

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Ten, Number Three

## Towards the Capitalist discourse: the sublimity of objet petit and the Master-Signifier

Simon Rajbar, Cardiff University

### Abstract

The focus of this paper lies in the unconscious solidification of capitalist ideology through Lacanian understanding of subjectivity. The analysis intervenes in the ideological *fantasy* and its inherent antagonisms in order to analyse the way capitalist ideology strives to fill or repress these ruptures in the socio-symbolic edifice. It points to the mode of proliferation of certain objects, which the fantasy puts in the position where they can function as objects of desire, covering the cracks in the socio-symbolic order by filling their own lack. Furthermore, I focus on the establishment and signification of meaning within the capitalist matrix as well as its dialectical overlap with the objects proliferated by the socio-economic system in question. Such simultaneous fusion of lack and excess creates ideological enjoyment and solidifies capitalist ideology in the subject's fantasy construction. Here lies the strength of capitalist ideology and its appropriation of even some social phenomena into consumerist categories. It is therefore vital to understand how ideology manages to fix its core of enjoyment through a dialectical overlap of meaning and objects to produce a totalized experience of reality. In itself, this already points to the much neglected Lacanian discourse of the Capitalist, revealing how the daily reality of subjects is driven by unconscious fantasy in its dogmatic ideological circle. It also hints to the homology between Lacan's surplus-*jouissance* and Marx's surplus-value.

**Keywords:** Capitalism, Lacan, discourse of the Capitalist, ontology of crisis, ideology

## Introduction

“The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was to convince the world he does not exist,” proclaimed a description of the omnipotent, underground mafia boss Keyser Söze. He was embodied in a limping and awkward small time thief, pulling the strings in the film *The Usual Suspects*. During the interrogation, Söze utilized random objects in the detective’s office and incorporated them in his own story with new meanings that fascinated and ultimately deceived the detective. The latter simply mistook the clumsy crook as a small deviation of the parasitic underworld through which he could analyse his way deeper and deeper towards the main suspect. With eyes frivolously set on achieving the goal, he overlooked the dynamics of his aim, namely the way of achieving the goal. The crook made sure that the detective shifted his focus of conduct solely on the aim, the proverbial hunt, which led him to suspend the gap between the aim and the goal. The detective has forsaken the latter by misperceiving it via his relation to the former. Consequently, he nullified the importance of the object-Thing sitting in front of his eyes the whole time. Could we not say something similar about our predicament towards the capitalist dynamics: one of the greatest tricks capitalism ever pulled was its disappearance from any serious public debate or analysis in the course of over three decades? Were we not, just like the detective, dealing with and fixing small time deviations in a blind hope to stir the socio-economic model in the right direction, unwittingly avoiding the troubling core of the problem? Moreover, does it not hold the same for the logic of capitalism itself, in turn embedding the subjects into its own dynamics? Has Keyser Söze not imposed his own framework on the unsuspecting detective, confining him to its limits?

We can perhaps relate to our own predicament through such examples, which can help us demonstrate how capitalism appropriates subjects into its own failed logic. Like capitalism itself, subjects misperceive the link between their knowledge or goal, namely what they think they are doing, and action or aim, what they are actually doing. In this case, research from the point of view of a whole, omniscient subject would hinder not only the point of inquiry into the analysis, but the analysis itself. We should not overlook the awkward, limping system in front of our eyes by creating a distance with constant fixing of its inherent deviations. “The ultimate idolatry is not the idolizing of the mask, of the image itself, but the belief that there is some hidden positive content beyond the mask,” (Žižek 2003: 138). By looking for some deeper truths behind the self-imposed masks, we are creating a distance towards official ideology. This distance, usually considered as a protective measure against ideological

dynamics, is in fact redoubled, in itself already ideological and inevitably serves only to perpetuate a decaying system.

Considering the example of our detective, the analysis proper should not start with a simple discursive research of capitalistic deviations, but by striking directly at the very core of the systemic inconsistencies in order to see how they produce the deviations in question. Market discourse has become fundamental and central component of ideological struggle according to Jameson, where everyone surrenders to the various forms of market ideology. The proposition that the market is a part of the human nature has become the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle of our time (Jameson 2012: 281-2). In this sense, a noticeable shift is occurring in both public and analytical spheres during the last economic crisis. For this shift to occur, however, the discourse revolving around capitalism first gained momentum by manifesting itself in the form of public uprisings embodied in the anti-globalisation movement and revived analytically through still obscured theoretical schools and institutions. In many cases, instead of a critical approach to the fundamental structure of our predicament, we ended up with yet another version of alternative modernity, critique of postmodern imperialism, or an externalized enemy in terms of the usual suspects, the communist-capitalist China or obscene US profiteering. Over-occupied with the investigation of temporary distortions, these views neglect the conceptual analysis of systemic infringements and fail to see how they affect the fundamental form of capitalist reproduction.

The contemporary systemic crisis has clearly penetrated a whole plethora of economic, political, and social discourses. There is a silent agreement forming among different academics, commentators, and analysts of different viewpoints that there is something fundamentally inconsistent with our predominant economic model. The debate is slowly shifting from crisis management to the fundamental questions of systemic structure and its inherent antagonisms. Despite being hard to deny the negative impacts of the current socio-economic constellation, the majority still seems to unwittingly rely on the intervention of the proverbial invisible hand to fix the current distortions and do all the hard work to eventually sustain the status quo. Even those ubiquitous critics of capitalism tremble at the possibility of its potential demise. In this sense, there is a proliferation of analyses looming on the horizon. Again, the majority focuses on its overcoming by proposing different solutions that are usually attached to the framework which caused the crisis in the first place. Some research is dealing with the system's historical analysis, but few with its ontological crisis, when in fact the two approaches must be conflated if we are to arrive at a feasible critique of our modern predicament. We must be careful, though, not to take capitalism as a simple abstraction, an overdetermined totality as a contingent articulation of different economic discourses. Marx

has already pointed out that capitalism as political economy must be analysed according to its notional structure with economy as its object. By disregarding such considerations, the inquiry may overlook the role of other notions in social totality. Capitalism is not just the outcome of multiple discursive practices and struggles for hegemony, but the logic of the capital is a singular matrix which designates its real (Žižek 2007: 211).

To discern the capitalist ideological matrix, we must approach the analysis of ideology at its purest elementary cell that goes beyond the formal discursive analysis where the need to draw a demarcation line between ideology and factual reality pulls us right back into ideology. As Gramsci has long observed through his notion of hegemony, ideology already persists in the word itself. We should add to this insight two of Althusser's famous premises: there is no practice except by and in an ideology; there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects (Althusser 1971: 170). It becomes clear now that we cannot approach ideological critique on the basis of social reality alone or what Althusser called *real conditions*. If ideology is already at work in everything that we experience as reality, we should treat ideology as Lacan's "*not-all*," namely to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance towards it. Since ideology engulfs reality, this place must remain devoid of any positive universality (Žižek 2012: 17). While we can develop a critical distance towards ideology, we should also bear in mind the unconscious libidinal attachments that structure subject's reality. The subjects are therefore always stained by ideology since they cannot live in the Real, but need substance to sustain their social edifice.

Psychoanalysis offers us here a unique point of inquiry by endorsing the premise that there is no externality to the above ideological dynamics. As such, it provides a way to observe reality that is ontologically devoid of any positive content. It allows us not only to see what content fills the place of this lack, but also to examine the origin and causes of such content by looking at its form. Psychoanalysis can access the libidinal economy of the subject invested to fill in this lack, as well as the processes of transference structuring social reality. In the process of filling or repressing such constitutive lack, ideology strives to create a fantasmatic illusion of social totality by concealing the Real of an antagonism, a traumatic dimension beyond signification. As Lacan claimed, the trick lies in the illusion that is already at work in reality itself and is as such redoubled. What people "misrecognise is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity," (Žižek 2008b: 30). The latter is thus already ideological, since the socio-economic system itself embeds the subjects into its own logic through commodity fetishism, where it finds ways to justify relentless commodification and valorization.

In this sense, the loosening of rules, perceived liberations, and even forms of protests can be a part of capitalistic dynamics, its own form of power. This is the point of Lacan's famous observation of the student protests in 1968, claiming that their form of protest only addresses a new master, since it was already unwittingly exhibited in a shopping window. On this point, psychoanalysis can break the dogmatic circle of ideology and ".../ could perhaps enable you to locate what it is exactly you are rebelling against – which does not stop that thing from continuing extremely well. /.../ The regime is putting you on display. It says 'look at them enjoying!'" (Lacan 2007: 208). By looking closely at the processes of these phenomena, we can observe how variety is not produced through institutional power, but by capitalism through saturated markets. The proliferation of the so called freedoms, varieties, and even transgressions are valorized as niche markets in an attempt to extract from them the surplus-value they bring. The economic form hijacks it to intensify the profit potential and in the process converges the capitalist power dynamics with the dynamics of resistance (Massumi 2003: 224). In this process, we are particularly interested in explaining the structural procedure of valorization via the commodity form.

In regard to the above dynamics, we should first emphasise the Lacanian premise that society is based on its repressed traumatism, which in turn paradoxically structures its very social reality. Since society never fully integrates its antagonistic split in the socio-symbolic order, the distance between the full vision of society and its lack is enacted. This gap is covered by the mechanism of *fetishism*, which simultaneously embodies and denies the structural impossibility of a totalized society in its positive existence. As such, it also marks the eruption of enjoyment in the social field (Žižek 2008b: 142). In this sense, we can observe how class domination has returned in the disavowed mode of fetishistic relations between things. A fundamental displacement occurs in the way subjects relate to objects and the way they experience objects relating to themselves (Vighi 2010: 30). By considering Lacan's insight that illusion is at work in reality itself, it is clear then that we cannot conceive the perpetual capitalistic crisis on a merely empirical level. The true difficulty, therefore, is to think of capitalist ideology in its ontological lack and simultaneously grasping it as consubstantial with the lacking subjectivity. This allows us to observe how ideology fills this lack in an attempt to create a fantasmatic illusion of social totality. Since it justifies endless valorization on the background of filling the gaps in the social edifice, it is crucial to consider the language and ideology of capitalism in the analysis. Capitalising on the crisis through an uncompromising signification can reveal the method inscribed in the system, striving for its self-reproduction and creating (human) waste as its by-product.

The above points to the basic modality of capitalist ideology, which strives to fill the cracks it produces by erasing its own impossibility. The lack from which it emanates is necessarily filled with content and the basic Lacanian lesson on this point is that the subjects are themselves masters of their own slavery. Their whole struggle consists in covering these gaps in the socio-symbolic reality by mediating ontological inconsistency. Conversely, by being mediated and therefore neutralised, that very structural ontological fracture creates their respective socio-historical paradigms. It must be noted though that the subject itself does not fill this Void with substance, which is itself ontologically incomplete, but stands in the very place of the antagonism that renders this substance incomplete. The ontological gap shining through the subject and substance is therefore exactly what binds them together and designates the overlap between the subjective and objective dimensions (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 104).

Such negative ontology paves the way to analyse the mechanisms through which the libidinal content is invested by the subjects in order to sustain the totality of their socio-symbolic edifice. As such, it allows us to observe the manifestation of ideology at the level of the unconscious. This way we also avoid analysing the always-already ideological content, which is the very trap postmodernism lures us into. To round up the above theoretical arguments, the subjects are therefore always divided between what they consciously know about their socio-political organisation of reality and a set of more or less unconscious beliefs they hold in regard to the system's authority. Ideological content then fills the gap between knowledge and belief and constitutes itself from the point of lack at the level of the unconscious. It is therefore the role of ideology to transform or erase the antagonisms of the Real in the socio-symbolic reality created by this very lack.

### **Fantasy and the sublimity of objet petit a**

We shall immerse in our detective investigation by striking directly at the Keyser Söze in front of our eyes and analyse his structural role in the reproduction of the system, instead of solving the mysteries he happens to lay on our path. With the considerations above and the dangers of the prevalent, supposedly non-ideological "End of history"<sup>1</sup> logic, we should approach capitalist ideology in terms of its libidinal features through Lacanian fantasy. We therefore examine a place of the real which stretches from trauma to fantasy where fantasy serves as a protective screen concealing something primary, determinant, and repetitious. In fantasy, the subject is frequently unperceived, but always present and situates himself as

---

<sup>1</sup> See Francis Fukoyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon books INC., 1992).

determined by it. Fantasy thus serves as a support for desire and as a complex signifying ensemble therefore links and blocks the subject's unconscious (Lacan 1994: 60, 185).

Every successful ideology conceals itself in the fantasmatic totality of the socio-symbolic edifice that is sustained through ideological fantasy. Fantasy contains the libidinal investment of the subject and is basically the subject's own fantasy. However, this structure is always stained by an antagonistic split, which cannot be integrated into the socio-symbolic order. The otherness of society in its antagonistic nature is thus the otherness of the subject, where it is possible to observe the overlapping of the subject's self-alienation and the alienation in society (Vighi 2010: 99). This objective and subjective overlap is important to keep in mind when thinking of our capitalistic predicament. Fantasy provides a framework for social reality by mediating between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of objects encountered in reality. They function as objects of desire, which close the gap opened in the socio-symbolic structure. The role of fantasy is therefore to provide the coordinates for desire itself (Žižek 2008a: 7).

We should also bear in mind that by structure desire is always mediated as it manifests itself through the socio-symbolic order and is as such the desire of the Other. It is constituted in the gap opened up by those signifiers, which come to represent the Other for it (Lacan 2002: 253). Desire is therefore characterised by its attachment to an object-cause of desire, sliding from one object to another in the structurally failed quest of its satisfaction. While the object of desire can be isolated and identified, the very cause of this desire, the lack embodied by the unconscious, which is what the object masks, must remain repressed. As desire slides from object to object, the subject always encounters a lack in the object that is already stained by certain unattainable excess, causing it to drift from one signifier to another. The proliferation of objects in capitalism should be read in the same way, since desire structurally always fails to bring satisfaction and thus produces more anxiety in the process.

Paradoxically, capitalism as a socio-economic system set out to fulfil all of our desires thus produces an endless stream of more desires to be satisfied and ultimately failed.

Fantasy construction is therefore sustained by desire following a particular object of desire, while simultaneously striving to remove its disturbing leftover to create a complete socio-symbolic order. This paradoxical object structurally always misses its place of inscription and simultaneously coincides with its own lack. The exclusion of this element from the socio-symbolic reality then provides the coordinates for its very frame. In the framework of fantasy, this element thus plays the role of some fascination, driving the subjects to follow it through the fantasy narration. It is the cause of desire and at the same time paradoxically posed

retroactively by this desire. This fascinating object only materializes the void of our desire around which it moves. It functions as a substitute for some missing representation and as such represents its lack, filling out the void of this lost object. That means we are dealing with a signifier, which is a part of representation of reality by filling its void, and also an object, which must be included in the signifying text (Žižek 2008a: 276; 2008b: 69, 178-181, 2008c: xiv).

What these positive objects are filling is not a mask for another order of objects, but simply the emptiness these objects fill. Here lies the sublimity of *objet petit a*: it is an ordinary object that happens to find itself occupying a position of an impossible object of desire, which is the positive remainder of the Real from the process of symbolization. It correlates to the subject by filling this void for the subject in the Other (which is ultimately the subject itself). By giving a body to this lack, an object starts functioning as the cause of desire (Žižek 2008a: 105, 276; 2008b: 221-223). In the transition of objects, *objet petit a* then serves the function of delivering the subject from satisfaction of desire, which would otherwise mean its simultaneous disintegration. The socio-symbolic order is therefore always stained by this particular object, constituting the subject's universality.

It is possible then to define *objet petit a* in its function as a mediator between the impossibility of the Real and the empirical objects that start to embody this very impossibility and as such produce (dis)pleasure for the subjects (Žižek 2001: 97). It is crucial on this point to also think of the function of *objet petit a* as the element that closes the socio-symbolic signification and simultaneously embodies the very inconsistency of this order in the subject's fantasy. In a dialectical overlap, it therefore simultaneously enables and prevents the full identity of the subject. This ambiguity is reflected in the subject's inconsistency, ultimately pointing towards the very inconsistency, the non-existence of the big Other (Vighi 2010: 101). *Objet petit a* is thus a remainder of the constitutive lack of the subject. Its disavowal marks the subject's subordination and inclusion in the socio-symbolic network. This allows us to observe how subjectivity and the socio-symbolic order emerge simultaneously by the intersection of their gaps. With this in mind, we are reaching the logic of effective proliferation and solidification of objects in capitalism, which are to be extracted for their surplus-value.

A double fracture can now be discerned beneath the enchanting appearance of *objet petit a*. On the one hand, this fascinating object designates the lack of the subject to itself, which always-already is, and on the other, the crack that makes objective reality ontologically inconsistent. If *objet petit a* is an inert stain, a leftover of symbolization from the Real, it is conversely also the minimal object necessary to produce a semblance of a coherent socio-

symbolic universe. That is to say, if objet petit a represents an ontological inconsistency of any socio-symbolic order, it simultaneously also produces an endless fantasmatic lure that strengthens rather than undermines such order. Its disavowal points to its ontological as well as socio-political role, embodying a certain unattainable excess. The proper task of objet petit a therefore lies precisely in its ambiguous role between devastating inconsistency and reactionary lure. While the emptiness of the object embodying the lack of the subject shines through it, this negativity is simultaneously neutralised by fantasy's pacifying function. Lacan, in the advent of scientific rationality of the University discourse that led to the ruse of capitalism, pointed to the critical historicization of objet petit a. That is achieved by making its constitutive negativity in the form of entropic waste less and less available by valorizing it via the commodity form. In this sense, we should conceive the core of desire in capitalism not so much as being attached to objet petit a with its liberating potential, but as a cruel master demanding more obedience to his ideological superego injunction "Enjoy!" Objet petit a seemed to undergo a transformation in capitalism from an inaccessible subversive remainder to an effective seal of the signifying operation (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 69-71, 78).

This should be put in context via Lacan's above claim on the discourse of University where attempts are made to neutralise the potentially subversive power of objet petit a. Consequently, this also explains how the possibility of experiencing the social link's negative point of articulation has been drastically reduced. Disabling objet petit a as an anxiety laden object of the drive seems to lead to a greater materialization of *jouissance* and with it to an administrated, mechanical society already condemned by Adorno and the Frankfurt school. With "masterization" of objet petit a, scientific knowledge and society are becoming increasingly totalitarian by establishing a discourse where anxiety and *jouissance* are incorporated in an unstable object of enjoyment, in which the self-difference of the object is counted as sheer differentiability. What gets lost in the process is experience, the ingredient for social transformation (ibid: 73).

Mediating between the fantasy form and positive objects in reality, objet a brings forward an array of objects that function as objects of desire from which surplus-value is extracted. In this process, the object that emanates from the being's lack turns into the object-cause of desire due to that very lack and establishes what we perceive as value (ibid: 98). In capitalistic rationality, objet petit a is therefore more able to stain the socio-symbolic order with its ability to successfully conceal the spectral apparitions from the Real, rather than simultaneously stand for a disturbing element with subversive potential. That is to say, it still embodies the negativity of the Real, but instead of new dimensions for the reconfiguration of

fantasy, this negativity is neutralised by fantasy via valorization and commodification, producing an alienated and split subject in the process.

The subversive potential of objet petit a is therefore being neutralised and used to extract a certain surplus-value from the objects. In that process, the negativity of the Real in such an anamorphic object needs an intervention from the subject's fantasy, which fuses this ambiguous element with the pacifying daily experience. To do this, these objects enter in a chain of signifiers where they alter and fuse meanings to create a fantasmatic appearance of totality. Their objective and subjective dimensions start to overlap, giving them an operational impetus through the capitalist fantasy. In order to fill in the gaps in this closed, circular movement, we must first look at the processes of establishing and sealing their meaning in the centre of a totalized socio-symbolic construction.

### **Caught in a loop: From objet a to Master-Signifier**

To see how meaning supports fantasy, we must first extract the moment when every ideology structures its ideological effect, namely the way certain signifiers (*Master-Signifier*) totalize our reality through the intervention of certain "nodal points" (*point de capiton*) in the ideological kernel of enjoyment. Ideological enjoyment is therefore the last support of ideology, which sustains itself by libidinal satisfaction the subject gets in its attempts to enjoy the symptom. By extracting this moment, which is simultaneously beyond and in the field of meaning, we can observe how ideology produces and manipulates enjoyment structured in fantasy. Since the content of subject's reality is managed through fantasy, it necessarily implies the mediation of the symbolic order, the big Other. In their interaction, the content is sutured by a central element through fusion of interconnecting signifiers in the field of meaning. Such an element represents an ideal unity, an ideal content beyond its true properties, but stripped and empty of its actual particularities (e.g. freedom, liberty). Master-Signifier (S1) therefore symbolizes a certain category and reduces the signified content to its image.

The identity of a certain ideological field is created and sustained by a multitude of ideological elements, the "floating signifiers," which are stitched into unity through a certain nodal point. The Lacanian point de capiton captures the open identity of signifiers into a signifying formation and stops their meaning from sliding. These points are in the heart of ideological struggle as they compete which of them will totalize the ideological edifice through its meaning and include in its series of equivalences other floating signifiers. This happens when the whole field of signifiers is sutured under the condition that one signifier "quilts" the whole

field and attaches particular elements to its overarching identity. However, point de capiton is not a density of supreme meaning, but on the contrary a bare structural agency of pure difference, an element which holds the universality together. That means meaning is itself additive and the signified is sliding along with the signifier, without being anchored to anything outside of themselves. They are stopped and tied together in point de capiton where their particular identity is determined retroactively (Fink 2004: 89, 112-3; Žižek 2008b: 95-7, 109-110). It is therefore crucial to detect this element that holds a specific ideological field together (e.g. God, Nation, Party...). While this element provides a full ideological experience of the socio-symbolic order, it also manifests an effect of a certain misperception of the ideological text. It therefore obfuscates the relation to our own predicament.

How does this operation of totalization take place? In the first instance, particular ideological elements are materialized through their signifiers. A signifier sustains its meaning by a self-referential movement which is never complete, but circulates around a certain void in an attempt to fully represent the object. The object that coincides with its own loss, objet petit a, the originally lost object of desire, is the embodiment of this void. A signifier then works as a substitute, filling out the void of some originally missing representation, the void of the lost object and as such represents its lack;<sup>2</sup> the presence of one signifier thus equals the absence of its opposite. The signifier therefore works on the background of its own possible absence that is materialized and forms a positive experience in the presence of its opposite (Žižek 2008b: 178-180; 2008d: 22). The objects stained by objet petit a in the order of signifiers are then sutured in the socio-symbolic order through a signifying formation.

Since signifiers represent a set of differences to each other, ideology as a fantasy solution deploys a signifier that functions as an empty container for the other's particular meanings (Žižek 2008a: 95). For a certain social totality or a historical unity to emerge, its narrative must refer to such a pure empty signifier that provides a totality of a certain ideological experience. Historical reality is always symbolized and the experience of its discourse is provided by an experience of its meaning, supported by some meaningless signifier without the signified. That meaningless Master-Signifier as “/.../ a signifier is what represents the subject for another signifier. This latter signifier is therefore the signifier to which all other signifiers represent the subject – which means that if this signifier is missing, all the other signifiers represent nothing,” (Lacan 2002: 304). This paradoxical signifier therefore gives body to lack as such and is not one in the chain of signifiers, but stands as the signifier

---

<sup>2</sup> In a signifying chain they operate through the process of *differentially* where the opposite of one signifier is not immediately another signifier, but the lack of the first. A signifier represents a gap between its own inscription as to be present and another signifier that would fill this gap when the first signifier is absent.

opposed to its absence and thus for the very presence of difference (Žižek 2011: 267, n. 199). As a signifier of lack, it is already in unity with its Other. The void is not external to it but S1 is itself a void, the void is its only content. This pure signifier does not designate any positive property of the object, since it only refers to its own unity (Žižek 2008d: 52).

Master-Signifier therefore provides an empty container for another signifier to attach and find itself in this lack and enter into a signifying chain. This empty Master-Signifier then supplements the chain of knowledge (S2) and thus enables it. Now the actual notion of reality gets devoid of its properties, but still presents its ideal form of content (ibid: 51, 76). However, this dialectical inversion does not change the element inscribed in the chain, but the “modality of its inscription in the symbolic network,” so that the “quilting takes place with a sudden reversal of perspective,” (ibid: 78). That means each signifier in the chain is now interlinked through their particularities with another, which conversely attach themselves to the universal meaning and thus produce the Master-Signifier for all other signifiers (e.g. democracy, freedom, liberty). The semiotic operation of the Master-Signifier therefore embodies an impossibility of society through a notion, which quilts other meanings to its narrative.

The hegemonic struggle of ideology is won or lost if it is able to successfully refer to and manipulate some extra-ideological kernel that holds the community together, which simultaneously cannot be directly reduced to a leverage of political power. Universal societal unity can therefore be presented through reliance on an empty signifier, hegemonized by a particular content of political struggle. The political struggle is therefore the struggle for the content of the empty signifier, representing the impossibility of society. Politics marks the gap between an ordinary signifier S2 and an empty signifier S1. In the hegemonic struggle of what subjects regard as apolitical content, one particular content becomes successful when its signifier is hegemonized and displaces other particular contents by providing the experience of an organized, consistent narrative. This narrative predetermines what subjects will experience as reality (Žižek 2008a: 28; 2008c: 207-8, 210, 311-313).

This is how Master-Signifier unifies a political field and as we have seen, it is not defined by its own content, but by its possibility of transference. We should also bear in mind that the hegemonic struggle and domination of these elements does not rest on force but consent, as Gramsci has already pointed out. In other words, the particularities of single signifiers are not suppressed, but provided with an identifiable space where they can alter and fuse identities in their service to the socio-political structure. This is the reason why certain realities of human existence can be (re)articulated and provided with a (new) meaning to fit the socio-

historic disposition of a certain society. One of the recent of such ominous examples is the re-articulation of torture justified precisely through freedom, where new limitations are sold as additional freedoms in the context of security. This process through the Master-Signifier of freedom mystifies and conceals a type of un-freedom as the foundation upon which the system relies.

### **Enjoyment: The overlap of lack and excess**

On this point, we should look at how *objet petit a* relates to the Master-Signifier within the capitalist matrix by observing how lack is perceived as plenitude. We can try to discern that via the above mentioned example of 68' student protests and Lacan's witty intervention. With it, he pointed out that any subjective resistance within the ruling capitalist ideology cannot provide an authentic subversion and is more likely to end up as a universalized deterioration. What the students overlooked is that the plurality of identities in liberal capitalism are fixed in the framework which corresponds to the Marxian insight that capital transcends territory where traditional fixity of ideological positions are an obstacle to the unconstrained commodification. They found themselves immersed in a socio-economic matrix that can domesticate and integrate excess by turning it into surplus-value.

The same dynamics can be observed in regard to the sexual revolution where excess can be valorized by capitalism as commodity and puts a price tag on it. What subjects in ideology overlook is how capitalism thrives on their excitement via consumerism and how this excitement is one of its profiteering patterns. This is yet another opportunity for capitalism to valorize the surplus-enjoyment by hijacking it to extract the surplus-value. Not only were the protests or the sexual revolution deprived of their subversive potential, but monitored and regulated by the perverted master of the Capitalist discourse. In times of crisis, the master retains his hegemony by utilizing liberal democracy to appease the rising anxiety. The compulsive, irrational, and valorized subversive stance within the capitalist matrix is therefore more likely to announce new forms of authoritarian political power, whose role is to keep the capitalist matrix in place. From the point of view of capital excess must be perceived as always available and at the same time depoliticized, criminalized, and deprived of its disturbing sting (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 85-6; Vighi 2010: 28).

Subjects are therefore pushed to experience all kinds of excesses as long as they are neutralised in advance. Even potentially subversive excesses of enjoyment can nevertheless get confined to the limits of the pleasure principle, meaning to enjoy without enjoyment (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 84). Albeit subjects aim for the full enjoyment, all they get is an

empty shell of commodified practices, since the subjects can never experience the given object fully. These type of experiences are then primarily empty in themselves, serving the purpose of profit accumulation via their attachment to the pacifying constraints of the pleasure principle. This emptiness can be discerned in the lack they bring (beer without alcohol, coffee without caffeine, adrenalin without danger, love without the fall). Surplus-value can nonetheless be extracted from them due to the overlap of lack and excess observed in the dialectical function of objet petit a and the Master-Signifier, which produces ideological enjoyment. It seems that subjects in capitalist society can best acquire meaning by a sort of silent, sedative enjoyment embodied in the object-commodity, completely reconciliatory to other subjects and capitalist dynamics via commodity fetishism. It seems that the totality of life in capitalism has been reduced to safe pleasures of frantic consumption in the shape of new products, styles, and experiences, unwittingly keeping the status quo.

With these final thoughts we are again reaching back to the proliferation of objects via objet petit a. If the task of objet petit a is to bring forward new objects but cloak their subversive potential, the crucial dialectical function of the Master-Signifier is then to bind and materialize the overlap of subject and object. This process enables the emergence of subjectivity as well as objectivity. That means the Master-Signifier quilts, or sutures, the being's ontological incompleteness. The Lacanian understanding of identity confirms this consideration, since the self-being is by definition the result of a detour through the Other. In this process, the subject borrows the available identity of the social order but, simultaneously, objective reality emerges through the self-alienating acceptance of the mediated role of language (ibid: 67). It is crucial to understand this operation as consubstantial to the dialectics of objet petit a described above.

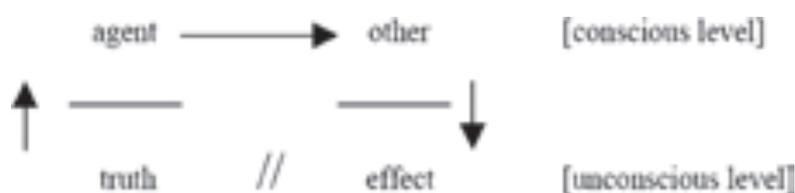
In comparison, both objet petit a and the Master-Signifier conceal the gap whose radical disavowal determines the fantasmatic formation of a meaningful world. However, despite both embodying a paradoxical lack, they perform a different function. According to Žižek, the key difference lies in their quilting role, where the Master-Signifier indicates "the point at which the signifier falls into the signified," while "*objet a* is on the side of the signifier, it fills in the lack in/of the signifier," (Žižek in Feldner and Vighi 2015: 69). In their relation to lack, objet a embodied in an object can be seen as a more revealing and more explicit element in the socio-symbolic order than the Master-Signifier, which points to its ontological and implicitly political role.

It is very useful on this point to turn to the last chapter of Lacan's *Seminar XI* where he points to the short circuit between S1 and objet a. As discussed above, objet petit a under Capitalist

discourse performs an effective seal of the signifying operation via commodification and valorization of the lack it embodies, rather than pointing to socio-symbolic inconsistencies. Due to the minimal embodiment of this lack, its function in this disposition translates in the superego injunction to enjoy via the object, an arrangement also found in the discourse of perversion. We can argue on this point that the mode of capitalist rationality commodified objet petit a and it now occupies the place of the Master-Signifier, which closes the circular signification loop of the capitalist ideological fantasy. As Feldner and Vighi point out, the enjoyment attached to the commodity then becomes a Master-Signifier and the positive object becomes its compulsive enjoyment. The injunction to enjoy as a part of desire is therefore ushered by a cruel master, demanding obedience from the point of unconscious (2015: 71).

### The unconscious logic of the Capitalist discourse

Above considerations have finally brought us to two important insights: first, objet petit a under capitalism does not only seem to successfully seal the ruptures in the socio-symbolic edifice, but also transforms into the Master-Signifier where the injunction to enjoy is coupled with the temporary object; second, it identifies Capital itself as the new Master, pointing to the much neglected and underdeveloped Lacanian discourse of the Capitalist. We can approach this claim through the four discourses as described by Lacan.<sup>3</sup> The question that remains to be answered is how to detect this master in the context of the mentioned discourses. In terms of today's capitalistic crisis, we can observe the anticlockwise regression of the four discourses from the discourse of the Master to the discourse of the University, which captures the crucial role of the Master-Signifier. It is important to note that in the passage to the modern University discourse, the supposedly objective scientific knowledge has merely substituted the role of the Master.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>3</sup> See particularly *Seminars XVI* and *XVII*, conceived in the aftermath of the 1968 protests

<sup>4</sup> For an elaborate description of the four discourses and its mathemes see: Alenka Zupačič, When Surplus enjoyment meets surplus value. In: Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (eds), *Reflections on Seminar XVII. Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (London, New York: Duke University Press, 2006)

Figure 1: The four discourses in question are produced by an anticlockwise rotation. These terms stand in a fixed relationship with each other and rotate by a quarter turn, thus giving shape to the four different discourses (Feldner and Vighi, 2015: 77)

For Lacan, knowledge is the conflation of subjective and objective, the foundation of which is both material and unconscious. With knowledge in the place of the new master, the chain of knowledge (S2) now occupies the hegemonic place of the agent and becomes objective by pretending it has abandoned its foundation in *jouissance*. What is remarkable on this point is the organization of work-value in capitalism and the historical appearance of knowledge on the market as commodity. On this point, “the secret of the worker himself is to be reduced to being no longer anything but value,” where the “surplus *jouissance* is no longer surplus *jouissance* but is inscribed simply as a value to be inscribed in or deducted from the totality of whatever it is that is accumulating,” (Lacan 2007: 80). That leads the capitalists to buy the knowledge from the workers, the gaining of which they effectively do not pay for. Consequently, the logic of capital itself occupies the position of the master, while

Discourse of the University

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \longrightarrow \frac{a}{S}$$

Discourse of the Master

$$\frac{S_1}{S} \longrightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

Discourse of the Capitalist

$$\frac{S}{S_1} \longrightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

simultaneously depriving the workers of their subversive potential. If the above anticlockwise turn installs “the new tyranny of knowledge” as the new master, it also modifies the link between the other and the production of objects of desire (*a*). This link is now occupied by a short circuit between knowledge and new others or commodities. The main effect of such disposition is that the place of production in capitalism is now occupied by the subject of the unconscious (\$), which is produced by and foreclosed to universal knowledge (Lacan 2007: 82-3; Vighi 2010: 52-4).

Figure 2: The three mentioned discourses of the Master, University, and Capitalist with their respective changes (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 77)

With the last claim we have already advanced to the discourse of the Capitalist, which does not follow the rotating logic of the other discourses, but is arrived at by a way of inversion of S1/\$ into \$/S1 in the discourse of the Master, foreclosing castration. This signals the change from the Master discourse, where mastery is antagonized by its unconscious truth, to the Capitalist discourse, where the truth of the barred subject is the Master-Signifier.

Furthermore, in both the Capitalist and University discourses, the Master-Signifier occupies the place of the unconscious, while the agency in the Capitalist discourse is taken over by knowledge (S2) and the barred subject (\$) (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 77-8). What emerges is a perverse situation where the self-alienated subject believing in his own omnipotence is in the place of the agent, in the command and production of knowledge. The subject is then duped into believing it can access the truth qua mastery, creating a discourse where the gaps opened by intrusions of the Real are suspended. In both discourses, however, the social link is in danger of imploding since it is constituted by a foreclosed Master-Signifier, despite having supposedly neutral scientific knowledge or the omniscient subject at its helm.

It is important to note that the relation to the truth qua Master-Signifier is very different in the two discourses. We can approach this phenomena via the University discourse where knowledge attempts to address and control the lost object (*a*), producing a subjective division (\$). S1 in this case is disavowed as ungraspable truth and the spectral apparitions from the Real are producing cracks in the socio-symbolic order. These cracks of the social edifice, however, gain a different form of relations in the Capitalist discourse, emphasised by Lacan in his Milan talk with an arrow pointing downwards from \$ to S1. It points to a different type of disavowal, which can be analysed according to the fetishistic reading of ideology.<sup>5</sup> In both of the discourses, then, we are dealing with a disavowed S1, although the relation to this disavowal in the Capitalist discourse is enacted by a fetishistic distance. Fetish in this case is merely a lie that enables the capitalist subject to control the truth.<sup>6</sup>

The barred subject of the Capitalist discourse is therefore very well aware of the truth of the discourse, but finds reasons to suspend its symbolic efficiency by establishing a fetishistic distance towards it (I know very well, but... - the position of the pervert who directly identifies with the object of enjoyment). A prime example of such a parallax object can be found in money; the subjects are well aware that money as such is a piece of paper with numbers on it, but they endow it with an aura of fetishistic belief due to its structural role in capitalistic society. Hence, what we are dealing with is a case of implicit perversion. The perverted

---

<sup>5</sup> For further reading on the symptomatic and fetishist reading of ideology, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime object of ideology* (London, New York: Verso Books, 2008), particularly chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> For further clarification of fetish as inverse of the symptom and their homology in ideological critique, see Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), particularly part 1.

subject believes he is in control, but it is the fetishistic distance itself that is ideological and causes the subject to overlook the dynamics in which he is an instrument to the enjoyment of Capital. The structural role of S1, however, remains the same; if we are to disturb this element, the whole system implodes. The subject is therefore unable to grasp the truth qua S1 to the point where mastery reappears in the guise of injunction to enjoy.

We can observe this operation through the above described formation of meaning and its dialectical overlap with objet a responsible for the proliferation of the objects of desire. Since capitalism produces an endless stream of commodities according to our structurally failed desires, what the subjects in capitalist discourse therefore really get is the lack of things. Following this logic further, the meaning imposed on these objects is thus established through the process of differential on the basis of what they are lacking, not their opposite. The reason behind its persuasiveness is the belief of ideological subjects that what they are really getting is what they perceive as lacking by unwittingly subverting their position (we can again resort to the signifier of freedom). This process is consubstantial to the capitalist discourse of production; it is able to produce more and more commodities available for purchase, because the subjects believe that they are actually getting what they really want. Despite being aware of the truth, the fetishistic suspension in the form of cynicism enables them to believe they are actually purchasing the accumulated *jouissance*, the lack of objet a that keeps eluding them. Nonetheless, the objects (*a*) are in fact substitutes brought about by objet petit a as the embodiment of certain surplus of *jouissance* setting desire in motion.

The capitalist discourse is thus fundamentally a perverted discourse because it relies on the accumulation of *jouissance* and its ambivalent lack for the consumer. That makes sense only through the discourse of perversion, since it takes it for granted. However, considering that the subject emerges through the way of disavowal and organization of *jouissance*, the latter cannot be accumulated. On this point, capitalism manages to convince the subject that it is enjoying the real *a*, the lack that the subject is desperately seeking but never able to attain. This discourse is perverted exactly because it pretends to produce the real lack as accumulated *jouissance*, while it merely produces its imitation. The consumer society therefore derives its meaning through such production and it is in this perverted fantasy that capitalism found a way to achieve its ultimate goal – the endless accumulation of surplus-value. As Lacan warned through Marx, what the latter rejects in surplus-value is exactly the plundering of surplus-*jouissance* (Lacan 2007: 81). The capitalist ideology therefore convinces its subjects that they are getting “the real thing,” the proverbial “it” they are searching for, while in reality what they get is exactly the embodied lack of this “it.” As Alenka Zupančič (2006: 170) wrote: “The revolution related to capitalism is none other than this: it

found the means of making the waste count. Surplus value is nothing else but the waste or loss that counts, and the value of which is constantly being added to or included in the mass of capital.”

The Capitalist matheme therefore confirms the above claim of objet petit a serving the duty to a harsh master, who demands obedience to the unconscious command of enjoyment. Subjects act as free agents in their self-determination, but are in fact under an unconscious injunction where the mastery occupies a displaced position of truth. If the Master demanded “You must obey!,” the University command is “You must know!,” transforming into the Capitalist command “You must enjoy!,” despite both of the latter two being experienced as spontaneous (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 78).

“The crisis, not of the Master discourse, but of the Capitalist discourse, which is its substitute, is overt (*ouverte*). I am not saying to you that the Capitalist discourse is rotten, on the contrary, it is something wildly clever, eh? Wildly clever but headed for a blowout,” (Lacan 1972: 10-11). At first glance, the outcome is formally the same as with the Master discourse, since the Capitalist discourse produces a *qua* lack. However, there is a profound change in the lower unconscious level where S1, the disavowed master of the barred subject, is unable to relate to its product or effect (*a*) of its discourse. That means that the subject of the unconscious, either the consumer or the worker, is paradoxically situated in the position of command and production. As we warned in the beginning, this is the unconscious position that blinds the subject of the Capitalist discourse, believing he has the access to objective knowledge and thus the full vision of society. As Althusser has already warned, ideology is most efficient when it remains concealed.<sup>7</sup> The capitalist worker or consumer therefore addresses the other as objective knowledge and the effect of this link is the production of surplus-value, the so called valorized surplus, a distortion of the surplus within *jouissance* as deadlock to any social link. Crucially, we thus arrive at the truth of the discourse embodied by Capitalism as the Master-Signifier (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 79).

Let us put Lacan’s above observation into perspective. Capitalism is “wildly clever” exactly because it inserts in the desiring subject the illusion of full autonomy, while it is simultaneously secretly forcing this desire to make a one way trip into production and consumption, but disregarding their dynamics and consequences. It therefore serves only its own logic of valorization and accumulation via commodification. It is the same logic that consequently elevates consumption and work into highest priorities of desire. The more the

---

<sup>7</sup> See Louis Althusser’s essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Exemplary fetishistic distance concealing what Althusser called *real conditions* is a total immersion in and identification with the ideological presuppositions mentioned above as the idea of “End of History” by F. Fukuyama.

subject enjoys its power, the emptier it becomes since the true object-cause of desire qua lack keeps eluding it. In the relation to mastery, we can discern how Capitalist discourse replaced the Master with a disavowed authority that is unable to connect with what it triggers via the subject, i.e. the accumulation of surplus-value. The genius part of it all is exactly the neutralization of this split, namely the barred subject via its elevation to the position of command (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 79, 81). However, this dynamics is also the reason why Lacan claims capitalism is “headed for a blowout.” In other words, the capitalist subject only thinks it knows what it is doing and where it is going, while the relation to its actions is obfuscated by ideology. The capitalist subject is thus a fetishist in practice rather than in the mind, since the subject of the unconscious in command of production listens to the orders of a disavowed master. We can thus read both the University and the Capitalist discourse as two faces of modernity where lack is disguised as plenitude and “capitalism reign[s] because it is closely connected with its rise in the function of science,” (Lacan in Feldner and Vighi 2015: 80).

## **Conclusion**

It should be clear on this point that the crux of the matter lies in the ontological crisis of capitalism, since it devours its subjects in the name of endless accumulation of surplus-value that is inscribed in its very logic. We can say we came back to Marx’s point to analyse the economy as the object of capitalism discussed at the very beginning: “The true barrier to capitalism is capital itself. It is that capital and its self-valorization appear as the starting and the finishing point, as the motive and purpose of production,” (Marx 1981: 385). The ruthless valorization does therefore not point to capitalism’s external limit in terms of resources but discerns its inherent ontological limit, which is why we call this crisis ontological.

It is only a short step from here to see the homology between Lacan’s surplus-*jouissance* and Marx’s surplus-value. Capitalism has the ability to commodify all types of categories in the name of surplus-value and has expanded them to the extent that in the search for profit, it has valorized human category as well where the poor serve as its entropic waste. Through the process of valorization, the initially lost surplus-*jouissance* returns in the shape of masses of excluded subjects whose status undermines capitalism as a social mode of production. Lacan’s Capitalist discourse therefore points to its product (*a*) as conversion of a loss to be counted and exchanged solely for the purpose of producing more value by hijacking human unconscious. It simultaneously also embodies a radical condition of mass exclusion from work, a structural anomaly that threatens our very social fibre. The disturbing lost object of

capitalism is ultimately the failed connection between the capitalist drive and surplus-value (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 100).

We can again use the example of our detective at the start, lost in solving the obstacles instead of the problem. His *modus operandi* points more to his satisfaction in dealing with the aim of getting the main suspect, instead of the main suspect himself. That is to say there was more satisfaction for him in the proverbial hunt, rather than achieving his actual goal. Translated in the Lacanian terms of the drive, its function is to put in question what is satisfaction for the subject. Due to the interplay of a certain object and a certain way of satisfaction, it is important to note that drive is not something primordial or ultimately given, but a thoroughly cultural and symbolic construction (Lacan 1994: 162, 166-8). Its purpose is not to reach the goal (destination, object) but to follow its aim (satisfaction), which is to circle around the object, or in our case, the Keyser Söze sitting in his office.

Does this not neatly correlate to the mode of capitalism and the subjects embedded in it? There is a gap in capitalism as well, positioned between its explicit goal – profit – and its aim – endless accumulation through self-destructive valorization. Put differently, while the authoritarian drive of capitalism works well to keep the consumer subjugated ('Enjoy!' as the ideological injunction), it is impotent with regard to its actual goal. The paradox simply lies in the mode of production that ignores how the accumulation of surplus-value influences the worker's or consumer's ability not only to produce, but also to purchase the objects of desire. The production–consumption axis is counterproductive because of the capitalist drive towards endless expansion (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 79-80). Let us not forget Lacan's warning: "After all, it is the cleverest discourse [Capitalist] that we have made. It is no less headed for a blowout. This is because it is untenable," (Lacan 1972: 11). If capitalism persists on ruling the global population with its logic, it is because we continue to fetishize its fruits that seem to neutralise the inherent excesses of our lives.

## References

- Althusser, L. 1971. *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*. London, New York: Monthly review press.
- Feldner H. and Vighi F. 2015. *Critical theory and the Crisis of Contemporary Capitalism*. London, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc.

- Fink, B. 2004. *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Ecrits closely*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Jameson, F. 2012. Postmodernism and the Market. In: Žižek, S., ed. *Mapping Ideology*. London, New York: VERSO books.
- Lacan, J. 1972. On psychoanalytic discourse. In: *Lacan in Italia, 1953–1978*. Milan: La Salamandra. Trans by Jack W. Stone. [Online]. Available at: [web.missouri.edu/stonej/Milan\\_Discourse2.pdf](http://web.missouri.edu/stonej/Milan_Discourse2.pdf) (accessed 15.8.2015).
- Lacan, J. 1994. *Four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis*. trans. Alan Sheridan. London, New York: Penguin books.
- Lacan, J. 2002. *Ecrits: A selection*. London, New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Lacan, J. 2007. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The other side of psychoanalysis*. Trans. Russell Grigg. London, New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Marx, K. 1981. *Capital: A critique of political economy, Volume 3*. New York: Vintage books.
- Massumi, B. 2003. Navigating movements. In: Zournazi, M., ed. *Hope: New philosophies for change*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Vighi, F. 2010. *On Žižek's Dialectics: Surplus, Substraction, Sublimation*. London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Zupančič, A. 2006. When surplus enjoyment meets surplus value. In: Clemens, J and Grigg, R., eds. *Reflections on Seminar XVII. Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. London, New York: Duke University Press.
- Žižek, S. 2001. *On Belief*. London, New York. Routledge.
- Žižek, S. 2003. *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The perverse core of Christianity*. Cambridge, London: MIT press.
- Žižek, S. 2007. Afterword: With defenders like these, who needs attackers? In: Browman P. and Stamp, R., eds. *The truth of Žižek*. London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Žižek, S. 2008a. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London, New York: VERSO books.
- Žižek, S. 2008b. *The sublime object of Ideology*. London, New York: VERSO books.
- Žižek, S. 2008c. *The ticklish subject: The absent centre of political ontology*. London, New York: VERSO books.
- Žižek, S. 2008d. *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. London, New York: VERSO books.
- Žižek, S. 2011. *Did somebody say totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (mis)use of a Notion*. London, New York: VERSO books.
- Žižek, S. 2012. The spectre of Ideology. In: Žižek, S. ed. *Mapping ideology*. London, New York: VERSO books.