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# Postmodern Marxism Today: Jameson, Žižek, and the Demise of Symbolic Efficiency

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## A Bit of Periodization

I will begin by being reductive and for the purposes of contextualization attempt a brief definition of “postmodernity,” the period that is not only most illuminated by the writings of Jameson and Žižek, but also that in which their work ultimately *makes* sense. With hindsight, we might say that the *arrival of postmodernism* is the product of the sublation of the various subversive tendencies found within modernism, buckling under the mighty weight of capital. “Modernism,” to put matters simply, describes the various art movements within the cultural moment of advancing or developing capitalism, the technological advancement of industrial modernity, as well as the rising hegemony of the market and the bourgeoisie as its political and cultural authority. Although it might be fair still to separate the field of cultural production out from the market for various other goods, the market still bears upon the qualitative dimensions of art because it debases it in its diminishment towards commodification. The art of modernity is therefore constantly under threat of commodification, which as we know from critics such as Adorno and Horkheimer, reduces the work of art to its mere exchange value. This is, after all, the purpose of mass culture, according to them, serving the ideological interests of capital. Modern art therefore exists in a dialectical tension with mass culture – in fact, it is easy enough now, with hindsight, to claim that modern art comes into existence as that form which endeavours to chide commodification, thus evoking its ethic: “Make it new!”

But modernism is also instigated by the technological development of industrial verisimilitude, where the work of art, as Benjamin tells us, can be mechanically reproduced and copied. We might say that modernism emerges, for instance, with the rise of Impressionism in the visual arts, which, in seeking to reinvent the authority and authenticity of its medium – painting – against the new onslaught of the photographic image and its mimetic powers – makes the *subversion* of the real its very own form of self-authorization. Culturally and politically, too, as modern art sought to *subvert* commodification, as it sought to subvert realism, it made of the bourgeoisie its public

enemy *numéro uno*. My objective in raising this brief exploration of the cultural history of modernism is to make the following point, which bears upon the relevance of Jameson and Žižek within the postmodern: whereas modernism, as Perry Anderson (1998) has described, defined itself as anti-bourgeois, *postmodernism* occurs when, without any (apparent) victory, that adversary is gone.

The virtual disappearance of the adversarial relationship of modernism provides just one way that I want to express a critical overlap in the approaches of Jameson and Žižek; and, I would say that we can simplify their overlap by looking towards the problem of the *signifier* in the culture and politics of postmodern capitalism. For it is exactly around the politics of the signifier that I locate a shared sense of the historical, the subject, and the ideological in their work. Each, I should point out, has developed his own understanding of the relationship between the postmodern and the logic of the signifier, and each has done so according to a Lacanian “aesthetic.” Jameson has, on the one hand, likened postmodernism to the aesthetic picture drawn by the Lacanian schema of the psychotic – read by Deleuze and Guattari (1983) through the character of the schizophrenic – as a “breakdown of the signifying chain” (Jameson 1984). Žižek, on the other hand, has in various ways referred to a post-ideological era, but has summarized this perspective with the notion of the “demise of symbolic efficiency” (Žižek 1999). Both highlight the loss or the foreclosure of the master-signifier as central to postmodernity. My proposal, in looking at the two as occupying a parallax relationship of sorts, is to position Jameson – in the Marxist jargon – on the side of the *historical* materialist logic, and to view Žižek, conversely, through the side of *dialectical* materialism. But this distinction shouldn’t confuse us since Jameson is likewise very much dialectical in his approach, just as Žižek, too, with his own periodizing schema, is very much historical. Regardless, the historical emergence of the postmodern positions the historicity of the signifier in each of their respective trajectories.

### **The Evisceration of the Signifier**

If modernism may be understood as a code that subverts commodification, new media and realism, and the bourgeoisie, postmodernism can best be grasped, not as the point at which subversion disappears, but as the point at which it becomes

hyperextended – when it becomes *everything* (see Jameson 1998). Let's consider this point in the following manner: first at the level of commodification. We need to understand the dialectical tension between the commodification of art and its subversion, and the pace at which this dynamic is increasingly dissolved. If the ethic of modern art was to "Make it new!," where newness had been defined against the old that had been diffused into the market logic of commodification – having become mere *kitsch*, mere repetition of the once novel – then commodification can be seen very much so as the *driving force* of modern art. We shouldn't mistake this brand of subversion as anomalous to the capitalist logic of deterritorialization, flight, re-territorialization, and accumulation, since capital itself is constantly seeking to subvert its own practices, not unlike the visual media which similarly have to continuously re-invent themselves in order to maintain their relevance. This being the case, if modernism sought continuously to *escape* commodification – that is, to escape its own essence – postmodernism is what happens when modern art reaches its Notion, not of escaping commodification, but of leaving no possibility of escape.

Postmodernism arrives on the scene when art and commodity converge: when art can no longer escape commodity and where mere commodities and the culture of the everyday, of the popular classes, *become* art – hence the worn out example of Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans. Similarly, postmodern criticism emerges as the lines between subversion and the canon begin to blur. Whereas modernism sought to subvert the official art of the canon (or of the market), postmodernism is what happens when modern art, the art of subversion, *becomes* the official art of the canon, the museum, the gallery, and the university. Postmodern art and culture then becomes a practice of *subverting subversion* itself. If modernism was defined by the subject seeking to subvert the phallic signifier – the paternal metaphor – then postmodernism is what occurs when the phallic signifier is foreclosed. In the general conditions of modern culture, perversion *is* subversion. This, however, is no longer the case under postmodernity when generalized perversion becomes typical of the reigning ideology. This is a theme that I intend to unpack and historicize/hystericize in what follows. But before doing so, I would like to provide a brief comment on the relationship between the cultural and the political in postmodernity.

With regards to the emergence of the *political* postmodern we need to question what happens to the radical subject when the adversarial relationship between bourgeois and proletariat begins to evaporate under the conditions of the postwar social welfare state, where in the aftermath of the depression, the second World War, and in the face of the “Red Threat” of the Cold War years, capital and labour come to a compromise formation, where capital agrees to sacrifice short-term immediate profits in order to ensure the longevity of the system; meanwhile, growing investment in social and public programs and services, the redistribution (or what I’d like to think of more appropriately as a more *equitable* distribution) of wealth made the class struggle appear to have withered away. However, the repressed conflict of the class struggle, under the conditions of the postwar class compromise, only ended up returning in the guise of the so-called New Social Movements of the 1960s, from the Civil Rights Movement and Second Wave Feminism to the Student Movement, the Antiwar Movement, and the Gay Liberation Movement, culminating (as legend has it) in the generation of the *soixante-huitards*. It’s the experience of the 60s and the rise of the new subjects of History that allowed the new postmodern theory to claim the disappearance of the Marxist historical subject and declare a new “incredulity towards metanarratives,” as Jean-François Lyotard (1984) famously put it. But if there have been, in the last several decades, two prominent voices that have declared the continued relevance, not only of the Marxist narrative, but also of the Marxist interpretation of the postmodern and the Marxist subject of History, it has of course been Jameson and Žižek. If the historical picture I have just painted of postmodernism is at all familiar to readers of Jameson and Žižek, then it is surely because I’ve drawn upon them to produce my own claims.

### **Object of History/Subject of History**

As I’ve already stated above, I think we can graph the relationship between Jameson and Žižek according to the conceptual distinction between historical and dialectical materialism – “conceptual” because I want to avoid the suggestion that these are two *different* forms of critical engagement. Every Marxist position is *both* historical *and* dialectical. But it is worth separating the two lines of inquiry to assess

their respective objects. I wish also to stress this separation as only conceptual to avoid the elevation of the materialist dialectic into a dogma. Yet, I provide the distinction between historical and dialectical materialism to show what is different and identical in the way that Jameson and Žižek approach the logic of the signifier and its apparent evisceration in the context of postmodern capitalism.

Jameson himself provides us with a useful framework for conceiving these two different, however identical, logics. First, in *Marxism and Form* (1971), Jameson writes that:

Marxism, owing to the peculiar reality of its object of study, has at its disposal two alternate languages (or codes, to use the structuralist term) in which any given phenomenon can be described. Thus history can be written either subjectively, as the history of class struggle, or objectively, as the development of the economic modes of production and their evolution from their own internal contradictions: these two formulae are the same, and any statement in one can without loss of meaning be translated into the other. (297)

Speaking of the differences between the two codes, he adds that it is:

...easier to write a history of matter than of consciousness, and the changes of the type of commodities produced and in the systems that produce them has somehow a tangible linear content that is lacking in the story of the productive power of labor and the ferocity of human antagonisms at every moment of the way. (297-298)

Later, in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), following his infamous proclamation – “Always historicize!” – Jameson adds that:

... the historicizing operation can follow two distinct paths, which ultimately meet in the same place: the path of the object and the path of the subject, the historical origins of the things themselves and the more intangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those things.

(8)

We can see from the outset the way that Jameson conceives the parallel, yet identical logics of historical and dialectical materialism. Although he does not name them as such, we can see clearly the way in which *historical* materialism refers to the *objective*

code – as the historical development of the various modes of production, themselves transforming, rising, and then falling according to the various internal contradictions that they produce. *Dialectical* materialism, then, refers to the subjective code – of the class struggle, the (class) consciousness of the subject, but also – and this remains important for the way that we can think the relationship between Jameson and Žižek – the concepts and categories of interpretation. It is the latter that complicates what might otherwise be the smooth distinction between the operations of the two.

Historical materialism, as a description of the historical progression or succession of the different categories and concepts used to think and interpret the capitalist relations of production, its culture and its ideology, is a project that we can see developed in Jameson's inspiring body of work, from his earliest studies of Western Marxism in *Marxism and Form*, to his examinations of Russian Formalism and French Structuralism in *The Prison-House of Language*, his challenges against the anti-humanism and the anti-interpretivism of structural Marxism and post-structuralism in *The Political Unconscious*, and also his readings of realism, romanticism, postmodernism, and utopia in theory and culture. Jameson, we might say, is an historical materialist "tracker" of the signifier (to borrow a phrase from Colin MacCabe) as it moves through various historical practices of critical theory and interpretation, across the changing lifespan and conditions of the capitalist mode of production. For, in his eyes, in his writing, we see the various transformations of the "ideology of Theory" – the changing and retroactive determination of the different practices of critical interpretation that move along a trajectory defined by the evolving conditions of the capitalist relations of production; and, with the postmodern anti-interpretivist criticism, it would seem from his perspective that the suturing operation of the signifier arrives at a dialectical standstill, leaving open a cleavage of "reflexive impotence," as Mark Fisher (2009) calls it, that, as Terry Eagleton (1996) has described, resulted less from the Left's rising-up-only-to-be-beaten-down than from an imaginary defeat marked by the cynicism of the present that has become decidedly anti-revolutionary. It's *within* this problematic that Žižek's brand of ideology criticism enters the scene.

## End of Ideology/End of History

Žižek's earliest contributions to Marxist critical theory are particularly innovative in the way that he responds to the apparent deadlock of the postmodern critique of ideology. He begins in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) by describing the problem of the arrival of a supposedly "post-ideological" era. The criticism of the inadequacy of the "post-ideological" condition applies, in my view, equally to both the Left and the Right. On the Right, from Daniel Bell (1960) to Francis Fukuyama (1992), we have heard since the 1960s about the "end of ideology." For Bell, this is so on account of two overlapping historical and political phenomena: one the one hand, the publication of Khrushchev's "secret speech," in which he publicly denounced Stalin, acknowledging failures of the Soviet Union; on the other hand, noting the coming post-industrial society that – as Lyotard (1984) would later agree – changed the technological basis of capitalism, resulting in a cultural transformation that would eschew hegemonic struggle in favor of pragmatic consensus about global operations. Then, of course, in 1989, Fukuyama declared the "end of history," a claim he reiterates in his book, *The End of History and the Last Man* in 1992. For him, drawing intriguingly on a Kojévian inspired reading of Hegel's dialectics of history – the very same interpretation that caused much of the French Left to reject the Hegelian model – the demise of the Soviet Union marked the culmination of (capital 'H') History: no longer the ideological battle between which is the better system – Socialism or Liberal Democracy; for Fukuyama, the end of the Cold War and the triumph of Liberal Democracy in politics, and the capitalist ("market") economy, demonstrated that the world had finally settled on *the* model.

End of History and end of ideology are not without their mirror reflections on the Left. It is precisely the postmodern critiques of Marxism (and psychoanalysis) that place Jameson and Žižek in critical positions. The post-structuralist and postmodern Left, responding to some of the same phenomena as Bell and Fukuyama, have sought to displace the centrality of the Marxist theories of History, ideology, and subjectivity. Michel Foucault, for instance, in a particularly telling passage discusses what are, for him, some of the deficiencies of the concepts of "ideology" and "repression" – two



terms that arise in the Althusserian theory of ideology and subjectivity, particularly in his essay on the Ideological State Apparatuses.

Foucault asserts some difficulty with the concept of ideology for three reasons: first, that ideology “always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth;” second, that the concept of ideology refers to “something of the order of the subject;” and, third, that ideology “stands in a secondary position relative to something which functions as its infrastructure” (Foucault 1984: 60).

Regarding the concept of “repression,” Foucault finds it dismissive of the productive aspects of power. Identifying power as repression, with the power to say “No!” – as a force of prohibition – ignores, according to Foucault, the way that power induces to varying degrees, forms of pleasure, the regulation of which is one of power’s primary functions (Foucault 1984: 61).

Foucault, as it is well known, replaces the concept of ideology with his concept of discourse, which is neither true nor false but instead produces “truth effects.” By identifying ideology with the false – i.e., “false consciousness” – Marxism, he claims, either ignores or dismisses its own particular subjective position within the relations of power, interpretation, and the production of knowledge. Discourse produces knowledge of an object; it is not simply true or false. The category of the subject therefore exists only in and by discourse. There is, in other words, no single “Subject of History” – a claim that both reflects and distances Foucault from Althusser. For Althusser, “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects.” However, as he famously claims, “History is a process without subject or goal.” Thus, ideology is on the one hand responsible for activating the subject; however, the subject for Althusser is a particularly fallacious, bourgeois conception of the individual, which I would oppose to the Marxist subject(s) of History: the proletariat (plural). Denying the (singular) existence of the subject, Foucault is then able to claim similarly the mere contingency rather than the necessity of the proletarian revolution. With his criticism of the Marxist (or more specifically Althusserian) rendering of the base/superstructure distinction, Foucault also asserts his disdain for the historical materialist analysis of social, cultural, and political change and transformation, preferring as he does the Nietzschean genealogical approach that he uses to rebuke an apparent search for

historical origins or essences, which in Marxism he sees as the priority placed upon the material relations of production in the material basis of society, or the mode of production. With this, Foucault develops a theory of history that departs from the historical materialist approach. We can see then in Foucault, for instance, a Left variation on the theme: end of ideology/end of History.

The Left challenge to History (read “historical materialism”) also comes across, of course, in Lyotard’s description of postmodernism – the end of “Grand Narrative” let’s call it – as does the Derridean practice of deconstruction reject (or at least destabilize) the theory of ideology; and, of course, so too does the Deleuzo-Guattarian conception of the subject displace practices of interpretation of the ideological. In all of these cases, there comes about a certain postmodern “breakdown of the signifying chain,” whether it is positioned towards History, ideology, or subjectivity. We can discern the impact of this line of inquiry further, and the impact it has had on Žižek in particular, by exploring the early post-Marxism of Ernesto Laclau. It is Laclau’s earlier writings on the logic of the signifier and the Real that bear upon Žižek’s Marxist theories of ideology and subjectivity.

### **A Foray into Post-Marxism**

Apart from his well-known book, co-authored with Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), Laclau’s position is best articulated in two short pieces: “The Impossibility of Society” (1983) and “Psychoanalysis and Marxism” (1986). In both pieces, Laclau tries to challenge what he sees as the essentialist and positivist tendencies in Marxism. Laclau identifies two overlapping problems with the Marxist concept of “ideology.” Not unlike Foucault, the two problems that he identifies are the notions of the social “totality” and the conception of ideology as a kind of “false consciousness.” Like Foucault, Laclau’s criticism here appears to be grounded more so in a critique of the Althusserian reading of both the Marxist topography of the base/superstructure and the ideological category of the subject. With regards to the concept of the social totality, Laclau takes up the Foucauldian conception of discourse to assert the ultimately antagonistic character of the social. The social, he writes, “must be identified with the infinite play of differences”

– that is, he asserts the ultimately impossible closure of the social totality as the product of antagonism. The social whole always remains incomplete precisely because it is impossible to totalize meaning. With this, Laclau – like Jameson – turns to the Lacanian discourse of the psychotic to assert that “meaning cannot possibly be fixed,” without the operation or mechanism of fixation, of “domestication” – without a “nodal point” or, more specifically, what Lacan later termed the “master signifier” (Laclau 1990: 90-91; Cf. Lacan 2007). It’s not insignificant, then, that what Laclau accomplishes here is a translation of the Foucauldian critique of the Marxist topography into the Lacanian logic of the signifier, which equally demonstrates why Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, rail against the ideological “tyranny of the signifier,” a point to which I will return.

For Laclau, the logic of the signifier is also where Marxism and psychoanalysis overlap. Unlike Foucault, however, Laclau credits psychoanalysis for bringing “a theory of subjectivity to the field of historical materialism” (Laclau 1990: 93). As well, against what he sees as the affirmative or positive characterization of historical materialism – mainly as it had been produced as the dogmatic reading of *dialectical* materialism under Stalin, and the affirmation of the Historical “mission” of the proletariat – Laclau draws upon Lacan to identify lack in the form of the political antagonism as the very reason why society “is not a valid object of discourse” (Laclau and Mouffe 2000: 111). As he and Mouffe describe, the “impossibility of an ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations – otherwise, the very flow of differences would be impossible.” The social, they claim, “only exists, however, as an effort to construct that impossible object [“society”]” (Ibid: 112). The hegemonic relationship, Laclau then claims, “can be thought only by assuming the category of *lack* as a point of departure;” and furthermore, that the “hegemonic subject is the subject of the signifier, which is in this sense, a subject without a signified [i.e., without positive content – as *lacking*]” (Laclau 1990: 96). For Laclau, the confluence of Marxism and psychoanalysis is made possible, not by adding the two or supplementing one with the other, but by reflecting upon their coincidence – as fixing or “suturing” the social totality, as *the* point of interpellation of the subject – around the logic of the signifier. Despite agreeing with the latter, I would be remiss not to point out that, although Laclau makes a convincing

case about the overlap between Marxism and psychoanalysis around the logic of the signifier, and despite the fact that Althusser's topographical (base/superstructure) and ideological model is a point of contention for the Foucault-inspired critique proposed by Laclau, it is in fact Althusser who first demonstrated another significant overlap between Marx and Freud.

Both Marx and Freud, according to Althusser (1996), exemplify materialist and dialectical thought. And both, he claims, have troubled significantly the bourgeois consciousness. Marx, on the one hand, through his critique of political economy, identified the class struggle, rather than the individual, as the motor of history. Class struggle, for Marx, shows that there is nowhere in existence this thing we call "political economy" or market; and, therefore, despite the way that Laclau admonishes the apparent affirmative character of the Marxist conception of the social, bourgeois society for Marx is plagued by a gap or a lack in the form of the class struggle. Freud similarly troubled the bourgeois consciousness by dis-unifying (unfixing) the individual through his discovery of the unconscious – that is, he originally de-centred the subject. Thus, as Althusser already pointed out, both Marx and Freud show that neither society nor the individual exist as a unified *thing* – conflict, in fact, prevents such a unity. Historical materialism and psychoanalysis, both as practices of dialectical materialism, do in fact identify lack or gap, or the negative rather than the affirmative, as the very point of departure for existing conflicts, both socially and subjectively, implying that each has already troubled the signifier. Bearing this in mind, there is an important line here that runs from Laclau and Mouffe to Žižek that I explore in the following section.

### **The "New Doctrine of Structural Causality"**

Whereas the post-Structuralist (Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari, in particular) approach is one that rails against the "tyranny of the signifier," and the post-Marxist one (Laclau and Mouffe) sees in the signifier a point of convergence for the Marxist and psychoanalytic "projects," we can best understand the play of the signifier in Žižek and Jameson by way of what Bruno Bosteels has referred to as the "new doctrine of structural causality." Just as Jameson had done so previously, Bosteels identifies the differences between historical and dialectical materialism. "The object of

historical materialism,” he writes, “as theory of history, includes the various modes of production, their structure and development, and the forms of transition from one mode to another” (Bosteels 2005: 117). But he is somewhat more precise in addressing the relationship between historical materialism as a “science” (in Althusser’s terms) and dialectical materialism as a philosophy: “In principle, the scientific nature of [historical materialism] cannot be established by historical materialism itself but only by a philosophical theory designed for the express purpose of defining the scientificity of science and other theoretical practices. This general epistemological theory of the history of the theoretical offers a first definition of dialectical materialism” (Ibid). Bosteels then uses this distinction as a springboard for addressing the Althusserian model of “structural causality.”

Dialectical materialism, according to Bosteels, can be understood as a theory of “contradictory breaks.” Applied, then, to historical phenomena, such as the material transition from one mode of production to the next arising out of contradictions in each previous one, historical materialism helps to define the *object* of dialectical materialist investigation, that is, through the production and deployment of a series of analytical concepts. Two of the concepts central to the Althusserian project are “structural causality” and its “absent cause.” Structural causality, as Bosteels explains, rests on the fact that “a society always possesses the complex unity of a structure dominated by one of its instances, or articulated practices. Depending on the conjuncture at a given moment in the history of society, the dominant can be economical, political, scientific, religious, and so on” (Bosteels 2005: 119). Depending, then, upon the historical conjuncture, a certain tendency will have *dominance* upon the characterization of the social totality.

Tangentially, we can perhaps come to understand this through the prism of Raymond Williams’ (1977) distinctions between dominant, emergent, and residual elements of a culture. Whereas it is difficult to claim that any one particular cultural formation totalizes the entire field, it is more so the case that the *dominant* tendency sutures – as Laclau might say – the entire field of the social, while still running in parallel with new *emergent* cultural elements, as well as *residual* elements from older or more traditional culture. Similarly, although we might talk about the dominance,

today, of finance capital, it is not as though we have witnessed the disappearance of agrarian capital, or industrial capital, or merchant capital. The dominance of finance capital speaks merely to its historically contingent position in organizing the entirety of the system within this particular stage or moment of the class struggle. Likewise, as Jameson (1984) argues, postmodernism is *not* the only cultural force – it is merely the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” which is to say that it is the culture that *dominates* alongside residual elements of traditional, national or ethnic culture, modern culture, as well as likely emergent elements of a wholly new and not yet fully formed culture, perhaps reflective of the ideological tendency that Mark Fisher (2009) has called “capitalist realism.” This way of reading the relationship between the dominant, residual, and emergent is what makes the logic of the signifier, as a point of meaningful fixation, culturally and ideologically significant. It does not totalize in the way that Foucault, or Deleuze, or even Laclau and Mouffe describe; but it does articulate a point of closure that is not disconnected from the historical state of power and the class struggle. But I digress...

What then gives cause to the structural emplacement of this or that dominant and overdetermining force is what Althusser, drawing on Spinoza, calls the “absent cause,” or the ultimately determining instance of the mode of production. As Jameson explains in *The Political Unconscious*, Althusser identifies the entirety of the structure itself with the mode of production (36). Therefore, he writes, if we wish to characterize Althusser’s as a *structural* Marxism, “one must complete the characterization with the essential proviso that it is a structuralism for which only *one* structure exists: namely the mode of production itself, or the synchronic system of social relations as a whole” (ibid). For Jameson, this is the sense “in which this ‘structure’ is an absent cause, since it is nowhere empirically present as an element, it is not part of the whole or one of the [topographical] levels, but rather the entire system of *relationships* among those levels” (ibid). This means, then, according to Jameson, that *history* figures as the very absent cause of the entire structure – history, that is, if we take it in the way we have seen already defined above as that intersection of the historical movement from one mode of production to the next and the class struggle as the antagonistic relationship that colours the dominant cultural and social character of the historical conjuncture; but

also, as the sets of relationships between subject positions differently articulated according to the topography: base/superstructure. For what is the base if not the expression of a particular social relationship between agents, i.e., the relations of production, which in the case of the capitalist mode of production is a relationship of exploitation? The superstructure similarly articulates the social relationship between agents, but it does so according to a different set of practices that are not unrelated to those of production. Marx (1993), in fact, notes in the introduction the *Grundrisse* that every mode of production must also at the same time bear upon the legal and political formation of every society to sustain and legitimize existing relations of exploitation.

Jameson writes, “history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the [Lacanian] Real itself [as that which resists symbolization] necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious” (Jameson 1981: 35). Jameson’s claim provides an important rejoinder to the Foucauldian critique of the apparent search for historical origins in Marxism since historical materialism shows, according to Jameson’s reading of structural causality and its absent cause, that each new expression of the class struggle in the present – each new historical conjuncture, marked by the ever changing conditions of the class struggle – *retroactively* determines the subjective reading of the historical. Marxism and historical materialism, upon this reading, are truly a “history of the present” – it’s the signifier that gives history its dominant retroactive figurability. We can then read the development of what Bosteels calls the “new doctrine of structural causality,” and Žižek’s place within this approach, in the following manner.

Beginning with Laclau and Mouffe, Bosteels identifies three points that can be made regarding the relationship between the Lacanian Real, the subject, and ideology. First, as Laclau and Mouffe point out in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the social field, just like the Lacanian Symbolic order (the field of the big Other) is “structured around the traumatic kernel of the real” (Bosteels 2005: 128). The traumatic kernel of the social field is identified by Laclau and Mouffe as (political) antagonism (Cf. Laclau and Mouffe 2000: 122). In Lacanian terms, we could say that the social field is *not-all*, and in order for it to have some ultimate fixity, it requires the addition of the master-

signifier. For Laclau and Mouffe, as Bosteels explains, politics only emerges because society is lacking – it does not exist as a unified whole. There is, in other words, a *gap* or *void* in the structure that they identify with the Lacanian Real and which Jameson identifies with the absent cause of *history*.

But in a second move that veers towards Žižek and other so-called *neo-Lacanian*s, such as Mladen Dolar, Bosteels notes that for them the *subject*, in fact, *is* this gap in the structure. If the Real is signalled by the very limits of the Symbolic, if antagonism posits the impossibility of society, then the subject is what overlaps with this very position; or, as Žižek puts it, just as the Real emerges as the limit of society, “the subject is strictly correlative to its own impossibility; its limit is its positive position” (Žižek 1989: 209). The subject, in other words, “is *nothing but* the impossibility of its own signifying representation – the empty place opened up in the big Other by the failure of this representation” (Ibid: 208). Better still, as Dolar explains the difference between the truly Lacanian category of the subject and the Althusserian one, is that for Althusser “the subject is what makes ideology work; for [Lacanian] psychoanalysis, the subject emerges where ideology fails” (Dolar 1993: 78). Subject, here – the political or revolutionary subject, the “proletariat” – is *correlative with the impossibility of society*. Not some positive or affirmative character – not yet, anyway – but the symptomatic point at which the deadlocks of the social emerge. This is one reason why, for Žižek, the antagonism identified by Laclau and Mouffe that forever prevents the full closure of the social has a precise name: class struggle (Žižek 1989: 164; Cf. Žižek 1994: 22).

Class struggle, for Žižek, names the social Real – the antagonism at the heart of the social, its limit point – at the same time that it posits the emergence of the subject of psychoanalysis: the hysteric. The hysteric comes to figure and overlap with History as an absent cause in the way that Jameson describes history as the absent cause of the structure. History, according to Žižek, is “nothing but a succession of failed attempts to grasp, conceive, specify this strange kernel [of the Real]” (Žižek 2002: 101). It’s this point that allows us, he writes, to reject the common reproach that psychoanalysis is non-historical and transform it from a critique into a positive identification of the historical. Put differently, in his own defense of the Hegelian dialectic (and this is a point that asserts his own commitment to dialectical



*materialism*), Žižek argues that dialectics offers the most cogent articulation of what Laclau and Mouffe conceive as antagonism: “far from being a story of progressive overcoming, dialectics is for Hegel a systemic notation of the failure of all such attempts – ‘absolute knowledge’ denotes a subjective position which finally accepts ‘contradiction’ as an internal condition of every identity” (Žižek 1989: 6). The Lacanian subject therefore exists according to him on two levels: both as the neurotic/hysterical subject and as the subject who emerges at the ends of analysis, when the subject has traversed the fantasy and has gone beyond the deadlock of subjective destitution – that is, when the subject herself occupies the position of the analyst – *this* subject is for him *the* subject of history: “hysteria is the subject’s way of resisting the prevailing, historically specified form of interpellation or symbolic identification.... Hysteria means failed interpellation” (Žižek 2002: 101).

But, now, there is a third movement in Bosteels’ description of the new doctrine that moves us back from the revolutionary character of the subject and into the subject caught in ideology; and, this movement is where finally we can claim the originality of Žižek’s theory of ideology, which departs from the Althusserian one, but also which allows us to understand more fully what remains ideological – from a Marxist standpoint – under the conditions of a post-ideological era (in both the Right and Left versions) at the “end of History,” or more specifically, within the historical context of the postmodern culture and society. That is to say that, when we have reached the limits of the social, when we have reached the limits of the Symbolic – or, when we have begun to acknowledge first-hand the nonexistence of the big Other – what is there left to keep us within the terrain of the ideological? Žižek’s response, of course, is *jouissance*: enjoyment!

### **Enjoyment as a Political Factor**

Žižek, at the beginning of *For They Know Not What They Do*, posits the problem in the following terms – and, here, we should note the specific historicization/periodization of his writing, which took place precisely at the moment of the Fukuyamaist pronouncement of the “end of History,” at the moment of the apparent triumph of liberal democracy, and of course what it truly stands for within the

co-ordinates of capitalism: the equation of consumerism with freedom. He poses the question: “How do we account for this paradox that the absence of Law universalizes Prohibition?” The answer, he says, is that “*enjoyment itself, which we experience as ‘transgression’, is in its innermost status something imposed, ordered* – when we enjoy, we never do it ‘spontaneously’ we always follow a certain injunction. The psychoanalytic name for this obscene injunction, for this obscene call, ‘Enjoy!’, is superego” (Žižek 2002: 9-10). To understand this claim we need to return to the problem of the signifier and what it stands for, both as a marker of the postmodern, but also as a marker of prohibiting agency or authority.

What makes Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983) reading of capitalism so intriguing is that they figure the relationship between capitalism, the structure of the modern family, and the impact upon each as they are reflected in the formation of the subject. As Marx states in volume three of *Capital*: “Capitalist production constantly strives to overcome [its own] immanent barriers, but it overcomes them only by means that set up the barriers afresh and on a more powerful scale” (Marx 1991: 358). In other words, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, capitalism constantly enforces processes of “deterritorialization,” which implies that to overcome its own self-imposed barriers to accumulation capital must become unhinged from its own processes and seek new ones as a means of survival. Such a practice implies, for them, the waning of the signifier that assigns meaning to the subjective dimensions of experience. The neurotic subject, for them, appears in the form of the bourgeois subject who is troubled by the changing conditions enforced by capital flight. However, rather than applying – as they see it – the re-Oedipalization of the subject (back into the mommy-daddy-me triad), they prefer an anti-interpretivist practice that seeks to maintain the barring of the signifier, restricting its (re-)territorialization, keeping open the range of freedom for the subject to accelerate the decline of the capitalist mode of production. This is why the schizo figures as their ideal hero: he is the one who forecloses the (tyranny of) the signifier. But there is a problem here that Žižek rightly identifies, and it addresses precisely what is problematic about both the Deleuzian and Foucauldian approaches.

On the one hand, the Deleuzo-Guattarian approach seems correct in demonstrating that internal revolutions to the capitalist mode of production end up

producing new forms of subjectivity. But it is by positing desire as a positive, rather than a negative force – i.e., lack – that they miss the ideological dimensions of postmodern (consumer) capitalism. The dilemma, in other words, is not one with neurosis or Oedipalization, but with generalized *perversion* in the strictest Lacanian sense. Žižek points out at the end of *The Ticklish Subject* the historical waning of the Oedipus complex, which he says is somewhat tied to the postmodern fading of authority – more precisely for my purposes, the waning of the signifier. But if the modern authority is on the wane this creates a strange scenario for the subject. If, as Bruce Fink puts it, “neurosis can be understood as a set of strategies by which people protest against a ‘definitive’ sacrifice of *jouissance* – castration – imposed upon them by their parents... and come to desire in relation to the law, *perversion involves the attempt to prop up the law so that limits can be set to jouissance*” (2003: 38). In *perversion*, the subject wishes to bring the law into existence – to make the Other exist – since it is the very existence of the Other that provides a space for transgression as a means of obtaining “obscene enjoyment,” as Žižek calls it. This is the sense in which Žižek identifies the form of postmodern ideology as *cynical*. Drawing upon the Lacanian description of the perverse mechanism – of disavowal – and relying on the phrase used by Octave Mannoni, Žižek describes the cynical attitude as one of “*Je sais bien, mais quand même...*” – “I know very well, but nevertheless...” (Žižek 1989: 28-30). It is even, in this way, that Žižek amends the Marxist logic of commodity fetishism with the Lacanian theory of the fetish.

The predominant Marxist approach to commodity fetishism is one in which the commodity masks or hides or conceals the *positive* – i.e., existing – social relationship between people or, more specifically, the social relations of production and exploitation. But the psychoanalytic conception of the fetish, instead, refers to it as that which “conceals the lack (‘castration’) around which the symbolic network is articulated” (Žižek 1989: 49). Fetish, in other words, mirrors the operation of the signifier. It is that which allows the subject to disavow the lack or gap which it *is* within the Symbolic order; however, what fills the lack that *is* the subject in the field of the Symbolic is the fantasy structure that allows her to relate to her enjoyment – fantasy, not as some dream of successfully obtaining the lost object of desire (the *object a*), but

that which regulates for the subject, teaches her, about what she desires. Fantasy, in this way, becomes a support of ideology, especially when we appear to inhabit a post-ideological era. But that is not all.

As Lacan had claimed, desire is the desire of the big Other – of the Symbolic order. The Symbolic order, in other words, comes to figure for the subject her relationship to her desire and to her enjoyment. As the gap within the Symbolic order, fantasy supports the subject's approach to this position, filling in for her what is lacking; but she simultaneously attributes this position to the signifier that defines her. Žižek therefore describes how "a signifier ( $S_1$ ) represents for another signifier ( $S_2$ ) its absence, its lack  $\$$ , which is the subject" (2002: 22); "the Master-Signifier, the One, is the signifier *for which* all the others represent the subject" (Ibid: 21). Simply marking the signifier as that which represents the subject, would however also miss the relationship between the subject and the ideological implication of propping up a power, that makes it ideological.

In contrast to the Althusserian claim that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects – which seems to imply that ideology is somehow *zapped* into the mind – Žižek adds that "ideology is the exact opposite of internalization of the external contingency: it resides in externalization of the result of an inner necessity, and the task of the critique of ideology here is precisely to discern the hidden necessity in what appears as a mere contingency" (1994: 4). This implies that, at the same time that the subject assumes a defining signifier giving her substance within the spaces of the Symbolic, the task for the subject is to have recognized by the authority of the big Other the signifier that she confers upon herself, and which has been conferred *upon her* by the big Other. Or, to be more precise, "it is never the individual which is interpellated as subject, *into* subject; it is on the contrary the subject itself who is interpellated as x (some specific subject-position, symbolic identity or mandate), thereby eluding the abyss of  $\$$ " (Žižek 1993: 73-74). The ambiguity as to the desire of the Other – *Che vuoi?* – "What do you want from me?" What am I to you?" – forces the subject into a precipitous identification, anticipating what the Other demands. But with the apparent loss of the Other in the postmodern, post-ideological condition of the *loss*

of the signifier, it appears as though the Other is nowhere – nowhere, that is, *to confer* meaning.

It appears in postmodern times that we enjoy so much freedom. There is a loss of authority (in the form of the big Other, in the form of political oppression, etc.). But what if what appears as a prohibition of enjoyment is in fact its very condition of possibility? This is the trick of the postmodern superego injunction: “Enjoy!” It becomes all the more difficult to enjoy the more we are increasingly and directly *enjoined* to do so. There is, as Žižek describes, a transgressive dimension to enjoyment where it is the transgression, itself – breaking the rules – that garners for us our enjoyment. This concerns the dialectical tension between desire and drive. If I can again be somewhat reductive for the sake of brevity, we might see desire as “enjoying what we don’t have” (to cite the title of a book by Todd McGowan). We desire insofar as we are lacking. But if that’s the case, then drive has to do, in a way, with hating what we enjoy – that is, the pain involved in *not* obtaining the apparent lost object of desire (which only exists insofar as it *remains* lost), which actually procures enjoyment. *Jouissance*, enjoyment, is thus caught up in an odd mixture of pleasure and pain – we both enjoy what we *don’t* have but we still hate (it is experienced as painful) what we enjoy. What separates the two, on the one hand, is the fantasy that screens the experience of the drive – and this is why in working towards the analytical cure, the subject must “traverse” the fantasy to arrive at the recognition that *jouissance* is firstly a treatment of the relationship between desire and drive, and secondly that what we desire is the obstacle (Cf. McGowan 2016). The latter is the position arrived at, at the ends of analysis. But in ideology, which also knows that the obstacle is a condition of enjoyment – the obstacle which we seek to transgress as the source of our enjoyment – the subjective position becomes one of perversion.

If we go back and recall that, at the beginning, I pointed out that modernism was a culture of subversion and that postmodernism is what occurs when subversion *becomes* the dominant ideology, then we can similarly propose that while perversion may have been subversive in modern times, in the conditions of postmodern culture, “perversion is not subversion” (Žižek 1999: 247). This is Žižek’s reproach to Judith Butler (and to Foucault), who provides perhaps what is the most cogent explanation of

this relationship between ideology and enjoyment. Referring to what she calls “passionate attachment,” Butler proposes (like Foucault) that power *constitutes* the subject. Power, she says, “is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are” (Butler 1997: 2). How does it do so? Butler, on the one hand, notes that this has to do with the discursive terms set out by power and that we depend upon for our existence. But if we read Foucault in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, we also see that we come to depend upon power for our existence because it is only by *resisting* power that we become subjects. This is Foucault’s critique of the “repressive hypothesis,” where amongst other things, he claims that (and this is returning to another line of criticism addressed above) desire is not something that is repressed – through a power that says “No!” – power, in fact, becomes the very *raison d’être* of desire in the sense that: “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault 1990: 95). Where there is power, there is, in other (Žižek’s) words, an inherent transgression. What the pervert knows, then, is that without the obstacle, without power, there is no transgression – there is no *jouissance*. It is the perverse subject, then, whose goal it is to prop up power, to impose an authority that says “No!” so as to be able to transgress. This is why, I claim, that *the pervert, and not the schizo, is the typical subject of postmodern capitalism – the subject whose arrival is marked by the generalized acceptance of subversion, when subversion becomes the dominant ideology*. But let’s put another spin on this because the pervert relates to the analyst as two sides of the same coin, as Žižek might put it.

Both relate to enjoyment in a similar fashion, but are distinguished by their relationship to the *objet a*. The pervert, we might say, remains caught in the logic of desire, needing then the imposition of the Master(-Signifier) as an obstacle to transgress. The analyst, however, is oriented towards drive, having traversed the fantasy. She accepts the non-existence of the big Other, and therefore comes to accept the possibility of her own non-existence.

I would argue that the analytical practice does, in this way, relate to the ethics of dialectical materialism. And we can find in this ethics, very closely to the way that Georg Lukács describes the movement from Kant to Hegel to Marx, the core of Žižek’s

dialectical materialism. If, with Kant (and here I am relying on descriptions produced by all three: Lukács, Jameson, and Žižek), we can know only our knowledge of things, but we cannot know things-in-themselves, when we move to Hegel, we find that the gap in knowledge – the gap between phenomenal and noumenal – bears upon the subject herself – the subject just *is* the very gap in our knowledge. The shift from Hegel to Marx, then, is tied to what the Lacanian discourse calls the “act” (Lukács 1971; Jameson 1971; Žižek 1993). When we act, we perform a radical material transformation that likewise results in a radical transformation of the self. As Žižek describes (and I apologize for quoting at length):

the proletariat becomes an *actual* revolutionary subject by way of integrating the *knowledge* of its historical role: historical materialism is not a neutral “objective knowledge” of historical development, since it is an act of self-knowledge of a historical subject; as such it implies the proletarian subjective position. In other words, the “knowledge” proper to historical materialism is self-referential, it changes its “object”. It is only via the act of knowledge that the object becomes what it truly “is”. So the rise of “class consciousness” produces the effect in the existence of its “object” (proletariat) by way of changing into an actual revolutionary subject. And is it not the same with psychoanalysis? Does the interpretation of the symptom not constitute a direct intervention of the Symbolic in the Real, does it not offer an example of how the word can affect the Real of the symptom? And, on the other hand, does not such an efficacy of the Symbolic presuppose entities whose existence literally hinges on certain non-knowledge: the moment knowledge is assumed (through interpretation), existence disintegrates? Existence is here not one of the predicates of the Thing, but designates the way the Thing relates to its predicates, more precisely: the way the Thing *is related to itself* by means of (through the detour of) its predicates-properties. When a proletarian becomes aware of his “historical role”, *none of his actual predicates changes*; what changes is just the way he relates to them, and this change in the relationship to predicates radically affects his existence. (Žižek 1993: 144-145)

Whereas the pervert seeks to impose a Master-Signifier as the sign of the obstacle that regulates his enjoyment, the analyst retroactively creates a new one in the process of the act, which *only* retroactively *authorizes itself*; or, in other words, historical inevitability is only knowable *after the fact*. Although, we could say, the subject caught in ideology is a product of “positing the presuppositions” of her own existence, the knowledge that comes to the ethical position of the analyst and the proletariat is one of “presupposing the positing.” But in order to do so, as Žižek acknowledges, one must have access to the analytical *discourse*, to its interpretive prowess. This, too, is where Marx and Freud overlap, and is where we can shift gears to consider what Jameson has called “cognitive mapping” – what I consider to be a foundational element of his own practice of *historical* materialist interpretation.

### **Cognitive Mapping, or Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act**

Even in Žižek’s work we can often locate the significance of the category of cognitive mapping. In *In Defense of Lost Causes*, he describes an ironic coincidence between the rise of postmodernism and developments in the biological sciences. As he puts it, the “predominance of scientific discourse thus entails the retreat, the potential suspension, of the very symbolic function as the metaphor constitutive of human subjectivity” (Žižek 2008: 32). Paternal authority, for instance, he suggests is based upon faith or trust in the identity of the father. The symbolic function of the father (the Name-of-the-Father) operates only to the extent that we do not know directly who our father is – we must accept his word. But, “the moment I know with scientific certainty who my father is, fatherhood ceases to be the function which grounds social-symbolic Trust.... The hegemony of the scientific discourse thus potentially suspends the entire network of symbolic tradition that sustains the subject’s identifications” (Ibid: 33). What Žižek describes here is close to his earlier claim in *The Ticklish Subject* regarding the “demise of symbolic efficiency” (Žižek 1999: 322). What he describes is the postmodern dispensation with the Master-Signifier, which as we have seen is rendered still quite well by Deleuze and Guattari in their connection between capitalism and deterritorialization. Again, it would appear that the dispensation with the Master-Signifier – the apparent recognition of the non-existence



of the big Other, the end of History, the end of ideology, and so on and so forth – would, on the one hand, leave open the potential for mass freedom. But on the other hand, as we have seen, it instead brings forth new ideological conditions. This, I would argue, is partly to do with the fact that the postmodern “incredulity towards metanarratives” leaves open a gap in the subject’s ability to positively reflect upon and recognize her position in the world and to herself – it creates a deadlock, an inability to act; or, what Mark Fisher calls “reflexive impotence.”

As Žižek again puts it, the postmodern end of grand narratives, or big explanations (like Marxism and psychoanalysis) “is one of the names for this predicament in which the multitude of local fictions thrives against the background of scientific discourses as the only remaining universality deprived of sense” (2008: 33). The problem as he sees it is the existence of various parallel discourses, caught in a chain of equivalences, none of which has been able to radically intervene in the capitalist relations of production. All they do, he claims, is supplement the dominant narrative with other local narratives that do not effectively disturb the existing system. Instead, he says, “the task is to produce a *symbolic fiction (a truth) that intervenes into the Real*, that causes a change within it” (Ibid) – and isn’t this exactly what Jameson has in mind with his notion of “cognitive mapping”?

We have to recall that when Jameson first introduces the concept in his essay on Postmodernism, he does so by pointing out the Althusserian relationship between the Imaginary and the Real, noting that the Lacanian matrix is in fact a tripartite system that includes the Symbolic. He then says that an aesthetics of cognitive mapping will require the dimension of the Symbolic to provide the social co-ordinates necessary for the subject to arrive at her ethical position. And, if I can go further along in this thread, we might even begin to understand Jameson’s application of the Lacanian Symbolic, as the intervention of the Symbolic in the Real, very much in the way that Žižek describes it as a condition of the analyst’s discourse, as a return to grand narrative – the specificity of the historical materialist one. In fact, this is how we should also understand Jameson’s approach to allegorical interpretation, beginning with his essay on “Metacommentary” and *The Political Unconscious*, and all of his work that has since followed.

One of Jameson's chief insights relating to the concept of the political unconscious is the fact that *all* interpretation *is* allegorical interpretation. He identifies this, initially, by noting some of the ways that post-structural criticism has gone after the Marxist hermeneutic, which he defines according to its own historicism and application of historical materialism as a "master code," as well as its practices of ideological criticism or the theme of representation (as it has been defined by Althusser – ideology *represents* an imaginary relationship of the subject to her real conditions of existence). With his focus on practices of interpretation, Jameson points out that every hermeneutic, whether consciously or unconsciously, is an allegorical process, meaning that it acts as a process of *rewriting*. Every interpretive operation, therefore, operates according to "some ultimate privileged interpretive *code* in terms of which the cultural object is allegorically rewritten" (Jameson 2008: 451-452). Examples of this in critical discourse include: forms of language or communication in structuralist criticism; desire and *jouissance* in psychoanalysis; anxiety and freedom in existentialism; temporality in phenomenology; collective archetypes in myth criticism; or, even some forms of liberal humanism as in the reigning ideological framework (Ibid: 452). The point of the political unconscious, as a concept, is that even statements that appear as mere fact or "common sense" (more on this below) are always already operating according to a particular interpretive framework, which we might even say is preceded by the subject-position which gives it its particular political shading. Or, to put this differently: there is no interpretation that is not already determined (in the last instance) by the class struggle.

Like these other examples, Marxism, according to Jameson, proposes its own "master code," which he says is neither the "economy" (as in much of the reductive criticism of Marxism which sees it as a practice of "economic determinism"), nor is it even the class struggle. Instead, it is, according to him, that absent cause of the system, itself: the mode of production. How might the mode of production be conceived as an interpretive master code? History, as we have already seen from Jameson, "is not in any sense itself a text or master text or master narrative." It remains, according to him, "inaccessible to us except in textual or narrative form" (Jameson 2008: 452). Historical materialism provides in narrative form an

interpretation of the historical and material transition from one *mode of production* to the next. It provides an explanation, from the perspective of a dialectical materialist understanding – that is, from the subjective position of the proletariat – of the historical transformation from one mode of production to each successive mode of production, and the internal forces of each, its contradictions, which are sublated in the shift from the one to the next.

We can also read this practice against the Lacanian approach that Žižek describes, of the overlap between the ethics of psychoanalysis and the radical ethics of the proletariat, if – that is – we begin from the position of subjective destitution, verging *towards* the ends of analysis. This is a crucial moment, we might say, when the subject is left destitute *without* any reason. Here, we need to indeed locate the master code or master text, or an interpretive framework, that retroactively authorizes the ethics of the subject. What is needed, in other words, is a practice of cognitive mapping. At the moment of destitution, the subject is trapped by the weight of the act, and the gravity of the decision to do so. Deciding, therefore, in some ways requires the imposition of a teleology – that is, of asking implicitly what kind of goal do we seek out? From the psychoanalytic perspective, the ethical imperative is one of not giving way to one's desire. This may create the appearance of a non-goal-oriented approach, but if we understand anything about the drive – that which desire becomes once it has traversed the fantasy – we know that it still maintains a goal, despite re-orienting itself with regard to its aim. By going after its aim, the drive achieves satisfaction by never reaching its goal – it merely circulates around the objectified lack that it *is*. So if we can now return to the historical materialist interpretation, we must add, I think, another important dimension central to cognitive mapping, which Jameson correctly identifies as Utopia.

### **The Dialectic of Ideology and Utopia: Reification or Realism**

All class consciousness – all ideology – is ultimately utopian. Jameson (1981) has proposed this thesis in different ways, but along the lines of two contradictory formulations – contradictory, that is, from the perspective of the class struggle – that I think are pertinent to the *context* of the class struggle. He has, on the one hand,

looked at the relationship between *reification* and utopia, as well as, on the other hand, that between *realism* and utopia. Jameson explains that every class consciousness is utopian insofar as “it expresses the unity of a collectivity.” Such a unity is an allegorical one in the sense that the achieved collectivity is utopian “not in itself, but only insofar as all such collectivities are themselves *figures* for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society.” Because of this, “even hegemonic or ruling-class culture and ideology are Utopian, not in spite of their instrumental function to secure and perpetuate class privilege and power, but rather precisely because that function is also in and of itself the affirmation of collective solidarity” (Jameson 1981: 291).

Consider, for instance, the way that Žižek describes the utopian vision of the so-called middle class: “the ‘middle class’ is in its very ‘real’ existence, the *embodied lie*, the denial of antagonism – in psychoanalytic terms, the ‘middle class’ is a *fetish*, the impossible intersection of Left and Right which, by expelling both poles of the antagonism into the position of antisocial ‘extremes’ which corrode the healthy social body... presents itself as the neutral common ground of Society. In other words, the ‘middle class’ is the very form of the disavowal of the fact that ‘Society does not exist’ (Laclau) – in it, Society *does* exist” (Žižek 1999: 187). “Middle class,” we might say, is therefore the utopian fetish of the ruling order – the utopian hegemonic vision of a “classless” society, in which the organic whole of the collectivity is secured by the disavowal of the class antagonism. This, I believe, is what we might refer to as a *reified* utopia. It is one in which the social body is articulated – is “sutured” – by the fetish object that ultimately dispels and disavows an existing antagonism. The flip side to the corporatist imaginary of the “middle class” utopia could also take the form of the fetish of the “intruder” tied to the fascist-populist imaginary.

Both Jameson and Žižek have used the example of Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975) to make this case. The shark in the film operates as a kind of fetish object – an enemy or intruder – that galvanizes the collective efforts of the community, bringing them together to formulate the unified whole. It is not unlike the way that the Nazi anti-Semitic representation of the “Jew,” or even today the racist-populist image of the Islamic fundamentalist, the refugee, or even those who identify as transgender – it is

not unlike how the images of these figures are deployed to disavow and displace the centrality of the class antagonism. These are images of figures who operate as fetish objects used to constitute the implied unity in the utopian vision of the organic body through exclusion. Utopia is here *reified* through the fixation on the fetish object and is similar to the logic of the commodity fetish, which is the very objectively regulated appearance that stands as the linchpin of the entire capitalist system. The fetish objectifies and then displaces the Real social antagonism, i.e., the class struggle, which is the true indication of the fact that “Society does not exist.”

A *realist* utopia is one, conversely, that does not make any claim to the organic composition of the collective unity of the community. In fact, its operation is to pronounce fully the presence of the antagonism that *prevents* the collective unity of the society, while simultaneously offering a glimpse of an emancipatory resolution to the problem. It accomplishes, in other words, a mediation of the antagonism that leaves it intact while simultaneously elucidating that which remains true on both sides of the contradiction. The latter is also how I understand the category of the *totality*. A cultural example that both Jameson and Žižek cite is the David Simon television series, *The Wire* (2002-2008) (Jameson 2010; Žižek 2012). What they both show is that each season of the series portrays a genuine social problem – the conflict between drug dealers/organized crime and the police, which is ultimately also a racialized conflict; the struggles of labour unions and the disintegration of organized labour; problems in public education; and the problems with what is now commonly referred to as the “fake news” – but each season also proposes some ultimately utopian scenario in which the problem is ideally resolved; the solutions, however, are only ultimately defeated due to ill political will, and the context of power within the existing class struggle. To cite Žižek, who refers to Jameson’s piece on the series, “*The Wire* is a whodunit in which the culprit is the social totality, the whole system, not an individual criminal (or group of criminals)” (Žižek 2012: 101). He goes on to ask, “how are we to represent (or, rather, render) in art the totality of contemporary capitalism?... The point is that the Real of the capitalist system is abstract, the abstract-virtual movement of Capital” (Ibid). And isn’t this in fact what Jameson means when he refers to the mode of production as the absent cause, of History as being only available to us in textual form? Nevertheless,

the aesthetic rendering, and particularly the utopian realist one, provides access to and represents the unrepresentable absent cause: the Real of the class struggle.

Dystopia is a relevant postmodern genre. Unlike the kinds of utopian envisioning that was typical of modernism, dystopia is postmodern in the way that it relates to History at the end of History, quite so in the sense of Jameson's own hyper-quoted statement (often, wrongly attributed to Žižek), that "it seems easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism" (Jameson 1994: xii). As I have argued in other places (Flisfeder 2013; Flisfeder 2017), Jameson's statement models the postmodern disposition against big utopian projects. Jameson's thesis and picture of capitalist cynical reason ("it's easier to imagine the end, than...") amounts to a kind of retroactive utopia in which the present situation (despite existing flaws) is imagined as the best of all possible worlds – all that's left is the end of the world. But this, I would argue is a kind of *uncritical* dystopia; dystopia also has the potential for bringing to consciousness a truly utopian ideal, what we might call *critical* dystopias (see Mirrlees 2015). An *uncritical* dystopia would be of the kind that Jameson links to reification, whereas a *critical* dystopia is of the realist variety. An uncritical dystopia depicts a future gone bad *because* we strayed too far from the present conditions – for example, the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2009); a critical dystopia, instead, shows us just where we are headed if we *do not change* the present course of things historically, such as Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) – it stands as a realist warning of the potential to come should we continue down our path of existing capitalism. Critical dystopia provides in textual form what is truly at stake in the category of the *totality*, or maybe even a metaphoric negative image of it – it is a concept not unlike that of cognitive mapping, which Jameson (1998: 49) has also proclaimed to be merely another way to express what is at stake in class consciousness.

## **Totality as the Form of Historical and Dialectical Thought, or, How to Arrive at the New**

Far from the caricature depicted by Laclau, the concept of totality goes beyond the modeling of the society according to the base/superstructure topography. Lukács provides for Jameson the most adequate model of totality, which he says expresses the *limits* to bourgeois consciousness: not to its content, but to its *form*. For Lukács, totality shows us what is false, not so much at the level of the *content* of any given ideology, but what is false at the level of its *form*. Applying totality to his predecessors, Marx, for instance, showed us, not what was wrong in the *details* of Ricardo and Smith, but how their models failed to identify the larger totality of perspective (Jameson 1971: 183). This is where we can return to what is dialectical within the field of the historical, for as Jameson also points out with regard to the shift from Hegel to Marx:

dialectical thought is in its very structure self-consciousness... The difference between the Hegelian and the Marxist dialectics can be defined in terms of the type of self-consciousness involved. For Hegel this is a relatively logical one... here the thinker comes to understand the way in which his own determinate thought processes... limit the results of his thinking. For the Marxist dialectic, on the other hand, the self-consciousness aimed at is the awareness of the thinker's position in society and history itself, and of the limits imposed on this awareness by his class position. (Jameson 1971: 340)

Form, of course, matters for Žižek as well, as he is very keen to point out some of the methodological overlaps between Marx and Freud when it comes to the analyses of commodities and of dreams (Žižek 1989). What is historical about Žižek's thought is shown in the way that he describes the significance of the *formal* transitions in the consciousness of the subject, from feudalism to capitalism, from modernity to postmodernity, from the predominance of the Master's Discourse to that of the University Discourse (see Žižek 2006: 298-308). It involves the formal shift in the position and the role of the Master-Signifier, whereas in the Master's Discourse it is in the position of agency, and in the University Discourse it is in the position of truth – the truth that the university administrator is really just the repressed Master. But it is in the

Hysteric's discourse that the Master is troubled, bombarded with the question: "what do you want?" "What am I for you?" It is the Hysteric who is the true agent of the production of new historical *knowledge*, the hysteric who does for psychoanalysis what the proletariat does for historical materialism; they are the assumed subject positions of those who produce real new knowledge, who push forward the hermeneutic practice in the face of the dialectical motion at a standstill.

Change, as Jameson describes, "is essentially a function of content seeking its adequate expression in form" (Jameson 1971: 328); and "form is but the working out of content in the realm of the superstructure" (Ibid: 329). At this intersection, we might be able to see in what sense the signifier is the cipher of both the historical and the dialectical relative to Marxist and Freudian hermeneutics, of which Jameson and Žižek now name the co-ordinates for the continuation of these analytical and political projects under conditions of contemporary postmodern capitalism. So how might we now imagine change and the new? How might we understand subversion at a moment when the subversion of the signifier is the dominant ideology?

### **Communist Epilogue; or, An American Utopia**

What is ultimately paralyzing about the end of history and the end of ideology, about the postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives, about the breakdown of the signifying chain or the demise of symbolic efficiency – what is ultimately paralyzing about all of these things is the loss of the utopian imaginary that drives historical progress. Therefore, those who have proclaimed the end of history, as well as those who have chided the tyranny of the signifier, regardless of what they may attest to with regard to their criticisms of the present system, are today the true utopians of the present. They are those who miss the retroactive determination of the imaginary required for emancipatory cognitive mapping, which in the same gesture that it deconstructs the hegemonic signifier of the present, brings – through its radical act – a wholly new one. The *Communist* imaginary is not one that premises a necessarily inevitable, absolute teleology; it does not conceive a predestined historical outcome. Rather it provides for us the co-ordinates for regulating the movement away from the *dystopian* trajectory of the present that is maintained by the cynical resignation of the



dominant postmodern consciousness. Communism is a signifier of *retroactive speculation* – or of *retroactive signification*. And, if postmodernism means in some ways the elevation of subversion into the reigning ideology, then perhaps the signifier of contemporary radical politics needs to be Communism, not as subversion, but as our new *common sense* political unconscious.

Communism as our new common sense master code arises in Jameson and Žižek's recent projects, from Žižek's volumes on *The Idea of Communism*, to Jameson's essay "An American Utopia" (contained in the book of the same name, edited by Žižek, which we might also count as another volume in *The Idea of Communism* series). What they both continue to demonstrate is that in the face of the absolute foreclosure of the signifier, the deadlocks of capitalist exploitation, as well as its own inherent internal contradictions, can only go on and transform into absolute excess. As Žižek has put it, "when people tell me that nothing can be changed [my response is] – no it can, because things are already changing like crazy. And what we should say is just this: if we let things change the way they *are* changing automatically we are approaching a kind of new perverse, permissively authoritarian society, which will be authoritarian but in a new way" (Žižek 2013: 50). Against the Deleuzo-Guattarian-inspired #accelerationist view (see, for instance, Shaviro 2015; and, Srnicek and Williams 2015) that seeks only to exacerbate and heighten existing contradictions, or at the very least continue to maintain the deterritorialized flows of capital, without – that is – imposing a new signifier, we might take the advice of both Jameson and Žižek that it is today increasingly necessary to re-invent utopia!

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