration. Like *objet a* is always the stand-in for a lost *jouissance*, Žižek conceives of *clinamen* deviations to be the result of the lost *Den*.<sup>52</sup> For Žižek, moreover, it is not enough to presume that *Den* is in the eternal past, some retroactive presupposition of change. As a result, to understand change we must move back from *clinamen* to *Den*.<sup>53</sup>

As a result, a lot rests on the nature of *Den* and its subsequent relationship to *clinamen*. What we find is that their structure is almost identical to the relationship of the indivisible remainder and the abyss of Freedom. *Den* is a similar positively charged *nothing* with a specific creative power — like the abyss of Freedom, 'the nihil *out of which every creation proceeds*'<sup>54</sup> — which in Žižek's most recent works is named the "less than

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<sup>50</sup> Žižek, *AR*, p.386.

<sup>51</sup> Mladen Dolar, "The Atom and the Void — from Democritus to Lacan" in *Filozofski* vol.XXXIV, no.2 (2013) pp.11-26, p.25.

<sup>52</sup> Žižek, *AR*, p.389.

<sup>53</sup> Žižek, *AR*, p.391.

<sup>54</sup> Žižek, *AR*, p.386. *My italics*.

Nothing.”<sup>55</sup> As Žižek explains in *Less Than Nothing*: ‘this nothing is not the Oriental or mystical Void of eternal peace, but the nothingness of a pure gap [...], the pure form of dislocation ontologically preceding any dislocated content.’<sup>56</sup> The structural relationship that Žižek develops between *Den* and *clinamen* mirrors that of the abyss of Freedom and the indivisible remainder. What it means is that change is understood to occur through the abyssal dimension of *Den* rather than the immanent contingency and openness indicated by *clinamen*. Indeed, Žižek connects *clinamen* to *Den* arguing that the former are nothing but the substantialisation of the latter.<sup>57</sup>

Žižek does not offer up any political advice regarding this understanding of transformation. However, by reducing the contingency of *clinamen* to this prior pre-ontological Cause he risks a series of political conclusions that Marx’s materialism actively seeks to avoid. For Marx, Epicurean materialism was the forefather of modern science and critical thinking given that it disqualifies conceiving of the nature of our world and its potential transformation on the basis of a ‘divine power,’ or ultimate cause.<sup>58</sup>

Epistemologically, given the particularity of chance and change, Marx suggests that Epicurean philosophy was the pre-Socratic equivalent to the sensuous “blooming” and “buzzing” materialism of Francis Bacon and the conjunctural, multi-factorial evolutionary materialism of Darwin.<sup>59</sup> But what is of concern are the political consequences of Epicurean philosophy. For Marx and Engels, as they write in *The German Ideology*, Epicurean philosophy entailed that ‘the world must be *disillusioned*, and especially freed from the fear

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<sup>55</sup> Žižek, *AR*, p.386.

<sup>56</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.38.

<sup>57</sup> Žižek, *AR*, p.391.

<sup>58</sup> Lucretius quoted by Karl Marx in *Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy, Third Notebook, MECW*, vol.1. New York: International Publishers (1975) p.466.

<sup>59</sup> John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Nature and Materialism*, New York: Monthly Review Press (2000) pp.38-9, 63-64.

of gods.’<sup>60</sup> Because there were no final or absolute causes, no ultimate determinate structure to nature, Marx and Engels suggest that the possibilities and freedom this entails must be the basis for any relation to the world. No longer subject to divine determinism, Marx argues that in Epicurean philosophy ‘human self-consciousness’ emerges as ‘the highest divinity.’<sup>61</sup> As John Bellamy Foster argues, with Epicurus, we ‘retain a clear conception of *the possible*, while remaining open and non-determinant.’<sup>62</sup>

It is this sense of the possible that is at risk of being lost when Žižek subordinates *clinamen* to *Den*. Freedom and transformation are not the result of the gaps in our socio-historical world but merely the re-emergence of the original power of *Den*. This marks a clear change of direction when compared to Žižek’s other discussion of materialism and is much closer to an expressive dialectics than one grounded on the not-all. In the context of the not-all Žižek writes that ‘True materialism [...] consists precisely in accepting the chanciness *without* the implication of the horizon of hidden meaning — the name of this chance is *contingency*.’<sup>63</sup> The “less than Nothing” as the original dislocation, the first and ultimate Cause from which all change derives, seems to return to the presupposition of such a hidden meaning or ultimate determination, in the same way that equating the subject’s Act to the original Act of God means that all change stems from an original Absolute power.

In an 1842 article Marx wrote for the *Kölnische Zeitung*, Marx criticises philosophy for failing to sufficiently replicate the sciences. He argues that a philosophical, ‘theological physics,’ a physics of the final and singular cause, was bound to be ‘a virgin dedicated to God and barren.’<sup>64</sup> It could be argued that the same will apply to a “theological politics”, in which

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<sup>60</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, p.141.

<sup>61</sup> Marx, *Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy*, p.30.

<sup>62</sup> Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, p.57.

<sup>63</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.lii.

<sup>64</sup> Karl Marx, The Leading Article in No. 179 of the *Kölnische Zeitung*, *MECW* vol.1, New York: International Publishers (1842) p.201.

change was thought to be based upon a singular causal outside, without mediation or symbolic determinacy, as any political practice conceived on this basis would risk equally becoming a virgin dedicated to God and, as such, barren.

## 6.5. The Act, Schelling and "the End of History"

In Žižek's work the conception of the Act that we have described above has become an increasingly marginal position. However, its thematics emerge on occasion in even his most recent work; the escape from the symbolic, absolute violence, and individual destruction are all suggested as potential political strategies. At times, Žižek still cannot resist the temptation of inhuman terror, while casually shrugging off total global annihilation.<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere he speaks about killing with impunity given the absence of the big Other,<sup>66</sup> overlooking how, far from "anything goes", the point of autonomous political practice is that subjects must decide on their own ethical and political value-systems while pursuing change. It is my contention that as Žižek has developed more refined modes of practice through his engagement with Alain Badiou's work and a more detailed analysis of the political the wholly irrational destructive Act is less frequently invoked as a serious political proposal. Politically at least the "second Žižek" is a less prominent figure in his more recent writings.

Why did this figure emerge in Žižek's work at all, we might ask? It could be argued that the emphasis that it placed on the possibility for total transformation might have represented a provocative challenge to the de-politicised consensus of the status quo. In this sense, the rhetoric of violence and total transformation associated with the Act might have functioned at a discursive level micro-Act in itself. Žižek argues that he aims for something similar when he speaks of a Leninist politics — the name, for Žižek, stands in part for the

<sup>65</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, pp.169, 171.

<sup>66</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p.170.

suspension of ‘the stale [post-]ideological coordinates, the debilitation *Denkverbot* in which we live [...]’<sup>67</sup> In this regard, it is perhaps worth noting that Žižek’s violent rhetoric certainly changed some minds. In 2011 his work was cited in the Irish *Dail* as a warning that if radical reform was not forthcoming Members of Parliament could expect something far worse.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps, there is an element of provocation in these positions. Žižek at various points argues that he sets traps for his liberal-postmodern-deconstructivist opponents, as if in some way testing whether they really want the radical transformation that they claim.<sup>69</sup> However, even when measured against the much needed attempt within this post-political era to assert and keep open the possibility of a radical politics, the Act of the “second Žižek” is wildly inappropriate, and as I have argued, likely discourages and stultifies any Utopian longings if this was thought to be the type of transformation they might affect or the kind of process that transformation relies upon. Moreover, it would almost certainly be a catastrophe for any Leftist political project that took it seriously. Indeed, far from representing a serious politics for the left, this conception of the Act has far more in common with the ideologies that inspired revolutionary millenarians.<sup>70</sup>

Perhaps the Act and his Schellingian turn plays another role for Žižek, however. When Žižek introduces his readers to Schelling’s work he defends his decision to utilise a work of theology to inspire a new understanding of Lacanian meta-psychology, he argues that Schelling’s theological narrative form was merely a means through which it was possible to address the yet to be resolved contradiction of Kantian Idealism, namely: how does one

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<sup>67</sup> Žižek, *DSST?*, p.3.

<sup>68</sup> “Michael D Higgins making his last speech in the Dail,” 16:04 *Youtube.com*, posted by Irish Labour Party, uploaded on Jan 26 2011, [Online] Accessed from: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJJ5q1\\_5jX8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJJ5q1_5jX8) accessed on: 2.10.2013

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Žižek, *PV*, p.11.

<sup>70</sup> See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, Ayesbury: Paladin (1970) p.13.

account for the Real genesis of transcendently constituted reality?<sup>71</sup> Schelling's account of the emergence of God and the beginning of the world, thus, actually resolves questions for Kantian, and Lacanian philosophy, if we are able to look past the ideological form. To bolster his defence, Žižek cites Fredric Jameson's (1981) thesis regarding narrative form as a sophisticated ideological mode of contradiction resolution. He suggests that because the contradiction of Kantian philosophy could not be resolved within Kantian terms a 'philosophico-mythological narrative' was invented to do so. However, if we look at the quote to which Žižek refers, Jameson is quite explicit in his view that narrative form resolves a very particular, extra-philosophical kind of contradiction. 'The production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal solutions to unresolved social contradictions.'<sup>72</sup> Schellingian scholars would no doubt be able to offer some ideas regarding which social-contradictions his accounts of the un-Godly beginnings of God were addressed to. The omission of the dimension of social contradictions in Žižek's rephrasing of Jameson's thesis is telling, symptomatic even perhaps, because regardless of any social contradictions that Schelling's work addresses, it raises the question of what social contradictions does Žižek's Schellingian philosophy and its accordant conception of political practice attempt to resolve?

While Žižek's conception of the Act is presented as an emancipating practice whereby the subject regains their autonomy from the Other while effecting social change, it appears to very closely reflect the very deadlock that it attempts to address. Rather than the unique power of the subject, it suggests impotence and isolation, an act of striking at the self rather than the system. Indeed, in *Heroes* (2015) Franco "Bifo" Berardi diagnoses a similar form of frenetic, irrational self-violence as a symptom of the subject of late-capitalism's exhaustion

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<sup>71</sup> Žižek, *AF*, p.94, n.36.

<sup>72</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p.79.

and powerlessness in the face of the pressures of a hyper-competitive society, which constantly compels the subject to mobilise its energies. “Running amok,” a sudden frenzy and rage where the subject impotently hits out to try to establish reputation and temporarily reassert itself against the pressures of a world that begins to feel intolerable. As Bifo charts, it is a frequent precursor to suicide.<sup>73</sup> The Act shares nearly all the features of what Bifo diagnoses as “running amok.” The loss of self, the blurring of boundaries between inside and outside, the collapse of temporal categories of past, present and future in to pure present and psychosis.<sup>74</sup> The Žižekian Act, then, appears less the basis for an emancipating politics and more like a tragic form of pathology in our contemporary period.

Within Žižek’s system the valences are reversed and the problem is repackaged as a solution. The deadlock is not overcome but rather accepted. The same could be said when we compare the ideological dead-end of Žižek’s early period and how he here suggests that we escape it. What Žižek’s position with regard to the Act and his earlier democratic position have in common is an acceptance that radical political practice and disaster are one and the same thing. With the conception of the Act, the “second Žižek” merely accepts the dichotomy of catastrophe or the status quo, before asking subjects to risk the former as precisely what we need. Far from a solution to this deadlock Žižek’s conception of the Act seems to reproduce its dead-end.

With regard to Žižek’s Marxist politics, this conception of the Act could be said to also reflect and reproduce the ideological deadlock described by Fredric Jameson as that of “the end of History.” As his now canonical formulation puts it: ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.’<sup>75</sup> The Act, while based on a conception of the end of

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<sup>73</sup> Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*, London: Verso (2015) pp.55-56.

<sup>74</sup> Berardi, *Heroes*, Pp.55-56.

<sup>75</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, New York: Columbia University Press (1994) p.vi.

analysis, could be said to be a deeply ideological figure as a result. Žižek accepts the ideological deadlock and follows its “inherent transgression” — i.e. destruction. Rather than resolving the challenge of “the end of History”, as well as the political deadlock of his own democratic work, through an analysis of capitalism and its antagonisms and symptoms, the Schellengian empowered act allows Žižek to simply cut the Gordian knot. Imagining the possibility of change by way of the Act as an extra-historical Freedom with the power to inaugurate a total revolutionary transformation, thus allows the “second Žižek” to side step the patient critique and analysis of the “the end of History” and the invention of forms of political practice. From the perspective of this Act of total destruction these problems and challenges can be side-stepped. As such, Žižek is vulnerable to the charge that the violence and destructiveness of the Act is a form of ideological displacement. In his own terms, it is a fetish that covers the lack of a viable emancipatory politics and the absence of a historical materialist critique of capitalism and liberal democracy, or whatever the Lacanian equivalent of that might be, in this period of his work. Given the implausibility of the Act and its multitudinous problems it would seem that this is nothing but a fantasmatic resolution to a set of historical challenges that elsewhere Žižek realises he must address.

## Chapter 7: Žižekian Science

### 7.1. Introduction

“What can dialectical materialism tell us about quantum physics and the other natural sciences?” By asking this seemingly innocuous question Žižek returns to one of the most controversial areas in the history of Marxist philosophy. After Lysenko, Zhdanov, and the intellectual crimes of Stalinism, the idea of returning to a project of a Marxist, dialectical materialist science is unthinkable to many. Yet, in the same work that he outlines his understanding of Schelling, Žižek returns to precisely this project, engaging with quantum physics and the cognitive sciences in an attempt to bring together Hegelian philosophical speculation and the findings of the natural sciences. What emerges from this attempted synthesis is a confusing and precariously balanced amalgam of dialectical critique and metaphysical speculation that threatens at many points to collapse into a heap of untenable theoretical positions. But, perhaps more shockingly given the history of Marxist dialectical materialism, what is truly concerning about Žižek’s dialectical materialist science is that it makes or comes unerringly close to making the very same mistakes that characterised *diamat*, or “classical” dialectical materialism. Given that Žižek associates his own dialectical materialism with the Marxist project, his failure to learn from the mistakes of the “classical”

dialectical materialism of Engels, Stalin, *et al.* is highly worrying. In this chapter I want to demonstrate how Žižek's engagement with the sciences mirrors and repeats the problems of "classical" dialectical materialism. In doing so the chapter will build upon Adrian Johnston's (2013) recent critique of Žižek's engagement with quantum physics. Johnston correctly argues that what underpins Žižek's arguments regarding the "Hegelian" or "Schellingian" character of quantum science is a highly problematic analogical form of reasoning, which risks crudely reducing the complexity of natural phenomena to figures from his own dialectical materialist philosophy. The extended use of these dialectical materialist conceptual figures also risks transforming Žižek's dialectical materialism from a philosophy of the not-all to a philosophy of the One-All.<sup>1</sup> By overestimating the role of philosophy and the applicability of Hegelian-Lacanian-Schellingian categories Žižek risks transforming his philosophical position into a world-view in the form of a structure that is supposed to encompass and explain all phenomena, presenting a world which contradicts the axiom on which his critical, political work is based: the not-all. While Žižek's engagement with the sciences also demonstrates elements of a non-reductionistic and critical materialism, these elements are almost wholly overridden by a tendency in his work to impose his own dialectical materialist ontology on to scientific theory in a way that, at points, seems to wholly distort it. Where I depart from Johnston's position, however, is that rather than merely seeing this as a problem with Žižek's engagement with quantum physics, I suggest that it is a result of failing to take "classical" dialectical materialism as a philosophical position seriously. Consequently, with regard to "classical" dialectical materialism, Žižek's dialectical materialism repeats two of its central mistakes. It clumsily straddles the divide between scientific positivism and Hegelian philosophy, ultimately foisting the latter behind the former

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Johnston, "A Critique of Natural Economy: Quantum Physics with Žižek" in *Žižek Now: Current Perspectives in Žižek Studies* eds. Jamil Khader and Molly Anne Rothenberg, Cambridge: Polity (2013).

as a supposedly underpinning metaphysical structure. In doing so, it projects into nature the values and politics of his own dialectical materialism in what we might call a psycho-socio-morphism not dissimilar to the socio-morphism evidenced in “classical” dialectical materialism.

While there is certainly a debate to be had concerning the possibility of a contemporary dialectical materialism engaging with the sciences, it would do well to begin with an acknowledgement of the failures of the past. In the few sympathetic accounts of Žižek’s engagement with the sciences, where the possibility of a dialectical materialism of the sciences has been defended,<sup>2</sup> as well as Žižek’s work itself, this has so far been sorely lacking. We will reflect on and analyse these failures, as well as considering how they are also present in Žižek’s dialectical materialism in this chapter. To begin, this chapter will compare Žižek’s dialectical materialism and “classical” dialectical materialism with a particular focus on how *diamat* took the form of a political cosmology, partially as a consequence of over-estimating the power of philosophy and its scope and applicability. Following this, we will attempt to untangle the knot of Žižek’s multiple engagements with the sciences by showing that there are several competing approaches operating at any one time in his writing. The analysis will then turn to Žižek’s interpretation of quantum physics, the most problematic element of his work with the sciences, outlining the problems with Žižek’s engagement over two sections — “Žižekian Positivism” and “A Psycho-Socio-Morphic World.” In doing so, I will demonstrate how as a result he repeats certain mistakes that were at the heart of classical dialectical materialism’s interpretation of scientific results.

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<sup>2</sup> See Roland Williamson, "Hegel Among The Quantum Physicists" in *International Journal of Žižek Studies* vol.3. No.1 (2009); Joseph Carew, “‘Why is there Nothing Rather than Something?’ *Less Than Nothing’s* New Metaphysics,” in *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol.8 no.1 (2014).

## 7.2. Žižek and Diamat

Despite the manifold limitations of Žižek's philosophical engagement with the sciences the impulse behind the project is admirable and well-founded. By giving the sciences an important place within his dialectical materialism, Žižek addresses a blind-spot that generally characterises Western Marxism, which was consistently hostile to Engelsian philosophical themes. With this rejection, Western Marxism fell into two broad categories: the Gramscian "absolute historicism" which reduced the object of science to an object of ideology,<sup>3</sup> or Lukácsian dialectical materialism which implicitly accepted the divide between neutral value-free science and ideological and political matters.<sup>4</sup> This latter conclusion was also frequently drawn in analyses of the failures of *diamat* and its so-called "proletarian science."<sup>5</sup> This position nevertheless has a number of problems. As John Bellamy Foster (2000) argues, the separation between science and politics did not prevent the renewal of biologism and extreme forms of social Darwinism in the sciences.<sup>6</sup> Marxism was also said to have been hampered by the failure to address questions regarding nature, because the division between the objects of science and history are often far from as absolute as the philosophical value-divide proposes, especially it might be said in the era of the Anthropocene, when political and ideological decisions are having a decisive influence on the Earth and its future. As a result, there has long been an undercurrent of desire within Marxism to address this lacunae with a critical,

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<sup>3</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, New York: International Publishers (1992) p.445.

<sup>4</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Pontypool: Merlin (1971) p.3.

<sup>5</sup> With regard to this conclusion concerning the Lysenko affair and the Zhdanovist movement for "proletarian science" see Zhores Medvedev *The Rise and Fall of T.D. Lysenko*, New York: Anchor (1969) and David Joravsky, *The Lysenko Affair*, Harvard: Harvard University Press (1970).

<sup>6</sup> Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, p.8.

non-mechanistic, non-reductive materialism that engages with the sciences while keeping a close connection to a materialist conception of history.<sup>7</sup>

When Žižek is questioned about returning to dialectical materialism in an interview in the journal *Historical Materialism* shortly after he returned to the project, he similarly attacks Western Marxism and Cultural Studies for the insufficiency of their responses to the sciences, arguing that remaining at the level of historical and ideology critique has several problems, including an inability to answer questions regarding the relationship of the subject to nature and its emergence from nature.<sup>8</sup> Žižek states that his work on Schelling and quantum physics is an attempt to address this by returning to ontological questions regarding radical contingency.<sup>9</sup> But what is telling is that, despite acknowledging that taking the position that dialectical materialism is needed to supplement historical materialism is controversial, at no point here, or in any other place in his work as far as I am aware, does Žižek stop to question why Western Marxism in particular is uncomfortable addressing these questions and what such an engagement would have to avoid given the limitations of classical dialectical materialism. Despite his return to the problematic of classical dialectical materialism, Žižek offers little more than derisory remarks about it as a philosophy, nearly wholly ignoring its status other than as a “fetish.” This failure to engage with it seriously seems to have led to him overlooking several of its problems that his own work is at risk of repeating.

Most centrally, there is a question regarding philosophical form. While we certainly cannot reduce classical dialectical materialism to the late philosophical works of Friedrich Engels, at the core of these works reside errors that provided the foundations for *diamat* after

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Bellamy-Foster, *Marx's Ecology* (2000), Sebastian Timpanaro, *On Materialism*, trans. Lawrence Garner, London: New Left Books (1975), Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism*, London: Verso (2005).

<sup>8</sup> Žižek, “Interview,” pp.185-6.

<sup>9</sup> Žižek, “Interview,” p.187.

they were uncritically accepted by later Marxists.<sup>10</sup> Engels over-estimates the achievements of Marx, suggesting that his theory of history was on a par with the theories of the natural sciences.<sup>11</sup> And, in an era of supreme optimism regarding the explanatory power and unity of the sciences,<sup>12</sup> Engels also overestimates the power and applicability of the Hegelian dialectics for explaining not only social but natural phenomena as well.<sup>13</sup>

The result of these mistakes was that Marxist philosophy took the form of a “philosophico-scientific” master key that functioned to not only unlock the structure of the socio-historical world and its transformation but also that of the natural world as well.<sup>14</sup> In no way did Engels intend for Marxism to take the form of a “world-view”, quite the opposite in fact; Engels hoped for a Marxist science, rather than an ideology. Nevertheless, by overestimating and over-generalising the applicability of his historical and philosophical modes of analysis and critique, Engels turns Marxism into precisely that, giving it the form of a universal discourse, that allowed it to become a “political cosmology,” as Jordan illustratively labels *diamat*.<sup>15</sup>

The risk that Žižek courts by attempting to offer a dialectical materialist interpretation of quantum physics, or other sciences, is repeating Engels’s mistake of overestimating the appropriateness of categories derived from a socio-political theory for the understanding and

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<sup>10</sup> Richard T. De George, *Patterns of Soviet Thought: The Origins and Development of Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, Michigan: Ann Arbor (1970) p.107. See also Jordan, *Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*.

<sup>11</sup> At Marx’s funeral: ‘just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history.’ Friedrich Engels, “Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx,” March 18th 1883, [Online] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm> accessed on: 03.10.2014

<sup>12</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *The Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P.S. Falla, complete edition, London: W.W. Norton (2005) pp.308-310.

<sup>13</sup> ‘It goes without saying that my recaptulation of mathematics and the natural sciences was undertaken in order to convince myself also in detail — of what in general I was not in doubt — that in nature, amid the welter on innumerable changes, the same dialectical laws of motion force their way through as those which in history govern the apparent fortuitousness of events [...]’ Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science*, in *MECW*, Vol. 25. (1987) p.12.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Thomas, *Marxism and Scientific Socialism: From Engels to Althusser*, London: Routledge (2008) p.41.

<sup>15</sup> Jordan, *Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*, p.394.

explanation of natural phenomena and the objects of scientific inquiry. The result of this would also be the same. Dialectical materialism would become something akin to a world-view. In some sense, Žižek already risks this with his engagement with Schelling, which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, presents a closed and total image of the universe via a cyclical structure of birth, death and re-birth. Whereas Engels suggested that Absolute dialectical laws regulated a cosmos that takes the shape of an eternal cycle of transmuting matter-in-motion, Žižek posits the eternal return of God's original Act which, like dialectical laws, certain subjects, and philosophers, are able to grasp. Engaging with the sciences in a way that wields Hegelian-Schellingian-Lacanian categories to describe the structure of all levels of being risks committing the same error, namely, transforming dialectical materialism into a philosophical master-key and the world that it describes into a closed, ordered totality. As Adrian Johnston writes apropos the analogical and homological reasoning that underpins Žižek's engagements with quantum theory, it 'seems as though it leads right back to the onto-theological vision of being as an organic Whole of smoothly enmeshed microcosms and macrocosms, a seamless, chained continuum of recurring patterns embedded within each other in a fractal-like fashion.'<sup>16</sup> Dialectical materialism, then, becomes the philosophy of that onto-theological vision and something akin to an understanding of the structure of the Absolute.

### **7.3. Žižek's Four Approaches to the Sciences**

One of the central difficulties in understanding Žižek's engagement with the sciences is working out what he is in fact doing. Far from simple critique or interpretation, in *Absolute Recoil* (2014), *Less Than Nothing* (2012), *Parallax View* (2006) and *Indivisible Remainder*

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<sup>16</sup> Johnston, "Critique of Natural Economy," p.107.

(2007[1996]), his most extended engagements with the sciences, he switches back and forth between four approaches with little or no signposting. These are: a defence of scientific realism against discursive idealism; a critical-historical materialist position; dialectical materialist re-interpretation; and the deconstruction of the scientific object-subject divide.

- Following Lacan's own use of mathematics and mathemes as a way to formalise a form of *vérité* beyond *savoir*, Žižek defends scientific truth that is mathematically formalized. He argues that these pure non-sensical syntaxes describe something that "just works."<sup>17</sup> Žižek argues that this "symbolic Real" enables a form of non-subjective "acephalic" knowledge.<sup>18</sup> On this basis, Žižek also argues that philosophy must be conditioned by scientific discovery and its developments.<sup>19</sup>
- Žižek combines this with a broadly historical materialist position that criticises various scientific interpretations as ideological reflections of their conditions of emergence. Žižek argues that this functions in a number of ways. On one hand, certain scientific positions "catch on" because they find in nature similarities to our social world that seem to legitimise it, like classificatory biology in the eighteenth century, for example.<sup>20</sup> Equally, the process can run in the opposite direction with scientific theory presenting historical particularity as truth. In a study of the ideological interpretation of cognitive science, Žižek finds evidence of the ideologies of New-Age post-materialism, liberal relativism,<sup>21</sup> and post-Fordist, infinite

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<sup>17</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.209; Žižek, *LTN*, p.738.

<sup>18</sup> Žižek, "Desire," pp.147-151.

<sup>19</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.912.

<sup>20</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.908.

<sup>21</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.179.

plasticity.<sup>22</sup> Žižek argues that science is bound to ideological interpretation to such an extent that “everything goes,” all answers can exist, with no clear consensus among competing interpretations.<sup>23</sup>

- Žižek’s engagement with the natural sciences, however, goes beyond critique to embrace his own interpretation and, on occasion, even suggests a “productive reformulation” of scientific problems with Lacanian, Hegelian or Schellingian categories.<sup>24</sup> At times this is presented as if it involves mere conceptual clarification. In *Parallax View* he argues that contemporary science comes close to a dialectical, non-reductive materialism like his own, but does not quite realise it, oscillating instead between ‘mechanical materialism and idealist obscurantism.’<sup>25</sup> He then helps these sciences become sufficiently dialectical materialist through providing the “missing concepts” that they are unable to formulate, presumably given their philosophical insufficiencies.<sup>26</sup> It is here that he embarks on the risky dimension of his endeavour, since we need a means through which to judge whether or not Žižek’s interpretation is any less ideological than others. The danger that lurks at this point is the same one that was realised in classical dialectical materialism, which began from a similar presumption that the contemporary sciences were quickly realising a spontaneous dialectical materialist position but nevertheless needed help in realising it.

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<sup>22</sup> Žižek, *PV*, pp.209, 241.

<sup>23</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.177.

<sup>24</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.225.

<sup>25</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.4.

<sup>26</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.171.

- The fourth position that Žižek takes is to challenge the spontaneous separation of subject and object on which the sciences are traditionally conceived. He questions whether on occasions the spontaneous separation of subject and object is not socially mediated in some way. He asks: can we also find the moment of the subject, that contingent moment of negativity, in the object of science. In the instance of his engagement with the cognitive sciences, this is a reasonable suggestion, given that the object is, in some sense, the subject. In this case, the space of freedom, or the particular type of freedom that Žižek argues is characteristic of his psychoanalytic understanding of the subject, would seem at the very least a legitimate area of inquiry. It would seem far less so, however, when Žižek turns to quantum physics. Locating the subject at the micro-level of quantum fluctuations appears beyond any relatively sensible hypothesis.

When Žižek engages with quantum theory or cognitive science we see examples of all four approaches. The results are highly variable. I follow Adrian Johnston in thinking that his work in the cognitive sciences is far more convincing than his recent endeavours with quantum physics. If a realistic dialectical materialist engagement with the sciences were going to be possible, then, one would think that all four of these approaches might indeed be useful, arguably with a specific emphasis on the dimension of critique. Žižek intimates that he intends something similar in the movement back and forth between science and our ideologically determined perceptions regarding our natural world.<sup>27</sup>

While Žižek claims success, frequently asserting the discovery of “cognitivist Hegel” or the “Schellingian character” of quantum physics, in actual fact we find that Žižek’s

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<sup>27</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.912.

multiple approaches produce three unresolved tensions. First, Žižek offers no way of responding to the tension between his desire for mathematical formalisation as a condition of science and the implicit rejection of positivistic confinement to the measurable and observable, on the basis that the latter generates “spiritualist obscurantism.”<sup>28</sup> Second, while Žižek is quick to point to the ideological function of other interpretations of the sciences he is much slower in questioning whether his own interpretation might also carry an ideological function or demonstrate his own investment in certain ideological figures. In a similar way, when Žižek presents his conceptual reformulations, he frequently seems to suggest that these can be taken as fact. In other words, he never questions whether his own conceptual intervention in the interpretation of the positivistic findings of science are merely hypotheses, or whether the sciences merely “fit” into his Hegelian-Lacanian-Schellingian concepts. The latter would suggest a panlogicism in which the universe is the realisation of some overarching transhistorical *logos*. This essentially Hegelian position is a possible position with regard to the sciences, but one very different from the one that Žižek claims he is taking. Alternatively, given that Žižek sees the total proliferation of interpretations along ideological lines, one does wonder if his own intervention is an example of a kind of “if you can’t beat them, join them” strategy. Third, there are several unanswered epistemological questions when Žižek embarks on the deconstruction of the separation of subject and object. Does that mean for Žižek that the findings of science are any less “objective”? Quantum physics especially is a highly formalised discourse that produces a set of statistically consistent results despite the strangeness of what occurs at the quantum level. These certainly do not leave room for anything like Žižek’s subject — as contingency, openness, negativity. So, does Žižek’s subject, then, override the objectivity of quantum theory? If this is the case,

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<sup>28</sup> Žižek, *IR*, pp.208-9.

Žižek can no longer maintain that he also considers the findings of the sciences true in terms of the symbolic Real.

## 7.4. Quantum Physics with Žižek

It is Žižek's engagement with quantum physics that most starkly demonstrates the problems with combining these positions. It is also a vital topic area to engage Žižek on since in his most recent works he has placed quantum physics at the centre of philosophy's endeavours. As he puts it: 'Today, the scientific discovery which needs philosophical rethinking is quantum physics.'<sup>29</sup> In *Absolute Recoil* and *Less Than Nothing* Žižek places renewed emphasis on quantum physics, while returning to a subject that he first broached in the second part of *Indivisible Remainder*. I will read the two sets of engagements together given that there are enough similarities and repetitions to consider them as broadly homogeneous, even if there are some revisions in the later texts and the addition of an attempt to understand the so-called "God Particle," the Higgs Boson. In these works, quantum physics has also taken on additional importance, because it provides Žižek with a materialist response to problematic 'theosophical speculation' about the emergence of existence and matter.<sup>30</sup> In other words, in an apparent self-criticism of his former reliance on Schellingian speculation, Žižek now thinks quantum physics must provide the materialist basis for his own ontological commitments.

Quantum science describes a world of paradoxical effects without causes, fluctuations in which phenomena change from different states, as if at random, and a logical structure in which common philosophical views regarding matter, determinacy and non-contradiction are no longer possible. For Žižek, the importance of quantum physics for philosophy resides in

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<sup>29</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.741.

<sup>30</sup> Žižek, *AR*, p.393.

precisely how it has ‘broken with our everyday comprehension of “reality.”’<sup>31</sup> To be more specific, Žižek is particularly interested in how quantum physics a) has undermined our view of nature as a holistic, unified entity and b) undermined the separation of subject and object, since some of its findings show how “objective” reality includes a space for the subject within it. Žižek, here, refers to the infamous double-split experiment with which it has been demonstrated that, at a quantum level, the subject’s observation alters the results of experimentation. To put it rather crudely, quantum phenomena seems to “know” if it is being observed and, as a result, acts in different ways. What Žižek hopes that quantum physics will provide him with, as a result, is a way to locate the (Lacanian) subject in the world of the infinitely small sub-atomic level, beyond the level of the Newtonian interactions of atoms and particles and the socio-historical world of signifying structures and *jouissance*. On the basis of this understanding, in *Indivisible Remainder* Žižek sets about revealing the limitations of rival ideological interpretations, focusing on how the radical consequences that he has drawn from quantum physics are frequently effaced. For example, he argues that “New-Age” approaches frequently obscure this unbalanced conception of nature at the very lowest level by recuperating this disconcerting effect in ideologies of peaceful existence.<sup>32</sup>

For Žižek, the only way one is able to retain the full consequences of quantum theory is by treating the relationship between the object and our knowledge of it as equivalent to the relationship between subject and object described by Marxism and psychoanalysis, where knowledge of something can provoke a violent change in it — as, for example, the confrontation with the unconscious symptom denatures the subject and the Other, or the self-knowledge of the worker transforms them into a revolutionary proletarian.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.209.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek, *IR*, pp.210-211.

<sup>33</sup> Žižek, *IR*, pp.208-210.

It is here where the crux of the problem with Žižek's engagement with quantum physics comes to light. Žižek takes what is, at the very most, a relatively benign analogy to be indicative of the truth of quantum physics. It leads to a severe misrepresentation, as we will see. On the basis of his understanding of quantum theory through Lacanian epistemology, Žižek then claims that the subject dependent nature of quantum experimentation demonstrates the absolute freedom, creativity and possibility which denotes the Lacanian subject.

To take a more recent example from Žižek's work, in *Absolute Recoil* and *Less Than Nothing* Žižek argues something similar is revealed in the Higgs Field where, given its similarity to the kind of dynamic that characterises what Žižek understands to be the logic of the *Urgrund* or abyss of Freedom in Schelling's work, we find the material basis of the "absolute contradiction" from which all content and substance emerges. It is, he claims, a 'physical version of how "something appears out of nothing."' <sup>34</sup>

As Žižek explains it, the Higgs field describes a paradoxical vacuum state. When left to run without intervention physical systems tend towards a state of lowest energy. If enough mass is taken away from a system, thereby lowering its energy, conventional theory suggests that it will reach a state of vacuum, where the energy in a system reaches zero. However, in certain conditions — and this is the paradox that the Higgs experiment has tried to explain — it has been shown that particular fields never reach this zero-level vacuum because reducing mass enough actually functions to *raise the system's energy*.<sup>35</sup> Something seems to create energy at precisely the point it is taken away to create nothing.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.4.

<sup>35</sup> Žižek, *AR*, p.393, *LTN*, pp.944-5.

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.945.

For Žižek, this is indicative of how “less than nothing” is a creative state in which, from nothing, something emerges. As Žižek says: ‘Energetically, it costs something to maintain the nothing (the void of the pure vacuum [...]) This is why “there is something and not nothing”: energetically, *something is cheaper than nothing*.’<sup>37</sup> We can see why Žižek might want to draw quantum physics into his account here because, on the surface, it seems a more effective and plausible way through which to make a similar point to that which he attempted to make with his earlier conception of the abyss of Freedom as the *Urgrund* of all existence. If this is still the basis for agential freedom, as it seems to be in *Absolute Recoil* and *Less Than Nothing*, then Žižek has a minimally “materialist”, scientifically backed, account of the existence of a basal creative contingency. Similarly, Žižek can now suggest that his conception of the emergence of the world through this “absolute contradiction” is based in the findings of contemporary science. Nevertheless, in all these deployments of the Higgs Field and the kind of emergentist ontology it applies, Žižek constantly refers to Lacanian and Schellengian categories. He tells us that this has the same logic as the death drive<sup>38</sup>, that the Higgs Boson ‘is the equivalent of what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*’<sup>39</sup> or that ‘we are back here with the notion of *Den* in Democritus.’<sup>40</sup> The whole theoretical construction relies so heavily on analogies and homologies that, despite claiming to take these scientific discoveries seriously, Žižek appears merely to be slotting them into his own dialectical materialist ontology. This conclusion is supported when we consider how Žižek takes quantum physics far beyond its own terms when it is explained through recourse to these concepts.

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<sup>37</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.945, *AR*, p.393.

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.945.

<sup>39</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.944.

<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.945.

As Adrian Johnston argues, Žižek’s contention that in quantum phenomena we see the potentiality for freedom has a) no basis in contemporary science, b) would be almost impossible to test for and c) would need an account of how there is a connection between the social and Newtonian worlds and the quantum world of micro fluctuations, as well as and how those quantum fluctuations ensured freedom while not being ‘thoroughly diluted, transmuted, and/or effectively screened-out at larger-sized levels of material reality.’<sup>41</sup> No such account exists in Žižek’s work, or, as far as I am aware, in quantum theory.

The essential philosophical position of Žižek’s dialectical materialism — that “the big Other does not exist”, or, the materialist “not-all” — is similarly not supported by the ontology of quantum physics. Far from “out-of-joint”, “contingent”, or “barred” in the same way that Žižek contends the symbolic order is fractured, the quantum world is predictable and orderly. This is not to say that, as Žižek argues, quantum phenomena are not uncanny, paradoxical or go against many of our everyday, common-sense perceptions about external reality. However, far from contingent and open, the quantum level is highly “regular.” Part of why quantum theory has caused such dismay within scientific theory and the philosophy of science is that despite its highly counter-intuitive findings it has proved unerringly accurate in its predictive ability.<sup>42</sup> Thus, for example, when Žižek refers to the wave-function as evidencing the indeterminacy and incompleteness of reality that leaves space for the subject, he wholly misses the nature of the discovery. The wave function is completely determined mathematically in terms of future time and place, while the indeterminate part of quantum formalisation is probabilistic and can correctly predict the possibility of certain occurrences

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<sup>41</sup> Johnston, “A Critique of Natural Economy,” p.109.

<sup>42</sup> Salvator Canavo, *Quantum Theory: A Philosophers Overview*, New York: SUNY Press (2009) p.7.

in these terms. To suggest, as Žižek does, that this emergence is properly contingent ignores the admittedly strange regularity and predictability that quantum theory reveals.<sup>43</sup>

It also shows why Žižek is wrong in arguing that quantum physics demonstrates a spontaneous dialectical materialist epistemology, in which our knowing affects and changes the object, because the object of quantum physics – the laws of subatomic particles – already accounts for the effect of the subject within it. As Quentin Meillassoux argues in his own account of quantum physics:

Certainly, the presence of an observer may eventually affect the effectuation of a physical law, as in the case from some of the laws of quantum physics — but the very fact that an observer can influence the law is itself a property of the law which is not supposed to depend upon the existence of the observer.<sup>44</sup>

In other words, “knowledge” does not really change the object because that act of knowing is already included in what is known. The possibilities of what might occur when the subject observes quantum phenomena are bounded, predictable and restricted. If this was not the case, mathematical formalisation would not be possible. Put simply, if the role of the observer-subject appears strange at the quantum level, it is not strange enough to do anything but leave the persistent and closed structure intact. “Subject,” then, is part of substance in a neatly, already determined manner, far from the “crack” that Žižek wants to claim.

Žižek’s attempt to found his ontology on the findings of quantum physics has an unintended effect. If Žižek wants an ontology that demonstrates the “not-all”, that “the big Other does not exist,” quantum physics is incapable of providing this. As well as the practical difficulties of demonstrating the legitimacy of his claims, or the wildly underdeveloped

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<sup>43</sup> Canavo, *Quantum Theory*, p.9-11.

<sup>44</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, trans. Ray Brassier, London: Continuum (2008) p.114.

nature of many of his arguments, the probabilistic reason that quantum phenomena demonstrates is nothing more than a form of big Other given that it requires a finite set of possibilities to be rationalised as possible. Thus, if Žižek tries to universalise this, extrapolating from what occurs at the quantum level to a model that can account for every level of reality, quantum theory would provide only a mechanistic materialism since what occurs in quantum phenomena is statistically regular. In this way, Žižek's argument would fail. If freedom resides in quantum fluctuations, a form of natural event, the subject is not free but, in fact, determined by substance.

## 7.5. Žižekian Positivism

The divergence between Žižek's reformulation of quantum phenomena in dialectical materialist terms and the positions of quantum theory itself demonstrates a tension between philosophy and science that is played out in Žižek's reticence to precisely outline their relationship. At times, Žižek suggests that he is merely working within the framework of the sciences, straightening out unacknowledged conceptual problems, or offering a theoretical stringency that science might have overlooked. Similarly, Žižek claims that science must inform philosophy and take on and accept its consequences. In these cases, Žižek presents philosophy as if it is subordinate to scientific practice. However, Žižek's dialectical materialism proves to be something of an unruly subordinate. At other times, thus, Žižek calls for the reformulation of quantum theory, and while attending to the findings of science rides rough-shod over them. He even states this position programmatically on occasion: in *Less Than Nothing* he asks how thought, freedom, and the Event are possible, and then suggests that we must reverse engineer their conditions of possibility into the findings of quantum

theory.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the results of Žižek's conceptual work are far from mere hypotheses it would seem. Nowhere in his work does he suggest the provisionality of his positions, or acknowledge the necessity of confirming them through empirical practice, hypothesis testing and theory revision.

In essence, the same tension is present in classical dialectical materialism beginning with Engels. Like Žižek, Engels thought that many contemporary sciences were spontaneously realising the truth of the materialist dialectic and that those that were not could be better equipped in their task if they would utilise this philosophy. But while seeming to give priority to the sciences, adding that philosophy was subordinated to them, Engels also argued that it was time for philosophy to take revenge upon certain sciences that were insufficiently dialectical. Indeed, he even goes so far as to assert that Hegelian dialectics are necessary to protect against 'shallow,' 'one-sided empiricism' and the 'whole swindle of induction,'<sup>46</sup> associating 'the unobstructed development of all scientific knowledge with the application of the reconstructed dialectical method.'<sup>47</sup> Engels might reject "absolute truth" but nevertheless proposes something very similar, insofar as he argues that with Hegelian philosophy it is possible to 'trace out the inner law running through all its apparently accidental phenomena.'<sup>48</sup> At a philosophical level, both Jordan (1967) and Leichtheim (1961) describe the result of this tension in classical dialectical materialist positions as "Hegelian Positivism,"<sup>49</sup> seemingly borrowing the phrase from Freidrich Hayek's (1964) characterisation of a philosophical trend that included Marx and Engels but also Hippolyte

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<sup>45</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.735, *IR*, p.230.

<sup>46</sup> Engels quoted in Jordan, *Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*, pp.146-147.

<sup>47</sup> Jordan, *Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*, p.83.

<sup>48</sup> Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, p.24.

<sup>49</sup> Jordan, *The Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*, p.147, George Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study*, London: Routledge and Paul Keegan (1961) p.251.

Taine, Emile Durkheim, John Dewey and Benedetto Croce.<sup>50</sup> The term is immediately insightful. It signposts the two opposed theoretical positions that classical dialectical materialism attempts to straddle, while the striking disjunction that the term evokes by combining these positions indicates the tension that emerges when doing so.

Žižek faces the same tension. And, ultimately, the same question that characterised many of the internal wranglings over the status of philosophy within the Soviet state: do we give priority to the empirical or the rational? Like *diamat*, Žižek ultimately sides with the latter. In what follows, I want to illustrate how Žižek's arguments function with regard to quantum theory and how he is able to offer his interpretations of it.

Žižek's account of quantum relies primarily on the Copenhagen Interpretation (CI) of quantum phenomena. This interpretation is relatively positivistic. Although it does not reduce everything to computational data, it nevertheless is one of the most minimal quantum ontologies, and insofar as it is possible presents its positions in terms of waves, particles, locations and states.<sup>51</sup> As one might expect, CI is primarily descriptive and far less explanatory than other interpretations. It presents an image of underlying reality that is vastly counter-intuitive but grants these strange appearances the status of brute-facts.<sup>52</sup> It results in what might be described as an incredibly *spacious* image of a world that offends common-sense, as much as for the strangeness of what it describes as its refusal to offer anything more than the most minimal causal explanations.

It would seem that Žižek's "productive reformulations" or his attempt to provide conceptual clarification utilise, and perhaps even rely on, such a minimal ontology. Where the positivistic CI might seem philosophically challenged, Žižek can offer Lacanian,

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<sup>50</sup> Friedrich Hayek, *The Counter Revolution in the Sciences*, New York: Macmillan (1964) p.204.

<sup>51</sup> Canavo, *Quantum Theory*, pp.52-3.

<sup>52</sup> Canavo, *Quantum Theory*, p.51.

Hegelian, and Schellingian concepts as a kind of weak explanation. Read through this lens, quantum naturally appears “Hegelian” or “Schellingian” in character, or demonstrates an epistemology that is common to psychoanalysis or Marxism. However, what Žižek is in fact doing is utilising concepts developed to resolve wholly different theoretical and practical problems in order to account for quantum phenomena.

This minimal ontology perhaps also helps us understand why wherever Žižek looks he seems to be able to find the space for the applicability of dialectical materialism. Castration can explain Wave-Particle duality,<sup>53</sup> the collapse of the wave function can mirror the effect of the “quilting point,”<sup>54</sup> the delay in the process of determination can be said to mimic the Freudian logic of retroactivity, or *Nachträglichkeit*,<sup>55</sup> or, as we have seen, the act of creation in the Higgs field can be said to follow the logic of the death drive. In each case it is as if Žižek is utilising the diminished ontology of CI as a kind of marionette that will dance for his own positions. Given its emptiness, it could be said to offer a scaffolding behind which Žižek can insert dialectical materialist structures. Of course, what this analogy misses out is that this does considerable damage to the theories it engages with. With respect to other less positivistically inclined interpretations of the findings of quantum science, it seems that Žižek would be far less able to perform this philosophical puppetry.<sup>56</sup>

Rather than “Hegelian positivism”, then, we might call this “Žižekian positivism.” Ultimately, it seems to produce the same effects. Jordan argues that Hegelian positivism results in the ‘reduction of the fundamental laws of particular sciences to a set of supreme universal laws, which would show that the former can be inferred from the latter.’<sup>57</sup> While we

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<sup>53</sup> Žižek, *IR*, pp.221-2.

<sup>54</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.223.

<sup>55</sup> Žižek, *IR*, p.225.

<sup>56</sup> See Cavano, *Quantum Theory*, p.51.

<sup>57</sup> Jordan, *The Evolution of Dialectical*, pp.83-4.

do not get anything like this brazen error in Žižek's writing, a much subtler reduction occurs through a gradual engagement of the sciences in which a set of supreme universal figures nevertheless appear. As a result, dialectical materialism appears as if it is a philosophy of the One-All, rather than the not-all.

## 7.6. Psycho-Socio-Morphic Projection

The One-All of this world can be said to emerge by way of a very specific displacement and projection on Žižek's behalf. Imposing dialectical materialist categories into the natural sciences seems to reduce even the subatomic level, the Real beyond the symbolic, to a repetition of the world that Žižek's Marxist dialectical materialism finds.

A similar projection occurs within classical dialectical materialism. The key term in this regard, given its political importance, is the dialectical "leap." The term was central to Engels's account of nature and an emergentist, modern materialism, in which the dialectic of quantity and quality operates through qualitative leaps by way of the accumulative process of quantitative change.<sup>58</sup> New phenomena and novel situations are said to be possible through processes where the result is composed from but not reducible to its conditions. By the time it is inscribed in "Dialectical and Historical Materialism" the notion of the leap becomes an essential part of the third socio-cosmic law of dialectical materialism.<sup>59</sup> But it was also key to securing the possibility of revolution. This was certainly the case for Plekhanov (1891) who in his article for the sixtieth anniversary of Hegel's death writes that it is the dialectical leap which gave to dialectics its extraordinary significance. It allowed revolutionaries to oppose evolutionists and conservatives on the basis that 'in nature and also in human thought and

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<sup>58</sup> Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, p.43.

<sup>59</sup> Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, pp.10-13.

history leaps are inevitable.’<sup>60</sup> In Plekhanov’s *Development of the Monist Conception of History* (1956), it also played a key role in securing the idea that gradual change would eventually produce more radical political transformation.<sup>61</sup> What, then, does establishing the inevitability of leaps in society and nature provide political practice? Asserting the existence of leaps on the basis of a supposedly universal law works to naturalise and legitimise what is in reality a controversial political thesis. Just as an anthropomorphic law ascribes human form and nature to a deity or a natural object, a theory which imbues the nature of the cosmos with social traits can be called a ‘sociomorphic theory of the universe.’<sup>62</sup> At the most general level ‘sociomorphic theories are knowingly or unknowingly formulated and advanced because of their alleged fitness to support one religious creed or one moral and political doctrine rather than another.’<sup>63</sup> In this instance we can see several ways that a “socio-cosmic law” functions; it can a) act as a normative model for man and society, b) offer a ground from which to deduce the inevitability of events given the natural order, c) function to support a particular political ideology, d) give a scientific basis for a social, political or ethical strategy. It does this, moreover, while denying the initial projection into nature.<sup>64</sup>

In the case of Žižek, could it be that the radical contingency of the subject at the lowest levels of nature also functions in order to secure a political thesis regarding the possibility of the freedom of the subject? Earlier we argued that securing the subject’s freedom on the basis of the divine act of God enabled Žižek to side-step the difficult questions of political power, organisation, and how the subject might strike at the system. By finding the power of the subject to be secured by nature, regardless of its circumstances,

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<sup>60</sup> G.V Plekhanov, *Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel’s Death*, [Online] *Marxists.org* accessed from: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1891/11/hegel.htm> last accessed: 9.8.2015 (1891) n.p.

<sup>61</sup> G.V Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist Conception of History*, London: Lawrence and Wishart (1956) p.203.

<sup>62</sup> Jordan, *Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*, p.204.

<sup>63</sup> Jordan, *Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*, p.204.

<sup>64</sup> Jordan, *Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*, p.204.

Žižek can in effect naturalise revolution and a mode of liberation for the subject in a manner that ensures it exists beyond any particular historical iteration or any specific socio-political conditions.

## 7.7. Lysenkoism and the Danger of Dialectical Materialist Science

This chapter has shown how, as a result of failing to reflect on the problems and challenges of a dialectical materialist engagement with the sciences, Žižek's positions in certain respects appear incredibly similar to the worst theoretical excesses of "classical" dialectical materialism. This should be of concern to us because perhaps no philosophy has demonstrated quite so aptly Lacan's understanding of ontology as the master's discourse. As Lacan puts it: accepting ontology as being *qua* being means 'quite simply being at someone's heel, being at someone's beck and call.'<sup>65</sup> In the case of the Soviet state, particularly in terms of cultural, political and scientific matters, the relationship between theory and practice meant that the 'the superstructure of a speculative philosophy [possessed] legislative powers with respect to the realm of facts.'<sup>66</sup> With regard to the sciences, it paved the way for the scandal of Lysenkoism, and the atmosphere of debate within the soviet sciences where what was of ultimate concern was not scientific practice and its results but that these results correctly reflected the interpretation of philosophy. In his analysis of this scandal Dominique Lecourt (1977) observes how the legitimacy of highly suspect scientific theories was maintained through reference primarily to the ideology that they were thought to be demonstrating the truth of.<sup>67</sup> The basis of this was the error that mistook Marxist philosophy for 'a programmatic method for the solution of particular physical problems,' as Lewontin and

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<sup>65</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p.31.

<sup>66</sup> Jordan, *The Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*, p.147.

<sup>67</sup> Dominique Lecourt, *Proletarian Science? The Case of Lysenko* trans. Ben Brewster London: New Left Books (1977) p.100.

Levins describe with regard to classical dialectical materialism.<sup>68</sup> When it is understood as such, rather than a mode of critique, dialectical materialism is at risk of becoming an instrument of justification for certain “truths” over others. This is not to suggest that Žižek’s interpretation is sustained and propagated by the state apparatuses that created the conditions for the Lysenko scandal, nor is it to say that Žižekian philosophy will produce those ends. However, there is cause for concern when such a clumsy engagement with the sciences forms a key part of a supposedly Marxist philosophy with so little reflection on the history of past mistakes.

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<sup>68</sup> Richard Lewontine and Richard Levins, “The Problem of Lysenkoism,” in *The Radicalisation of Science*, eds. Hilary Rose and Stephen Rose, London: Macmillan (1976) p.59.

# **Capitalism and Communism**

## Chapter 8: Capitalism and its Symptoms

### 8.1. Introduction

In the final section of chapter 3, 3.4., I outlined how alongside theoretical problems regarding the nature of the Real and possible forms of political practice it might allow, Žižek's newly critical stance with regards to liberal democracy posed several questions for political and historical analysis to answer. In chapter 3 I suggested that these were found at three levels. First, given the new and unexpected forms of political enjoyment that accompanied liberal democracy, Žižek confronted a blind-spot in his previous analyses of the nature of the Lacanian subject in contemporary society. Second, the limitations of his support for liberal democracy indicated the need to understand the connection between liberal democracy and capital. And, third, the absence of any consideration of the nature of capitalism and its dynamics and contradictions was a clear lacuna in Žižek's analysis that seemed to produce his overly optimistic support for a liberal democratic politics. Addressing these limitations of his democratic phase have broadly defined the political terrain of Žižek's work after his Marxist-turn. Since his democratic period, Žižek has regularly focused on the changed nature of subjectivity in postmodernity, the nature of liberal democracy and the "post-political" state, and the antagonisms that characterise contemporary capitalism. In this chapter I will

map out the changes in Žižek's position across these three levels to demonstrate the critique he has developed.

Žižek's analysis is not without significant questions at the level of form however. Žižek's dialectical analysis attempts to reveal the key symptomal points within the reproduction of capitalism at libidinal, political and economic levels. However, operating at the macro-level of national and transnational political structures, which have a complex and multivalent connection to the subject, whether this analysis produces the form of "infinite judgement" and the *Tuche* of the Real that Žižek suggests is necessary for the praxical political subject to emerge remains questionable. As I will argue below, in Žižek's attempt to offer a consistent and convincing account of capitalism as a "totality with failures" he risks negating the shocking confrontation with the Real by producing merely another form of knowledge or ideology, albeit one that is antagonistic and oppositional. In the final section of the chapter we will reflect on the effectiveness of the dialectic at a socio-political level as a result. Before then, in sections 8.3., 8.4., and 8.5., I will address how Žižek answers the questions that define his Marxist political project at the level of the subject, liberal democracy and capitalism, respectively. To begin, however, I will briefly reflect on the object of Žižek's dialectical analyses: capitalism *qua* Real.

## 8.2. Capitalism as Real

The aim of Žižek's dialectic is to produce a "totality with its failures", which is to say, a totality as an inconsistent not-all grounded only by the symptomal torsion of its constitutive exceptions and the relation of the subject to them. How does this level with Žižek's frequent claims that capitalism is *Real*? As we have seen, this term has a number of functions and meanings in Žižek's writing informed largely by the variety of ways that Lacan uses the term

in his work. In the context of Žižek's socio-political critique, however, what does he mean when he refers to capitalism as Real? Since there has been much confusion in the secondary literature regarding the meaning of the term in this context in Žižek's work it is useful to chart the different ways it has been used and address several misgivings that his critics have with the term.

When Žižek began describing capitalism as "Real" Ernesto Laclau (2000) objected that this Lacanian term made little sense in the context of a critical theory. If the Real is the beyond of the symbolic, an indicator of something that cannot be symbolised, Laclau questioned how could capitalism be "Real" given that it is quite patently a set of practises, structures, and relations?<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Laclau adds, describing capitalism as Real would also seem to prevent the very possibility of a Marxist critique given that the latter is premised on the possibility of understanding these practises and relationships and the violence and exploitation that result from them.<sup>2</sup> For Marxism, in other words, capitalism is anything but "unsymbolisable."

What Laclau's critique overlooks is the specificity and context of Žižek's use of the term. Coming within a dialogue with Laclau regarding the limits of radical democracy and Laclau's own post-Marxism, when Žižek refers to capitalism as "Real" he is, in fact, arguing that it is the Real of Laclau's discourse, of how capitalism and class remain the unconscious of radical democratic theory.<sup>3</sup> The same could be said, of course, of Žižek's previous position. His support for liberal democratic politics on the basis of its ability to keep the place of power empty could only be maintained by way of the repression or disavowal of the intimate connection between the contemporary liberal democratic state and capitalism. With

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<sup>1</sup> Laclau, *CHU*, p.235.

<sup>2</sup> Laclau, *CHU*, p.235.

<sup>3</sup> Žižek, *CHU*, p.96.

regard to Laclau's post-Marxist position, advanced primarily with Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Žižek argues that the democratic position that it took alongside the deconstructive renunciation of the "discourse of the universal" relied on the abandonment of the analysis of capitalism 'as a global economic system.'<sup>4</sup> More generally, Žižek sees this as the problem with all forms of identity politics as well as Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discursive hegemony. Reducing all political division and contestation to the practice of symbolic articulations of contingent identity, relies on the "repression" of the continuing 'key role of economic struggle.'<sup>5</sup> As Žižek puts it quoting Wendy Brown, identity politics and radical democracy, including his own former democratic position, occurs alongside 'a certain renaturalization of capitalism.'<sup>6</sup> In other words, radical democracy leaves the economic level as the unarticulated background of its political practice. For Žižek, then, capitalism is the Real of Laclau's work, the unsymbolisable background of radical democracy and post-Marxism.

The second way that Žižek uses this term has also caused some confusion. In chapter 7, "Žižekian Science," we described the "symbolic Real" as the product of a scientific discourse that practiced mathematic formalisation and the reduction of knowledge to a pure syntax — as Žižek describes it: 'the signifier reduced to a senseless formula.'<sup>7</sup> When Žižek refers to capitalism as Real in this sense he is arguing that there is the possibility of a similar type of formalisation of capitalist dynamics and relations. Confirming Sharpe's (2004) earlier thesis,<sup>8</sup> Žižek has more recently alluded to the "matheme" of the reproduction of capital. As he describes it in *Trouble In Paradise* (2014): there is something

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<sup>4</sup> Žižek, *POF*, p.162, *CHU*, p.106.

<sup>5</sup> Žižek, *POF*, p.162.

<sup>6</sup> Žižek quoting Wendy Brown in *CHU*, p.95.

<sup>7</sup> Žižek, *OB*, p.82.

<sup>8</sup> Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek*, p.201.

like a “matheme” of capital, a formal matrix of the self-reproduction of capital, like that which Marx was trying to elaborate in his *Capital*. This matheme, this trans-historical and trans-cultural formal matrix, is the “Real” of capital: the thing that stays the same through the entire process of global capitalism, the madness of which becomes palpable in moments of crisis.<sup>9</sup>

The matheme of capitalism would be a Marxist equivalent of Lacan’s formalisation of certain psycho-social structures — like the four discourses.<sup>10</sup> However, does this mean that Žižek conceives of capitalism in deterministic way, as an Other, precisely the kind of Real that his own dialectical materialism was conceived to destroy? Sharpe makes this claim of Žižek’s second reference to the Real of capitalism. He argues that it ‘risks at every moment the kind of fetishisation of [the capitalist economy] that Marx ceaselessly railed against.’<sup>11</sup> On occasion Žižek does seem to confirm Sharpe’s concern. For example, he describes capital as ‘a real whose imperatives are much more absolute than even the most pressing demands of our social and natural reality.’<sup>12</sup> But Sharpe’s critique sits uneasily with Žižek’s actual critical practice. Žižek has consistently demonstrated that the “objectivity” of capitalism — in essence, the value form — is a Real *qua* real abstraction but only on the basis of the interaction of subjects in commodity exchange.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Žižek also argues that this Real is always mediated by political actors — for example, referring to the global financial crisis of 2008, he argues that the Real was felt only through the actions of politicians who acted to re-

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<sup>9</sup> Žižek, *TIP*, pp.27-28.

<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, Žižek might be referring to Lacan’s matheme of capitalism, as a fifth discourse. This is an avenue that is still to be sufficiently explored in the continuing interest in a Lacanian-Marxism. It is a topic that is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis not only because Žižek does not engage with it, but that Lacan’s own reflections on it are underdeveloped. For the only published reference to the capitalist discourse in Lacan’s work see Jacques Lacan, “The Discourse of Jacques Lacan at the University of Milan on May 12, 1972” in *En Italie Lacan 1953-1978*, Milan: La Salamandra (1978) pp 32-55. I thank Jack Stone for the English translation. See also: Frédéric Declercq “Lacan on the Capitalist Discourse: Its Consequences For Libidinal Enjoyment and Social Bonds” in *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* vol.11 (2006) pp.74-83.

<sup>11</sup> Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek*, pp.201-2.

<sup>12</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.80.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, ch. 1.

establish the conditions necessary so that capitalism could continue to function. For Žižek, insofar as there is a symbolic Real of capitalism, this matrix always relies on the constant practice of subjects and the conditions needed for it to be established.

The final way in which Žižek uses the term Real resolves this ambiguity and suggests what is wrong with Sharpe's critique. For Žižek, capitalism is Real in the same way that the symbolic is Real as the not-all of a flawed, inconsistent, antagonistic totality.<sup>14</sup> As Žižek describes it in *Trouble in Paradise* (2014) capitalism is not a 'substantial unified field' but 'an inconsistent space traversed by a multitude of practices and discourses.' For Žižek, this includes different forms of labour, the function of money, state apparatuses, ideological narratives, and the affects and actions of subjects.<sup>15</sup> These not only demonstrate the complexity and diversity of capitalism but, ultimately, its "inconsistency." Žižek draws from this the key methodological and political hypothesis that there is no pure economy.<sup>16</sup> The point of Žižek's critique is to show that while there is nevertheless something like a "matheme" of capitalism that results from the totality of its interactions, inevitably capitalism is not a wholly consistent or unified system. It is for this reason that Žižek develops a critique of capitalism that analyses its relationship to subjects, the state, liberal democracy and its own excesses: to show that this totality only emerges through the combination of these different fields and relies on their inconsistent interaction and the uneven terrain that they demonstrate. It also suggests that Žižek's own analyses will always be partial, historical, and incomplete since capitalism itself is a historical, constantly shifting, almost patch-work like amalgamation of responses to its own insufficiencies and antagonisms.

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<sup>14</sup> Žižek, *OWB*, p.48.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, *TIP*, p.27.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, *TIP*, p.27.

When Žižek describes capitalism as not-all he is prioritising its moments of antagonism and the possibility of class struggle. Only if capitalism is an inconsistent totality can we conceive of the possibility of the space of genuine political interventions within it. For Žižek, in this context, the not-all of capitalism names the possibility of class struggle, not as a metalinguistic perspective that indicates some final signified or some centred political subject<sup>17</sup> but the ruptures and symptomal torsions in which the subject can recognise its own negativity. As Žižek writes, class struggle takes place on the basis of ‘the distance of the economy to itself.’<sup>18</sup> For Žižek, understanding this distance is to understand the political moment of the economy. In a discussion of the role of class struggle, Žižek describes how it produces a ‘new form of knowledge.’<sup>19</sup> Žižek describes this in “Lenin’s Choice” (2002) as the work of formalisation, which consists in mapping the presence of the political moments inherent to the economy in the form of its antagonisms, how prevailing forms of knowledge attempt to avoid these, and how forms of abstract negativity, the seemingly irrational outbursts of violence or other socio-political symptoms, are connected to them. Understood as formalisation, the work of analysis is to trace the inescapability of antagonism *qua* class struggle at the multiple levels of the socio-political field. As Žižek writes:

Form has nothing to do with “formalism”, with the idea of a neutral Form, independent of its contingent particular content; it stands, rather, for the traumatic kernel of the Real, for the antagonism which “colours” the entire field in question. In this precise sense, class struggle is the Form of the Social: every social phenomenon is overdetermined by it, so that it is not possible to remain neutral towards it.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.100, *POF*, p.77.

<sup>18</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.291.

<sup>19</sup> Žižek, “LC,” p.190.

<sup>20</sup> Žižek, “LC,” p.190.

To put this in other terms, class struggle means demonstrating the presence of political decisions where the bourgeois subjects see objective necessities grounded in the fantasy of the Other. As such, the formalisation of class struggle demonstrates the space for what we have called the proletarian/feminine/subtractive subject insofar as it demonstrates the absence of the big Other of capitalism *via* its symptomal torsions. To return to the notion of the Real, while Žižek concedes that capitalism appears as if an unavoidable force of nature that determines everything from the decisions of government to the minutiae of our daily lives, he conceives of the perspective of class struggle to see through this illusion and locate the limits and contradictions of the system. If class struggle is the form of the social, critical theoretical practice is tasked with demonstrating the necessity of and possible points for praxical subjective engagement.

### **8.3. The Subject as a Symptom of Late-Capitalism**

In section 2.4., we came to the conclusion that there were significant gaps within Žižek's understanding of contemporary forms of political identity and enjoyment. As a result of his own political and theoretical crisis Žižek required an account of the transformations of our cultural and ideological substance in order to understand new forms of subjectivity that he saw emerge in the disintegration of socialism and the process of democratisation in Eastern Europe. In his post-radical democratic period, Žižek begins an analysis of these modes of subjectivity and accounts for their form in three ways. First, at the level of identification, Žižek argues that a fundamental shift occurs in post-modernity that has seen symbolic identification undermined and leads to the primacy of an imaginary identification with particular ethnic and cultural practices. Second, Žižek explains that this has an equivalence in the transformation in the nature of the subject in post-modernity, locatable in the change in

the nature and function of the superego from a primarily prohibitory entity to an agency that takes the form of a direct injunction to enjoy. Third, Žižek argues that these transformations are a consequence of the effect of the “deterritorialising” logic of global capitalism and how it undermines all symbolic authority. In this sense, Žižek offers an account of how capitalism undermines and de-stabilises fixed identities and symbolic structures. From this position Žižek calls into question the effectivity of cultural politics, including that of Laclau and Mouffe’s radical democracy.

### 8.3.1. Post-Modern Identification

For Žižek, the prevailing diagnoses of post-modernity are essentially correct insofar as they identify the end of grand ideological narratives and the accordant denaturalisation of stable social and cultural identities, historically based at the loci of sex, religion, class and nationality. What gives this process its specific character according to Žižek is the decline of symbolic efficacy, the result of which has seen imaginary identification take precedence over its symbolic counterpart.<sup>21</sup> At the political level, Žižek argues that this has resulted in “the culturalisation of politics.”<sup>22</sup> Under this category Žižek includes multiculturalism, identity politics, and the return of new nationalistic fundamentalisms, including those of Eastern Europe. It is here where we see that Žižek is able to clearly delineate his own position from the post-Marxist position of Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. In this work it was argued that identities and cultural values were symbolic in nature and the result of the subject adopting certain symbolic positions.<sup>23</sup> In his analysis of the new forms of cultural politics and *jouissance* Žižek opposes this view detailing the imaginary nature of

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<sup>21</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.451.

<sup>22</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p.90.

<sup>23</sup> For example, see the account of the results for identity formation as a result of the Lacanian conception of the symbolic. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p.86.

identification and how these are both a product of and work to feed into the dynamics of late-capitalism.

In “Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” (1997) Žižek outlines how the logics of identification have shifted in the passage from modernity to post-modernity. He argues that modernity was characterised by the concretisation of “secondary identifications” — with a local community, the family, inter-personal relations — which no longer functioned as the abstract opposite to concrete “primary identifications” — Nation, Religion — but directly integrated into them.<sup>24</sup> The key feature of national ideology in modernity, so Žižek argues, was that secondary identification overlapped with primary identification. The subject, as a result, was not split by an opposition between primary and secondary causes but could serve primary identification through secondary identification. To put it in simple terms: the subject was not only a subject of Crown and Country in public life and a Father in their private life, the subject could serve Crown and Country, contribute to its success, precisely by being a good Father.<sup>25</sup>

Žižek argues that in post-modernity this logic has been surpassed and that in order to re-root the subject there has been a return to isolated, imaginary, primary identification. For Žižek, the key shift has occurred because secondary identification is no longer binding since it has come apart from primary identification once again. As a result, identification with ideological signifiers no longer have the same effect on the subject and are now experienced as an abstract formal frame for diverse and disconnected contents with no definite form of ideological unity.<sup>26</sup> Žižek sheds light on this process with the example of how “being an American” has altered in US culture. As the paradigmatic modern society, American culture successfully integrated the dialectic of primacy and secondary identification so that ‘in order

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<sup>24</sup> Žižek, “Multiculturalism,” p.41.

<sup>25</sup> Žižek, “Multiculturalism,” p.41.

<sup>26</sup> Žižek, “Multiculturalism,” p.42.

to be a “good American,” one does not have to renounce one’s ethnic roots — Italians, Germans, Blacks, Jews, Greeks, Koreans, they are “all Americans, that is, the very particularity of their ethnic identity, the way they “stick to it,” makes them Americans.’<sup>27</sup> However, in post-modernity, this declaration of ethnic identity no longer functions as part of the grand ideological project of “Americanness.” Rather than the sublime effect of ideological unity, “being American” has been largely annulled in the same way that subject’s are increasingly sceptical with regard to grand ideological narratives. “Being American”, Žižek contends, is now experienced as a mere belonging without ideological substance. It is a master-signifier that is experienced as empty. As Žižek puts it: “Americanness” is ‘a simple formal framework for the coexistence of the multiplicity of ethnic, religious or life-style communities.’<sup>28</sup> Žižek’s key thesis is that the weakening of the master-signifier has led to the undermining of substantial ideological meaning at a symbolic level. Far from resulting in the subversive reflexivity that is usually associated with the post-modern subject, however, it has set in motion a desperate search for new forms of ideological identity at the imaginary level.

In terms of Eastern European nationalism, the attachment to the national Thing and the attempt to re-root national identity through some fantasmatic historical substance — Land, Tradition, etc. — is but an attempt to come to terms with the loss of substantial unity at a symbolic ideological level. Žižek argues that the same process has occurred in Western liberal democracies where identity politics and multiculturalism, while appearing as the precise opposite of this fundamentalist attachment to some “primordial” form of identification, demonstrate a similar form of imaginary identification. For example in the UK, we might see this process in a return to British ethnicity in light of the weakening of the symbolic authority *qua* National project. On the right, this takes the form of a continuing

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<sup>27</sup> Žižek, “Multiculturalism,” p.42.

<sup>28</sup> Žižek, “Multiculturalism,” p.42.

obsession with the British values, or, on the far-right, with common ancestry or the ownership and isolation of Britain. There is even a leftist form of ethnic attachment that takes the form of a reflexive, ironic, retro-kitsch: for example, in recent years there has been the fetishisation of the “Keep Calm and Carry on” aesthetic, a construction of imaginary ethnic identification in the quirky way that Britons dealt with historical trauma with stiff-upper-lips. For Žižek, if the construction of the nation was achieved through the “nationalization of the ethnic” at “the end of ideology” there is the “ethnicization of the nation” at the level of ideology.<sup>29</sup>

In *Ticklish Subject* Žižek outlines how despite the disintegration of a stable sense of symbolic identification the supposed reflexive subject always relies on some form of “primordial” or, using Judith Butler’s (1997) term, “passionate attachment.”<sup>30</sup> For Butler, these are an attachment to something constructed but basal, an element upon which the subject is ‘fundamentally dependent.’<sup>31</sup> Žižek understands these attachments as imaginary and rooted at the libidinal level. They form, as he writes, the ‘obscene supplement to the public sphere of freedom and equality.’<sup>32</sup> For Žižek, “passionate attachments” can take a number of forms, but what they have in common is that they offer the subject some basic libidinal substance in the form of a particular transgression that simultaneously offers some protection against the decline of the symbolic form of ideology and how it structures subjectivity. Žižek cites “passionate attachments” from the extreme forms of sexual and hedonistic transgressions — smoking, drug taking, sado-masochism, “lad” or “bro” culture — to the more culturally acceptable forms of imaginary identification with ideals that replace symbolic norms, from embracing a particular fascinating “culture”, joining a life-style community, an

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<sup>29</sup> Žižek, “Multiculturalism,” p.42.

<sup>30</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.417.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life Of Power*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (1997) p.7.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.418.

obsession with bodily health, to the constant reliance on “small others” in the form of expert specialists or micro-ideologies, like buzz books.<sup>33</sup> In the same way that an attachment to an “ethnic” Thing functions to forestall the absence of effective symbolic norms at a national level, these “passionate attachments” function to allow the subject to regulate their interactions at an everyday level in societies in which ego-ideals — the symbolic mandates that result from the internalisation of master-signifiers — no longer function effectively.

### 8.3.2. The Superego

Žižek argues that the substantial mooring that these “passionate attachments” provide allow for the process of “dis-identification” with other symbolic and imaginary identifications that produce the appearance of cultural contingency and a reflexive relationship to symbolic identity and social norms. However, this cannot be considered a mode of liberated subjectivity. Far from free, the decline of ideological authority produces in the subject what Žižek describes as ‘the ultimate identity crisis.’<sup>34</sup> This is revealed in “the antinomy of post-modern individuality”, which resides in the overlap between the multiplicity of possibilities that post-modern self-reflexive identification delivers and the compulsive activity that this requires when not supported by the Other.<sup>35</sup> This crisis is rooted at a deeper level, however, than merely the decline of the effectiveness of symbolic authority and symbolic efficacy.

Žižek argues that the new modes of identification are accompanied by a transformation in the very structure of subjectivity.<sup>36</sup> Specifically, these new modes of identification evidence a change in the nature of the superego from a prohibitory agency to one that directly solicits *jouissance*. The “stupid” superego injunction to enjoy ‘increasingly

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<sup>33</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.451.

<sup>34</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.458.

<sup>35</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.458.

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.377.

dominates and regulates the perverse universe of our late capitalist experience.’<sup>37</sup> Žižek argues that the superego emerges in the vacuum left by a dysfunction in the internalisation of societal mandates and the decline of symbolic efficacy. While the subject is “rootless” in the sense that it is without a proper symbolic role, it is now dominated by an altogether more oppressive psycho-social agency: the superego. While we might no longer be interpellated by specific ideological grand-narratives, Žižek argues that we are now captured by ideology at the level of enjoyment, through the “desublimated”, worldless injunction to “*Enjoy!*” experienced only as an ‘obscure Unnameable.’<sup>38</sup>

This suspension of the Master-Signifier leaves as the only agency of ideological interpellation the “unnameable” abyss of *jouissance*: the ultimate injunction that regulates our lives in “postmodernity” is “Enjoy!” — realise your potential, enjoy in all manner of ways, from intense sexual pleasures through social success to spiritual self-fulfilment.<sup>39</sup>

At first sight it appears that our “post-ideological” world amounts to a freedom to create and sustain our own norms, escape into our own modes of pleasure, and enjoy previously prohibited practises. However, the emergence of the superego as the primary psychical agent of ideology has led to a fraught relation with identity and *jouissance*.

In 2.3.3., we touched upon the paradoxical and pathological form of the superego in terms of its character as an impossible demand. In the context of Stalinism, we described how the social law began to function as a superegoistic demand insofar as it compelled the subject to do what was otherwise already necessary. With the decline of symbolic efficacy the superego takes the form of an equally “impossible” demand: an empty injunction to “Enjoy!” without attachment to any particular content or prohibition. Precisely as such, the superego

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<sup>37</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.481.

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.188.

<sup>39</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.30.

makes it more difficult than ever to truly enjoy. Without the specific prohibition that allows for the “deadly,” illicit nature of *jouissance* in transgression no particular form of *jouissance* will ever satisfy the superego. Paradoxically, the empty form of the superegoistic demand to enjoy prevents enjoyment. As Žižek writes in *Ticklish Subject*: ‘Once again the superego has accomplished its task successfully: the direct injunction to “Enjoy!” is a much more effective way to hinder the subject’s access to enjoyment than the explicit Prohibition which sustains the space for its transgression.’<sup>40</sup> As a result, Žižek is highly sceptical of whether the new forms of enjoyment that characterise hedonistic, consumerist late-capitalism really lead to anything more than further frustration in the subject. Indeed, Žižek argues that we should index the sense of anxiety and guilt that proliferate in post-modern subjectivity in late-capitalism — the key components of the aforementioned identity crisis — to the increased force of the superego.

At the ideological level, Žižek argues that these frustrations and the deadlock that they engender in the subject produces “ferocious” superego figures in the imaginary of the subject. These spectres of Others who really *do* enjoy appear as a barrier to the subject’s own enjoyment and simultaneously account for their failure to enjoy. For Žižek, contemporary forms of racism are paradigmatic in this sense. The Other *qua* image of the object of hatred is a construction that coalesces around forms of cultural enjoyment that are different to the subject’s own. From this insight, Žižek returns to the question regarding *jouissance* that became central in his critique of liberal democracy in the post-socialist period where he saw hatred and inter-regional rivalry emerge alongside new forms of political *jouissance* in the national Thing. Žižek argues that these, in part, are a result of the deadlock of desire, for which the superego is responsible. Inventing fantasy figures who really *do* enjoy, and as a

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<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.450.

result block our own *jouissance*, allows the subject to account for their own frustration despite the universalised injunction. Žižek describes how through a process of ideological displacement the subject can ‘locate the cause of its inaccessibility in a despotic figure which stands for the primordial *jouisseur*: we cannot enjoy because *he* appropriates all enjoyment...’<sup>41</sup> Žižek is therefore able to offer an insight in to a specific form of rivalry which characterised the tensions and hatred of Eastern European nationalism: “the theft of enjoyment” in which we blame our own frustrations on some Other.<sup>42</sup> For Žižek, there is a precise correlate within liberal democratic societies in the “culture of complaint”, an attempt to translate our failure to enjoy into a legal obligation to the Other who has disturbed our satisfaction. Žižek also sees this relationship in how the subject is perturbed by the *jouissance* of others — how they smoke, or eat, or organise their own cultural practices. For Žižek, at the root of these disturbances and the resulting complaints, is frequently ‘the very unfathomable *surplus-enjoyment* I am deprived of, whose lack makes me feel underprivileged.’<sup>43</sup>

### 8.3.3. Atonal Capitalism

The subject’s lack of enjoyment, the decline in the effectiveness of symbolic ideological projects, and new modes of political and cultural enjoyment are not isolated changes, as we have seen. Nor does Žižek think that they can be addressed in a piece-meal fashion since they share a common root in a wider set of historical processes that, Žižek contends, are a result of the dynamics of capitalism that can be traced at political and ideological levels. In this sense, the transformations in ideology and the subject that characterise post-modernity can be

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<sup>41</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.378.

<sup>42</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.206.

<sup>43</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.441.

considered symptoms of capitalism. Žižek argues that at the heart of these transformations in our modes of ideological identification and political enjoyment is, ultimately, capitalism. For Žižek, the post-modern form of subjectivity and its Lacanian counterpart are symptoms of capitalism.

Turning to the question of nationalism and the topic that initially spurred his change of political position, Žižek understands the new forms of nationalism as a result of the precarity of nation states and the national project in globalised late-capitalism.<sup>44</sup> The ‘universal function of the market,’ which is indifferent to national boundaries, has gradually undermined the national project at a political and ideological level.<sup>45</sup> For Žižek, the “ethnicisation of the nation” is an attempt to produce and ensure the national project’s continuing ideological unity through an attachment to a “Thing.” In other words, the reassertion of a seemingly “regressive” attachment to a traditional remainder is a primary way that national identity is protected against the backdrop of the external demands of transnational capitalism. Žižek argues that in the case of Eastern European nationalisms, the re-emergence of fundamentalist forms of ideological identity that crystallised around the enjoyment of the national Thing can be thought of as kind of “shock absorber” to the disorientation that resulted from the exposure of vast swathes of public life to the market mechanism that characterised the entry of these countries into the capitalist system.<sup>46</sup>

With regard to the rise of the superego in the subject, this change has been cemented and reinforced insofar as it perfectly coincides with the consumerist character of late-capitalism. The subject’s participation in certain life-styles and the construction of identities feed into the direct commodification of every aspect of life in post-modernity — what the subject wears, where it eats, who it is — while the superego injunction to enjoy enjoins it to

<sup>44</sup> Žižek, “Multiculturalism,” p.49.

<sup>45</sup> Žižek, “Multiculturalism,” p.42.

<sup>46</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.210.

consume ever more varied and diverse objects for the *jouissance* that it lacks. As a result, Žižek claims that there is nothing subversive about these new forms of identity and new modes of transgressive enjoyment. Indeed, Žižek argues that universalised transgression is now the norm itself. The ubiquity of “counterculture” and its role in the cultural industries confirms its nature as a new mode of ideological conformity. Žižek also argues that the perverse subject is inherently useful to capital. The “imp of perversity” that characterises the post-modern subject is intimately connected to the continuing valorisation of capital through consumption because of the drive to the permanent refashioning of the self that it cultivates.<sup>47</sup> And, as well as feeding the circuits of capital through consumption, the root dissatisfaction that drives the perverse subject’s enjoyment is used in post-Fordist working practices for its creativity and individuality. As Žižek puts it workers are ‘under the injunction to be what they are, to follow their innermost idiosyncrasies.’<sup>48</sup>

The new forms of identity, ideology, and enjoyment are also intimately connected to capitalism, Žižek argues, on the grounds that the changes that have produced them have been driven by its central dynamics. At the level of ideology, Žižek argues that capitalism is a unique socio-economic order insofar as it “de-totalises” and “dislocates” stable ideological meaning.<sup>49</sup> Žižek offers a Lacanian variation on a philosophical theme developed in Alain Badiou’s work which characterises capitalism by its ‘universal unbinding’ function.<sup>50</sup> In *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1999) Badiou draws attention to the unique ontological status of capitalism as an order that undermines every stable frame of representation to disclose an ontological truth: the structuralessness of Being at the lowest level.<sup>51</sup> Like Marx and Engels

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<sup>47</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.373.

<sup>48</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.368.

<sup>49</sup> Žižek, *TIP*, pp.7-8.

<sup>50</sup> See Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, London: Palgrave Macmillan (2007)

<sup>51</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Manifesto for Philosophy*, London: Continuum (1999) pp.56-57.

claim that capitalism has a revolutionary effect on social relations — “All that is solid melt into air, all that is sacred is profaned,” as Marx and Engels put it borrowing Goethe’s words in the *Communist Manifesto*<sup>52</sup> — Badiou argues that capitalism produces an ontological revelation: in Badiou’s terms, that representation is always contingent, nothing more than the One effect as ‘a simple, precarious configuration’ over the pure multiplicity of Being-without-One.<sup>53</sup> For Žižek, the effects of capitalism are similarly revelatory. It reveals the fragile and precarious nature of all ideological and cultural meaning and, as such, produces the decline of symbolic efficacy that we have described as a central tenant of Žižek’s conception of post-modern subjectivity.

Žižek’s argument at this point is difficult to follow. What he seems to have in mind is the way in which the market mechanism works to create universal equivalence, whereby commodities are reduced to a quantitative value and their substantial qualities become merely incidental. In the same way, Žižek suggests that at a cultural level identity and ideology lose their substantial mooring and become abstract equivalents. For example, culture is no longer something we are grounded within and ideological belief does not operate effectively at the level of the ego-ideal, rather, it is something that is enacted at the level of choice, as if identities and cultures are genuine equivalents, which the subject might adopt in the same way that it might consume any number of commodities at a given moment.

Žižek’s position is underpinned by the thesis that, at the level of ideology, capitalism works effectively within and can accommodate itself within a vast range of ideological projects, cultures and values because it is not universal at the level of meaning but at the level of its market mechanism *qua* Real.<sup>54</sup> ‘The universality of capitalism resides in the fact that

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<sup>52</sup> Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, p.54.

<sup>53</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto*, pp.56-57.

<sup>54</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.181, *TIP*, pp.7-8.

capitalism is not a name for a “civilisation,” for a specific cultural-symbolic world, but the name for a neutral economico-symbolic machine which operates with Asian values as well as with others [...]’<sup>55</sup> This is not to say that it leaves these values intact; in fact, anything but. Processing them through this machine undermines their ideological efficacy and strips the symbolic of its prior substantial weight. In other words, the “deterritorialising” function of capitalism sets in motion the transformations in identification and the structure of the subject that we have seen. Žižek argues that as a result, late-capitalism is an “Atonal” world, borrowing another of Badiou’s terms.<sup>56</sup> The end of ideological grand narratives and the “free-floating” empty superego, in this sense, are the consequences of the “worldlessness” that global capitalism produces.

## 8.4. Liberal Democracy and the State

A key part of Žižek’s Marxist turn has been to critically re-evaluate liberal democracy, the democratic state, and their relation to capital in light of the limitations of his democratic politics. The results of these analyses can be divided into three parts. First, Žižek alters his view with regard to the apparent openness that he initially thought that liberal democracy was able to ensure. He now argues that democracy is always sustained by a “transcendental” frame which contains and colours democratic politics. Second, Žižek explains that the political power of the liberal democratic state is characterised by a post-political structure and demonstrates a bio-political logic. Third, Žižek argues that the democratic state is defined by an excess of power over representation that it disavows but can be found in its exercise of an

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<sup>55</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.318.

<sup>56</sup> The term comes from the French edition of *Logics of Worlds*, in the English version it is translated as *atonic*, which demonstrates Badiou’s meaning with greater clarity as well as a difference with Žižek: for Badiou, “Atonic” is a world not only without “Points,” but without truth or the Idea, in the Platonic sense, for Žižek atonal refers to the decline of the symbolic. See Alain Badiou *Logics of Worlds Being and Event II* trans. Alberto Toscano London: Continuum (2009) pp.220-222.

absolute and authoritarian political sovereignty at moments of crisis. Recalling the Benjaminian or Schmittean notion of the “the state of emergency”, Žižek argues that this excess of state power over any fidelity to its representative function reduces all democratic subjects to “bare life” as the object of the state.

#### 8.4.1. Liberal Democracy

Žižek’s position regarding liberal democracy shifted significantly after his Marxist-turn. For example, he now contends, at an ideologico-political level, that “democracy” functions as little more than a fetish that effectively blocks and neuters the critique of actually existing democracy.<sup>57</sup> Žižek’s position recalls recent observations that at the same time that “democracy” has become the single most important political cause of the West and almost universally accepted as an absolute political good its meaning has become hollowed out and detached from the reality of contemporary liberal democracy.<sup>58</sup> Žižek, as a result, wants to challenge the effectivity of this fetish by revealing the falsity of the “democratic illusion” that presupposes that the liberal democratic state reflects and embodies the wishes of citizens and is effectively held to account in democratic elections.<sup>59</sup> On the contrary, Žižek argues that large parts of the institutional aspects and interests of the state are never wholly accountable through the institutions and mechanisms of liberal democracies themselves.<sup>60</sup> Žižek spells this out in terms of the “transcendental” aspect of the liberal democratic state. Žižek argues that while at an “empirical” level democracy appears to mirror and reflect social interests, the “transcendental” aspect of the liberal democratic state functions to determine these interests

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<sup>57</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.391.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Wendy Brown, “We are All Democrats Now ...” in *Theory and Event*, vol.13, no.2 (2010). Alain Badiou, “The Democratic Emblem” in *Democracy in What State?* trans. William McCuaig New York: Columbia University Press (2011) pp.6-15.

<sup>59</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, pp.412-3.

<sup>60</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.412.

by defining their character and limiting the kinds of content they can express.<sup>61</sup> Far from the Real of contingent contestation that he previously described democratic elections as, Žižek now suggests that they function as fact a kind of echo-chamber in which the hegemonic ideological views and interests are reproduced. In his recent work, Žižek thus confirms our earlier suspicions with regard to his overly optimistic proclamations on the nature of democratic power. Far from “empty”, this space is coloured and structured by the “transcendental” excess. The conclusion that Žižek draws from this limiting function is that it renders genuine politicisation impossible if political practice operates only through the ordinary channels of democratic participation.

#### **8.4.2. Post-Politics, Bio-Politics**

Žižek argues that given this inherent resistance to politicisation and structural change, every liberal democratic politics is a politics of the ‘non-event.’<sup>62</sup> However, how does Žižek move from the argument that liberal democratic politics is ineffectual to the additional claim that the ‘main function’ of liberal democracy is, as he puts it, ‘to guarantee that nothing will really happen in politics’?<sup>63</sup> We must pay careful attention to the role that the state plays in delineating the coordinates of contemporary ideology and politics. Žižek’s argument rests on an account of the two political logics that define contemporary liberal democracies: post-politics and bio-politics.

Following a number of other theorists, including Chantal Mouffe (2005) and Jacques Rancière (1999), in *Ticklish Subject* Žižek describes the contemporary mode of liberal democratic politics as a form of “post-politics.”<sup>64</sup> As generally understood, post-politics is

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<sup>61</sup> Žižek, *FATTA*, pp.136-7.

<sup>62</sup> Žižek, *Desert*, p.151.

<sup>63</sup> Žižek, *Desert*, p.151.

<sup>64</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.xxvi.

associated with the weakening of the public sphere, de-democratisation, and an *a priori* structuring of political spaces by accepted logics of governance. For Žižek, its defining factor is the exclusion of the political dimension of antagonism, or in Žižek's case class struggle. What replaces it is a politics of competition and negotiation by enlightened technocrats and professionalized political actors who attempt to overcome ideological divisions through the use of expert knowledge to address specific needs and represent specific interests.<sup>65</sup> Political decisions are, thus, framed always in terms of 'expert management and administration.'<sup>66</sup>

The political dimension is denigrated within post-politics, or more precisely "foreclosed" according to Žižek,<sup>67</sup> insofar as "extremes" are placed outside of a narrowly defined political consensus that takes the form of a framework of debate in which it is not possible to question or disrupt the accepted configurations of political and economic normalcy. In other words, 'the transformation of the democratic struggle into the post-political procedure of negotiation and [...] policing.'<sup>68</sup> Politics, as a result, is reduced to what Žižek calls the "art of the possible,"<sup>69</sup> a practice of opportune intervention that adapts to the demands of the world market within the limits of public opinion, the legal framework, and interest groups, with a good deal of manipulation of each when possible. Operating within this space of determined consensus, its central political feature is a move, as Anthony Giddens (1994) described approvingly, "Beyond Left and Right."<sup>70</sup> Žižek cites the Clinton and Blair eras of American and British politics as exemplary of the post-political logic in power.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.226, n.22.

<sup>66</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p.40.

<sup>67</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.198.

<sup>68</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.199.

<sup>69</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.237.

<sup>70</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, Cambridge: Polity Press (1994).

<sup>71</sup> Žižek, *FA*, p.62.

The other side of post-politics is bio-politics, Žižek contends. Bio-politics is defined by a reduction of the political to questions of ‘administrating and regulating “mere life.”’<sup>72</sup> Žižek conceives of bio-politics as a university discourse, where knowledge (S2) conditions and works upon the “raw”, uncultivated Real of the subject (*a*) to produce the interpellated subject. Here, the body, or bodily affect, is disciplined, regulated and managed to become the object of and embodiment of knowledge. It’s aim is always to foster and protect the economically productive and socially permissible forms of *jouissance* at the same time as it produces subjects who know nothing more than those pleasures and their dissatisfactions. At a cultural-ideological level, the subject of bio-politics is the narcissistic subject attached to an enjoyment in personal development, “well-being,” and healthy-living.<sup>73</sup>

Within the context of post-politics, what unites subjects is the very absence of any higher political causes. Žižek contends that bio-political regulation ensures that the ultimate goal of life is life itself, that there is nothing beyond its petty victories and pleasures. In part, bio-political authority does this by keeping at bay ‘any traumatic shocks that could prevent [individuals’] self-realisation.’<sup>74</sup> Žižek often evokes Nietzsche’s (1966) “Last-Men” in his characterisation of the form of subjectivity that bio-politics relies upon and reproduces.<sup>75</sup> The association is fitting given that, like the era of the Last-Man, bio-politics creates a false sense of unity and peace. Žižek argues that the predominant mode of bio-political politicisation fosters a similarly superficial harmony through the “culturalisation of politics” that we explored above. For Žižek, however, what is absent as a result of this political recoding and foreclosure is not the heroic *Übermensch* but antagonism and other political categories which

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<sup>72</sup> Žižek, *Desert*, p.100, *Violence*, p.40.

<sup>73</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.297.

<sup>74</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.297.

<sup>75</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p.90.

point beyond a reified acceptance of differences as fact. As Žižek writes of the bio-political dimension of post-politics:

Political differences — differences conditioned by political inequality or economic exploitation — are naturalised and neutralised into “cultural” differences, that is into different “ways of life” which are something given, something that cannot be overcome. They can only be tolerated.<sup>76</sup>

The political dimension, thus, continues to exist but only in a neutered, decaffeinated form. What disappears, in other words, are questions usually associated with the very essence of politics. The possibility of disagreements regarding the nature of justice, the existence of exploitation, and the allocation of political power are replaced by a politics of tolerance and the acceptance of established differences as cultural and individual. For Žižek, the key ideological form of post-politics and bio-politics is multiculturalism, which, as Žižek understands it, seeks to regulate accepted differences and reduce all antagonisms to questions of culture and matters of individual and community choices.

Where political passion continues to exist it does so only in a negative form. For Žižek, the symptoms of the foreclosure of the political dimension of antagonism include the abstract negativity of the riot and other forms of explosive, misdirected refusal. More commonly, however, this negative passion is sublimated and manipulated into a politics of fear, which, Žižek argues, is the ‘ultimate mobilising principle’ of all post-political ideological projects.<sup>77</sup> This can be understood, at an ideological level, as the political manipulation of the figure of the “primordial *jouisseur*” that was discussed above. This re-emerges in post-political ideology in the propagation of the fear of immigrant who might steal our enjoyment, the fear of the criminal harasser who might disrupt our pleasures, and

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<sup>76</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p.140.

<sup>77</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p.41.

even the fear of a catastrophe that might destroy our “way of life.”<sup>78</sup> By mobilising fear Žižek argues that the state is able to prevent real antagonisms emerging. It is in this sense, that the politics of fear can be understood as a means to displace and obscure the possibility of politicisation by creating a figure in order to ensure that the “place of threat” is ‘externalised into the Outside.’<sup>79</sup> As such, the politics of fear is a crucial ideological tool of post-political power.

Ultimately, the purpose of post-politics is the prevention of the subject becoming aware of the product of this discourse: itself as a point of negativity, the “indivisible remainder”, \$, that persists as what is inconceivable with the determined space of post-political contestation. In a political order whose goal is, ultimately, the smooth and efficient regulation of life, economy and pleasure, what is forever forestalled within the post-political logics of liberal democracy is the subject ‘politicizing his [sic] predicament.’<sup>80</sup>

### **8.4.3. The State of Exception**

The politics of fear and the exclusion of the subject as “indivisible remainder” are two-sides of the dynamic that structures the transformation of political possibility into post-political administration. What rests at the centre of this dynamic is an extraordinary feature of state power that always resides in the interstices of this dynamic: the power to declare “the state of emergency.” Žižek argues that the “paranoid construction”<sup>81</sup> which operates in the politics of fear is used to justify political interventions that reveal the liminal dimension of state sovereignty as an excess over all democratically legitimated power. “Fear,” Žižek argues, legitimises the pre-emptive strike, the increases of state power for security and defence, and

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<sup>78</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p.40.

<sup>79</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.371.

<sup>80</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.199.

<sup>81</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p.41.

“the state of emergency.”<sup>82</sup> It is here that what is perhaps the most important aspect of the “transcendental” dimension of the state that Žižek focuses upon comes into view. At this site, we see the excess of state power that renders visible most explicitly the lie of the “democratic illusion.” As Žižek sums this exceptional moment up in Lacanian terms: it demonstrates ‘the constitutive role of the exceptional/excessive Master-Signifier.’<sup>83</sup> Or in terms of the supposedly representational nature of liberal democracy, the “excess” of representation over what it represents.<sup>84</sup> For Žižek, in the last instance this excess is not just the violence that results from the distortion and containing function of the state as it mediates the interests that it also claims to represent through its post-political logics. But, rather, the constitutive violence of the state as it excludes certain actors, modes of participation, and interests from the deliberative democratic space in the name of preserving that space as such. For Žižek, this is precisely what ‘liberalism misrecognises.’<sup>85</sup>

The excess becomes shockingly visible as it is rendered into an absolute power in “the state of emergency.” What defines this power is the ability to suspend the current legal order, or particular aspects of it, and intervene in the space of that suspension to ensure the continued possibility and smooth functioning of that order. In this space, the state, or other actors operating on its behalf, can act without the usual legal restraints required, while subjects have their normal legal protections suspended. Žižek cites several examples of this logic in operation to describe the variety of functions this exceptional power has within the contemporary context. It can be utilised in order to prevent politicisation,<sup>86</sup> it can be employed to cope with the problem of the other,<sup>87</sup> most evidently, to protect our “freedom”

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<sup>82</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.371.

<sup>83</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.114.

<sup>84</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.413.

<sup>85</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.114.

<sup>86</sup> Žižek, *Desert*, p.108.

<sup>87</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, pp.46-7.

from the threat of terrorism or other catastrophes,<sup>88</sup> and also, in times of economic crisis, to maintain the appropriate conditions for capital accumulation.<sup>89</sup> The definitive characteristic of “the state of emergency” is an inter-zone where the law no longer operates because of and to facilitate the operation of the sovereignty of the state. As with Carl Schmitt’s (2014) conception of the emergency state, Žižek suggests that it reveals the true nature of sovereignty: the very power to decide “the state of emergency.” In liberal democracy, Žižek contends that this does not reside in the people, nor with parliament, but with an excess that is characteristic of the state as such. Žižek takes a similar position to Walter Benjamin (2007) insofar as he argues that “the state of emergency” is not strictly an exception, although it often emerges in exceptional moments.<sup>90</sup> Rather, it is the elementary basis of the state and one that is frequently normalised by its use. As Žižek argues, the emergency state operates increasingly to make sure that ‘life goes on as normal’; it is ‘necessary to guarantee the normal run of things.’<sup>91</sup> In this sense, Žižek’s concern with “the state of emergency” reflects Giorgio Agamben (2005) who also argues that it is used ‘increasingly as a technique of government rather than an exceptional measure.’<sup>92</sup>

The exceptional power of the state to declare the state of emergency is a crucial aspect of bio-politics. Its two aspects in this regard are ‘the pure tautological exercise of power grounded only in itself — the rule of “pure” law which suspends all positive particular laws (in Lacanese: *S1*) — and “pure” life as its object (in Lacanese: *a*).’<sup>93</sup> Žižek here refers to Agamben’s thesis regarding the reduction of humanity in the state of exception to *homo-*

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<sup>88</sup> Žižek, *Desert*, pp.106-7.

<sup>89</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, pp.14-5, *FATTAF*, p.77-8.

<sup>90</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses On The Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Random House (2007) p.257.

<sup>91</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, pp.47, 135, *Iraq*, p.158.

<sup>92</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell. London: University of Chicago Press (2005) p.3.

<sup>93</sup> Žižek, *Iraq*, p.159.

*sacer*, bare life. As either the purely innocent Other of the refugee or the object of humanitarian care, or the evil Other of the terrorist, at the level of the subject the exceptional status of the emergency resides in how it renders the subject not merely outside the law *qua* illegal, but beyond it through its suspension in this space. The prime example is that of the “legally dead” prisoners of Guantanamo Bay, located in the empty space sustained by the power of the state but not regulated by the laws of the state. In the state of emergency the subject is reduced to an object without rights or guarantees, it is wholly subject to the excess of power that characterises the state.

For Žižek, the “truth” of the post-political state is this exceptional moment of sovereignty. As such it highlights the shocking contradiction of the post-political logic. At its core there is a return to the political in the form of an absolute and self-referential sovereignty. The precise nature of the political moment, however, is still contained within the post-political logic since it is at the same time the cancellation of the political because the state of emergency is to ensure that the antagonism does not emerge. Post-politics and the ultra-political moment of absolute sovereignty are two sides of the same coin because this suspension of order operates to maintain that order as such.<sup>94</sup> In other words, it functions to prevent the “true” state of emergency, the politicisation of that order.<sup>95</sup> This can be seen in the way that antagonism is displaced in this ultra-political moment. It is neutralised and legitimated through the creation of an “ultra-antagonism” in the form of a threat — often mobilised through the politics of fear — that is presented as the possibility of the destruction of individuals’ “ways of life.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Žižek, *Iraq*, p.159.

<sup>95</sup> Žižek, *Desert*, p.108.

<sup>96</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, pp.34-5.

## 8.5. Capitalism

The final political limitation of Žižek's democratic phase was the failure to recognise the continuing importance of an analysis of capitalism and class to understand the nature of political power and the limitations and possibilities of a liberal democratic politics. As a result, Žižek overlooked the potential for the "empty" place of power to be contaminated or limited. Žižek's critique of capitalism is an attempt to address this limitation and offer an account of the connection between the state and capital as well as some of the central dynamics and contradictions of capitalism.

### 8.5.1. The (Bourgeois) Excess of State Power

For Žižek, post-politics is the political logic of global capitalism. With regard to the state it demonstrates its inextricable connection with capital and, ultimately, what Žižek describes as the bourgeois character of its "excess", that transcendental dimension of liberal democracy that structures and defines its character. As Žižek argues, 'the sovereignty of its power, in its ideologico-political presuppositions, embodies a "bourgeois" logic'<sup>97</sup> With regard to its connection with capital, Žižek argues that far from "withering away", as often assumed of the neo-liberal state, our contemporary period has seen the state gather further strength and its role crystallise as a servant for capital.<sup>98</sup> The state plays a key role within the development of global capitalism. The expansion of capital 'co-exists with, and relies on, increasingly authoritarian interventions of the state and its legal and other apparatuses.'<sup>99</sup> This is especially the case in digital capital and the becoming rent of profit where the state has established and

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<sup>97</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.412.

<sup>98</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.145.

<sup>99</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.145.

ensured the '(arbitrary) legal conditions for extracting rent,' for example, with expansion of intellectual property rights.<sup>100</sup>

Within the functioning of the post-political logics of the state, however, the political nature of these interventions is obscured insofar as its actions appear as if based on 'a simple insight into the objective state of things.'<sup>101</sup> Post-political 'depoliticisation' is always centred upon the depoliticisation of the economic sphere.<sup>102</sup> For Žižek, post-political states are characterised by 'the common acceptance of Capital and market mechanisms as neutral tools/procedures to be exploited.'<sup>103</sup> Herein we find the very core of the contemporary state. For Žižek, the economy is "the Real" of the post-political state both in the sense that it is the unquestioned neutral background of its political logics and insofar as it functions as its "sublime object", the object raised to the level of the Thing. States are judged, ideologically and materially, by the success of the economy in the last instance.<sup>104</sup>

Žižek's account of the bourgeois character of the state, therefore, rejects the social democratic position that the state is a neutral container which different interests might occupy, or the post-structuralist position, of Rancière and others, that the state is a general ordering and policing apparatus. For Žižek, given the "excess" of the state, as an exceptional power or as a transcendental logic, it has to be characterised as bourgeois in its very form. Given that the "transcendental" form reaches beyond democratic elections, Žižek concludes that the contemporary state, regardless of its democratic mode of operation, should be considered as a bourgeois dictatorship in the last instance.<sup>105</sup> Žižek's position on the matter is not sufficiently mapped out to be able to judge the legitimacy of his claim or understand

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<sup>100</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.145.

<sup>101</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.375.

<sup>102</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.375.

<sup>103</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.353.

<sup>104</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.156.

<sup>105</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.412.

precisely what this bourgeois character consists in. However, it is possible to shed some light on Žižek's position in the way that he suggests that the "emergency state" plays a pivotal role in the state's relationship to capital. As Žižek has highlighted in light of the response of states to the most recent economic crisis, the state employed a power similar to the logic of the emergency state to shore up the banking system at great expense to the people. More commonly, the logic of the emergency state is found in special economic zones in which ultra-liberal conditions are created for capital to operate beyond the standard rule of law, often alongside the suspension of the usual protections for workers.<sup>106</sup> In these instances, the state's primary function has appeared to be to ensure the continuing possibility of the smooth running of the economy. The state employs the logic of emergency to justify exceptional intervention to allow the continuing "servicing of the goods."

### **8.5.2. The Symptoms of Globalisation**

Given its foreclosed character, what seems impossible within the post-political logic of the state is the politicisation of the economy. Presented as if an objective process, its violence and contradictions appear like an inevitable result of capricious fate, akin to a natural disaster, or as if merely the result of mismanagement by its caretakers.<sup>107</sup> For Žižek, the way that we escape from this deadlock is by identifying certain symptoms which do not only index temporary dysfunctions, but, rather, the inherent irrationality of the system itself. In other words, Žižek politicises the economy by demonstrating its Real, the site of its inherent politicisation at which its irrationality appears as constitutive and the space for a decision over the nature of the system as such is forced upon the subject. In Žižek's most recent work he has argued that four such dysfunctions exist. These are the challenge of the possibility of

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<sup>106</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.126.

<sup>107</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p.14.

ecological catastrophe,<sup>108</sup> the privatisation of our intellectual commons,<sup>109</sup> the privatisation of our bio-genetic inheritance,<sup>110</sup> and the production of a surplus population that demonstrates, so Žižek argues, an inherent limit point to the possibility of the infinite expansion of capitalism. What all of these antagonisms demonstrate is that capitalism deprives subjects of their basic commonality. While capitalism is a global system, one albeit that cannot be called a “world” given the absence of shared ideological meaning, it is a global system that is inherently divisive and exclusionary. The above antagonisms demonstrate the crisis of the commons inherent to capitalism at social, political and natural levels. In each there is a basic substance, an inconsistent Real of possibility, that subjects are being deprived of.

For Žižek, however, one of these antagonisms has a structural priority for conceiving of class struggle — and, as we shall see, Communism — because compared to the other antagonisms it cannot be resolved with capitalism. As Žižek argues, the creation of a surplus population is a “necessary product” of the “innermost logic” of capitalism. With regard to Žižek’s understanding of the object of his critique, it described how capitalism is not-all. That is to say, that capitalism cannot totalise itself without the production of an element that contradicts this totality in the form of an excluded mass who, in the society of work, are prevented from finding the possibility of realising their social role. It differs from the other antagonisms because this will always call into question the system. Whereas the ecological crisis can be resolved within capitalism, for example, through measures like carbon taxes and other forms of incentives that might drive development of green technologies, Žižek argues that nothing can prevent the creation of a surplus population within capitalism.

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<sup>108</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.421.

<sup>109</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.422.

<sup>110</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.91.

Žižek describes the explosive growth of a surplus population that are no longer needed by global capitalism. '[C]apitalism is rendering an ever greater percentage of workers superfluous.'<sup>111</sup> Most-startlingly, this surplus population is found in the massive re-emergence of a new class of slum dwellers in the mega-cities of the third world, as documented by Mike Davis in *The Planet of The Slums* (2004). For Žižek, the emergence of this class is the 'crucial geopolitical event of our times.'<sup>112</sup> 'They are the true "symptoms" of slogans such as "Development," "Modernization," and the "World Market": not an unfortunate accident, but a necessary product of the innermost logic of global capitalism.'<sup>113</sup> Within these slums there are marginalised labourers, former members of the middle classes and migrant rural worker, all are incorporated into the global economy in new ways but on informal grounds, with no protections and a high level of precarity.

The post-political response to the emergence of large groups of individuals who are only partially and informally part of capitalist circuits of consumption and production and excluded from many of the benefits is the construction of new walls safeguarding zones of '(relative) economic prosperity and those excluded from it.'<sup>114</sup> In the context of the European Union creating a transnational border police, Žižek writes:

This is the truth of globalisation: the construction of new walls safeguarding prosperous Europe from the immigrant flood. One is tempted to resuscitate here the old Marxist "humanist" opposition of "relations between things" and "relations between persons": in the much-celebrated free circulation opened up by global capitalism, it is "things" (commodities) which freely circulate, while the circulation of "persons" is more and more controlled.

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<sup>111</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.104.

<sup>112</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.424.

<sup>113</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.424.

<sup>114</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p.102.

We are not dealing now with “globalisation” as an unfinished project but with a true “dialectics of globalisation”: the segregation of the people is the reality of economic globalisation.<sup>115</sup>

However, for Žižek, this antagonism cannot be sustained indefinitely or resolved by the state because this it is also immanent to the population of the state in question. This slum population is only the most shocking symptom of a trend inherent to capitalism, which has accelerated since the 1970s. As an influential analysis puts it:

Since then, the major capitalist countries have seen an unprecedented decline in their levels of industrial employment. Over the past three decades, manufacturing employment fell 50 percent as a percentage of total employment in these countries. Even newly “industrialising” countries like South Korea and Taiwan saw their relative levels of industrial employment decline in the past two decades. At the same time the numbers of both low-paid service-workers and slum-dwellers working in the informal sector have expanded as the only remaining options for those who have become superfluous to the needs of shrinking industries.<sup>116</sup>

The emergence of surplus population is not simply a result of policy decisions but a tendency inherent to the development of capitalism driven by the consequences of the law of value. Individual capitals are constantly compelled to reduce variable capital (labour) costs given the socially determined nature of value by removing workers from the production process through technological and organisational innovation. Following Jameson (2011), Žižek argues that capitalism is defined by the structural necessity of unemployment. As Žižek writes: ‘it is the very success of capitalism [...] which produces unemployment’ given that the dynamics of accumulation and capitalisation are “structurally inseparable” from the

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<sup>115</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p.102.

<sup>116</sup> Endnotes, “Misery and Debt,” in *Endnotes #2: Misery and the Value Form* (2010)

production of unemployment and human superfluity.<sup>117</sup> For Žižek, thus, it is not just the extreme of slum populations that demonstrate the immanent result of capitalism's innermost dynamic. Rather, this population is only the extreme edge of the phenomenon of unemployment generally. As a result, Žižek calls for the expansion of the category of unemployment to encompass

the wide space of population from the temporarily employed, through the no-longer-employable and permanently unemployed up to people living in slums and other types of ghettos (all those often dismissed by Marx himself as "lumpen-proletariat",) and finally, entire areas, populations or states excluded from the global capitalist process, like the blank spaces in ancient maps.<sup>118</sup>

On this basis, Žižek recalibrates our understanding of exploitation in capitalism. Žižek argues that exploitation should not be conceived primarily in monetary terms or in the expropriation of surplus. Rather, capitalist exploitation can be understood in the systemic manner as the prevention of subjects actualising their potential.<sup>119</sup> This can be understood in terms of the limitations to libidinal satisfaction, or, in more concrete terms, in the way that capitalism prevents subjects realising their social roles. In "Lenin's Choice" Žižek argues that the proletarianisation of the subject results from the divergence between what is socially necessary for their existence and the reality of their social existence. Subjects are defined as workers and educated and trained as such. However, within capitalism, large swathes of the population are prevented from practising these skills and identities. At the same time, they are unable to move beyond this socially necessitated mandate given that in capitalist societies subjects rely on selling their labour in order to reproduce themselves. In capitalism, despite

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<sup>117</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.1001; See Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital*, London: Verso (2011) p.149.

<sup>118</sup> Žižek, *TIP*, p.22.

<sup>119</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.1003.

the impossibility of work, ‘the substantial determination of an unemployed person remains that of a worker, but he or she is prevented from either actualizing it or renouncing it, so that he or she remains suspended in the potentiality of a worker who cannot work.’<sup>120</sup>

## 8.6. Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how Žižek’s analysis addresses the short-comings of his democratic period with an analysis of the transformations in subjectivity and identification, the political logics of liberal democracy, and the relation between capital and state. Žižek’s account provides a series of symptomal points which demonstrate the inconsistency of capitalism. If we consider the three levels that we have looked at these are the impossibility of libidinal satisfaction, given the continuing reign of the superego. The reduction of the subject to the “bare life” of bio-politics and the sovereign exception found in its power to realise “the state of emergency.” And in capitalism itself, the reduction of workers themselves to a form of symptomal surplus of the system, deprived of the very possibility of realising their own role within capitalism. Žižek describes the condition of proletarianisation as that of depriving subjects of their substance, referring to Marx’s conception of “substanceless subjectivity” in the *Grundrisse*.<sup>121</sup> In each case, Žižek has a plausible argument for a form of proletarianisation that occurs within capitalism at the libidinal, political and economic level. In each, moreover, we see that as such, a particular sphere of the socio-political totality is perforated in the sense that it is not only rendered inconsistent but renders visible the subject at the symptomal site of inconsistency in the form of a negativity that the system can never fully pacify. However, while at the level of explication, Žižek’s analyses seem plausible, it could be argued that the very form of these analyses is

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<sup>120</sup> Žižek, “LC”, pp.290-1.

<sup>121</sup> Žižek, *DSST?*, p.140, *TWN*, p.26.

problematic. Here I want to raise a problem with Žižek's dialectic that emerges from the very attempt to provide a detailed account of these various levels of contemporary capitalism at the most general level.

As I argued in chapter 4, Žižek's dialectical mode of knowing is not a philosophical practice in the traditional sense since it does not seek to offer an alternative point of identification but, enacted from the "place of displacement," attempts to render visible the hole in the Other in order to produce that shocking, discomforting effect at which point the subject recognises themselves at the site of the inconsistency of the Other. We said that the purpose of the dialectic, as a result, was not to produce a new form of knowledge but Truth in the sense of the disruption that occurs through a confrontation with a symptom or non-knowledge that the order of Being relies upon for its consistency. However, here, it would seem that in order to offer a plausible and sufficiently detailed account of these phenomena within capitalism Žižek undoes the critical revelatory effect of the dialectic. The enormity of the structures that Žižek describes and the considerable intellectual labour that is required in analysis, means that the shocking effect is at the very least somewhat dampened. This would seem to be a consequence of the fact that Žižek's analysis works in two directions simultaneously. He attempts to offer an account of the inconsistencies of capitalism at various levels but to do this, to enact a cut that might produce a form of political consciousness, Žižek is unable to limit analysis only to single symptoms and marginal phenomena. Instead, he must address large-scale socio-political structures at the most general level, outlining their operation, their logic, and their connections across several levels. That is to say, what seems to separate in Žižek's analysis is the notion of a "hole" in the Other and the shocking and praxical effect that this Truth has on the subject and, as a consequence, on the object itself. While the result of Žižek's analysis is a conception of the various

antagonisms inherent to the Other, this revelation does not disrupt this Other or the relationship of the subject to it.

It is symptomatic of this problem, I contend, that Žižek seems to tacitly concede the limitations of his dialectical mode of knowing when he refers to the results of its practice as a form of “cognitive mapping,” with reference to Jameson’s term. Although, Žižek’s use of this term is unclear,<sup>122</sup> for Jameson the challenge of “cognitive mapping” described an urgent requirement for the reinvention of Marxism at the level of ideology. Jameson’s conception of this ideology is Althusserian in tenor insofar as it conceives of a practice that re-connects the “imaginary relations” of ideology to the “real relations” of existence.<sup>123</sup> For Žižek, the dialectic is supposed to reverse this relationship insofar as it is designed to reveal the ideological moment inherent to the “real relations” of existence by demonstrating the lack in this Other by way of the symptom. However, the results of Žižek’s dialectical practice would seem to be far closer to Jameson’s understanding of the term. By referring the subject’s ideological discontents back to the deep structures of capitalism, the state and the transformations in the subject’s libidinal economy, Žižek’s dialectic is reconnecting the subject to a series of “Real” relations in the sense that they determine and structure the subject’s experiences. While this might evoke a different form of political consciousness, it is one that is ideological in the sense that it functions at the level of “knowledge” rather than the Real as that unsettling effect of the *Tuche* that occurs when those “real” relations are disturbed and denatured as the subject realises their inconsistency as the condition of their own Freedom. In this context, the subject is left to organise and fight against these structures. The same can be said with regard to the knowledge that formalisation produces. While it

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<sup>122</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.3.

<sup>123</sup> Fredric Jameson “Cognitive Mapping” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. University of Illinois Press (1990) pp.347-60.

traces the space of class struggle and, at the level of knowledge, is antagonistic with the positions of the status quo of bourgeois subjectivity, it seems to remain oppositional only at the level of knowledge or ideology. It opens a space for practice, but to actually denature and dislocate the hegemonic relations it seems to demand a practice that goes beyond this initial moment of critique.

The problem seems to also emerge when we consider who Žižek's dialectical knowing is addressed to. Here, the disjunction between the role of the analyst and the dialectic becomes very clear. The position of the analyst works given that it addresses the subject within the clinical setting, setting in motion the transferential dynamic that sees the subject mistakenly believe that the analyst already has knowledge of its symptom. Here, however, the symptom is not particular but general and Žižek is not addressing any particular subject. Instead, he is telling all subjects that they themselves are the symptom of various social processes that are beyond them — as Žižek speculates with regard to the trend that defines capitalism, “[p]erhaps today we are, in a sense, “all jobless.””<sup>124</sup> It could be argued that like the clinical subject seeks out an analyst on the basis of some initial feeling of discomfort or concern, that readers of Žižek do likewise, turning to Žižek's work in order to probe a sense of social unease. But in the reader-author relationship that results, it seems that Žižek offers an alternative explanation of the subject's discontents and a site of future political practice, rather than the direct cause of their dissatisfaction *qua* the lack in the Other that the subject must accept at an unconscious level. As a result, the effect of Žižek's work is an alternative knowledge in terms of an explication of the relationship between that discontent and the social structures and logics that account for it. For this knowledge to avoid

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<sup>124</sup> Žižek, “LC,” p.291.

recuperation at the level of ideology — for example, through the disavowal of the lack in the Other — it must be incorporated with and become the basis for a collective practice.

## Chapter 9: Communism

### 9.1. Introduction

The return to Communism as a name for a political project and future society is the most surprising development in Žižek's work since his return to dialectical materialism. As we have seen, in his early critique Žižek argued that the central flaws of Marxism and Stalinism grew out of a utopian aspiration at their core. Moreover, Žižek's response to these failures as he has developed his own dialectical materialism has largely consisted in the rejection of any notion of an Other, the paradigmatic utopian form. How can Žižek return to a notion of Communism without also returning to a similarly problematic utopianism?

Žižek's return to Communism could not have occurred at a more politically interesting and salient moment. Shortly after the global financial crisis of 2008, and just as radical leftist politics began to return to public consciousness, Žižek declared the importance of resurrecting a notion of Communism and a Communist politics for our contemporary world. The series of international conferences and collections of writings that this project inspired, and the connections with political movements that resulted from it, garnered considerable media and public attention, especially considering that its main drivers were radical academics.

Žižek's conception of Communism has developed steadily over a number of works in which he has developed various aspects of an understanding of Communism across several

levels. However, the multifaceted nature of Žižek’s Communism and Communist politics has sadly not been reflected in the secondary literature, which is plagued by a failure to consider the specificity and development of Žižek’s positions since his engagement with Communism began. With some notable exceptions notwithstanding, Žižek’s Communist politics has been wrongly associated with the abyssal Act of suicide,<sup>1</sup> a return to totalitarianism,<sup>2</sup> and even a form of Left-Fascism.<sup>3</sup> These inaccurate accounts of Žižek’s work have largely been a result of two factors. On one hand, they demonstrate a continuing obsession with the “second Žižek,” a position that stands at odds with much of Žižek’s work, as I argued in chapter 6. On the other hand, they also demonstrate the dangers of overly hasty judgement. While these analysis have identified the emergence of Communism in Žižek’s writing they have primarily focused on Žižek’s pre-Communist works in order to develop an understanding of his position regarding the content and form of Communism. For example, in the special edition of *the International Journal of Žižek Studies* dedicated to Žižek’s Communism most contributors focused on works that pre-dated his turn to Communism, focusing mainly on Žižek’s *In Defence of Lost Causes*, a work in which he attempts, and fails in my view, to rehabilitate certain totalitarian positions.<sup>4</sup> As a result, there has been a widespread failure in drawing attention to the novelty of Žižek’s position with regard to Communism and the mode of utopian thinking associated with it. The most interesting of Žižek’s positions on Communism are found in work that has been published since these initial negative critical assessments, namely *Living in the End Times* (2012) and *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (2012). At

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<sup>1</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, “On Acts, Pure and Impure” in *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol.4 no.2 (2010)

<sup>2</sup> Geoff Boucher, “An Inversion of Radical Democracy: The Republic of Virtue in Žižek’s Revolutionary Politics” in *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol.4 no.2 (2010)

<sup>3</sup> Alan Johnson, “The Power of Nonsense,” in *Jacobin*, no.3-4. (2011) [Online] available at: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2011/07/the-power-of-nonsense/> last accessed on: 5.5.2014.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Mcmillan makes this point in *Žižek and Communist Strategy* (p.166). To my mind, *In Defence of Lost Causes* is a work that is characteristic of the “Second Žižek”, although it still contains some useful clarifications on the nature of subtraction, for example.

present, there has been no attempt to analyse the positions taken in these works in the secondary literature.

In pursuing an in-depth analysis of Žižek's Communism this chapter will offer an alternative assessment to these critical accounts. In his most recent work, Žižek conceives of an "Idea of Communism" in the form of a model for an egalitarian and libertarian direct democracy that takes the structure of the discourse of the analyst. He arrives at this position using a novel utopian hermeneutic in which he understands Communism from the perspective of so-called "signs from the future." In this chapter I focus on Žižek's utopian hermeneutic and his Idea of Communism and how they offer a mode of utopian thinking in response to the limitations of classical Marxism uncovered by Žižek's Lacanian critique. Alongside this I will also use Žižek's conception of Communism as an opportunity to demonstrate how, through an understanding of subtraction and the Act, Žižek is able to navigate the problems that he identified with classical Marxism and Stalinism at the political level in terms of their continual reliance on an Other. In doing so, I will also return to the tension at the heart of Žižek's Lacanian-Marxist dialectical materialism, which we drew attention to in the conclusion of chapter 5, section 5.5.. The question that we raised as we charted the shift in the role of the theorist-philosopher from that of the analyst to something closer to the master was whether Žižek could remain faithful to his critique of traditional Marxist theory at the same time that his own work became minimally programmatic and prescriptive. Alongside a detailed exposition of Žižek's Communist politics I want to outline how Žižek manages this tension by attempting to retain the position of analyst at the levels of practice, organisation, and the Idea. We will see that to avoid returning Marxist philosophy to its traditional role, Žižek constantly attempts to emphasise the role of the subject over the theorist, and an openness on the basis of the lack in the Other, over the definitiveness of any political programme.

## 9.2. The Communist Cause and Collectivity

The initial theoretical inspiration for Žižek's return to the notion of Communism comes from Alain Badiou's *The Meaning of Sarkozy* (2008). In this work, Badiou describes the necessity of what he calls "the communist hypothesis." For Badiou, this hypothesis is a form of faith in the continuing existence of the eternal Idea of Communism. Badiou argues that against a resigned acceptance of the status quo philosophy must battle to once more establish the very existence of the communist hypothesis and the Idea that has been the invariable basis of emancipatory projects throughout human history. Given the difficulty of conceiving of Communism in an era defined by the total victory of capitalism and liberal democracy, Badiou proposes that our task at present is the renewal of the Communist Idea rather than its realisation.<sup>5</sup> Against Badiou, Žižek conceives of Communism primarily as a deadlock that results from the inability to resolve the antagonisms of capitalism rather than an eternal Idea or some other ideal invariant. In the last chapter we demonstrated how for Žižek contemporary capitalism was defined by several antagonisms. At the level of the subject we saw how the libidinal deadlock of post-modern identity tortured individuals with the demand for an impossible *jouissance*. At the political level we saw the confluence of the post-political and the ultra-political as the contradiction at the heart of liberal democracy. Finally, we identified how for Žižek the central antagonism of capitalism was the existence of a surplus-population, an excluded mass of potential workers unable to work in the society of labour but produced within it. For Žižek, it is this last antagonism that is crucial in re-conceiving Communism. He argues that it is the 'reference to the excluded' that justifies the use of the term.<sup>6</sup> At a theoretical level, it is the importance of antagonisms in conceiving of Communism that sets Žižek's initial reflections apart from Badiou's. Rather than an eternal Idea Žižek

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<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, trans. David Fernbach, London: Verso (2008) pp.97-98.

<sup>6</sup> Žižek, "from the beginning," p.44.

argues that Communism must emerge from ‘actual social antagonisms,’<sup>7</sup> and be ‘re-invented’ against them.<sup>8</sup> As such, even though Communism also names a ‘future society’ and a ‘present political movement acting towards its goal’ Žižek argues that it must primarily be conceived as a ‘problem to be resolved’, a burning question addressed to the political subject<sup>9</sup>: ‘how can we get beyond the antagonisms of existing society without reproducing them at a different level?’<sup>10</sup>

On this basis, Žižek conceives of Communism in the form of this burning question as a Cause. In Žižek’s account of the Cause in *Metastases* when reflecting on its relationship to the subject and signification, he touches on two features which are especially pertinent when thinking of Communism as a Cause. As the disturbing Real at the heart of the subject’s relationship to the Other, the Cause derails the symbolic, throwing it off balance and, as a result, effects signification since the subject is always compelled to resolve this Real.<sup>11</sup> In the socio-political context, by naming this Cause, *qua* antagonisms of capitalism, as Communism, Žižek is beginning the process of symbolisation by opening a space for political practice to operate within and offering the antagonisms of the socio-political totality as the basis for a Communist politics to react against and attempt to overcome.

In the conclusion to the previous chapter, I argued that by operating at the macro-level Žižek’s dialectic might fail to produce the kind of disruptive *Tuche* of the Real that he argues is the imperative of dialectical critique. As a result, it was suggested that in order for the new form of knowledge that it produces to avoid becoming ideology it needed to be connected to a form of collective practice that realised, sustained and acted upon the not-all that it renders visible. It would seem that in understanding Communism as a Cause *qua* Real Žižek offers an

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<sup>7</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, pp.87-88.

<sup>8</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.6.

<sup>9</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.470.

<sup>10</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.470.

<sup>11</sup> Žižek, *ME*, pp.29-33.

initial solution to this problem insofar as he understands the Cause as the basis for a form of political practice. It has been argued that within Žižek's work there is no room to conceive of the collective, class conscious driven politics that characterises Marxist political practice,<sup>12</sup> however, the Cause demonstrates the error of this view. The Cause is the basis for a collective identity not based upon divisive imaginary or symbolic ties but a Real that is beyond these. Žižek associates this collective identification with Love, which is always based on something that is ineffable and unknowable. 'I respect you for your universal features, but I love you for an X beyond these features [...]'<sup>13</sup> Because this identity is not sustained by accepted cultural signifiers, or guaranteed by the state or the Other, there is a certain precarity to it. As Žižek writes of Love, the mode of collectivity it enables must be 'fought for and regained again and again' through a commitment to the Cause.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, precisely insofar as it identifies a point that cuts through and against all positive features, the Cause can operate without exclusionary or coercive effects upon the subject. For Žižek, identification with the Cause allows a form of stability and solidarity because it is based upon a beyond to ideological oppositions. Based on the Cause the collective has a number of features. Given that the Cause is anti-deterministic, a point that demonstrates a break in the linear chain of sufficient reason, the subjectivity that it crystallises 'can be adopted by *any* individual' since there is 'not a determining causal connection' between social role and revolutionary subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> Rather, it provides the political link of 'all those who experience a fundamental solidarity' in this Cause.<sup>16</sup> It is around this Cause that subjects who recognise the forms of capitalist antagonisms must come together and invent a future.

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<sup>12</sup> Parker, *Žižek*, p.97.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek, *PATD*, p.17.

<sup>14</sup> Žižek, *FA*, p.118.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, *TS*, p.227.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, "LC," p.177.

A key part of the role of this political collective is to foster class consciousness through their connection to the deadlock of the Real. What defines the collective is the position of subtraction that it takes. Identifying with the Cause *qua* symptomal surplus, means that the subject takes a position that is incomprehensible from the perspective of the logics of the order of Being or the socio-political totality. As such, it is defined by that affirmative negation that Žižek associated with Bartleby's Act – which we touched on in section 5.4. In the subtracted position, this collectivity will appear as the disturbing object which runs counter to the political and ideological currents of the order of the status quo insofar as it stands-in for its inconsistency and the possibility of an order beyond it. As the external object, the collective does not offer a metalinguistic position – as in the Kautskian model of the socialist *intelligentsia* beyond the class struggle importing the Truth from without in the form of scientific knowledge (S2). Rather, as Žižek conceives of the Leninist position in opposition to Kautsky, the collective offers a disruptive Truth *qua* the antagonism of the Other and a political struggle on its basis.<sup>17</sup> As such, Žižek argues that it shakes the subject 'out of its self-indulgent spontaneity'<sup>18</sup> by introducing a gap in the order of Being. The collectivity that stands for the Cause, then, fosters political consciousness not by revealing the "true interests" of certain subjects but the limitations of the current political and ideological forms of consciousness and the continuing presence of antagonism from this subtracted position. In this sense, it relies on a wager that the antagonisms that we have identified in the previous chapter continue to perturb the subject and, in a similar way to how the subject seeks analysis when they are disturbed by the Real of their symptom, the collective offers a possible solution to their dissatisfactions that result from the antagonisms of capitalism.

The collectivity's role in fostering class consciousness is intimately connected to the effect of identifying with the Cause. As a political embodiment of the lack in the Other, the

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<sup>17</sup> Žižek, "LC," pp.183-5.

<sup>18</sup> Žižek, "LC", p.187.

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collective operates at an antagonistic disjunction to the order of Being and its hegemonic ideologies. We can understand the result of this commitment in terms of how subtraction, or the feminine subject, ‘disturbs the balance of the Whole’<sup>19</sup> through the incision that it makes as it enacts a ‘radical division, at the very heart of the social body.’<sup>20</sup> The commitment to the Cause, like the decision that subtraction engenders between two forms of universality, takes up the slack that we argued was potentially left in the limitations of Žižek’s mode of knowledge, since its practice is antagonistically partisan and oppositional. We spoke earlier of the alternative mode of universalisation in the form of an identification with the part-of-no-part, the excluded of a socio-political totality that stood in opposition to the whole and its ordered parts.<sup>21</sup> We can equally see this division emerge with the collective commitment described here insofar as it also runs counter to the logics of post-politics. Through the collective’s commitment to Communism the foreclosed dimension of class struggle re-emerges against ideological closure. While, as a form of collective politicisation of the socio-political totality, Communism names a type of political commitment that post-politics and its bio-political equivalent attempts to occlude by reducing life to the pursuit and management of pleasure.

By naming Communism as a Cause in the way that we have outlined Žižek also attempts to emphasise the political moment of rupture that runs through the socio-political totality, revealing a division of open political contestation over the nature of society. The collectivity’s role in the commitment to this Cause is to continue to pursue this politicisation. The form of the Cause is also vital to this. As the Real that exists only insofar as it is continually subject to signification, it introduces and sustains a space for an alternative within and against the order of Being. Žižek, thus, avoids the trap of the collective *qua* Fetish, as in

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<sup>19</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.103, *FA*, p.121.

<sup>20</sup> Žižek, “LC,” p.177.

<sup>21</sup> See Žižek, *PATD*, p.133. See also Žižek’s account of the forceful intervention of subtraction with regard to the part of no-part. Žižek, *IDLC*, pp.410-1.

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the case of the Stalinist Party which was conceived as the embodiment of the Other. The revolutionary collective ‘occupies the place of Truth’<sup>22</sup> understood as the antagonism *qua* Real that other positive modes of social knowledge attempt to obscure given that it demonstrates the political moment as the lack in the Other. The purpose of the collectivity, thus, is to keep open the space of politics at the same time that it organises and unites Communist struggle.

### 9.3. Communist Utopianism

Within Žižek’s understanding of Communism as a Cause and basis for a collective political practice there remains a question as to what this practice is meant to realise. While we have seen that Žižek thinks that part of the function of the identification with the Cause is to create the space for invention against the antagonisms of capitalism, until recently he has been reticent with regard to what this invention might produce. This is arguably an expected consequence of Žižek’s problem with utopian forms of imagination since his critique of Marxism and Stalinism. In his recent work, however, Žižek has conceived of a way around the dangers that his critique outlines. As a result, Žižek has been able to offer his own account of an Idea of Communism, as a form of utopian imaginary that might guide Communist political practice. Before going on to examine the details and content of Žižek’s Communist Idea, I will return to the difficulties that Žižek has to navigate in order to propose this mode of utopian thinking and avoid the pitfalls of Marxist and Stalinist forms of utopianism that we discussed in chapter 2, in terms of Marx’s fantasy in section 2.4.. I will then look at the two ways that Žižek overcomes these difficulties with a form of symptomatic analysis, which he uses to reveal a kind of utopian impulse in certain “signs from the future.”

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<sup>22</sup> Žižek, “LC,” p.188.

### 9.3.1. The Trouble with Utopia

As we have seen, Žižek is highly sceptical of utopian thinking. He conceives of the imaginary utopia of the possibility of a harmonious and well ordered society, with each part or element having a designated place, as having the structure of fantasy. From this position Žižek argues that utopia is largely an imaginary attempt to resolve the subject's impossible relationship with *jouissance*, or, at a socio-political level, an attempt to abolish the inevitability of antagonism *qua* Real. In the case of Stalinism, this mode of utopian expectation was at the heart of the misrecognition of the Party. As the embodiment of the whole and the pinnacle of History, the Party conceived of its own power on the basis of the fantasy of the People as a homogenous, unified mass that supported the Party. As we saw in chapter 2, when the Party allowed this fantasy to “take power” it resulted in the dynamic in which anything that disturbed this image of unity — opposition to the Party, elements that got in the way of the progress of History — was violently dismissed as a “scrap” or “waste.” For Žižek, the fantasy operated to legitimate the Party's position as the embodiment of universality and worked to sanction its most violent actions.

Žižek finds similar problems in other contemporary modes of utopian thought. While Žižek does not think that Badiou's Idea of Communism will necessarily result in such disastrous consequences, he remains sceptical of its form on similar grounds. Žižek argues that Badiou's Idea of Communism overlooks the historical nature of the Real and, thus, relies on a similar obfuscation of the necessity of antagonism. For Žižek, by conceiving of the Idea as eternal, as Badiou does in *The Meaning of Sarkozy*,<sup>23</sup> he risks the fantasmatic flight from the Real that ends in implicitly accepting that the necessity of an alternative is equally eternal. As a result, rather than addressing and attempting to overcome capitalism's antagonisms, the Idea will merely offer an imaginary escape from them. The *eternal* Idea of Communism, as

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<sup>23</sup> Badiou, *Meaning of Sarkozy*, p.99.

Žižek writes, ‘implies that the situation which generates it is no less eternal, that the antagonism to which Communism reacts will always be here.’<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, Žižek argues we are also ‘only one small step to a “deconstructive” reading of communism as a dream of presence [...] a dream which thrives on its own impossibility.’<sup>25</sup> In the same way that fantasy can never be wholly realised, Žižek argues that Badiou’s Idea of Communism risks inevitable failure given that it does not locate the ‘new mode’ of Communism in the present antagonisms of capitalism.<sup>26</sup>

However, locating the Communist Idea in a current antagonism does not necessarily overcome the problems that Žižek finds in utopian thinking. As we know from his critique of Marxism, it can be equally problematic to conceive of Communism on some present historical basis. With regard to the limitations of Marx’s critique of utopianism, Žižek argues that simply extrapolating from the present into the future is equally liable to a “bad” form of utopian thinking. As we saw in chapter 2, Marx’s deduction of the future from the present resulted in the productivist, bourgeois fantasy of capitalism without its inherent limitations. In the context of his engagement with other contemporary Marxisms, Žižek takes the same position with regard to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s works *Multitude* (2004) and *Empire* (2000). Žižek describes their Spinozist-Deleuzian Marxism as the ideology of late-capitalism insofar as their conception of liberation is ‘uncannily close to that of “postmodern” digital capitalism.’<sup>27</sup> The problem with their position, so Žižek argues, is that it conceives of revolutionary transformation in expressive terms. Hardt and Negri argue that capitalism contains Communism *in utero* in the relationships that characterise post-Fordist production. From this, as Žižek explains their position, all that is needed is the formal leap of removing the constraints of the capitalist form of private property to realise the already-Communist

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<sup>24</sup> Žižek, “from the beginning,” p.211.

<sup>25</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.88.

<sup>26</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.88.

<sup>27</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p.56, *TWN*, p.218, *OWB*, pp.163-4.

potential of post-Fordist capitalist production.<sup>28</sup> Žižek argues that conceiving of the decentralised, mobile and flexible multiplicity as the hegemonic organisational form of capitalism, Hardt and Negri's Communist utopia is a capitalist fantasy. That is to say, their conception of a future in terms of an unbridled social productivity shares a remarkable resemblance to the ideal image of a post-modern capitalist utopia.<sup>29</sup>

Žižek's critical position is important to bear in mind because it restricts the possibility of actualising a utopian re-imagining of the future. If the Communist Idea can not be thought of as an eternal referent, as something that exists invariably, we have also seen how Žižek is equally sceptical of basing utopian imagination on the present socio-political world given that it tends towards a fantasmatic form of contradiction resolution. As a result, it would seem that Žižek boxes himself into a rather restricted space, unable to conceive of the Idea, or any form of utopia, on an imaginary or symbolic basis. Indeed, when Žižek first confronts the problem of utopian invention he suggests that it can only occur at some future point after the subject has already escaped the constrictions of the present in some liminal post-revolutionary space. As he writes in *Organs Without Bodies* (2002): 'in a radical revolution, people not only "realise their old (emancipatory, etc.) dreams"; rather, they have to reinvent their very modes of dreaming.'<sup>30</sup> The problem with this position is that if the imagining of utopia relies on a revolutionary break to have already occurred, Žižek will be unable to offer anything more than a promise of future modes of post-revolutionary dreaming to those currently in the struggle with the antagonisms of contemporary capitalism. An Idea of Communism or any utopian re-imagining is off the cards until then. As a result, Žižek, or any other political actor, would be unable to offer a conception of the aim or outcome of political practice.

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<sup>28</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.265.

<sup>29</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.263.

<sup>30</sup> Žižek, *OWB*, p.188.

### 9.3.2. A New Utopian Hermeneutic

In *Living in the End Times* (2012) and *Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (2012) Žižek conceives of a new mode of utopian imagination that resolves the limitations of Badiou's conception of the Idea and the problems with utopian modes of thought more generally. This new hermeneutic locates, interprets, and renders visible the potential existence of the Communist Idea in certain types of thought and practice. Whereas it previously seemed that Žižek was unwilling to posit an immanent beyond to the order of Being other than in the form of a negative opening, in his recent work he has argued that within the order of Being there are also points of immanent escape that directly open the space for the immediate re-imagining of the future. Žižek describes how certain events and cultural practises, from works of literature to '[e]vents like the OWS [Occupy Wall Street] protests, the Arab Spring, the demonstrations in Greece and Spain' can and should be read as a specific form of symptom, which he calls a 'sign from the future.'<sup>31</sup> It is on the basis of these points, understood as immanent to our situation but beyond its predominant logics, that Žižek believes it is possible to extrapolate a future that might escape the deadlocks of the present.

To make sense of the mode of understanding that Žižek employs we can refer to Lacan's conception of the temporality of the signification of the unconscious, which Žižek outlines initially in *Sublime Object*. For Lacan, the meaningless unconscious traces that disturb the subject are symbolically integrated "from the future." That is to say, the meaning of the symptom and the nature of the trauma that characterise the prehistory of the subject are determined retroactively. As Lacan puts it, its meaning '*will have been*.'<sup>32</sup> As Žižek glosses Lacan's words: the meaning of the unconscious symptom is not 'discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past but constructed retroactively [...]'<sup>33</sup> Žižek describes the

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<sup>31</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.128.

<sup>32</sup> Lacan, *Seminar I*, p.158.

<sup>33</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, pp.55-6.

realisation of this process as a “journey into the future.” By “overtaking” the present we suppose in advance a knowledge of what we will one day know to be true. The logic here is that of transference, which, while an illusion, is necessary in the production of the meaning of the symptom. From the perspective of the present symptoms are meaningless but through analysis as a practice based on the supposition that they have a meaning the symptoms are eventually ordered and determined. In other words, the meaning of the symptom emerges as the subject realises that meaning.

Žižek’s wager is that the meaning of these ambiguous sites, whether protests, or works of literature or art, will be similarly determined in the future. What is unique about them at present — and herein resides their utopian potential — is that they appear as irrational from the perspective of the dominant ideologies and logics of capitalism and liberal democracy. What initially appears as “impossible” in these signs, as a result, might in fact be inherently possible within some future alternative world. However, like the symptom, their meaning will only be realised and determined retroactively as a result of the work of the subject who struggles for their existence. Without this, they will remain merely irrational fragments without purpose or being.

Žižek, as a result, is able to step around the challenge that his critique of Marxism presents to utopian thinking. As we have seen, we cannot base Communism in the logics and knowledge of capitalism without reproducing its content at a different level. So, for Žižek, not only must we remove Marx’s idea of Communism as pure reconciliation but also the notion that Communism is the result of capitalism’s objective development. Žižek’s conception of the relationship between the “signs from the future” and Communism breaks with this logic since these symptoms already exist beyond the socio-symbolic system of capitalism and liberal democracy. Take, for example, the case of protests and political revolutions, not only do these demonstrate a form of politicisation that disturbs the post-political logic of

representative democracy, but they also demonstrate different forms of democratic political practice, or, perhaps, new ways of organising our socio-relationships and communities.

Žižek's reading of the "signs from the future" has two crucial features. First, it relies on the engaged perspective of the proletarian. We described this previously as that of the feminine subject, which assumes an openness towards historical possibility and what appears impossible within the present.<sup>34</sup> This engaged perspective is able to discern the potential in these symptoms on the basis that they cannot be integrated within the present. Second, the way in which Žižek suggests that we must read these "signs from the future" relies on a mode of interpretation that reverses the usual Marxist historicist perspective in which an event is understood in terms of its historical conditions and context. Instead, this hermeneutic entails positing a *future* from which they can be interpreted. Here, Žižek evokes Walter Benjamin's understanding of a moment of the past/present that is redeemable only in the future, as he describes in his essay "Theses on The Philosophy of History" (2007). As Žižek describes this:

[I]nstead of analyzing them as part of the continuum of past and present, we should bring in the perspective of the future, taking them as limited, distorted (sometimes even perverted) fragments of a utopian future that lies dormant in the present as its hidden potential.<sup>35</sup>

For Žižek, it is by following these signs from this engaged, futural perspective that we might be able to discern and bring into existence what at present appears "impossible" within them. It is at this point that Žižek introduces his own understanding of the Communist Idea. Žižek argues that these signs demonstrate the Communist Idea at the same time that they must be read from its perspective. As he puts it in *Year of Dreaming Dangerously*: these are 'elements

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<sup>34</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.128.

<sup>35</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.128.

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which are here in our space, but whose time is the emancipated future, the future of the Communist Idea.<sup>36</sup>

#### 9.4. Žižek's Idea of Communism: The Discourse of the Analyst

Žižek has recently put this utopian hermeneutic into practice in an engagement with several “signs from the future” to develop his own Idea of Communism. Working primarily with literary and filmic sources Žižek analysis suggests that the Idea which these signs indicate has the structure of the analyst’s discourse.

The Discourse of the Analyst

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\cancel{S}}{S_1}$$

Compared to the discourse of the university, the discourse of the analyst represents a quarter-turn counter-clockwise for the different elements. While it is to some extent modelled on the analysand-analyst relationship found in the clinical setting, the application of this structure is certainly not limited to it.<sup>37</sup> Equally it is in no way a *telos* or end but, as Fink writes, ‘one discourse among many.’<sup>38</sup> There is a debate with regard to whether the discourse

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<sup>36</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.128.

<sup>37</sup> See Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, p.33; see also Jeanne Lorraine Schroeder, *The Four Lacanian Discourses: Or Turning Law Inside Out*, Oxon: Birkbeck Law Press (2008) chapter 4.

<sup>38</sup> Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p.129.

of the analyst is merely a passing moment between other discourses or whether it can name a new social link. Whereas Žižek previously held the former view — in *Tarrying With The Negative* where he argues that it emerges only in between other discourses, and, as such, is tasked with the production of the master-signifier in the sense of rendering ‘visible its “produced,” artificial, contingent character’<sup>39</sup> — in *Parallax View* he argues that despite the failure of the attempted institutionalisation of analyst’s discourse — primarily in Lacan’s own psychoanalytical associations — the fight for new communities on the basis of the discourse of the analyst is ‘worth pursuing.’<sup>40</sup> In *Living in the End Times* Žižek finds the discourse of the analyst in operation within certain “signs from the future.” In terms of Žižek’s own thinking of alternative modes of socio-political organisation the Communist Idea that he develops allows him to realise what he described as the ‘chance of a different [social] link’ in *Parallax View* when discussing the analyst’s discourse and, negatively, the difficulty of imagining Bartleby in power.<sup>41</sup> In his engagement with Communism Žižek is able to suggest the possibility of realising this potential through his utopian reading of Franz Kafka’s short story, “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk” in which we see the analyst’s discourse realised as a political community.

Understood as the discourse of the analyst, Žižek’s Idea of Communism is far from a complete solution to the antagonisms of liberal democracy and capitalism. However, it does offer a vision of an alternative that potentially escapes the libidinal deadlock of late-capitalism and a new mode of participatory democracy, far removed from the rule by knowledge and the bourgeois excess that characterise post-politics. Just as pressingly from the perspective of the development of his own position, conceiving of the Idea of Communism as an analyst’s discourse allows Žižek to avoid repeating the problems of Stalinist and Marxist utopias. As

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<sup>39</sup> Žižek, *TWN*, p.2.

<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.306.

<sup>41</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.306.

we will see, the analyst's discourse foregrounds the presence of the lack in the Other and as such is differentiated from "Marx's fantasy" which was characterised by the abolition of the lack. Presumably, all forms of utopia that Žižek would endorse would have to find some way to accommodate and establish this dimension of the Real at their centre.

#### 9.4.1. The New Model of Egalitarian Collectivity

The central figure in Kafka's story is Josephine, a singer who enables a form of community among the Mouse-folk when she sings. What is pivotal for Žižek is how she is not held in any particular esteem despite playing a crucial role in the formation of the community. In her interaction with the Mice people she is presented as meek, weak, and, at times, a little rude. Even her singing is not considered particularly favourably. As the narrator tells us, Josephine's singing is closer to "piping," a form of noise-making that is common to the other mice within the community but is never considered as art by any of them. According to Žižek, the enigma of the tale that we must resolve is how this performance operates to unite the community. The key to this is the position of Josephine. For Žižek, she occupies the position of the agent in the analyst's discourse, the embodiment of the lack in the Other, *objet a*. What she offers is nothing, or more precisely *a* nothing, she is, as Žižek puts it, 'a purely differential marker,'<sup>42</sup> a form of positivisation against which the community can understand itself *as a community*. As Jameson (1994) writes of Josephine in his analysis of Kafka's tale as a utopia: she is 'the vehicle for the collectivity's affirmation of itself: she reflects their collective identity back to them.'<sup>43</sup> For Žižek this is why, despite the fact that her 'voice is the same as all the others'' Josephine's is still vital to the community. 'Her piping-singing is a pure pretext — ultimately, the people gather for the sake of gathering.'<sup>44</sup> It plays a formal role in

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<sup>42</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.367.

<sup>43</sup> Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p.125.

<sup>44</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.367.

relation to the community, allowing them to assemble and unite without being definitive of them. It is here that Žižek finds that the quality of Josephine's singing, or lack thereof, is in fact an advantage because its limited value prevents the fetishisation of her.<sup>45</sup> In-itself Josephine's singing functions like one of Duchamp's ready-mades: an ordinary object is elevated to an art-object by the way it is framed or exhibited. Her singing gains an exceptional status only by way of how the community assembles around it. As a result, the Mice people can come and go without coming under its spell, and they can humour Josephine or even be antagonistic to her, as Kafka suggests.

For Žižek, in Kafka's tale we find the 'most elementary idea of communism' in terms of 'the clarity of a minimalist order sustained by a gentle form of freely imposed discipline [...]'<sup>46</sup> The minimum of discipline is found in the freedom of assembly sustained only by the limited nature of Josephine's "piping," while the very unexceptional nature of Josephine demonstrates a certain egalitarianism. Josephine is an authority figure who is neither a leader nor a particular authority. Following Kafka's tale we see that her status means that as soon as she tries to go beyond her position as merely a "differential marker" she dissolves once again into the throng of the Mice people because 'her admirers are well aware that there is nothing special about her, that she is just one of them.'<sup>47</sup> When she demonstrates an egotism that threaten her status, it is treated with polite ignorance, a request that is ignored.<sup>48</sup> And when she leaves her position, she is not missed, but enters back in to the masses with total anonymity. For Žižek, this indicates how her exceptional status is both temporary and based solely upon her function for the Mice people.

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<sup>45</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.370.

<sup>46</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.380. Žižek develops this position in an account of Eric Satie's furniture music and Dziga Vertov films but it is equally applicable to his reading of Kafka.

<sup>47</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.370.

<sup>48</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, pp.370-1.

What Žižek finds fascinating in Kafka's tale is how Josephine's role indicates the possibility of a different form of socio-political organisation beyond the discourse of the master or the university. To put this in a different way, Josephine plays the role of a totalising exception without being exceptional nor totalising in the traditional sense of the term. She does not impose her will, like the master, nor does her knowledge dominate the subject. As a result, she allows a totality in which no specific qualities define it. Rather, Josephine is like the analyst insofar as her exceptional position carries no authority or fantasmatic standing among the collective.<sup>49</sup>

#### 9.4.2. Beyond the Superego and the Ego-Ideal

In Žižek's reading of Kafka's tale a question remains with regard to the role of collectivity: what does this "minimal" ordering enable? For Žižek, the purpose of the discourse of the analyst as a mode of socio-political organisation is that it enables a flourishing of personal idiosyncrasies and a multiplicity of differences. In this regard, Žižek's Idea of Communism can be seen as a response to the libidinal deadlock that results from the subject's rule by the superego. The discourse of the analyst promotes a new way of organising the subject's relationship to its *jouissance*.<sup>50</sup> If we recall Žižek's analysis of the transformation of subjectivity in late-capitalism (section 8.3.2.) we saw how permissive late-capitalist societies in fact made *jouissance* even harder to realise, at the same time as producing an oppressive guilt, as a result of the unrestrained superegoistic injunction that emerges from contemporary ideology. The analyst's discourse provides a way beyond this entrapment by the superego, without a return to the master.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.368.

<sup>50</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.303.

<sup>51</sup> Žižek, *PV*, pp.306, 308.

As we have said with regard to the role that Josephine plays *qua* analyst, she stands ‘for the ultimate inconsistency and failure of the big Other.’<sup>52</sup> Žižek’s wager is that, given her very ordinariness, Josephine suspends the possible fetishisation of her exceptional status. As a result, she embodies the *objet a* without the fantasy frame that transfigures her into the sublime object. Instead, she stands for the ‘void behind the lure.’<sup>53</sup> Or, as Lacan describes with regard to the identity of the analyst with the *objet a*: the cause of desire appears to the subject as a pure absence.<sup>54</sup> As such, Josephine is not another object of desire but, as Žižek writes of the analyst, ‘the Void, which provokes the subject into confronting the truth of [their] desire.’<sup>55</sup>

Understood as the analyst-object the agent of the discourse of the analyst makes the subject embrace their own *enjoyment* without the protection of the Other. It also tells them that the prohibition on which the symbolic order was constructed, and which generates the desire of its transgression, can be stepped around. In other words, the agent of this discourse opens up possibilities for the subject that go beyond those established by the Law and its superegoistic supplement. The process can be understood as akin to the end of analysis where the analysand realises that ‘the analyst himself [sic] is nothing but a big question mark addressed to the analysand.’<sup>56</sup> That is to say, through the confrontation with the analyst the subject recognises that ‘desire has no support in the Other, that the authorisation of desire can come only from themselves.’<sup>57</sup> As a result, the function of the analyst-agent is to loosen the grip of the superego.<sup>58</sup> While the superego bombards subjects with the imperative to “*Enjoy!*”, as the embodiment of the void the analyst opens the possibility of limiting the constant

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<sup>52</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.422, n.66.

<sup>53</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.304.

<sup>54</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, p.106.

<sup>55</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.304.

<sup>56</sup> Žižek, *ME*, p.72.

<sup>57</sup> Žižek, *ME*, pp.72-3.

<sup>58</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.304.

demand for *jouissance*, not through a new set of prohibitions, but, rather, by revealing the absence of the basis of the injunction and the impossibility of its realisation. The novelty of psychoanalysis that the analyst's discourse formalises is that it tells the subject that they 'are allowed *not* to enjoy (as opposed to "not allowed to enjoy")'.<sup>59</sup>

Based on the analyst's discourse Žižek's Idea of Communism also suggests that there is no return of symbolic authority since the other function of the analyst-agent is to reveal the Other's 'inability to guarantee the subject's symbolic identity.'<sup>60</sup> As such, it is an order in which there is also a suspension of the kind of ego-ideal that master-signifiers produce in the subject. While in our present, the subject experiences master-signifiers as alienating social demands that are frequently accompanied by real coercion, the Communist society that Žižek has in mind enables the subject to separate from imposed ego-ideal through the non-authoritarian nature of the agent. Here, those attributes and characteristics of the subject that contradict and are painfully repressed in the attempt to live up to the socially authorised mandates can, as a result, come to the surface and become active and acceptable forms of social identity within an order that is not structured by oppressive master-signifiers.

From the perspective of Žižek's example of Josephine, her presence opens the space for the subject to pursue their own enjoyment and identifications without limit, guilt or coercion given the absence of authority that she embodies. As a result, Žižek's Idea of Communism describes a social order in which a proliferation of modes of desire and types of identity is possible. Looking beyond his engagement with Josephine we see that the other "signs from the future" that Žižek focuses on are groups of "freaks" and social outcasts. These "proto-communist" communities are demonstrative of forms of cultural libertarianism and modes of collectivity where the peculiar particularities of subjects find purpose and the space

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<sup>59</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.304.

<sup>60</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.422, n.66.

to come to the fore.<sup>61</sup> For example, Žižek refers to Fredric Jameson's account of the investigative unit from David Simon's HBO series *The Wire* who engineer a situation where they are able to utilise their skills while letting their foibles and follies be displaced on to other personal activities rather than getting eaten up by the system.<sup>62</sup> What Žižek takes from these examples is the possibility of a less uniform and far more complex society. This is not to say that the analyst's discourse will not also produce something of an uneasiness for the subject. It is a mode of social organisation which would place a certain amount of pressure on subjects as a result of their libidinal autonomy. As Žižek puts it with regard to the effect of the analyst, 'the burden falls upon the subject [...] since they renounce any support in the other.'<sup>63</sup> What it would do, however, is remove the subject from the tortuous circuit of desire sustained by the Other and enforced by the superegoistic injunction that can never be sated.

### 9.4.3. The Production of the Master-Signifier

Understood as the discourse of the analyst, Žižek's Idea of Communism also allows an alternative form of political organisation to post-political liberal democracy. Žižek describes that the challenge of imagining a radical alternative to post-political democracy resides in how to institutionalise the 'egalitarian democratic impulse' without it becoming normalised and regulated.<sup>64</sup> The latter, according to Žižek's critique, is a core feature of liberal democracy in its post-political mode. The discourse of the analyst offers another model of democratic political organisation that seems to retain this impulse. To understand how this might operate it is crucial to consider the central dynamic of the analyst's discourse. At the level of production the discourse of the analyst is defined by S1, in the bottom left hand corner of

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<sup>61</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.98, *LITET*, p.377.

<sup>62</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Realism and Utopia in *the Wire*" in *Criticism*, vol.52, Nos.3&4 (2010)

<sup>63</sup> Žižek, *EYS!*, p.69.

<sup>64</sup> Žižek, *IDLC*, p.417.

Lacan's *matheme*. As a discourse it functions to produce this signifier through a decision based upon the impossibility of a neutral, totalising knowledge. In the clinical setting the analyst stands for the object-cause of desire, *objet a*.<sup>65</sup> On the basis of the transference illusion, the analyst appears to the analysand as "the subject supposed to know,"<sup>66</sup> the subject who can help locate and resolve their perturbing Real.<sup>67</sup> Through this illusion the subject addresses their repressed unconscious knowledge, S2, to the analysand.<sup>68</sup> The point of analysis, then, is to take the subject to the point of the symbolic act in which they makes sense of the unconscious knowledge by producing S1 as the retroactively effective cause.

What value does this have for a new mode of collective political organisation? The discourse of the analyst means the production of new S1, not on the basis of knowledge or the supposed wisdom of the authority figure. The key point with regard to the analyst's discourse is that the production of the master-signifier is one that is the subject's alone. As Bracher (1994) points out, the analyst's discourse is a model in which the ultimate values and decisions it produces will not be imposed on subjects by an Other but will be *produced by them*.<sup>69</sup> Understood as a model of socio-political organisation, the decision that the analyst's discourse produces will rest upon the collectivity rather than an elite. As such, the discourse of the analyst would put an end to the domination of democratic decision by (expert) knowledge or the (secret) rule of the bourgeois excess by returning control of the commons to a decision made in common, as has long been thought to be the basis of a Communist mode of political organisation.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Žižek, *LA*, p.131.

<sup>66</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Television* trans Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, in *October* no.40 (1987) p.8.

<sup>67</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.101.

<sup>68</sup> Žižek, *EYS!*, p.45.

<sup>69</sup> Mark Bracher, "On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses" in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, Society*, eds. Mark Bracher, Marshall Alcorn, Ronald Corthell, and Françoise Massardier-Kenney. New York: New York University Press (1994) pp.123-4.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Friedrich Engels, "Principles of Communism" in *MECW*, vol.6. New York: International Publishers (1976) pp.341-357.

#### 9.4.4. The Limitations of Žižek's Idea of Communism

Understood as the discourse of the analyst, Žižek's Idea of Communism provides answers to the problem of imagining an alternative to liberal democracy and the domination of contemporary subjectivity by the superego but is clearly limited at the level of economic questions, or what provides the "base" of this socio-political superstructure. Speaking of the blossoming of new and previously unconceivable modes of enjoyment and types of identity seems to indicate not only the absence of imposed and coercive moral and social values but the existence of a world where individuals have the means and time to freely pursue such diversity without restraint. However, the discourse of the analyst and the "signs from the future" that Žižek engages with are all silent in this regard. The absence of any reflection by Žižek on this matter is only further highlighted by his choice of sources. When outlining the culturally libertarian consequences of the analyst's discourse as the Idea of Communism Žižek refers heavily to and quotes some of Fredric Jameson's speculative readings of utopian figures in *Seeds of Time*. In the passage that Žižek focuses on, Jameson speculates that if the need to dominate external nature produces the domination of internal nature through the creation of an egotistic survival instinct, then, in a future of plenty, where the survival instinct is no longer required, our "human nature" will be truly free to take any number of alternative forms. As Jameson writes:

Speculation on the consequences of just such a general removal of the need for a survival instinct (such a removal being then in general what we call Utopia itself) leads us well beyond the bounds of Adorno's social life world and class style (or our own), and into a Utopia of misfits and oddballs, in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed, and human beings grow wild like plants in a state of nature: [...] who, no

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longer fettered by the constraints of a now oppressive sociality, blossom into the neurotics, compulsives, obsessives, paranoids and schizophrenics, whom our society considers sick but who, in a world of true freedom, may make up the flora and fauna of “human nature” itself.<sup>71</sup>

However, when Žižek reflects on this passage from Jameson he ignores the dimension of the survival instinct and instead postulates the possibility of an ‘unencumbered blossoming of idiosyncrasies’ on the basis of the ‘shared ritual’ of Josephine’s “piping,”<sup>72</sup> or in more general terms the figure of the analyst. As a result, Žižek obscures the question of what is required in order to realise the obsolescence of the social function of such a survival instinct. If we recall Marx’s account of Communism as the “realm of freedom” in volume III of *Capital* (1991), Marx refers to the flourishing of human powers only on the basis of a “realm of necessity” in which the means of social reproduction is secured for all in a rational, humane and democratic way so that it can be accomplished with the very minimum ‘expenditure of energy.’<sup>73</sup> For Marx, then, the reduction or abolition of labour is the prerequisite for any potential flourishing of true diversity and human potential. In contrast, Žižek sees this as a problem for social and political organisation to resolve. As a result, there is a highly significant blind spot in Žižek’s conception of Communism. It should be noted here that this issue is not wholly beyond Žižek’s view. Without offering anything close to a sustained analysis of what this might consist of in the above context he nevertheless argues in places for a dialectical understanding of freedom which conceives of economic and political necessity as its basis. Citing European social democracy as an example, Žižek writes:

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<sup>71</sup> Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p.99. Žižek cites this in *LITET*, p.377. Jameson’s reflections are based on a prior engagement with Adorn and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997) in his earlier work on Adorno, *Late Marxism* (1990) (see p. 102.)

<sup>72</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.377.

<sup>73</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol.3. Trans. David Fernbach, London: Penguin (1991) p.958-9.

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Freedom and regulation are not opposites: we are effectively able to make free choices only because a thick background of regulations sustains this freedom [...] The lesson to be learned is thus that freedom of choice operates only when a complex network of legal, educational, ethical, economic and other conditions form an invisible thick background to the exercise of our freedom.<sup>74</sup>

Elsewhere, in the context of neo-liberal post-politics Žižek argues that ‘[i]t is not enough [...] to reject the depoliticized rule of experts; one must also begin to think seriously about what to propose in place of the predominant economic organization.’<sup>75</sup> Žižek also states that a Communist politics must politicise the distribution of goods and services whose allocation, at present, is dictated primarily by the market mechanism.<sup>76</sup> Yet, other than an occasional reference to Lenin’s *State and Revolution*<sup>77</sup> or the collectivisation of certain infrastructures,<sup>78</sup> Žižek offers little in the way of any speculative prescription.

The other limitations of Žižek’s Idea of Communism come to the fore when we ask how the discourse of the analyst would work as a new mode of social and political organisation. Most pressing among these questions is how the analyst’s discourse is prevented from regressing to yet another master’s discourse, in its traditional or perverse form. As Žižek himself notes ‘[t]he line of separation between the “totalitarian” leader and the analyst is [...] almost imperceptible.’<sup>79</sup> Both attempt to embody the Other, but whereas the totalitarian leader stands for the Other as such, and in the perverse relationship disavows this impossibility, the analyst stands for its lack. Totalitarianism, as we have seen, fetishises the totalitarian leader, engendering the perverse social link by enacting the short-circuit and assuming the leaders

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<sup>74</sup> Žižek, *LITET*, p.359, see also Žižek, *DTI*, p.76.

<sup>75</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.82.

<sup>76</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.85.

<sup>77</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.82.

<sup>78</sup> Žižek, “LC,” p.294.

<sup>79</sup> Žižek, *PV*, p.380.

total equivalence with the Other. How is it kept empty, however? More specifically, how do we prevent the analyst from becoming the totalitarian leader by directly standing in for the Other rather than its absence? The difficulties Žižek's position faces can be better viewed from his innovative reading of the Hegelian constitutional monarch in *Philosophy of Right* (1967). Žižek has provocatively suggested on a number of occasions that the Hegelian constitutional monarchy is a model for a democratic society not dissimilar to the way that he conceives of the discourse of the analyst.<sup>80</sup> Žižek argues that the monarch's role is purely formal, suggesting an equivalence with the agent of the analyst's discourse. This is sustained Žižek suggests because, like the analyst, the monarch is merely a contingent stand-in of the empty place that reflects the community's unity back to them. Moreover, the reliance on biological lineage to determine the monarch demonstrates an irrationality that suspends the fetishisation of this figure. As a result, Žižek praises the Hegelian constitutional monarchy for demonstrating the possibility of keeping separate *a* from S1 in the same way that the analyst ensures that the lack in the Other is articulated. In terms of its relationship to the decisions of the state, the monarch merely emphasises the subjective moment, confirming what is produced by others in the remaining structure of the system. As Žižek describes the role of the monarch in this instance, quoting Hegel, its role is reduced to merely "dotting the i's and crossing the t's."<sup>81</sup> Žižek's view on the matter is evidently highly contentious not least because throughout history, monarchs have frequently been fetishised and have been able to assume a position as the direct embodiment of the Other, whether the People, or God. Žižek also overlooks several crucial aspects of Hegel's account of constitutional monarchy in this overly hasty confluence with a form of democracy along the lines of the discourse of the analyst. For Hegel, the powers of the monarch are far more extensive than Žižek's reading

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<sup>80</sup> Žižek has turned to on a number of occasions, but in most detail in *For They Know Not*. Žižek, *FTKN*, pp.82-84.

<sup>81</sup> Žižek, *FTKN*, p.84.

suggests. The monarch has the power to appoint a government, a veto over certain laws, and also has the power, as head of the state, to conduct and pursue the state's foreign affairs.<sup>82</sup> Most importantly, however, by focusing on the formal role of the monarch, Žižek obscures the vital role of the constitution in the constitutional monarch. What concerns Hegel most of all is not the formal position of the monarch but how its powers and role are defined and limited by the constitutional element. Of course, this does not prevent a fetishistic effect in the subject's consideration of the monarch, but it does, however, prevent the monarch taking the role of the fetish as the direct short circuit in which it becomes the totalitarian leader. It raises the question, then, of how is the power of the analyst limited to ensure it does not take the totalitarian position? Žižek's Idea of Communism does not address this problem but a radical constitutionalism might provide an answer of sorts. Without its enforcement, the analyst-agent is potentially free to exceed its supposedly limited power and minimal role. In this regard, it is surprising that Žižek has not turned to the go-to source for Marxism on this topic, the Paris Commune. Therein a number of measures were created in order to reduce and limit the power of leaders, from the right to recall, to ensuring they were not materially benefited by taking up specific roles of power.

From the perspective of Žižek's reading of Hegel's constitutional monarchy a second question that Žižek's Idea of Communism does not address comes into view: namely, how will the state and democratic decisions be administered and enforced? For Hegel, the monarch is impotent without an executive that maintains and executes the common ends of the state. The several layers of state bureaucracy that Hegel describes include the existence of the division of labour and mechanisms of control and coercion. Without broaching this question, one is left to wonder whether the "truth" of Žižek's vision of Communism is a class of bureaucrats or civil servants administering our social world. While Žižek's examples suggest

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<sup>82</sup> G.W.F Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, Oxford University Press (1967).

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a classless future in which the division of labour has ended – at least with regard to Kafka’s tale, wherein the difference between leader and followers is reduced to a minimal, formal difference – what sustains, enables, and realises its results is not considered by Žižek.

## 9.5. A Communist Politics without the Other

Despite the limitations of the content of Žižek’s Communist Idea there is nothing preventing the use of the utopian hermeneutic to extrapolate and develop potential solutions to these problems through reading other “signs from the future” that might offer the possibility of a more extensively developed conception of political or economic organisation. What seems to be a more fundamental challenge, however, is how, at the level of practice, Žižek prevents the Idea operating as the basis for the legitimating fantasy of the perverse subject. This challenge is clearly connected to the question that we raised at the end of chapter 5 in section 5.5. regarding how Žižek can offer activists and militants with an answer to the question “what is to be done?” without transforming his own position from that of the analyst to that of the master. More generally, the emergence of Communism in Žižek’s work brings this challenge back in to focus because, as a name for a future society and a political project, Communism could operate as a stand-in for the Other.

Žižek’s intention is that the Idea functions as a guide to subjects engaged in transforming the socio-political world. Its purpose is to offer a form that, to put it in Gramsci’s terms, is ‘ideally active’ in the practices and discourses of those who want to realise it.<sup>83</sup> Žižek invites subjects to create and practice this Idea as they attempt to realise it. However, as such, it seems that the Idea is ripe for the kind of perverse misrecognition that characterised Stalinist subjectivity. When we examined Žižek’s critique in chapter 2, section

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<sup>83</sup> Antonio Gramsci, “The Problem of the School,” in *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgacs, New York: New York University Press (2000) p.68.

2.3., we concluded that the disastrous consequences of communist politics in the past were a result of the perverse relationship of the Stalinist communist to a fantasy of the Other. The fantasy produced the sense that the communist was the “sublime” embodiment of the Other, the realisation of the “objective” logic of History or will of the People. Žižek seems to come dangerously close to repeating this position when he describes the relationship of the subject to the Communist Idea and its presence in the “signs from the future” in terms of a ‘Communism Absconditus,’ with reference to the notion of a hidden God available only to those who commit to his existence, as described by Pascal in *Pensees* (2004).<sup>84</sup> Žižek, however, wants to prevent the subject from ever conceiving of this Idea as a legitimating fantasy for communist subjects in the way that Stalinist communists perceived the fantasy of History and their relationship to it. Žižek does this by emphasising the subjective and partial nature of the Idea.

The circular, retroactive relationship between the Idea and its signs is crucial in this regard. While these signs might appear as “germs” which give birth to the Idea, they will only be determined as such in the future. As Žižek describes this relationship, they must be recognised as signs ‘that, paradoxically, precede that of which they are the signs.’<sup>85</sup> Their status as “germs”, in other words, will only be secured after the realisation of what they might give birth to. This is an important part of Žižek’s insistence that we remove any belief in the objectivity of their potential, as if what they contain is ready and waiting in *actu* to be realised. It is for this reason that Žižek describes their futural promise with the term *avinir*, rather than *futur*. The latter indicates the ‘continuation of the present,’ while *à venir*, on the other hand, ‘is what is to come (*à venir*), not just what will be.’<sup>86</sup> For Žižek *à venir*, implies the existence of an openness within history, the lack of an Other of History. Žižek’s

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<sup>84</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, pp.129-131.

<sup>85</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.129.

<sup>86</sup> Žižek, *LTN*, p.264, *YDD*, p.134.

“Communism Absconditus,” thus, differs from the Other of History in a slight but crucial way: the Idea is historically and subjective derived, with no trans-historical being. Rather than “objective,” as classical dialectical materialism understood historical development, the speculative and contingent basis of the Communist Idea means that History is radically subjective.<sup>87</sup> On this basis, Žižek’s Idea is carefully delineated from that of Badiou’s. The Idea is not “eternal,” but both futural and potentially present – rather than a present potentiality – in those elements that are antagonistic to the ruling political and ideological logics.<sup>88</sup>

The Communist Idea, thus, should not be held up as a lofty ideal that everyone can accept according to Žižek. As Žižek sums up: ‘we can no longer pretend (or act as if) the Communist Truth is simply here for everyone to see, accessible to neutral rational historical analysis [...]’<sup>89</sup> Given that the emergence and realisation of the Idea is always passing through the contingency that the lack in the Other demonstrates, Žižek emphasises that the Idea is both historical and subjective and, as such, must be conceived primarily in a regulative way in the Kantian sense of an object that has an existence in thought.<sup>90</sup> By emphasising the subjective moment at the heart of this relationship, Žižek is foregrounding the irreducible political moment that must be retained alongside the Idea. With this position Žižek intends to prevent the misrecognition of the Idea of Communism as objective, which was precisely the misrecognition that drove the violence of Stalinist communism. At the same time, Žižek is denying the possibility of the metalinguistic position on which this objectivity is inevitably grounded.

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<sup>87</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.129.

<sup>88</sup> Despite Žižek’s critique of Badiou this is, in fact, far closer to his position than Žižek admits. For Badiou, Truths are trans-temporally available but always historical and subjective in their nature. Their relationship with other truths is also retroactively effective. See Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran, London: Verso (2010) pp.229-34.

<sup>89</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.131.

<sup>90</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.129.

The centrality of this political moment to Žižek's Communism has far reaching implications for how we conceive of the trajectory and course of political transformation. Most importantly, it breaks with any conception of political transformation in which its ends are guaranteed or determined, even if they are suggested by the "signs from the future." As Žižek argues, Communism today cannot rely on a 'higher historical necessity or teleology to guide and legitimize our acts.'<sup>91</sup> Žižek rejects this position for similar reasons that he rejects "economism,"<sup>92</sup> a position that defined the meta-political stance of traditional Marxism. Quite simply, this logic does not exist. Like we touched upon with regards to "the Art of the Impossible," the Communist intervention will always be a risky, wagered position. Its consequences can never be guaranteed, nor can they ever be fully known in advance. Moreover, because this is an intervention that not only breaks with the current necessities of the status quo and its political and ideological logics but also is not determined by any Other, it will always be 'voluntaristic' in character.<sup>93</sup>

In drawing out the consequences of the political moment as a result of the lack in the Other, Žižek recalls the debate between Rosa Luxemburg and Eduard Bernstein regarding the right moment for political transformation. Žižek, ultimately, sides with the former against Bernstein's 'revisionist fear of seizing power "too soon."<sup>94</sup> Žižek argues that Luxemburg was correct in arguing that a) there are no "objective conditions" for Communism and that to think these will one day "ripen" to facilitate a smooth transformation to Communism is a debilitating illusion. The Communist intervention will not only break with the "objective conditions" of the situation but, as with the Act, attempt to create the conditions of its own success. As Žižek writes with regard to the Luxemburg-Bernstein debate the

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<sup>91</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.131.

<sup>92</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.27.

<sup>93</sup> Žižek, *FATTAF*, p.154.

<sup>94</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.62.

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only way for the working class to reach its “maturity,” to await the arrival of the “appropriate moment” for the seizure of power, is to form itself, to educate itself for the act of seizure, and the only possible way of achieving this education is precisely the “premature” attempts.<sup>95</sup>

The same holds with Žižek’s Communist politics. Given the political nature of the intervention and its basis in the lack in the Other, every attempt will always appear as “premature” and will have no guarantees given that the conditions for the success of a Communist politics will never be present at the moment of the Act, even if there are signs which might become the presuppositions of the future. For Žižek, as a result of the contingency and openness that characterise the Other, practice must tread a careful line between ‘decisionistic nihilism,’ that conceives of Communism as a total leap of faith in to the unknown, and the type of ‘determinist planning’ based upon a metalinguistic position common to traditional Marxism.<sup>96</sup> With regard to the practice of the Idea this means the careful negotiation of the militant insistence of its existence and the acceptance of the openness of history and the possibilities that result.

The consequence of this subjective, political moment is that the relationship between theory and practice undergoes a substantial transformation. What is removed from view once the Other is disregarded is the idea that the theorist examines the concrete situation, and armed with the correct understanding of its tendencies and structures, tells subjects how to strike, while giving them full confidence in the results of their act.<sup>97</sup> Far from the unity of the theory and practice that Marxism has traditionally searched for and that the philosopher-theorist was supposed to hand down to the masses, from the perspective of Žižek’s work there is always an essential disjunction or *non-rapport* between theory and practice that must be

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<sup>95</sup> Žižek, *SOI*, p.62.

<sup>96</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, p.129.

<sup>97</sup> Žižek, *SH*, p.25.

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reflected within theory. It is this that Žižek attempts to realise in his various theoretical figures. In essence, it means that theory must resist schematising an exact rhythm and trajectory of transformation, especially with the kind of ‘eschatological expectation’ that traditional Marxism often offered.<sup>98</sup> With regard to Žižek’s Communist Idea it means that not only must the realisation of the Idea be struggled for in practice, but that the Idea must always be struggled with in-itself. The Idea must be re-shaped and adapted according to the “signs from the future” and the demands of the historical situation. In its engagement with it, theory’s role is to also prevent the Idea becoming isolated from continuing critique and futural analysis, and, thus, becoming subject to the misrecognition that characterises perversion. As a result, Žižek can continue to resist standing-in for the Other as long as this subjective moment continues to resonate. Whereas for the Stalinist communist, the theorist carried the responsibility to decipher and offer an Other *qua* History, in Žižek’s re-conceptualisation theory consistently shifts this weight on to the shoulders of the subject. This is why Žižek’s Communism avoids repeating the problems of traditional Marxism and Stalinism. Whether as the Cause or the subjectively mediated Idea, Žižek continues to emphasise the impulse for political transformation in the hole in the Other and, as a result, its partisan and ungrounded character. Without the Other, Žižek’s reconceptualisation of Communism hands to subjects the freedom and responsibility to determine and pursue the future.

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<sup>98</sup> Žižek, *YDD*, pp.133-4.

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