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Excess: The Obscene Supplement in Slavoj Žižek's Religion and Politics

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I. Introduction

In *The Parallax View*, Slavoj Žižek explores a split between the overt rule of law and the obscene underside of the society governed. The divergence is irreducible and can only be understood as a function in the gap between conscious and unconscious injunction. The 2004 reports of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib raised the specter of war-crimes, and though the Bush administration attempted to blame the abuse on isolated, rogue behavior by deviant soldiers, subsequent reports from human rights organizations exposed a pattern of torture condoned, authorized, and encouraged at every level up the chain of command. The incident provided Žižek with an interesting hypothetical: had the Bush administration's claims of ignorance and noninvolvement been true, would it have then been innocent? Žižek claims the overt rule of law is always sustained by an obscene supplementary element that transgresses the conscious element; in short, such abuse is *exactly* what anyone should expect to see from young soldiers

put in the charge of captives whom they are trained to see as sub-human, threatening, religiously other, etc., in prison hidden far from media attention. (Žižek 2006a: 366-70) In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud suggests the conscious is merely an expression of the superego in its attempt to censor behavior. Just as Lacan claimed the symbolic and real are supplemented and sustained by their divergence, the overt commands and desires of the administration would be supplemented with an obscene, excessive opposite.

The corpus of Slavoj Žižek's work on religion and politics relies on a curious term: the obscene excess-supplement of the superego. The supplement is present wherever a conflicted anxiety exists within conscious and unconscious conflict. Žižek uses the obscene supplement to describe the defense of the superego in neurosis and perversion that prevents the subject from consciously experiencing anxiety and commands the subject to enjoy. The supplement also appears to function directly within the ego of the pervert. This paper will explore the meaning of Žižek's term in relationship to belief and desire. The thesis of this paper is that understanding Žižek's use of the obscene excess-supplements of the ego and superego can explain how political and religious signification defends the ego from change by mitigating anxiety, tacitly commanding the subject toward *jouissance* even while the overt command prohibits *jouissance*. My objective is to 1) provide an overview of relevant psychoanalytic terminology, 2) discuss the Žižek's use of the supplement in relation to Christianity, 3) discuss Žižek's use of the supplement in political dynamics, and 4) provide a response and critique to his use of the supplement.

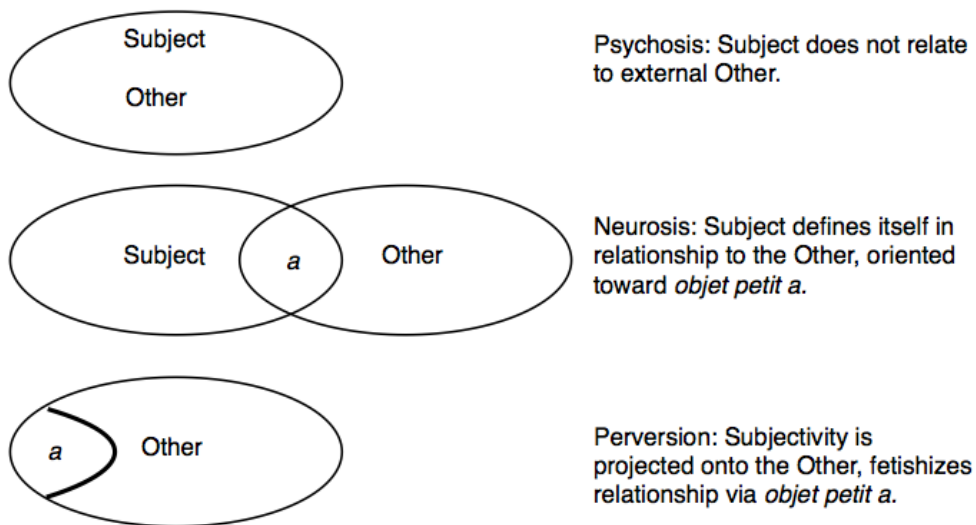
II. Psychopathology: the Ego's Desire is the Other's Desire

In order to define Žižek's use of the supplement, the psychoanalytic categories and terms involved must be briefly defined. Terms to be explored include the three primary pathologies (psychosis, neurosis, and perversion), Lacan's three registers (imaginary, symbolic, and real) in relation to the ego, superego, and id, and the relationship of the pathologies and registers to *jouissance* and the *objet a*. I will then discuss Lacan's early and later goals for therapy and transference to provide a basis for Žižek's approach to religion and politics apropos of the obscene excess-supplement. This paper relies heavily on Bruce Fink's *A Clinical Introduction to*

Lacanian Psychoanalysis (1997) and Clayton Crockett's *Interstices of the Sublime* (2007) in order to explain these terms and their function in Žižek's work.ⁱ

The obscene excess-supplement of the superego refers to an injunction to enjoy in the midst of a conflict between the conscious and the unconscious. Lacan locates the subject primarily within the symbolic register.ⁱⁱ The symbolic is composed of signifiers that mediate imaginary, signified ideas, and the real. The unconscious symbolic structures the imaginary, meaning the excess-supplement is both constitutive and unconscious for the subject's perception. In his early work, Lacan spoke of the real in a way sometimes indistinguishable from reality as such, but this ambiguity appears to cease by the third seminar. Rather than being reality *qua* reality in a strictly Saussurian sense of referent, the unconscious real is "the impossible... which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic." (Lacan 1981: 280) As with Freud, the Lacanian superego is unconscious and balances the ego

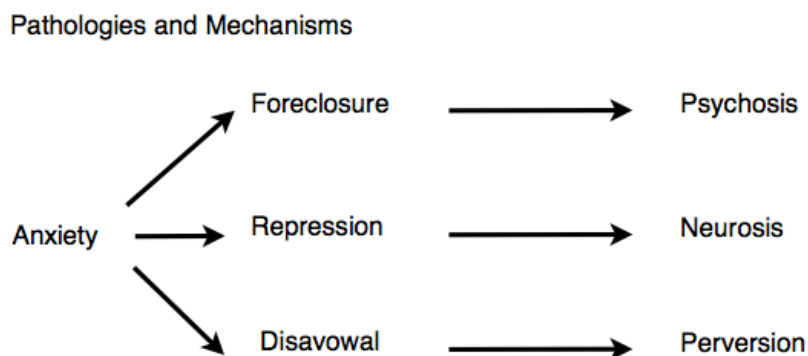
Pathological relationships between the Subject, the *objet a*, and the Other



between the pleasure and reality principles. *The Ego and the Id* describes ego as both conscious and unconscious, but Freud explicitly situates all consciousness within the ego. The ego is born in the mirror stage, arising from the subject's imaginary concept of itself. The superego instructs the subject to enjoy but only within conditions (often in the form of the death drive's obscenely excessive repetition). (Žižek 2006a: 110) Freud's delineation of illusion and delusion are instructive here. (Freud 2011: 52-4) Though it is clear Freud considers illusions generally negative, their root in a wish (desire in Lacan) can have a useful function. The illusion

is rooted in the ego's desire to please the id in a way compatible with the developed superego. In contrast, a delusion is rooted in an essential conflict of ego with reality. Though Freud is reluctant to call all religion delusional, he is quite clear religion is an illusion rooted in a mixture of conscious and unconscious wishes. Lacan's well-known formula for atheism in the eleventh seminar—God is unconscious—locates desire in the symbolic register, meaning the excess-supplement is always present in the symbolic register. Freud likens the ego's battle with the unconscious to a rider guiding a much stronger horse or a constitutional monarch vested with great power yet unwilling to impose a veto on the parliament. The act of going to therapy is the ego's rebellion against the Other's accusation. As Lacan repeats in nearly every published work, the discourse of the subject is, in fact, merely the Other's discourse.

The mechanisms listed in the middle section of the graph above are responses to initial anxiety, and they create the psychopathological disposition.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, while it is true to say that perverts disavow, it is more accurate to reverse this formula to say that repeated disavowal in early years creates a pervert. Freud's early work located anxiety as an after-effect of the three mechanisms (e.g., the neurotic represses, which leads to anxiety and a return of the repressed). In his later work, the relationship is reversed: anxiety is repressed, foreclosed, or disavowed. (Crockett 2007: 95-6) For Lacan, the (*je*) subject should not be confused with the resistant (*moi*) ego. (Crockett 2007: 88). The reaction of the latter to anxiety will structure the unconscious former. At the time of this paper's publication, the most recent seminar translated into English is the tenth on anxiety. The seminar describes anxiety as triggered when a barrier to *jouissance* is removed, thus we should be clear that the vicissitudes of the unconscious seek to maintain repetition rather than satisfy the drive. This theme is developed further in the



following seminar where the partial drive must always encircle an object (rather than directly acquire) in order to obtain *jouissance*. Far from being a passive acceptance of pathology, the

goal of all three mechanisms is to actively prevent change in the subject by keeping awareness unconscious. (Fink 1997: 76)

Psychosis

The distinction between psychosis, neurosis, and perversion is crucial for a psychoanalytic analysis of belief and the obscene excess-supplement. The psychotic is defined by a lack of a developed superego, or by “the symbolic’s failure to overwrite the imaginary” (Fink 1997: 87) during the mirror stage. The psychotic has no “Name of the Father,” no paternal/Law element stabilizing an ego-ideal. The psychotic does not experience guilt, doubt, or anxiety in the same way a superego-developed individual does (Lacan holds that “normal” individuals are by default neurotic, beholden to a functioning paternal metaphor). As the psychotic does not have a normally developed superego, the psychotic is controlled by drives and forecloses the symbolic before a thought can be repressed or disavowed. Psychosis is therefore excluded from Žižek’s obscene supplement of the superego.^{iv}

Neurosis

Neurosis has two primary subtypes, obsessional and hysterical, though any reader of Lacan will see references to phobia and traumatic neurosis scattered throughout the seminars. The neurotic has a developed superego is accustomed to following normative social relations, expectations, laws, etc., often paralyzingly so in the case of obsessives. Neurotics are “castrated,” having accepted the ego-ideal of the parent, and they exhibit a high degree of doubt, particularly for obsessives. “The obsessive’s fantasy implies a relationship with [*l’objet a*], but the obsessive refuses to recognize that this object is related to the Other.” (Fink 1997: 118) The obsessive follows norms *as such* without the need to consider the genesis of the rule, whether the rule should be discarded, and so on. “The hysteric, on the other hand, emphasizes the partner or Other, making herself into the object of the Other’s desire so as to master it. The Other is the desiring subject in the hysteric’s fantasy.” (Fink 1997: 123) In religious and political behavior, the obsessional neurotic is the individual that follows laws and taboos explicitly, forgoing the direct pursuit of satisfaction by acquiring a substitute satisfaction from following the big Other’s injunctions. The religious or political hysteric sees herself as the *objet petit a* of the big Other and experiences substitutive *jouissance* from the imagined pleasure of the big Other. The subtypes of phobia and traumatic neurosis receive little attention in Žižek’s work, but is

included here in the interest of proper explanation. The phobic, which Lacan describes as a much more radical form of neurosis, (Lacan 1996: 698) refers to a superego that is subject-generated without instantiation by the Name of the Father. Even rebellion against the Father (as seen in the Freudian myth of the murder of Moses), binds the subject in relationship to Law. (Lacan 1996: 464) The act of rebellion situates the subject in a debt that can only be repaid with obedience, which is to say that the debt is paid by foregoing *jouissance*. In all neurotic subtypes, desire and fulfillment are thus displaced by the superego, which opens space for the superego supplement to continue to unconsciously function.

Perversion

Perversion is the most difficult to define. Freud left this category largely undeveloped, so Žižek's references to perversion can be assumed to rely on Lacan, who spoke regularly on the matter. Like the neurotic, the pervert has a developed superego, but the pervert's *objet a* is always fetishistic. "In perversion the subject struggles to bring the law into being—in a word, to make the Other exist." (Fink 1997: 165) The subject-barred refers to a subject split into conscious and unconscious, which occur during the normal development of alienation and separation in the subject's infant years. But the pervert contains a second split within the ego. This second split allows mutually exclusive ideas or desires to be maintained in the ego register that are effectively indifferent to realities of prohibition. One might think of the obscene excess-supplement functioning for the pervert in *both* the superego and the ego, creating multiple tiers of disavowal. Whereas the neurotic must only repress undesirable knowledge to the unconscious, the pervert must add to this an additional strategy of continually disavowing knowledge that raises itself to conscious awareness. One could imagine the perverse ego as continually at war with a pre-conscious pregnant with threatening signifiers, requiring an intensely aggressive strategy to maintain order.

Objet a and Jouissance

The *objet petit a* is the object of desire, but must be understood as a relationship between the subject, the ego, the desire's real object, the desire's cause, and the *je ne sais quoi* invested in it by the analysand. (Žižek 2006b: 66) Thus while *l'objet petit a* is multifaceted, Žižek uses it as the imaginary's object of desire. Again, it is the *encircling* (rather than direct acquisition) of *l'objet petit a* that generates *jouissance*. Pleasure (*plaisir*) relates to Freud's homeostatic law in

Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1922), whereas *jouissance* is acquired by trespassing beyond the pleasure principle. (Lacan 1981: 281) Instincts are that which conserve and seek to restore states of tension to states of untension. The drives are that which are excessive, producing behavior *beyond* what can be accounted for through the pleasure principle. *Jouissance*, along with the excess-supplement, is associated with the drive rather than the instinct. *Jouissance* is, “desire carried to the extreme... certainly sexual or libidinal in nature, but it is also destructive and ultimately self-destructive passion... unwilling to compromise or negotiate its drive for satisfaction.” (Crockett 2007: 83) It is transgressive and obscene by nature, and object-acquisition must be perpetually postponed in order to sustain desire.

The Object of Therapy and Categorization of Pathology

Far from helping analysands find happiness, Lacan’s early goal was to “eliminate the interference in symbolic relations generated by the imaginary.” (Fink 1997: 33) By the 1950s, Lacan’s goal reversed emphases to “pierce through the imaginary dimension which veils the symbolic and confront the analysand’s relations to the Other head on.”(Fink 1997: 35) In therapy, Lacan uses the term transference for the moment the analysand projects the subjective position onto the analyst so as to analyze herself. Therapy concludes when the analysand resumes the position of the subject and the fictions afflicting the subject lose operative power.

The difficulty in analyzing Žižek’s use of the supplement, as with the difficulty of categorizing analysands in therapy, is that most of the categories are somewhat fluid; that is to say, the disavowal of reality by the fetish can be used to repress reality for a neurotic without leading her to become a pervert (as seen in the Freudian *Fort-Da* episode). Further, while psychotics are a concretely separate category from the much more similar categories of neurosis and perversion, it is often the case that the latter two demonstrate behavior that appears on the surface to be psychotic. In the example from Abu Ghraib, it is premature to label the guards as psychotic even if they simply acted viciously on their own, without regard to the supposed prohibition on torture. Certainly some of the guards might be properly categorized as psychotic, but Žižek rightly argues that their apparently psychotic behavior is actually grounded in the obscene supplement that characterizes neurosis or perversion. In short, expression of an unwritten rule exposes a conflicted symbolic order that can be analyzed according to the injunctions of big Other.

Finally, a word must be said regarding a break between Freud and Lacan that Žižek oscillates between. The less systematic Freud used disavowal as a mechanism for neurosis as

well as perversion, whereas Lacan reserved the term exclusively for perversion. I will return to this break in my critique below, but the reader should be aware that Žižek often uses disavowal in the Freudian sense rather than the Lacanian, demonstrating a liberty to mix pathologies and their mechanisms as he explains the role of the excess-supplement. This might also be due to a neurotic subject temporarily reorienting to act as a pervert or alternate neurotic subtype when excessive anxiety cannot be handled by the default vicissitude.

III. Christianity, Law, and Love

The subtitle of *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (2003) refers explicitly to the obscene supplement functioning in belief. This section will bridge the individual psychopathology outlined above with the communal psychopathological dynamics we shall explore below. Apropos of perversion and Christianity, Žižek writes, “In his ‘father, why hast thou forsaken me?’, Christ himself commits what is, for a Christian, the ultimate sin: he wavers in his Faith. This... concerns what cannot but appear as the hidden perverse core of Christianity: if it is prohibited to eat from the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise, why did God put it there in the first place?” (Žižek 2003: 15) Žižek cites Kenneth Burke’s work on the Decalogue as a command to never kill with a veiled injunction to do the opposite. Žižek continues, “This is the Lacanian opposition between the symbolic Law and the obscene call of the superego at its purest... you are put in an impossible position of always and a priori being under suspicion of violating some (unknown) prohibition. More precisely, the superego splits every determinate commandment into two complementary, albeit asymmetrical, parts,” (Žižek 2003: 104-5) Excusing the inflammatory reading of the injunction not to kill, the point made is the splitting of the superego into dual (and dueling) injunctions. The reader should recall the split-subject (of the neurotic and pervert) and the further split-ego (of the pervert). The parent instructing their child not to reach for the desert creates the same conflicted injunction: the axiom from Lacan is that the spoken prohibition creates the desire to transgress.

Transgression Solicited by Law

The only solution to the anxiety created by the split superego is to transgress the cause of the antagonism. For Saint Paul, the Law must be transgressed so that, in Žižek’s reading, the ego can freely desire what it loves without the opposing injunction. This is developed in Lacan’s seventh seminar.^v One is free to love when one is not required to love. Citing Agamben on

Paul's "Kafkaesque" disposition with regard to the Old Testament Law, Žižek reads the Law as being in opposition to Love; further, the opposition reveals the antagonism is located within Law itself. The Law's concrete injunction tells the subject to obey while its more abstract potentiality makes the subject always guilty, experiencing a crisis over whether Law is really meant to be applied in some particular instance. The superego tells the subject that while the Law is theoretically whole and uniform, she is nevertheless to understand the supplemental injunction to break the Law to show mercy. Using this irreducible inconsistency between Law and love, Žižek asks whether it is not better to reverse the obligation of the subject; instead of living by the Law while making slight deviations in favor of mercy, is she not better served by orienting herself toward mercy so that the strict application of Law can become the exception? Žižek cites Paul's *as-if-not* injunctions in I Corinthians 7 to demonstrate this point (e.g. the believer who mourns should live as if she is not mourning). (Žižek 2003: 110-1) One must, "obey the laws as if you are not obeying them,'... *We should suspend the obscene libidinal investment in the Law, the investment on account of which the Law generates/solicits its own transgression.*" (Žižek 2003: 113)

This is not such a radical claim. The readers of Paul most heavily cited by Žižek read him with varying levels of anarchism, but none is arguing a community can operate without some instance of Law. The opposition of Žižek's influences in Agamben and Badiou on the one hand and Taubes on the other is instructive here. While Badiou emphasizes the radical claim of faith that allows Paul to dethrone the Law and reorient ethics toward the Event of the risen Christ in I Corinthians, Taubes argues with much more emphasis on Paul's anarchic disposition to Law in Romans. As a self-described "Paulinist Jew," Taubes appreciates Paul's Pharisaical knowledge of Law and its antagonisms in conjunction with the creation of a community no longer defined by the normative markers of civilization (neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female). But however much Taubes flirts with the language of anarchism (claiming Paul's political theology is so far radicalized that it appears conservative), his point remains not that Law is unnecessary but that Law is the exception. Žižek builds on these figures to argue that the internal antagonisms and excess-supplement of the Law should lead the subject to reorient herself toward love.

Of course, Lacan's claim is not that an analysand can become completely free of the superego's injunctions. A properly neurotic Love would still contain the excess-supplement to apply Law just as any loving parent will still punish a child, but the subject can become aware, as it were, of the injunctions living through herself and orient herself toward her own desire as she becomes aware of symbolic demands. Law must sublimate to Love. On this point, Žižek

reads Agamben on *Aufhebung*: “Pauline love is not the cancellation or destructive negation of the Law, but its accomplishment in the sense of ‘sublation,’ where the law is retained through its very suspension, as a subordinate (potential) moment of a higher actual unity.” (Žižek 2003: 112) Reorientation can only take place in therapy with the subject’s reoriented relationship to the Other.

Christianity: Perversion at Its Purest

The rejection of the big Other brings us to the reason Žižek appreciates the perverse core of Christianity. Following Chesterton’s reading of Job as the trial of God, Job is seen as a proto-Christ figure that unmasks the impotency of God. If Law must sublimate to Love, the concrete universal figure of Christ is the Event of the infinite God experiencing finitude. The Hegelian universal whole must become split into its 1) Part and 2) Remainder. The Remainder is the obscene supplement that transgresses the whole. (Žižek 2003: 131) “Since the function of the obscene superego supplement of the (divine) Law is to mask this impotence of the big Other, and since Christianity *reveals* this impotence, it is a system that radically abandons a split between the official/public text and its obscene initiatory supplement; there is no hidden, untold story in it. In this precise sense, Christianity is the religion of Revelation: everything is revealed in it, no obscene superego supplement accompanies its public message.” (Žižek 2003: 127) (But subjective excess is still read as constitutive of a Hegelian objective excess of abstract universality- this is either a contradiction in Žižek or a relocation of supplemental excess to the ego). (Žižek 2008: 14) The Holy Spirit is then read as the entry of the signifier that constitutes a “first symbolization,” but this new symbolization is explicitly anti-Master-Signifier, suspending normal social distinctions and symbolic, subjective distortions of the superego. (Žižek 2003: 112)

Why then is Christianity *perverse*? The entry of the signifier constituting the Name means Christianity-as-subject cannot be psychotic, for it requires the symbolic big Other as a given field for the theology that develops. But the transgression of Law (with Paul) and the death of the big Other (with Christ) together require that Christianity not be neurotic. This leaves us only with the category of perversion, and the spit-ego of the perverse subject, holding mutually exclusive views. Perversion is particularly well equipped to maintain fidelity to a cause that it both believes and rejects simultaneously (mitigating anxiety via fetishism). If we grant the materialist Christian position Žižek advocates, it is quite simple to see the appeal of a big-Other-less faith, a faith that affirms a founding myth of God’s death while simultaneously denying the

divine. The ego-injunction of the pervert is to 1) transgress the big Other while 2) being an instrument of the Other's *jouissance*. Žižek's reads Christianity to be a most extreme case of superego-less, perverted faith.^{vi} The ecclesiology of the Žižek's perverse reading is that of a community defined by Love (transgressing the Law) while maintaining fidelity to a cause's *jouissance* in *l'objet petit a* of the fetish Christ Event. Having explored the way in which Christianity exposes and exploits the existence of an obscene excess-supplement, this paper will now turn to discuss how the obscene supplement functions in political dynamics.

IV. Political Dynamics

We have seen that the symptom and mechanism by which analysands deal with anxiety reveal the pathological nature of the psyche. This section will table the idea that a society could exhibit a psychotic nature as a whole and focus instead on how Žižek and his influences analyze the obscene supplement operating in collectives. First, I turn to a source cited often in Žižek's work, Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, to provide context for Žižek's focus on the superego in a fascist system.

Staged Theater: Fascism and Anti-Semitism

The final chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972) is an exposé on the inner logic of fascism. Horkheimer and Adorno write that anti-Semitism must not be reduced to a misdirected failure of German self-preservation; hate cannot be conceived as a case of reason gone terribly wrong. Instead, anti-Semitism must be seen as irreducibly arbitrary; the Jew is an object of disavowal for the German citizen to project anxiety upon. Externalization reveals a self-hatred that must be repressed and returned in the form of blaming the other. (Horkheimer, & Adorno 1972: 175-6) "The psychoanalytical theory of morbid projection views it as consisting of the transference of socially taboo impulses from the subject to the object." (Horkheimer & Adorno 1972: 192) As instances of anti-Semitism spread and ossify throughout the culture, deviation from the new subjective reality is seen as pathological. (Horkheimer & Adorno 1972: 187) Prejudice becomes inscribed into the superego of the culture. Capitalism in its fascist conclusion contains an obscene injunction against intellectual criticism or spiritual inquiry, and "knowledge is neutralized and used as a mere qualification on specific labor markets and to heighten the commodity value of the personality." (Horkheimer & Adorno 1972: 197-8) In short, the totalizing

nature of capitalism, especially in its fascist conclusion, requires the economic and political superego to give an obscene injunction to externalize angst upon an arbitrary entity.

Žižek refers to fascism's method as staged theater in his discussion of the truth-Event. "Nazism was a pseudo-Event and the October Revolution was an authentic Event because only the latter related to the very foundations of the situation of capitalist order, effectively undermining those foundations, in contrast to Nazism, which staged a pseudo-Event precisely in order to save the capitalist order... 'to change things so that, at their most fundamental, they can remain the same.'" (Žižek 2010: 85) The staged theater of the fascist regime illuminates his criticism of the third way, "global capitalism with a human face." (Žižek 2009b: 56) The sentimental, merciful aspirations of liberalism with regard to human rights can function as a cover for the obscene underside of the capitalist economy. In an ironic twist, Žižek is hostile toward liberalism's emphasis on human rights for precisely the same reason he, Horkheimer, and Adorno are hostile toward the anti-Semitic projections of fascism: each represents an ego justification for continuing in the powerful, obscene, and unconscious logic of capital.

Complexities of Pathological Categorization in Politics

Before turning to a final example of the excess-supplement function in clearly perverse politics, the ambiguity of psychoanalytic categories is worth pausing to consider. The discussion on the motivations behind Hitler in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* demonstrate how vague and difficult settling on a pathological category can be, especially between hysteric neurotics and perverts. Žižek considers four possible explanations for Hitler's use of anti-Semitism: 1) irrational hatred of Jews, 2) cynical manipulation of prejudices to acquire power, 3) honest belief that Jews were a dangerous threat, and 4) pure evil. (Žižek 2001: 61-3) Only the last option is psychotic, acquiring direct *jouissance* from the act of persecution itself. The second option is indicative of a perverse sociopath. The first and third options are more traditional neurotic explanations. With the exception of the fourth option, which acquires *jouissance* not from the superego but directly from the id (satisfaction of malevolent instinct), the other three options acquire substitute satisfaction in ways that can be analyzed according to their mechanisms of anxiety-avoidance. However, we may imagine Hitler and his cohort experiencing *all* these positions at some point or another, meaning the social pathology (depending on collective behavior) is much more fluid than personal pathology (categorized by how the subject relates to the symbolic register). Again, this suggests a shifting between psychopathological dispositions when a default mechanism cannot cope with severe anxiety.

Perhaps a fascist society would be more appropriately labeled hysterically neurotic due to its substituted satisfaction in nationalistic ideology and repression. The fusion of capital interests and state that defines fascism produces a powerfully developed, unconscious superego for the society. Neurotic fascism experiences substitute *jouissance* from conformity to social ideals and/or desires the *jouissance* of the big Other in the form of nationalism. It represses anxiety by externalizing in a way that exhibits a return of the repressed. Žižek might opt to label fascism as perverse, but, given the similarities between the hysteric and the pervert, this may be due to his reluctance to label totalitarian regimes as anything other than perverted. Lacan's *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, an analysis of four discourses written in the wake of the French student protests of 1968, is used by Žižek to call capitalist excess hysterical in just this way: "The explosion of the hysterical capitalist subjectivity that reproduces itself through permanent self-revolutionizing, through the integration of the excess into the 'normal' functioning of the social link (the true 'permanent revolution' is already capitalism itself)." (Žižek: 2012) But he quickly reverts to describe the capitalist consumer as caught up in a game of perverse, excessive desire. The conclusion of his argument seems to point to a matrix of hysteric citizens caught up in a perverse game (where Lacanian surplus *jouissance* is explicitly linked to the Marxian concept of surplus value): it is possible that Žižek's ambiguity is an intentional overlap of pathologies pointing to an excess-supplement that has no consistent *objet a*. Therefore we must ask: what would a truly perverse political economy look like? Žižek finds perversion in Stalinism.

Communal States of Perversion in Stalinism

The trial of Politburo member Nicolai Bukharin during the 1930s purge under Stalin reveals the antagonism of a neurotic individual clashing with a perverted system. In his chapter "When the Party Commits Suicide," Žižek uses the episode to discuss displaced belief, claiming, "Belief is a notion that displays the deadlock characteristic of the real: on the one hand, nobody can fully assume belief in the first person singular... On the other hand, however, no one really escapes belief - a feature that deserves to be emphasized especially today in our allegedly godless times... We all secretly believe." (Žižek 2001: 88) As discussed above, the pervert is defined by a splitting of the ego beyond the first split of the subject into conscious and unconscious. The second split, that of the ego itself, allows the pervert to hold mutually exclusive views simultaneously and semi-consciously. The anxiety from conflicting realities is dealt with via the fetish, and the subject desires to be the object of the Other's desire. As opposed to the staged

theater of fascism, revolutionary movements are particularly prone to perversion in the sense that the revolutionary ideology sees itself as the instrument of historic progress. The greatest threat to a pervert is naming the disavowal as a farce; the superego is fragile, and there can be no overt acknowledgement of the obscene excess being disavowed. Žižek cites the cynical motto from the Stalinist era, "the more they are innocent, the more they deserve to be shot," (Žižek 2006b: 80) to illustrate the fragility of the split ego. Thus, the terror of the purge can be disavowed as necessary for the *jouissance* of the Other's will in revolution, but in order for this to happen the supplementing disavowal mechanism must not be named.

In the show trial we see an individual who is fully resigned to his fate, but who still desires absolution from his comrades. Bukharin wrote to Stalin that, while not contesting his purely formal guilt, he still hoped Stalin would forgive him and secretly admit his innocence of conspiracy charges. Bukharin exhibited the neurotic characteristic of fully, directly believing. He had likely always repressed the excesses he witnessed by seeing them as unfortunate exceptions. In short, Bukharin believed he and Stalin were playing the same game. But Stalin and the Party had developed to full perversion, becoming comfortable with contradictions so long as the contradiction was not named. The Party's excess-supplement functioned directly within its split-ego. During the purge, the accused individual's actual guilt was irrelevant and disavowed; only the individual's formal guilt matters. Žižek claims that Bukharin's confusion comes from maintaining his place as a subject when a perverted system requires Bukharin to be nothing more than an object of the big Other: he was ready to plead guilty *in public* if the Party needed his confession, but he wanted it to be made clear among the inner circle of his comrades that he was not really guilty but merely agreeing to play the necessary role in the public ritual. "This, precisely, the Party could not grant him: the ritual loses its performative power the moment it is explicitly designated as a mere ritual." (Žižek 2001: 108-9) The unwritten rule is an excess that cannot be named, else we reveal the ideology built upon it as a farce.

Bukharin never received even a private absolution. Seventy-nine of eighty-two secretaries were shot during the 1930s purge. Bukharin's story would be nothing spectacular except for the way in which it shows the antagonism between individual neurosis and social perversion. The obscene supplement of the neurotic comes in the form of an exception to the superego's rule. In the perverted split-ego, the obscene supplement is constitutive of both superego *and* ego. The split-ego of the perverted individual or system allows it to remain indifferent to the real, but it is fragile.

V. Critique

It is clear that Žižek's appeal to Christianity relies on a very specific reading of the death of God, the resurrection and Holy Spirit, and the relation of the Christ event to the transgression of Law. Without a reading of these that mirrors the psychoanalytic dialectic, it is difficult to see how Žižek (or Lacan) could have any use for Christian theology. The question is raised whether Žižek has any genuine interest in Christianity as such or instead sees Christianity as a vehicle to re-actualize German Idealism via psychoanalysis. His theology is admittedly radicalized and does not portray itself as traditional or orthodox, but he nevertheless makes a curious statement regarding Milbank: "My claim is that it is Milbank who is in effect guilty of heterodoxy, ultimately of a regression to paganism: in my atheism, I am more Christian than Milbank." (Žižek 2009a: 248)

The question of dialectic versus paradox in *The Monstrosity of Christ* (2009) is the clearest example of Žižek's deviation from traditional Christian theologies in the name of supplemental excess. On the one hand, Milbank stands accused of nothing more than an updated pietism for his advocacy of a paradoxical harmony of the antagonisms in Christianity. On the other hand, Žižek claims Christianity leads to a sublation that subtracts its own historical dependence on the big Other. This theme is stated most strongly in the opening chapter of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003), where three claims are made: 1) Žižek is a materialist, 2) the subversive element of Christianity is only available to the materialist, and 3) dialectical materialism must be accessed through Christianity. (Žižek 2003: 6) He is quite clear in his assertion that a dialectical application of Christian theology *must* eventually lead to the materialist position. As the question of Christian materialism is not the subject of this paper, I will not attempt to resolve the gap between Milbank or Žižek. If it is not obvious already, my theoretical inclinations tend to side with Žižek. I only comment to clearly locate the controversy over his theology and its relevance to the excess-supplement, which is found nowhere more clearly than the question the reader must face in *The Monstrosity of Christ*: is Milbank's paradoxical theism still a viable option today, or is Žižek's dialectical materialism, his theology without the big Other, the unavoidable conclusion of Christian theology?

Concerning the obscene excess-supplement, my only critique concerns the fluidity of categories Žižek deploys to explain group pathology. Žižek's language is intentionally inflammatory. Points with which he feels strongly are often described as pure, irreducible, and so on. I do not at all mean to critique his evocative writing style, but I suspect he would agree that clinical psychoanalysis requires precision easily lost in the criticism of society. Consider his

use of mechanisms to define pathology in the Stalinist regime above: is there a confusion of neurotic and perverted mechanisms (repression and fetish, respectively) that blurs the distinction between the two pathologies? If a regime is said to have a split-ego and is deploying fetish symbols, is it not a confusion of categories to speak of “repressing” via fetish? Or is this simply the difficulty of psychoanalyzing systems instead of individuals? In both *Violence* (2008) and *Parallax View* (2006), the “return of the repressed” is labeled a perversion for the Stalinist regime. On the other hand, he has called fascism hysterical. Left and right extremism share a perverse need to disavow and a need for the Other’s authorization. Žižek maintains this ambiguity by labeling fascism as both hysteric and perverse. Additionally, while Žižek never (so far as I have seen) links the specific phrase “obscene excess-supplement” to the ego, my interpretation is that Žižek would affirm the existence of some supplement functioning at the ego *and* superego levels in perverse social systems. Thus while ambiguity can be frustrating, it is the cost of saying something worth provocatively saying. The confusion of terms is the result of minor differences in Freud and Lacan as well as the layered complexity of political psychopathology. I explicitly do *not* consider the lack of precision in social psychopathology to be the result of carelessness; on the contrary, I would argue that a certain ambiguity is inevitable for those of us that wish to take these ideas out of the clinic and apply them to the social realm.

This returns us to the complexity of psychoanalyzing systems. Žižek clearly sees himself as a psychoanalyst of cultures, not of individuals. In therapy, pathological categories are exposed via the subjects relation to symbols rather than behavior. In Žižek’s group therapy of entire cultures, the option of analyzing individual relationships to symbols is impossible, and thus an analysis of the culture’s *behavior* toward symbols is the only option available to the analyst. Certainly, Lacan taught that the analyst must learn to ignore the conscious reasoning for speech and actions in order to get at the unconscious motives often best seen in behavior, but the wide gap between individual and social analysis remains. Nowhere is this gap more clear than the simplest realization that a culture cannot be psychotic; only the varieties of neurosis and perversion are open to the cultural psychoanalyst. As discussed above, extreme behavior in one pathological category can mirror symptoms of another category until the analysand “slips” in conversation and discloses motives she is not aware of. The development of a collective superego (in the form of normative behavior, laws, religions, taboos, etc.) is the beginning of culture, so analysis of the obscene excess-supplement remains relevant to social psychoanalysis every bit as much as it applies to individual analysands. But the decision to

label a culture neurotic-obsessive, neurotic-hysteric, or perverse may be as much of an a pure choice as that between paradox or dialectic.

Finally, *if* Milbank were correct and Christianity requires the paradox, does this render Žižek's claim of dialectic and perversion, along with his analysis of the obscene excess-supplement, a mute point? I argue that that while Žižek's emphatic materialism is crucial for political implications of theology, it is ultimately irrelevant for categorizing of neurosis and perversion into religion and politics. Whether or not there is a God, we are still psychotics, neurotics, or perverts. Even the most conservative and orthodox sects can be analyzed as neurotic or perverse according to the *jouissance* experienced in relation to their fidelity to faith-claims. My position remains that analysis of the believer's imagined *objet a* and substitute *jouissance* is a powerful tool for analyzing religious behavior and experience that manifest in relationship of the subject to the excess-supplement.

VI. Conclusion

This article discussed the role of the obscene excess-supplements in religious and political dynamics. Having provided an overview of Freudian and Lacanian terminology, this paper has explored the role of the supplement in Žižek's work on Christianity and politics. We concluded by arguing that regardless of the reader's opinion on Žižek's materialistic reading of Christianity or political affiliations, an understanding of psychoanalytic theory provides a cogent schema for understanding belief in individuals and groups alike. The question of how to label the fascist or communist regime as well as the question of why Žižek claims Christianity contains a perverse core accessible only to the materialist perspective should naturally raise a question about the excess-supplement: is there a consistent definition of the supplement deployed in Žižek's work on neurotic and perverse belief? This paper concludes that while the role of the supplement can be seen broadly at work in political and theological beliefs systems, the exact nature of the supplement when used in analysis of groups intentionally remains somewhat vague for social psychopathological analysis. The term obscene excess-supplement is best deployed in a polymorphous strategy to outline broad behavior, and it not meant to withstand the exactitude applied to individual psychotherapy.

We might take a note from Lacan's own transition from his early skepticism on the application of psychoanalysis to group dynamic to his later embrace. In the 1950 essay on criminology, he wrote, "Thus no form of the superego can be inferred from the individual to a given society. And the only form of collective superego that one can conceive of would require

a complete molecular disintegration of society.” (Lacan 1996, 112). In the seminar on the four discourses a full two decades later, he famously brought psychoanalysis into the political realm. The question, of course, is whether Lacan changed his theory or instead discovered something that already existed in his theory. My wager is on the latter. Society has a superego, tribalism has a big Other, and conservative and radical politics alike desire a master. There are always obscenely excessive injunctions working against the individuals encapsulated by the social.

This paper concludes at precisely this impasse in Žižek’s work between the diverging nature of the Lacanian/Freudian analysis of individuals and the Žižekian analysis of societies. Further reading of Lacan’s seminar VII on the knave and the fool or seminar XVII on the relationship between capitalism and the four discourses does not appear to elucidate the terminology’s usage for political psychopathology. The reader may surmise Žižek sees an obscene supplemental excess at work in any relationship of power, whether religious, political, or economic. It functions either 1) by sustaining the conscious injunction by disavowing the “underside” of the injunction, or 2) by condoning the subject’s transgression of the conscious injunction. The obscene excess-supplement is the underside of the big Other, the injunction toward *jouissance* the subject becomes caught up in as she fetishizes the *je ne sais quoi* of the *objet a*. It is not something we can remove from ourselves or our societies without collapsing into psychosis. The most we can hope for is the recognition of the underside, the unwritten rule, the obscene and irreducible difference within the Other that gives birth to our world.

Notes

ⁱ The three graphs here are taken from Fink 1997: 195.

ⁱⁱ The Lacanian subject is notoriously difficult to describe in terms simplified beyond the “L schema” used throughout the seminars and *Écrits*. While the schema ostensibly describes the entirety of the subject, it also uses “subject” as one of four positions (the others being Other, ego, and *objet a*) that together constitute the analysand. What is clear from the force of direction depicted in the schema is that the Other is prior to the formation of the subject (and certainly prior to the formation of the ego).

ⁱⁱⁱ The graph here is taken from Fink 1997: 76.

^{iv} On rare occasion, Žižek does refer to the psychotic driven by an excess of the id, but the categorical difference between the id drive and ego/superego injunction makes psychotic excess irrelevant to the obscene excess-supplement studied in the scope of this paper. The psychotic’s excess is an excess of id drive rather than ego or superego injunctions.

^v Žižek is often accused of merely using Christianity as a tool, which is a curious charge if one has read Lacan’s seminar on ethics. Lacan goes much further than noting points of affinity between Luther and Freud; his claim is that there could be no Freud without the conceptual developments of Luther. To fail to recognize the link between the two, Lacan claims, is to misrecognize what Freud was doing altogether.

^{vi} Normal perversion retains the superego element. Žižek’s representation of Christianity is perversion carried to the extreme, beyond what is normally seen in analysands.

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