

Žižek's New Universe of Discourse: Politics and the Discourse of the Capitalist

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Truth punches a hole in knowledge.

~J. Lacan

1. Towards a Formal Difference in Discourse Between Žižek and Lacan

If the originality of Žižek's contribution to psychoanalytic theory is to be distinguished from the thought of Jacques Lacan, this should be done at the level of *form* rather than *content*.

Although Žižek makes significant contributions to psychoanalytic thought at the level of content through the deployment of new concepts such as interpassivity, the conjunction of Lacan with the analysis of popular culture, political theory, Marx, German Idealism, and Enlightenment rationality, the singularity of Žižek's thought with respect to Lacanian theory can be most visibly discerned at the level of the *formal structure of discourse* with which his theoretical and political *praxis* strives to engage and respond. In Žižek's *own self-understanding* of his project, his thought occupies the position of the discourse of the analyst, striving to affect a separation of

the master-signifier and *objet a*, so as to contribute to an opening of revolutionary emancipatory possibilities for both thought and engaged political *praxis* in response to capitalism as the universal horizon of our historical present (Žižek 2006a).¹ As he remarks in the documentary *Žižek!*, Žižek does not see his role as one of providing the formula or answer to the question of what is to be done in response to capitalism, but rather of throwing this question back at those that ask it, those that expect an answer, reframing the nature of the questions and modes of political engagement that inhabit our current political field of possibilities.²

The issue, then, is not one of choosing among the various possibilities currently available in the symbolic, but rather of introducing entirely new possibilities into this field. As Žižek puts it in his brief introduction to Mao, "...in a radical revolution, people not only 'realize their old (emancipatory, etc.) dreams'; rather they have to reinvent their very modes of dreaming" (Žižek 2007: 24). Here revolution cannot simply be situated at the level of the material, of shifts in conditions of production, but must also be situated at the level of the cultural or symbolic. Without these shifts in the symbolic, we remain tied to particular conditions of production and power, simply reproducing them in another form. At the level of form, we replace one master with another master, leaving the structure as we found it. Consequently, Žižek remarks that,

There are, roughly speaking, two philosophical approaches to an antagonistic constellation of either/or: either one opts for one pole against the other (Good against Evil, freedom against oppression, morality against hedonism, etc.), or one adopts a 'deeper' attitude of emphasizing the complicity of the opposites, and of advocating a proper measure or their unity. Although Hegel's dialectic seems a version of the second approach (the 'synthesis' of opposites), he opts for an unheard-of *third* version: the way to resolve the deadlock is to engage oneself neither in fighting for the 'good' side against the 'bad' one, nor in trying to bring them together in a balanced 'synthesis', but in opting for the *bad* side of the initial either/or. Of course, this 'choice of the worst' fails, but in this failure it undermines the entire field of alternatives and thus enables us to overcome its terms (Žižek 2007: 12).

The point here is that the either/or alternative offered by these alternatives is an ideological trap characterized by what Lacan called a "forced veil of alienation": "Your money or your life!" Our immediate instinct is to choose the Good, freedom, and morality. Who, after all, would side with Evil, oppression, and hedonism? However, what this false alternative masks is that oppression and Evil lie on the side of the *good* choice, the obvious choice. In short, the choice itself functions to reinforce the reigning ideology and the way in which that ideology functions as a

lure for our desire, leading us to will, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, our own oppression and slavery. In choosing the “bad choice”, the aim is not to choose hedonism, evil, and, oppression-- the choice of hedonism, for example, turns out to be impossible due to the death drive and our subordination to the Law or the signifier --but rather to affect “...the inherent decentering of the interpreted text, which brings to light its “unthought,” its disavowed presuppositions and consequences” (Žižek 2006b: ix). Here the text would be the symbolic field we inhabit in contemporary capitalism. The disavowed presuppositions and consequences would be the manner in which the “good choice” itself functions to reinforce this system of power and oppression. The activity of decentering these disavowed presuppositions would open the space of new possibilities where an act might be possible. As Žižek remarks, “...in an act, I precisely redefine the very coordinates of what I cannot and must do” (Ibid: 49). So long as these coordinates are defined for me, my action, my *praxis*, simply reinforces the coordinates of the reigning ideology.

In the forced choice we are given the illusion of a free choice and of making a free choice, without genuinely having a choice at all. The choice was already decided from the outset. But why is this detour through short circuiting the alternatives of a false choice, of a choice that is already ideological in its essence, a necessary detour for any political *praxis*? This question can be answered by recourse to Lacan. As Lacan remarks in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*,

...the idea that knowledge can make a whole is, if I may say so, immanent to the political as such.... The imaginary idea of the whole that is given by the body, as drawing on the good form of satisfaction, on what, ultimately, forms a sphere, has always been used in politics by the party of political preaching (Lacan 2007: 31).

We can readily discern this idea of the political in Plato’s *Republic*, where the *polis* is conceived as an organic totality akin to the organic body, where all members have their properly assigned functional place, producing a harmonious organic social structure where the elements composing this social structure are also best able to find personal satisfaction. The dream here is one where personal and collective satisfaction are co-terminus with one another without any loss or sacrifice. Under this organic model, Plato is able to plot four “pathological” forms of social organization-- the timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny --where social disorder results from disequilibrium produced by the intervention of an excessive and unchecked desire issuing from one element of the social system and thereby disrupting the collective. Insofar as

the ideological conception of the political is premised on the idea of a harmonious whole, it is necessarily grounded on a bifurcated structure of fantasy.

In order to understand just why the imaginary idea of a harmonious organic totality is grounded on a bifurcated structure of fantasy, it is necessary to situate how antagonism is understood within this conception of the political. In the context of the imaginary conception of the political, antagonism is understood as an *accidental* feature of the social, rather than constitutive structure of social relations. On the one hand, harmonious organic totality without antagonism is understood to be a *possibility* for social structures. On the other hand, any antagonism unsettling the social formation is understood to be something that, in principle, could be *removed* and as something that besets the system from the *outside*. For example, the desires that unsettle the social realm in the case of timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny are not *intrinsic* or *structural* features of the social as such, but are pathological disruptions produced by unbalanced desires that could be removed thereby producing a harmonious social world.³ By contrast, one of Žižek's fundamental claims is that antagonism is not an accidental feature of the social, but rather a structural feature of the social as such. Žižek articulates the reason for this very nicely in *The Parallax View* when he observes that,

...a system of pure differentiability (a system totally defined by the differential structure of its elements, with no antagonism and/or impossibility traversing it) would lead to a pure equivalence of all its elements-- they are all equivalent with regard to the void of the Outside; and, at the other extreme, a system of radical antagonism with no structure at all, just the pure opposition of Us and Them, would coincide with a naturalized difference between Us and Them as the positively existing opposed species... What we need to do is to take a step further from this external opposition (or mutual reliance) into direct internalized overlapping, which means: not only does one pole, when abstracted from the other and thus brought to the extreme, coincide with its opposite, but *there is no "primordial" duality of poles in the first place, only the inherent gap of the One*. Equivalence is primordially not the opposite of difference; equivalence emerges only because no system of differences can ever complete itself, it "is" a structural effect of incompleteness. The tension between immanence and transcendence is thus secondary with regard to the gap within immanence itself: "transcendence" is a kind of perspective illusion, the way we (mis)perceive the gap/discord that inheres to immanence itself. In the same way, the tension between the Same and the Other is secondary with regard to the noncoincidence of the Same with itself (Žižek 2006b: 38).

The key point to draw from this passage is that 1) every system is necessarily *structurally* incomplete, and 2) that any One differs not simply from others, but differs first and foremost

from itself. On the one hand, if the One, for example a mark or signifier, must necessarily differ from itself, if it can never attain coincidence or equivalence with itself, then this is because the mark can only function as a mark insofar as it differs from its place of inscription. Numbers, for example, could not count *things* were they not simultaneously identical to themselves and different from themselves. For, if they did not contain difference within themselves, how would it be possible for them to *stand for something else*. Similarly, signifiers could not signify, but would themselves become dumb, mute, sonorous *objects* as in the case of psychosis if they did not simultaneously differ from themselves. The net result of this is that *any* identity or One necessarily contains a gap or discord within it that prevents it from attaining identity with itself.

If, by contrast, no system of differences can attain completeness, then this is by virtue of that property of the signifier such that the signifier can never signify itself (Lacan 1966: Seminar of 16 Nov.). In order to signify, every signifier must necessarily refer to another signifier. As such, the signifiers that belong to the set of signifiers have the property of being sets that do not belong to themselves, thereby fulfilling the requirements of Russell's paradox pertaining to the set of all sets that are not members of themselves. Were the signifier to signify itself, then it would violate this principle prohibiting self-membership. Were this set not to contain itself, it would again cease to be the set of all such sets. The consequence is that there can be no complete set of signifiers.

The consequence of these two features of the signifier is that antagonism is a *structural* feature of any social organization. Antagonism is not an accidental feature that disturbs social organization from the outside, but is instead intrinsic to the organization itself. The organic totality is always already Other to itself, and identity always already differs from itself. If, then, the idea of the political premised on the idea of an imaginary organic whole or totality is necessarily grounded on fantasy, then this is because fantasy comes to cover over this traumatic antagonism, this structural impossibility of unification and self-identity, at the heart of social structures as a constitutive feature of these structures by transforming a constitutive wound into an *accidental* wound. Put otherwise, fantasy transforms a *lack* into a *loss*. A lack is an ineradicable absence that can never be surmounted, while loss implies the possibility that we both once had something and that we can regain that thing. Fantasy functions as a supplement, surmounting this gap or deadlock at the heart of identity and the One; first, by providing a schema of harmonious totality that we either once had in the case of nostalgic political discourses about the decline and fall of civilization, or by proposing a utopian future; second, by proposing a cause for the disturbances preventing harmonious totality: the Jews, terrorists, single welfare mothers, blacks, gangs, Hollywood, etc (for a more detailed treatment

of this logic, see Bryant forthcoming). As such, the subject in the grips of this structure of fantasy ends up tilting at windmills, failing to get at the “real” of antagonism. If, then, a detour through the coordinates of the symbolic is necessary, if it is necessary to “decenter” these disavowed presuppositions and consequences, then this is because we must be brought before the constitutive structure of antagonism premised on the “not-all” of the social. It is only then that non-self-defeating political engagement becomes possible. Žižek, along with thinkers like Badiou, Laclau, and Ranciere can be seen as proposing a politics grounded in the not-all, the non-existence of the One, the Real, as opposed to one based on the idea of imaginary wholeness.

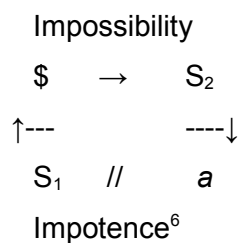
But what does any of this have to do with the *form* of the discourse or set of social relations with which Žižek engages? While there is a kernel of truth in Žižek’s self-characterization of his theoretico-political *praxis* in terms of the discourse of the analyst revealing the castration at work beneath the discourse of the master and university, the *letter* of his text suggests something quite different. Indeed, the letter of his text even suggests a critique of the relevance of Lacan’s four discourses to our contemporary historical moment. Expressing this point in “Hegelese”, it could be said that Žižek *in-himself* is quite different than Žižek as he is *for-himself*. As Lacan remarks, “...it is not at all self-evident that all knowledge, by virtue of being known, is known as knowledge” (Lacan 2007: 30). In this context, Žižek “for-himself” would be the commentary he gives on his own project, how he understands that project, and how he articulates what it is that he is doing. Put differently, this would be Žižek as he is *conscious* of himself and his work. By contrast, the letter of Žižek’s text, what that text is *in-itself*, would be the knowledge at work in this text that is known without being known as knowledge. What comes into relief in reading Žižek in this way is that his thought profoundly deepens and expands the work of Lacan. More specifically, Žižek’s thought, as I will try to show later, does not inhabit the discourse of the analyst at all-- nor any of the other three discourses explored by Lacan (see Verhaeghe 1999: 95-118) -- but rather, is a very precise cartography of an entirely new universe of discourse⁴, that strives to uncover the structures governing the new discourses that populate this new universe of discourse, their constitutive deadlocks, and how it might be possible to politically engage this universe of social relations. On the one hand, Žižek can be understood as tracing the consequences of the collapse of the universe of mastery explored by Lacan in his four discourses.⁵ On the other hand, Žižek can thus be understood as engaging the form of social relations that have emerged in the shadow of this universe of discourse: the discourse of the capitalist, the discourse of bio-power, the discourse of

immaterial labor, and the discourse or form of social relation to which Žižek's own text belongs, the discourse of critical theory.

2. The Discourse of the Capitalist: Production and Consumption

In his address to the University of Milan in Italy (Lacan 1972: 6), Lacan introduced a fifth discourse in addition to the four discourses first put forth in Seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. The fifth discourse introduced by Lacan is there referred to as the "discourse of the capitalist", and is found by inverting the position of truth and the agent in the discourse of the master:

Discourse of the Capitalist



The argument of this paper is that Žižek's political and philosophical project is characterized by an engagement with the universe of discourse following from the discourse of the capitalist, rather than the discourse of mastery explored by Lacan. Since Žižek himself nowhere, to my knowledge, mentions the discourse of the capitalist in these precise structural terms, this thesis is to be established through the structure of Žižek's own texts and interpretations of social, cultural, and political formations. I leave it to readers to determine whether this organization of Žižek's *politico-theoretico praxis* does not better lay bare the structure behind his thought as well as the social symptoms with which he is trying to engage and to which he is trying to respond, than the discourse of the master, the discourse of the hysteric, the discourse of the hysteric, and the discourse of the analyst.

Lacan tells us precious little about just how the discourse of the capitalist is to be understood. Significantly we are told that the discourse of the capitalist has come to *replace* the discourse of the master (Ibid: 10 - 11). This echoes a claim Lacan had already made in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, where he hints that the discourse of the master has largely disappeared (Lacan 2007: 24). As such, discourses should not be understood as eternal

Platonic forms characterizing all social relations, but rather as historical entities that come-to-be and pass-away in time. Thus, for example, not only does the discourse of the master disappear, but the discourse of the analyst only comes into existence at the beginning of the 20th century. This raises the question of the relationship between the four discourses populating any universe of discourse. For example, if the discourse of the master is now in a state of decline and disappearance, does this entail that the other discourses populating this universe--the discourse of the hysteric, university, and analyst --are also endangered? As we shall see, there is reason to believe that this is precisely what we are witnessing today.

In addition to being told that the discourse of the capitalist has come to replace the discourse of the master, we are also told that it is the most ingenious discourse or social relation ever devised (Lacan 1972: 11). However, despite all of its ingeniousness, Lacan remarks that,

It is no less headed for a blowout. This is because it is untenable. It is untenable... in a thing that I could explain to you... because capitalist discourse is here, you see... [*indicates the formula on the board*]... a little inversion simply between the S_1 and \$... which is the subject... it suffices to the extent that it runs as if on a roulette wheel, but it runs too fast, it consumes, it consumes so well that it consumes itself (Ibid).

In claiming that the discourse of the capitalist is headed for a blowout due to its own internal contradictions, Lacan appears to be endorsing the standard Marxist account where contradictions between production and distribution lead toward the implosion of capitalist modes of production. However, in speaking of consumption as lying at the heart of capitalism, Lacan also seems to be speaking of consumer culture as central to how capitalism functions. My suggestion is that Lacan's formula for capitalism should be read as simultaneously representing the structure of capitalist consumption and production. By virtue of the form of impossibility and impotence that this particular structure of discourse or the social relation generates, it will be seen that a number of social symptoms emerge characteristic of our historical moment, the horizon of political engagement in our time, and characteristic of Žižek's analysis of capitalism as it functions in late modernity.

a. *The Dynamics of Production*

First the structure of production in the discourse of the capitalist: Unlike the discourse of the master where *objet a* in the position of production is produced by the servant (S_2) for the *master's consumption* or enjoyment, the discourse of the capitalist does not aim at producing an

object for the subject (\$) to enjoy or consume, but rather aims at endless accumulation, production of surplus-value, and capital that can then be re-invested in the next cycle of production so that the system can expand even more. To put this difference in rather literal terms, in the discourse of the master the Monarch (S_1) commands the servant (S_2) to produce either the object he desires or the knowledge he wants as in the case of the slave in Plato's *Meno*, which the Monarch then consumes. By contrast, in the discourse of the capitalist, the worker (\$) sets knowledge, technology, and know-how (S_2) to work which is then appropriated by the owner of the means of production (either the owner of the company or the shareholders in the form of S_1) which is procured not for the sake of the *owner's* consumption, but rather for the sake of reinvestment to produce yet more capital that is then reinvested in the next cycle to produce yet more capital. Unlike the discourse of the master, then, the discourse of the capitalist is premised on constant expansion. Thus, as Deleuze and Guattari argue in *Anti-Oedipus*, the capitalist machine differs from the savage machine and the despotic machine in that the latter carefully guard against accumulation, expansion, and anything that deviates from the codes governing these territories, whereas capitalism feeds itself through constant expansion, constantly decodes or pulls apart existing social codes, and integrates anything that deviates from existing social codes into the system of capitalism to produce new markets. In the savage machine everything goes to the community as a whole, while in the despotic machine everything goes to the despot. By contrast, in the capitalist machine everything is reinvested in the machine itself so that it might continue to expand.

If the divided subject (\$) now appears in the position of the agent, then this is because the agents of production under capitalism are now *workers* who are themselves commodities on the market. In short, the agent of production in the discourse of the capitalist does not own his own labor, but sells his labor to someone else, the owners of the means of production (S_1), in return for a wage. While the worker is free to sell his labor to any capitalist he might like, in all but the most exceptional circumstances the worker does not have the freedom to *not* sell his labor at all simply by virtue of the necessity of being able to survive and live. If, then, this subject is a divided subject, then this is because 1) the worker produces more value than he is given for his labor (the famous "surplus-value"), and 2) because the value of the worker's labor as a commodity is not determined by the worker himself, but rather by competition among other workers also selling their labor as a commodity as well as by the degree of technological development characterizing production. Thus as Marx had already observed in his unpublished *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, labor increasingly comes to be experienced as

something outside of life as it is something that belongs to someone else, and life is experienced as beginning when the work day ends.

The upper level of the social relation in the discourse of the capitalist is characterized by impossibility in two ways. First, as Marx observed, capitalism must perpetually revolutionize the means of production by virtue of competition between different sites of production. Consequently, the relationship between workers (\$) and know-how, technology, and science never exists in a steady-state, but is always characterized by instability such that last years modes of production need to be updated this year so that production might remain competitive with other businesses. As such, part of the capital produced must always be reinvested in training, the development of new knowledge, and the development of new technologies. This is part of what makes the discourse of the capitalist, in Lacan's words, the cleverest discourse ever devised as it is forced to perpetually recreate itself. However, the net result of this competition is that the market can never entirely be mastered so as to establish perfect production. Part of this dynamic, of course, entails that if the production of surplus-value is to be maximized, wages for labor must increasingly decline to maximize the production of surplus-value and ensure competitiveness, such that the gap between those that own the means of production and workers becomes increasingly large. Here is one of the ways in which the discourse of the capitalist is "headed for a blowout", for production also requires distribution, and distribution requires subjects capable of affording commodities. Yet where wages increasingly decline, it becomes more and more difficult for workers to afford commodities, thereby leading to a decline in the production of surplus-value. So far this problem has been managed by "uneven geographical development", where commodities are produced by less developed countries and distributed among wealthier countries, such that the less developed countries gradually become more affluent, while the developed countries spiral into decline, thereby insuring the emergence of new zones of underdevelopment where cheap labor again becomes available for the newly developed markets.

Second, the relationship between the worker (\$) and know-how, technology, and science (S_2) is characterized by impossibility insofar as it is plagued by inefficiency and waste. As Marx observed in *Grundrisse*, "[t]he act of production is... in all its moments also an act of consumption" (Marx 1973: 90). In the process of production, raw material is used up, energy is consumed, machines and tools are worn out, effectively consuming the means by which commodities are produced. Similarly, workers do not implement their labor with maximal efficiency, they get sick, they must take restroom and smoke breaks, they chat and gossip, they play computer games on company time, there is miscommunication between the various levels

of the factory, and all the rest. It is for this reason that factories and businesses are constantly compelled to search for more efficient modes of production, either through constant job training-- in "Postscript of the Society of Control" Deleuze will argue that today we are never "done" with anything, but must undergo endless training and modulation --or studies to determine how time wasted can be minimized and labor maximized. This is a pattern that has now even entered pedagogical theory and the organization of the curricula of secondary schools and universities in the "education" of students.

The relationship between the owners of the means of production and surplus-value is similarly characterized by impotence for two reasons: On the one hand, as David Harvey somewhere observes, capitalists (S_1) are not necessarily wicked people *consciously* bent on exploiting workers or divesting them of the value of their labor. The capitalist might very well wish to occupy the position of the master, simply enjoying the fruits of his business. However, the capitalist does not exist in a vacuum as a solitary individual, but rather exist in a market characterized by many other capitalists all in competition with one another. If we read the relationship between the capitalist (S_1) and profit (a) on the lower level of Lacan's formula as the desire to master profit, then this relation is characterized by impotence insofar as the capitalist must perpetually reinvest the capital his business produces so as to remain in business and be competitive with other businesses. In short, the capitalist never produces a sufficient amount of capital to halt this endless cycle or develop a stable system at equilibrium. The dynamics of reinvestment thus emerge immanently within the system of capital, and not as the result of the desire of any particular individual. On the other hand, the relationship between the capitalist (S_1) and what is produced in this discourse (a) can be read not as profit or commodities, but rather in terms of waste or remainders. The capitalist seeks to master the market, but within the system of capitalism something always escapes either at the level of production, as we have already seen, or at the level of new groups and social formations with desires that fall outside of the current commodities being produced. Faced with these "deterritorializations" or "lines of flight", the capitalist is perpetually compelled to produce new commodities so as to reintegrate these elements of the social field that have escaped the current system of distribution. This entails new modes of production, which, in turn, require the investment of additional capital. Here we again encounter the fundamental difference between what Deleuze and Guattari call the "capitalist machine", and the savage and despotic social machines. The latter carefully police and destroy any deviation from the social codes (identities, social positions, practices) inhabiting the social territory. The aim is to insure the continuance of the machine according to the same code. By contrast, the capitalist machine embraces these deviations from existing

social codes, turning them into new markets. It is not Hollywood or godless secular humanists that destroy traditional values, but the dynamics of capitalism itself that perpetually produces new markets and which reduces the sole value to the monetary value where all calculation becomes simply a question of whether or not a profit can be made. We shall see later how additional discourses or social relations emerge within the universe of capitalism to both create these new markets and manage waste and inefficiency that emerges within this system of production. This impotence and impossibility transforms the discourse of the capitalist into a perpetual motion machine, seeking to respond to these deadlocks that inhabit the machine, accounting for why capitalism repeats in the way that it does. This is both the success of capitalism and its perpetual failure. Or as Deleuze and Guattari constantly remind us, capitalism functions only by breaking down. It is this endless breakdown that constitutes the specifically Lacanian real of capitalism.

b. *The Dynamics of Consumption*

Just as the discourse of the capitalist can be read in terms of the specificity of capitalist production, it can also be read in terms of distribution and consumption. However, here the signification of the variables populating the discourse of the capitalist-- S_1 , S_2 , \$, and a --take on a somewhat different meaning. A good deal of Žižek's work has focused on precisely this aspect of the discourse of the capitalist.

From the standpoint of consumption, it is now the desiring subject (\$), the consumer, that appears in the position of the agent. One of the central claims of Lacanian psychoanalysis is that all subjects are characterized by insatiable desire, distinct from need and demand. Need is something that disappears when satisfied. Demand is a request addressed to another for a specific object. For example, the child cries for milk. However, because the demand is expressed to another, over the course of development the object demanded also gets bound up with love insofar as receiving the object from the other comes to be experienced as a sign of being loved or unloved. By contrast, desire, as understood by Lacan, is not a desire for a specific object, but is an insatiable desire that is not precisely sure of what it desires. It desires something for which there is no object. Lacan argues that desire is what remains when need is subtracted from demand. In short, it is the dimension of love in relation to the Other, where this love is not itself an object. As Lacan sometimes puts it, "desire desires to desire", or "desire desires an unsatisfied desire", or "desire is a desire for an impossible desire". Indeed, *one* way

of reading Lacan's notorious aphorism that "desire is the desire of the Other" would be that desire always desires something other.

If desire takes on this insatiable, endless quality in which it seeks only to perpetuate itself, then this is because, according to Lacan, an ineradicable lack is introduced into the biological individual once that individual is subjected to the signifier. Insofar as language introduces an *a priori* lack into our being (*a*), the subject is perpetually searching for this lost object without ever being able to find any actual or empirical object that would plug up the lack. Not only is there no object that would be capable of filling this lack, but, since the lack is a lack of something that never existed to begin with-- it is a retroactive effect of our introduction into language --the subject characterized by this lack or desire never knows what, precisely, it is that he desires. As Žižek occasionally points out, the question of desire is not "what do I desire?", but rather the self-reflexive question of "what *should* I desire?". In other words, given the infinite plurality of objects that exist, how does the subject choose among this infinity of objects? In fact, contends Lacan, this question is not a question about objects, but a question of those conditions under which the subject might be desired by the Other (yet another way in which the aphorism "desire is the desire of the Other" can be understood). Thus we might, for example, take on the desires of our beloved, developing a taste for particular types of music, novels, texts of theory, activities, commodities, etc., not because we directly desire these things but because, in desiring these things, we capture the desire of the Other. Similarly, the young child is keenly attentive to its parents, noticing when they delight in its various activities, speculating that he captures the desire of the Other by enjoying the strawberries so much. In other words, we look to the Other to determine what it is that we should desire, which is precisely what Lacan understands by the fundamental fantasy. Fantasy is not so much the desire for a particular thing or scenario that one imagines, but rather is a frame through which we fill out the opaque and enigmatic desire of the Other, providing ourselves with a structure through which we might become desirable to the Other. Through fantasy the subject strives to convert the enigmatic desire of the Other into a determinate demand from the Other that can then be satisfied or thwarted. Traversing the fantasy lies in discovering that the Other itself is barred, desiring, castrated, divided. Or, in less dramatic terms, that the Other itself does not know what it desires.

In the domain of consumption, the discourse of the capitalist takes advantage of this insatiable structure of desire, insuring that commodity consumption is an infinite domain that can never be fully satisfied. As Lacan remarks in "Radiophonie", capitalism is "the extensive, hence insatiable, production of a lack of *jouissance*" (quoted in Leupin 2004: 74). In other words, in a

manner not dissimilar to Baudrillard's analysis of symbolic-value (in distinction from use-value, exchange-value, and surplus-value) in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, capitalism perpetually manufactures lack and therefore desire, thereby insuring that commodity consumption continues despite the satisfaction of essential needs.⁷ In early works like *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx had seemed to suggest that capitalism would eventually find itself exhausted by virtue of filling all the commodity niches defined by essential needs, such that its ability to produce profit and expand would stagnate. However, all of this changes with the addition of symbolic-values, where the object of desire no longer corresponds to the satisfaction of an essential need, but instead becomes a stake in social struggles for prestige and recognition. Later Marx in the unpublished *Grundrisse* and *Capital* clearly recognizes these forms of desire, while still maintaining an internal dynamic at work in capitalism between production and distribution that tends to point in the direction of implosion.

When approached from the angle of consumption, the agent of the discourse of the capitalist is occupied by the desiring subject (\$) that does not know what it is that she desires and who thereby addresses herself to "knowledge" (S_2) in the form of advertising, media, experts, talk-shows, fashion shows, home decorating shows, etc., to learn what a proper subject *ought* to desire. Insofar as the constitutive desire characterizing the divided subject is an insatiable desire without any object, insofar as it is premised on an ineradicable lack, the product of this discourse is now a *remainder* haunting the consumption of any commodity, not unlike the disappointment experienced by the protagonist of Joyce's story "Araby" in *Dubliners* upon finally visiting the bazaar to procure a gift for his love interest, only to discover that it is filled with cheap and gaudy baubles and trinkets. In short, the commodity never delivers the satisfaction or *jouissance* promised in the glossy pages of magazine advertisements where we are presented with a sexy and exciting world populated by fulfilling romantic and social relationships, but rather is always surrounded by a halo of disappointment in which unrequited desire painfully persists.

In the position of truth we find the master-signifier (S_1) as the motor behind the divided subject. However, here, the master-signifier is no longer to be understood as the capitalist who has bought the worker's labor, but rather as the ferocious *super-ego*. As articulated by Lacan, the super-ego does not so much prohibit, as command us to *Enjoy!* On the one hand, this commandment to Enjoy! issues from the incompleteness of the Law or prohibition in telling us what it is we are to do. As such, the Law is always supplemented by a shadowy and obscene double of the Law characterized by the commandment to transgress. As Paul had already observed in Romans 7:7,

What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead.

The point here is not that the relationship between Law and sin is like the relationship between the Yin and the Yang where you cannot have one without the other, but rather that the very prohibition *creates* or produces the desire for that which is prohibited. Here the Law is either experienced by the subject as a sadistic *jouissance* enjoyed by the dispenser of the Law in exacting his command, as in the case of Joseph K. in *The Trial* where he discovers pornographic pictures in the books of the law at the courthouse; or the subject experiences himself as compelled to procure *jouissance* through transgression. The point not to be missed is that the *jouissance* commanded by the superego is not necessarily the subject's *jouissance*. For example, both the sadist and the masochist experience themselves as procuring *jouissance* for the Other, not for themselves. Likewise, the petty bureaucrat or subordinate soldier often seems to understand herself as a tool of the Other's *jouissance*, committing the most horrific acts in the name of the Other's *jouissance* (where the Other here might be History, the Movement, the Cause, the Organization, etc.).

However, while Žižek often comments on this obscene shadow law that always accompanies the public law and sustains that law, he also suggests that today the superego commands us to directly enjoy in a way that is not simply a desire for transgression produced as a by-product of the law.⁸ To illustrate this point, Žižek often has recourse to the difference between the classical Oedipal father and the so-called "postmodern father". In the case of the classical Oedipal father we are commanded to go to our grandmother's whether we like it or not. No provision is made as to whether or not we are required to enjoy this visit, only that we are commanded to go. Here, should we wish to contest this claim, the target is clear. The subject can enter into the discourse of the hysteric and contest the totalitarian father, resisting his despotic command. By contrast, the postmodern father does not command us to visit our grandmother, but says "whether or not you go to your grandmother's is entirely up to you, but if you do go, you must enjoy it!" In this scenario, the subject is directly commanded to enjoy. Moreover, this structure is far more insidious in that it is no longer clear how resistance is possible. If I choose not to go am I resisting my father? What is it that he desires? Does he desire me to go or not? If I do not go, have I disappointed my father? I do not really wish to go,

so in going I am betraying my desire, giving way on my desire, and thereby must *pretend* to enjoy the visit. In short, any choice we make seems to generate guilt.

Everywhere we look, commodity consumer society seems to command enjoyment, such that if we are not enjoying we are somehow falling short or failing. However, this is internal to the very nature of the superego. The paradox of the superego is that the more you obey the superego, the more anxiety and guilt you experience. This is clear in the case of the superego producing the desire for transgression for, even if it only occurs in thought, the very attempt to conform to the Law produces the shadow thought of the transgression violating the Law. In the case of a direct command to enjoy, guilt arises insofar as the subject betrays his desire in condescending to enjoyment (desire becomes entangled in specific objects). Additionally, the more the subject obeys the superegoic command to enjoy, the more ferocious and demanding the superego becomes, commanding more!, more!, more! Here, then, lies the compulsive character behind consumerism. Moreover, if the consumer capitalist superego commands enjoyment, and if obeying this command necessarily generates guilt, this might account for the comparative rise in depressive and anxiety disorders in recent history.

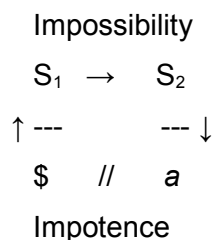
In light of the foregoing, it now becomes possible to see how the discourse of the capitalist functions to (re)produce consumption within the system of capitalism. On the one hand, this discourse is characterized by impossibility on the upper level of the discourse or social relation insofar as the relationship between the desiring subject (\$) and knowledge in the form of experts, advertising, home decorating and cooking shows, etc., is never able to successfully name the subject's desire. This is due first to the fact that the command of the superego (S_1) in the position of truth is insatiable, such that no commodity is equal to it, but also, second, it is due to the fact that the desire inhabiting the subject is a desire without an object, such that no commodity ever adequately responds to what is desired in desire. Indeed, the pursuit of commodities marks an increasing alienation and betrayal of desire. Perhaps this is one reason that many extremely wealthy people nonetheless seem so dissatisfied. On the other hand, this discourse is characterized by impotence on the lower level of the discourse insofar as the remainder (a) produced by the failure of the commodity to satisfy desire is never adequate to the ferocious command of the superego (S_1), such that the more the subject tries to respond to the superegoic command to Enjoy!, the more demanding the superego becomes. In this way, the discourse of the capitalist when viewed from the angle of consumption functions as a perpetual motion machine insofar as the subject is led to endlessly pursue new and different commodities in the elusive quest to finally find that object of desire that would complete the subject, but also to quiet the insatiable and guilt producing commands of the superego. As a

result, the subject endlessly pursues new commodities even when all the subject's needs are satisfied. In this connection it could be said that one of the central problems of Žižek's thought is that of how to disentangle desire from the superegoic command to enjoy. Insofar as commodity consumption is one of the central supports of the capitalist dynamic, no effective political engagement with the dynamics of capitalism is possible until the subject discovers that the solution to its constitutive lack does not reside in commodities.

3. Consequences and Symptoms of the Decline of the Master and the Rise of the Universe of Capitalism

In *Lacan Today*, Alexandre Leupin observes that "the Master's discourse is... the formalization of politics itself, to which philosophy serves as a help by giving it the 'reason' to justify totalization" (Leupin 2004: 71-2). In the discourse of the master, the master-signifier (S_1) appears in the position of the agent, acting on or addressing knowledge (S_2):

Discourse of the Master



Here we should exercise caution with respect to Leupin's universalizing statements and his suggestion that the discourse of the master is the only form that either politics or philosophy can take. One of the burning questions of Lacanian inflected political theory such as we find in thinkers like Žižek and Badiou would be that of whether or not it is possible to think a politics of the *real* or impossibility and constitutive incompleteness, rather than a politics premised on imaginary totalization. I will return to this question later when I address the discourse of critical theory. For the moment, if it is true that the discourse of the master is *one* formalization of politics, then certain consequences follow from the disappearance of the discourse of the master and its replacement by the discourse of the capitalist. Can we discern these consequences in Žižek's analysis of our contemporary historic moment? To address this

question it is first necessary to unfold just how the discourse of the master is a formalization of the imaginary politics of totalization.

When the discourse of the master is thought as a formalization of politics, we are to understand the leader or ideology (S_1) totalizing the disparate elements that make up the social totality (S_2) in an attempt to form an organic social totality. For example, we have the master-signifier “United States” organizing the totality of people living in the United States into a totality, presenting the illusion of a unified group. Likewise, a charismatic leader functions to surmount the differences between all of the followers, creating the illusion that all those following the leader or the movement are the same. In structuring social relations in this way, the master-signifier produces stability within the elements composing the social field (S_2). Even though the social field is riddled with differences, antagonisms, and contradictions, the master-signifier provides the illusion, the semblance, that unanimity exists and that these antagonisms and contradictions are illusions. Thus, when the master-signifier is treated as a person’s proper name, the illusion is produced that the person is a man of his word and that all the utterances that person makes point back to an identical person defined by identical intentions. Likewise, when the master-signifier is treated as God, morality and Law are seen as firm and fixed, based on a solid foundation. Descartes and Einstein both have recourse to God in order to establish the orderliness of the laws of physics despite the appearance of perpetual anomalies (a) we encounter at the level of experience (in the case of Descartes, it is necessary to show that God is not a deceiver so that we might trust our clear and distinct ideas, while in the case of Einstein, he appeals to God as the divine orderer of the universe who does not play dice). Such would be true of Newton’s conception of God as well. Even Laplace evokes the idea of a perspective outside of the universe (S_1) wherein all of the causal interactions might be observed with perfect knowledge from their initial state, when famously responding to Napoleon’s query as to where God falls in his mechanistic system. Likewise, when someone evokes the dictionary as an immutable authority on what words mean, the dictionary functions as a master-signifier, as an uncastrated authority, that can pin down the play of meaning despite the bewildering complexity and resourcefulness of language in creating meaning through context and surprising conjunctions of signifiers. Finally, in the Oedipal structure, the name-of-the-father (S_1), creates the illusion that the opaque desire of the mother or caregiver can be named and pinned down, giving it a determinate structure.

It is, of course, true that despite the attempts of the discourse of the master to form a totality, a remainder (a) is always produced that eludes the structuration of that totality. Something always falls away and fails to fit within the totality. However, the crucial point is that

in the discourse of the master, this remainder is not treated as something that necessarily fails to fit, but rather is treated as an *accident* disrupting the totality, coming from the outside, which can be eradicated. In other words, the totality is treated as sound and true, such that the anomaly is treated as an *accident* rather than a structural feature of any and all attempted totalities. As Žižek puts it,

..what makes such an assertion of belief (in the essential goodness of mankind; in the truly human character of the Soviet regime) sublime is the very gap between it and the overwhelming factual evidence against it, that is, the active *will to disavow* the actual state of things. Perhaps therein lies the most elementary *meta-physical* gesture: in this refusal to accept the Real in its idiocy, to disavow it and to search for Another World behind it (Žižek 1999: 323-4).

This other world, of course, is the world of *logos*, of the world as an orderly place despite appearances to the contrary. Thus the Nazi's, for example, do not treat the remainder as a structural feature of their attempt to form an organic society, as a structural antagonism at the heart of any and every organized system, but as the accidental and disruptive figure of the Jew, such that once the Jew is eradicated, the totality aimed at will finally be formed. Likewise, the Newtonians do not treat the anomalies in the orbit of the planet Mercury as a failure of the totalization of Newton's laws of motion, but instead work from the premise that there must be some hidden body that would account for these anomalies within the framework of Newtonian physics.

The truth of the discourse of the master is, of course, that the relationship between the master-signifier and knowledge is always impossible-- that it is structurally impossible to form a totality for the reasons outlined in the first section of this paper --and that the relationship between the divided subject and the remainder is impotent in that the subject is forever unable to surmount his own split (\$). The object produced (*a*) by this discourse is never the object commanded due to the fact that all communication is miscommunication; or, alternatively, all discourse produces a remainder that cannot be integrated into the system. It is due to both this impossibility and this impotence that the discourse of the master perpetually repeats, always striving to attain totality or completeness and integrate the remainder in the subject so as to finally, at last, surmount the subject's lack, without ever being able to accomplish this task. Nonetheless, as Jacques-Alain Miller observes, the fact that the Other does not exist-- that the master-signifier cannot form a totality out of the battery of signifiers --does not prevent the Other from functioning (Miller 2008). That is, those within the universe of the master continue to

believe that totality is the true nature of things despite appearances to the contrary. When, for example, a political party fails, the followers of that party do not explain this failure as a result of the fundamental bankruptcy of the party's governing philosophy, but as an accident of the insufficiencies of those who happened to be in charge.

If, then, the discourse of the master is in a state of decline and disappearance, we can expect to witness the disappearance of a certain type of politics as well as a crisis of a particular set of social relations insofar as the discourse of that master is that discourse that strives to produce totalization and insofar as this discourse is what establishes the illusion that these social relations are stable and grounded despite appearances. For example, it is only insofar as the name-of-the-father (S_1) is "that signifier that represents the signifier for all the other signifiers" that language takes on the appearance of having fixed meanings. Should this signifier fail to be operative as in the case of psychosis, the battery of signifiers (S_2) falls apart into a chaos where words are no longer distinguished from things and where meaning can no longer be pinned to based on a higher authority. Something similar happens in the domain of the political. On the one hand, we can expect a disappearance of grand totalizing political projects. On the other hand, we can expect the decline or disappearance of protest politics premised on the discourse of the hysteric, where the various figures occupying the position of the master-signifier are challenged by the divided subject (\$). Finally, we can expect a crisis of the stability of social ties, such that these ties become precarious and are approached with cynicism. Closely related to this, if the decline of the discourse of the master is not simply a fall into social psychosis but the emergence of a new form of social relations, we can expect that other discourses, other social relations, will emerge to respond to the precariousness of the contemporary social structure. In one form or another, in places too numerous to cite, we witness Žižek both analyzing this historical situation and seeking to discern solutions to the problems resulting from this disappearance of the discourse of the master. At the center of this engagement is the question of how politics is possible in an age that appears "post-political". Indeed, this is a question that preoccupies an entire range of thinkers from Badiou, to Ranciere, to Laclau and Mouffe, to Deleuze and Guattari. This anxiety appears to arise from inhabiting a set of social relations where it is no longer clear just where the enemy is and where the social field itself has come to appear de-politicized-- the market, for example, is described in terms akin to meteorological phenomena rather than as a site of political struggle.

The decline of the discourse of the master and the consequences of this decline have been a persistent theme throughout Žižek's work, but these points are developed with particular clarity in "Wither Oedipus", the concluding chapter of *The Ticklish Subject*. There Žižek notes

that the Oedipus-- one form the discourse of the master takes --is in a state of decline, and outlines a whole host of social symptoms that follow from this shift in social relations. It is worth noting that this decline is not restricted to the family structure, but can be discerned in a variety of structures organized around the function of the master, ranging from the declining efficiency (or trust) in political leaders, to Nietzsche's famous death of God, to the manner in which grand ideological signifiers seem to have lost their efficiency. Setting aside Žižek's own account of just why the Oedipus is in a state of decline, this collapse was already famously recognized by Marx in the *Manifesto*. As Marx there remarks,

The bourgeoisie, historically, has played the most revolutionary part.

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors," and has left no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, then callous "cash payment." It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom-- Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political institutions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation (Marx and Engels 1998: 53).

Throughout this passage Marx outlines the manner in which capitalism has targeted all those elements of social formation premised on the discourse of the master (religion, patriarchy, idyllic relations or society as an organic totality, feudal ties, "natural superiors", etc.). On the one hand, the discourse of the capitalist transforms agents into individuals rather than members of a social organism insofar as the subject no longer has a place in a "natural social order", but is instead a subject that sells his labor as a commodity on the market, in competition with other workers. As a consequence, I no longer see myself as a part of the divine clockwork of the social order working alongside my fellows, but rather as an *individual* in competition with these others. Rather than seeking to promote shared social aims or working in a community in obedience to the will of God, I now pursue my own self-interest.

On the other hand, the discourse of the capitalist introduces a *universal* value: the pursuit of profit. All things come to be measured in terms of this value, such that it becomes possible to relinquish traditional values when they do not accord with the pursuit of profit. For this reason, traditional forms of political organization premised on symbolic power as in the case of monarchy begin to collapse, for when measured against the profit motive they fail to hold up.

As Marx puts it, “[a]ll that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind” (Ibid: 54). Where the aristocracy cannot keep up with the pursuit of capital, they stand in the way of other capitalists pursuing capital and are therefore quickly toppled due to both their dependence on the bourgeoisie and their growing irrelevance. The old supports of their authority or power premised on myths and narratives about divine right begin to fall one by one as they are measured against the new universal set of values: the pursuit of egoistic self-interest. Where before these myths held and were sufficient to explain why a king was a king, a peasant a peasant, psycho-social critiques of monarchical power begin to emerge such as we find in Hobbes, Spinoza, Hume, Diderot, Voltaire, Nietzsche, etc., where myth comes to be seen as myth, and where these narratives are understood as cynical, self-interested mechanisms for maintaining power. Thrasyarchus is redeemed. It is for this reason that the divided subject (\$) comes to appear in the position of the agent, replacing the position formerly enjoyed by the master (S_1); for this is the subject pursuing naked self-interest. Likewise, all of the old master-signifiers begin to topple one by one. Insofar as self-interest now becomes the universal motive, master-signifiers such as the Good, Nation, Justice, Freedom, etc., increasingly come to be viewed with suspicion as veiled rhetorical maneuvers for power and the interest of one group over another. As Deleuze and Guattari observe, premised on their thesis that the unconscious is social prior to being individual and familial, this shift comes to pervade all levels of the social sphere, including the family.

From this historical shift, Žižek draws a number of consequences, two of which I shall focus on here. First, as a result of the decline of the discourse of the master, Žižek argues that we witness a decline of what he calls “symbolic efficiency”. As explained by Žižek, “[s]ymbolic efficiency’ thus concerns the point at which, when the Other of the symbolic institution confronts me with the choice of ‘Whom do you believe, my word or your eyes?’, I choose the Other’s word without hesitation, dismissing the factual testimony of my eyes” (Žižek 1999: 327). It will be recalled that the discourse of the master serves an ordering function for the multitude of floating signifiers (S_2), creating the illusion that meaning has a fixed and solid foundation or that the State has a fixed and solid identity, or that the Leader is in control of the situation. Despite the vast evidence that contradicts this, this contradictory evidence is not treated as undermining the belief in an Order or *logos* behind the anomalous appearances. Rather, the appearances to the contrary are ignored in favor of the posited Order behind the appearances.

The collapse of symbolic efficiency entails that the Other (S_1) no longer exists as an authority that could ground or secure social relations as a third term between agents that could decide between disputes and ground identities. Put differently, where subjects existing in the “enchanted world” of feudal society could take it as a basic and unquestioned fact that God’s law and will governed all subjects and assigned every subject a *natural* place in the cosmos with a role to fulfill, the universe following the universe of mastery is one in which everything is reduced to relations between individuals without a third mediating and *independent* term such as God’s law that subjects share in common. Thus, on the one hand, there are profound consequences for ethical and political deliberation. As Žižek observes,

These reversals signal that today, the big Other’s nonexistence has attained a much more radical dimension: what is increasingly undermined is precisely the symbolic *trust* which persists against all skeptical data. Perhaps the most eye-catching facet of this new status of the nonexistence of the big Other is the sprouting of ‘committees’ destined to decide upon the so-called ethical dilemmas which crop up when technological developments ever-increasingly affect our lifeworld: not only cyberspace but also domains as diverse as medicine and biogenetics on the one hand, and the rules of sexual conduct and the protection of human rights on the other, confront us with the need to invent the basic rules of proper ethical conduct, since we lack any form of big Other, any symbolic point of reference that would serve as a safe and unproblematic moral anchor (Ibid: 332).

This trend can also be discerned in the domain of politics and attitudes towards news media. Everywhere, it seems, elections are in question, there is cynicism towards elected officials, and subjects profoundly doubt the truthfulness of news sources. This even bleeds into the sciences, where people regularly express doubts about global warming, for example, claiming that the scientists are motivated to claim certain things based on their desire to secure grant funding. As a consequence, *individual* agents begin to pick and choose their own news and science according to what accords with their beliefs and tastes. In short, science and the news are no longer experienced as an objective Third that is independent of the whim of individuals and that adjudicates disputes. Trust in these institutions and figures increasingly becomes overwhelmed by doubt. Similarly, the emergence of conspiracy theories ranging from those surrounding to 9-11 to alien abductions can be seen as attempts to make the Other exist, seeking some Other that both knows and is silently functioning behind the scenes orchestrating everything.

On the other hand, it is not simply trust in authorities and stable codes that is undermined, but also the very identities of subjects themselves. As Lacan argues, the

alienation of the subject in language renders identity precarious because there is no signifier that is capable of fixing the identity of the subject. Once again, the signifier cannot signify itself. The discourse of the master functions to artificially fix the identity of the subject and assign the subject a place within the symbolic order. Yet with the collapse of this discourse, all of this is once again called into question. As Žižek remarks,

...the problem today is not that subjects are more dispersed than they were before, in the alleged good old days of the self-identical Ego; the fact that 'the big Other no longer exists' implies, rather, that the symbolic fiction which confers a performative status on the level of my identity, determining which of my acts will display 'symbolic efficiency' is no longer fully operative (Ibid: 330).

A number of social symptoms emerge in relation to this. For example, the rise of religious fundamentalisms and identity politics-- rightwing and leftwing versions of the same phenomena --can be seen as desperate attempts to fix and establish identities where identities no longer seem to hold. So too in the case of virulent nationalisms. Conversely, the intensification of various racisms can be read as both a symptom of the manner in which the social tie has been reduced to the dimension of the imaginary as a tie between individuals without a mediating Third, and also as a by-product of the precariousness of symbolic identities, leading subjects to strike out at an "Other" as that which threatens identity and renders it precarious. Later I shall attempt to show how a new discourse or social relation emerges to manage and respond to this collapse of symbolic efficiency. As we shall see, this discourse or form of social relation is one of the privileged targets of Žižek's politico-theoretico *praxis*.

As a second consequence of the decline of the discourse of the master, politics has increasingly disappeared from the social field. First, grand political causes (S_1) seem to have progressively evacuated the social field insofar as all master-signifiers have been called into question by the decline of symbolic efficiency. As Žižek observes in the documentary *Žižek!*, sixty years ago there were passionate debates as to whether we should have a socialist, fascist, or liberal democratic form of government, yet today these debates have almost entirely disappeared, capitalism has come to be seen as an unsurpassable horizon, and we can only imagine the end of capitalism resulting from a major global catastrophe. Second, as a result of this, capitalism itself comes to be depoliticized, such that it comes to be treated as a natural phenomenon, independent of any human agency. For example, we speak of what the market *does*, how the market regulates *itself*, and how we should let the market *decide*. Third, in contrast to the imaginary politics of totalization, the protest politics of the discourse of the

hysteric has also become ineffectual and has largely disappeared (see Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). Where the master-signifier disappears or goes underground, the politics of the hysteric disappears insofar as it loses its target and no longer knows where to turn. Finally fourth, where politics does today appear, it takes the form of diffuse and competing struggles over identities, rather than a unified political project that is capable of surmounting difference. As Žižek puts it,

... 'postmodern' political thought... [railing] ...against the spectre of the (transcendental) Subject, endeavor[s] to assert the liberating proliferation of multiple forms of subjectivity-- feminine, gay, ethnic... According to this orientation, one should abandon the impossible goal of global social transformation and, instead, focus attention on the diverse forms of asserting one's particular subjectivity in our complex and dispersed postmodern universe, in which cultural recognition matters more than socioeconomic struggle-- that is to say, in which cultural studies have replaced the critique of political economy (Žižek 1999: 3).

In one respect this shift in the political mirrors the rise of the individual that emerged alongside capitalism. Where the pursuit of self-interest becomes the universal value, solidarity disappears and emancipatory political struggle takes the form of struggles over various particularities and their representation. In another respect, where economy becomes naturalized, the site of political contestation becomes semiotic, a struggle over cultural signifiers, rather than a struggle over material conditions. One of the burning questions of the entire body of Žižek's work is that of how a politics of global social transformation is possible in the wake of the rise of the discourse of the capitalist. As I hope to show, capitalism is accompanied by the emergence of a new discourse, similar to the discourse of the analyst in the universe of mastery, that engages with precisely this problem.

4. Waste and the Discourse of Bio-Power

As we saw in the case of the discourse of the capitalist when viewed through the lens of production, one of the central problems plaguing the discourse of the capitalist is that of waste and inefficiency in the production process. As I attempted to show, the relationship between the worker (S_1) and know-how (S_2) is characterized by a structural impossibility, by a constitutive deadlock, that 1) is perpetually beset by waste and inefficiency, preventing maximal production of capital, and 2) that competition among capitalists compels the constant revolutionizing of

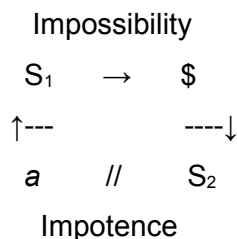
production so as to increase the production of capital and remain competitive. As Marx observe,

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify (Marx and Engels 1998: 54).

If social conservatives wish to understand the decline of traditional values, they should not look to Hollywood or godless leftists, but rather to these dynamics internal to capitalism itself. This process is not the result of an intentional desire on the part of capitalists, but rather emerges out of the necessity of constantly expanding production in the face of competitors that are doing the same. The capitalist is faced with the alternative of either expanding or becoming antiquated and falling out of the game altogether. Consequently, faced with the problem of waste and the necessity of perpetually increasing and revolutionizing production, a new discourse emerges out of the discourse of the capitalist that targets the body of the worker with the aim of enhancing productivity and producing workers. This discourse is the discourse of bio-power.

The discourse of bio-power is found by shifting the terms of the discourse of the capitalist one position clockwise so that the master-signifier (S_1) now appears in the position of the agent, the divided subject (\$) now appears in the position of the other, knowledge now appears in the position of production (S_2), and *objet a* now appears in the position of truth:

Discourse of Bio-Power



As described by Foucault, this social relation "...endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply [life], subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault 1990). Foucault himself associates bio-power with capitalism, arguing that,

This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes. But this was not all it required; it also needed the growth of both these factors, their reinforcement as well as their availability and docility; it had to have methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern (Ibid: 140-1).

Bio-power thus refers to a social relation in which an immense system of practices comes to act on the bodies and minds of subjects, giving them form to optimize production. Such power is embodied in the schools, military, churches, prisons, mental institutions, continuous on the job training, the perpetual development of new workplace procedures and protocols, etc., all of which emerged around the time that capitalism itself came into being and which have continued to mutate and intensify ever since. It could be said that bio-power is a production of production, in the sense that bio-power is a body of knowledge and techniques that produce those who produce.

If, then, the master-signifier (S_1) now appears in the position of the agent in the discourse of bio-power, then this is because this social relation aims at mastery of the bodies it acts upon ($\$$). The dream of bio-power is a completely regulated body that could function as a gear in the machine of production without friction, waste, or remainder. If the product of the discourse of bio-power is now the signifier for knowledge (S_2), then this is because the discourse of bio-power both generates institutions and disciplines. Foucault describes the latter as "...an *anatomo-politics of the human body*" (Ibid: 139). This would be the various disciplines in the social and information sciences aimed at producing knowledge of the various techniques through which humans can be effectively regulated and controlled, thereby maximizing production and efficiency. This knowledge, in turn, is implemented in institutions such as schools that preside over the formation of bodies and minds so as to produce the appropriate types of workers for the form production takes at a particular point in the course of the development of capitalism.⁹ These institutions and services also serve as a relay for the continuous retraining of workers as the means of production become antiquated and change.

The appearance of *objet a* in the position of truth or that which drives this discourse can be taken in a variety of ways. On the one hand, it can be understood as the pursuit of surplus-value as the driving force behind this discourse. The schools, on the job training, and “apolitical” social sciences¹⁰ perpetually tell the subject that these technologies are for their own benefit. An employer might refer a worker to a cognitive-behavioral therapist or psychiatrist, for example, not because the worker’s passive resistance is inhibiting productivity, but for the worker’s own welfare (i.e., with the subtext that the worker is being told, “Get your act together or you will not be selling your labor commodity here any longer!”). However, what lies behind all of this is the aim of increasing productivity. On the other hand, the appearance of *objet a* in the position of truth can also be understood as the reinvestment of capital in the means and forces of production so as to expand production as in the case of training in new techniques that enable the worker to produce twelve widgets an hour rather than ten for the same wage. Finally, the appearance of *objet a* in the position of truth can be taken as the waste and resistance that inhabits all systems of production-- so well chronicled by Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49* --and the aim of capitalism to exclude this waste and silence or integrate resistance. If this discourse perpetually returns, if new techniques, knowledges, and regulatory mechanisms are forever being devised, then this is because the remainder and resistance always returns in a new form.

There are advantages to a Lacanian formulation of bio-power in terms of discourse theory that surmount problems internal to Foucault’s understanding of power. As Foucault notoriously argued,

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in various hegemonies (Foucault 1990a: 92-3).

As a consequence, it appears that there is no outside to power, nor any point of purchase on power that would allow the agent to avoid reproducing the system of power relations. Indeed, this problem is only intensified in *The Use of Pleasure*, where we are presented with the internalization of power and the thesis that the subject itself is a product of these power relations

(Foucault 1990b: 25-32). If an agent is itself a product of these power relations, how can the agent do anything but reproduce these power relations? As Foucault observes, "...there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary" (Foucault 1990a: 95-6).

The Lacanian formulation of the discourse of bio-power calls this thesis into question. On the one hand, the discourse of bio-power is constitutively incomplete due to the role truth or the unconscious plays in this discourse. On the other hand, the upper and lower levels of the formula are haunted by both an impossibility and an impotence. If the relationship between mastery and the divided subject is characterized by impossibility, then this is because the techniques devised by the discourse of bio-power are unable to completely gain purchase on the slippery divided subject upon which it acts. Insofar as the divided subject is a pure void, an emptiness without positive content, there is structurally a minimal gap or distance between the subject and the body¹¹ which bio-power strives to target, and likewise a minimal distance or gap to all signifying formations that strive to represent the subject in a body of knowledge such as the DSM-IV. Since no signifier is ever adequate to the subject, any knowledge that strives to situate and fix the subject is doomed to fail. As a consequence, the knowledge and institutions produced in the discourse of bio-power always prove inadequate. Just as the hysteric always develops new tricks for challenging the master in the clinic, something about the subject perpetually escapes precisely because the subject is a failure of language. It is for this reason that the lower level of the discourse of bio-power is characterized by impotence. The knowledge and institutions produced in this discourse forever miss the remainder or surplus embodied in *objet a* which drives the subject. Put otherwise, the discourse of bio-power fails because the subject is already dead; which is to say that the subject is governed by the death drive, in excess of any homeostatic mechanisms characteristic of *life*.

5. The Decline of Symbolic Efficiency and the Discourse of Immaterial Labor

All in all Žižek has very little to say about the discourse of bio-power beyond what he draws from Agamben's account of *homo sacer*, and the focus on reducing us to bare life, where the power of death perpetually hangs over us. Instead, the privileged site and focus of Žižek's theoretico-politico engagement has been what I here have chosen to call the discourse of immaterial labor. It is within the field of immaterial labor that ideology proper is to be located. If, of the four discourses inhabiting the universe of capitalism, the discourse of immaterial labor is a privileged site of political engagement, then this is because the discourse of immaterial labor is today what

maintains social relations after the decline of symbolic efficiency by continuously weaving and unweaving the social field, creating temporary fields of social ties and opening new commodity markets, while perpetually recapturing or reterritorializing new subjectivities that do not fit with existing social codes. Here the reader should note that I have skipped the discourse of critical theory, which follows as the next structural permutation from the discourse of bio-power. The discourse of social critique will be explored in the next section.

As described by Negri and Hardt, immaterial labor has come to replace industrial labor, now dominating the social field.

In the final decades of the twentieth century, industrial labor lost its hegemony and in its stead emerged “immaterial labor,” that is, labor that create immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response. Conventional terms such as *service work*, *intellectual labor*, and *cognitive labor* all refer to aspects of immaterial labor, but none of them captures its generality. As an initial approach, one can conceive immaterial labor in two principle forms. The first form refers to labor that is primarily intellectual or linguistic, such as problem solving, symbolic and analytic tasks, and linguistic expressions. This kind of immaterial labor produces ideas, symbols, codes, texts, linguistic figures, images, and other such products. We call the other principle form of immaterial labor “affective labor.” Unlike emotions, which are mental phenomena, affects refer equally to body and mind. In fact, affects, such as joy and sadness, reveal the present state of life in the entire organism, expressing a certain state of the body along with a certain mode of thinking. Affective labor, then, is labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion (Negri and Hardt 2004: 108).

While not entirely sharing Negri and Hardt’s thesis that immaterial labor has come to replace industrial labor as the hegemonic mode of production, it is undeniable that immaterial labor is today ubiquitous in the most developed countries. Whether we are speaking of the work of advertising, political pundits and media, the production of jingoistic expressions or clichés in the world of politics, analysts providing standard narratives of what is going in the world, economy, country, with children, and all the rest, various service jobs, pollsters, self-help shows, the proliferation of self-help and how-to management books, fashion and home improvement shows, etc., everywhere we see forms of labor geared towards the production of codes, social identities, and affects.

As Negri and Hardt are careful to note, this form of labor is directed at the *production* of social life.

The labor involved in all immaterial production... remains material-- it involves our bodies and brains as all labor does. What is immaterial is *its product*. We recognize that *immaterial labor* is a very ambiguous term in this regard. It might be better to understand the new hegemonic form as "biopolitical labor," that is, labor that creates not only material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself. The term *biopolitical* thus indicates that the traditional distinctions between the economic, the political, the social and the cultural become increasingly blurred (Ibid: 109).

Immaterial labor is thus a complement of bio-power, functioning to shore up the functioning of capitalism. It serves this function in three ways. First, as we have already observed, the social relations or social life formed through immaterial labor come to supplement the declining symbolic efficiency, creating temporary relationships and identities to supplement the enduring relationships that had existed prior to the development of capitalist modes of production. These relationships are vital for the production of workers within the discourse of the capitalist. A whole fauna or ecosystem of various dispositions must be produced involving forms of affectivity, different social codes, and different social identities that assign bodies various positions in the overall system of production and promote social relationships among these subjects.

Second, as we saw in the discourse of the capitalist, capitalism is a system premised on continuous expansion and accumulation. This expansion must not only occur at the level of production, but also at the level of distribution and consumption. Were the system of capitalism to simply remain at the level of producing goods that satisfy basic biological needs, its gears would very quickly grind to a halt, bringing the system to a state of static equilibrium. Thus, not only must the production of goods expand, but there must be a production of *different types* of commodities as well as a production of *desires* for these commodities. As Marx puts it, "[p]roduction... produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively" (Marx 1973: 92)." Through the production of new desires, capitalism is able to insure that infinite expansion is possible.

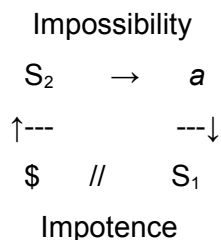
Finally, third, not only must social relations and desires be produced through immaterial labor, but it is also necessary to produce subjects that find their conditions of production and place in the social world tolerable, reasonable, and natural. As Marx puts it, "[p]roduction... creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object" (Ibid). As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello note in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*,

In many respects, capitalism is an absurd system: in it, wage earners have lost ownership of the fruits of their labor and the possibility of pursuing a working life free of subordination. As for capitalists, they find themselves yoked to an interminable, insatiable process, which is utterly abstract and dissociated from the satisfaction of consumption needs, even of a luxury kind. For two such protagonists, integration into the capitalist process is singularly lacking in justifications (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007: 7).

In such circumstances it is thus necessary to produce ideologies capable of rationalizing this system, explaining the subject's place in this system, and above all providing justifications as to how the subject benefits from this system. Where such justifications are lacking, it then becomes necessary to direct discontent elsewhere, to some other entity like immigrants or Jews, so as to provide a rationale for discontent. Such a task requires a massive production of signifiers, narratives, and affective responses to serve these functions.

How, then, is the discourse of immaterial labor structured? In the discourse of immaterial labor, the battery of signifiers, knowledge (S_2), now appears in the position of agency, acting on or addressing *objet a*, producing master-signifiers (S_1), with the divided subject (\$) in the position of truth:

Discourse of Immaterial Production



Unlike pre-capitalist social formations which rigorously enforce social codes and mercilessly defend against any deviation (*a*) from these codes, capitalism functions through the perpetual integration of that which escapes it. It is in this respect that we can understand the appearance of *objet a* in the position of the other in the discourse of immaterial labor. Here *a* stands for that which is not yet named or integrated in the system of capital. Thus, following Paolo Virno, we can distinguish between the people and the multitude. According to Virno, "...the *multitudo* indicates a *plurality which persists as such* in the public scene, in collective action, in the handling of communal affairs, without converging into a One... Multitude is the form of social

and political existence for the many, seen as being many..." (Virno 2004: 21). As Virno goes on to observe,

Before the State, there were the many; after the establishment of the State, there is the One-people, endowed with a single will. The multitude... shuns political unity, resists authority, does not enter into lasting agreements, never attains the *status* of juridical person because it never transfers its own natural rights to the sovereign. The multitude inhibits this "transfer" by its very mode of being (through its plural character) and by its mode of behaving (Ibid: 23).

On the one hand, then, there is the multitude, which is an excess or multiplicity without identity, a remainder (*a*) within capitalism that does not fit any established codes (S_2) belonging to the existing social field. On the other hand, there is the People which is the unification of a multitude into a shared identity or will (S_1).

In this connection, Virno shows an astonishing proximity to Badiou. Modifying Virno's understanding of the State as a governmental entity, the State can be understood as the operation by which inconsistent multiplicities, multiplicities without unifying identity, are transformed into consistent multiplicities or Ones.¹² As Badiou puts it, "[t]he state of the situation is that by means of which the structure of a situation is, in turn, counted as one" (Badiou 2005: 522). It is precisely this operation that the discourse of immaterial labor strives to accomplish. Through the intervention of language, social sciences, images, etc., the State (S_2) aims at the integration of that which fits no established place within the contemporary system of codes (*a*). As a consequence, the product of this discourse is a One (S_1), or the master-signifier, that transforms the excess, multiplicity, or multitude into a unified identity that can be counted. This master-signifier functions as a point of identification for subjects populating the social system, builds social relations between the now counted-identity and other identities, and opens new markets within the system.

To make these rather abstract points more concrete we might refer to the example of the punk movement in its early days. If we recall that *objet a* can also signify a remainder, resistance, or waste, we can read the discourse of the capitalist as producing a waste, resistance, or remainder alongside its functioning that is not integrated in the system. This, for example, might consist of various forms of worker sabotage (theft, loafing, cutting corners, not properly caring for the tools and technology used in production, etc.), not carried out in any directed way, but simply out of impotent frustration with their working conditions. The early days of punk emerged very much in this spirit. Punk began in London as a sort of protest against

both reigning economic conditions and the alienating and hypocritical nature of the social system of codes that tolerated these conditions. In its beginnings it was not a self-conscious movement, in the sense that it did not identify itself as a set of principles, a defined aesthetic, and a politics, but rather was a sort of amorphous multiplicity (*a*) growing like some monstrous new creature alongside the existing social codes (S_2). However, as time passed, punk came to be named (S_1), giving it a countable identity (the “count as one”), and it congealed into a defined aesthetic, with certain moral and political codes defining a set of social relations. At this point, punk became a point of identification for other subjects within the social field, opening an entirely new market largely divorced from its social and political origins. For instance, today we find youth and musicians participating in the fundamentalist Christian rock movement wearing clothing and writing music very similar to original punk music, but without any of the protest against economic and social conditions that originally motivated the movement. In other words, the multitude becomes pacified and integrated, forming yet another marketable commodity. As Deleuze and Guattari observe, capitalism can always add a new axiom.

In light of the foregoing, the rationale for the appearance of the divided subject (\$) in the position of truth now becomes clear. On the one hand, the discourse of immaterial labor functions to exclude or disavow the alienated subject of capitalism, masking it with a master-signifier that purports to provide the subject with an identity that would fix its place in the symbolic order. On the other hand, the divided subject is that which drives this discourse, endlessly pursuing some signifier that would be capable of naming it or assigning it a place within the symbolic order. Of course, this is structurally impossible insofar as the subject, to quote Lacan’s aphorism, “always is where it is not and is not where it is”. Every signifier that purports to name or fix the subject slides off of it like water on the back of a duck.

It now becomes clear as to why the discourse of immaterial labor is haunted by both an impossibility and an impotence. On the one hand, because the discourse of immaterial labor is driven by the divided subject, by that which is always displaced in the symbolic, no knowledge (S_2) can ever catch up with the loss (*a*) that plagues this subject as a result of its alienation in language. Endless signifiers proliferate attempting to catch up with *objet a*, only to see *objet a* displaced like an ever receding horizon. Consequently, the relationship between the divided subject (\$) and the master-signifier that purports to name it (S_1) is characterized by impotence. The naming always fails. As a result, the discourse of immaterial labor inevitably generates social symptoms structured around the bifurcated structure of fantasy described in the first section of this paper. The subject is forced to cast about for some reason for the failure of its

identity to function properly. It is precisely here that we see the aim of Žižek's critique of ideological formations. As Žižek writes in the introduction to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*,

In contrast to [the] Althusserian ethics of *alienation* in the symbolic 'process without a subject', we may denote the ethics implied by Lacanian psychoanalysis as that of *separation*. The famous Lacanian motto not to give way on one's desire [*ne pas céder sur son désir*]-- is aimed at the fact that we must not obliterate the distance separating the real from its symbolization: it is this surplus of the Real over every symbolization that functions as the object-cause of desire. To come to terms with this surplus (or, more precisely, leftover) means to acknowledge the fundamental deadlock ('antagonism'), a kernel resisting symbolic integration-dissolution (Žižek 1989: 3).

It is precisely at this point where the master-signifier strives to count the Real as one, where it tries to cover over constitutive antagonism, that Žižek's theoretico-political *praxis* intervenes. Yet here we encounter a new discourse, unlike the others that each support, in their own way, the discourse of the capitalist.

6. The Discourse of Critical Theory

As I suggested at the beginning of this paper, Žižek's characterization of his own engagement in terms of the discourse of the analyst fits uncomfortably. On the one hand, Žižek's gloss on the discourse of the capitalist is curious. As Žižek remarks,

...the analyst's discourse stands for the emergence of revolutionary-
emancipatory subjectivity that resolves the split of university and hysteria.
In it, the revolutionary agent-- *a* --addresses the subject from the position
of knowledge that occupies the place of truth (i.e., which intervenes in at
the "symptomatic torsion" of the subject's constellation), and the goal is to
isolate, get rid of, the master signifier that structured the subjects
(ideologico-political unconscious) (Žižek 2006a).

Not only is this gloss on the discourse of the analyst inconsistent with his analysis of the other three discourses in the universe of mastery, this is not what takes place in the discourse of the analyst. The master-signifier (S_1) is not excluded, but is the product of this discourse. Put otherwise, what emerges over the course of the analysis is the Oedipal determinants of the subject's unconscious. Similarly, the analyst does not speak from the position of knowledge, but rather knowledge is what is excluded from the analytic setting. The analyst sets aside his knowledge so that the unconscious knowledge of the analysand might come to the fore through

transference. The early Freud had attempted to occupy the position of the analyst as a master possessed of knowledge of the analysand's symptoms. It was this that drove Dora away. It was not until Freud set aside his knowledge that progress could be made in the process of analysis.

Aside from these issues of how Lacan's discourse of the analyst is to be interpreted, a more serious concern arises with respect to the aims of the discourse of the analyst when situated in a political context. Are analysis and engaged political activity consistent with one another? As Lacan remarks at the end of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, "[t]he analyst's desire is not a pure desire. It is a desire to obtain absolute difference, a desire which intervenes when, confronted with the primary signifier, the subject is, for the first time, in a position to subject himself to it" (Lacan 1998: 276). The analysand begins analysis in the dimension of the imaginary, treating everything and everyone as the Same. Over the course of analysis what emerges is an absolutely singular constellation of signifiers, specific to this subject and this subject alone as determinants of his unconscious (hence Lacan's reference to the subject being in a position to subject himself to this primary signifier). Lacan goes so far as to suggest that the primary signifiers uncovered in analysis are pure non-sense. "...[T]he effect of interpretation is to isolate in the subject a kernel, a *kern*, to use Freud's own term, of *non-sense*..." (Ibid: 250). If this primary signifier has the status of non-sense, then this is precisely because it is not *common* but particular to the subject and no other. It is thus difficult to see how it is possible to get a politics out of the discourse of the analyst, for the discourse of the analyst does not aim at collective engagement or the common-- which is necessary for politics -- but the precise opposite.

Nonetheless, there is a kernel of truth in Žižek's characterization of his own position in terms of the discourse of the analyst. Unlike the politics of the discourse of the master premised on the fantasy of imaginary organic totality, any revolutionary politics must speak not from the position of totality, but from the standpoint of the Real, of antagonism, of the remainder, or of that which the other social ties function to veil or hide from view. In other words, revolutionary political engagement differs from the politics of the State and master in that it approaches the social from the perspective of the Real, treating this as the truth of social formations. As Žižek remarks,

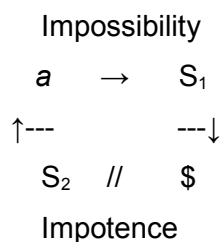
All 'culture' is in a way a reaction-formation, an attempt to limit, canalize-- to *cultivate* this imbalance, this traumatic kernel, this radical antagonism through which man cuts his umbilical cord with nature, with animal homeostasis. It is not only that the aim is no longer to abolish this drive

antagonism, but the aspiration to abolish it is precisely the source of totalitarian temptation: the greatest mass murders and holocausts have always been perpetrated in the name of man as harmonious being, of a New Man without antagonistic tension (Žižek 1989: 5).

Where the politics of the master treats this imbalance or traumatic kernel of radical antagonism as an *accident* to be eradicated and overcome, the critical-revolutionary politics treats the tension as the truth that allows a whole set of social symptoms to be discerned and engaged. For example, Marx does not treat discontent among the proletariat as an anomalous deviation disrupting the social to be summarily dismissed, but rather as the key to the systematic organization of capitalism and the perspective from which capitalist production is to be understood, and as the potential for revolutionary transformation. The mark of any critical-revolutionary political theory will thus be that *objet a*, the remainder, the gap, the traumatic kernel, occupies the position of the agent in the social relation.

However, while the discourse of critical theory resembles the discourse of the analyst in that *objet a* occupies the position of the agent, the structure of this discourse is very different and has entirely different aims. The aim is no longer that of uncovering those nonsensical signifiers that function as determinants of the subject's unconscious, but rather of *producing a divided subject*. In the discourse of the critical theory *objet a* now addresses the master-signifier (S_1), producing a divided subject ($\$$), with knowledge (S_2) in the position of truth:

Discourse of Critical Theory



The relation of *objet a*-- the remainder, excluded, Real, or traumatic kernel --addressing the master-signifier (S_1) comes as no surprise. Radical engagement is precisely the *praxis* that challenges reigning master-signifiers, ideologies, masters, leaders, forms of hegemonic domination of one group by another, and all the rest. However, the appearance of the divided subject ($\$$) in the position of the product comes as a surprise. Is not the aim of a critical theory

and *praxis* precisely that of emancipation? How can a discourse that produces a dominated or alienated subject possibly able to contribute to the aim of emancipation?

If we are to understand the appearance of the divided subject in the position of the product it is necessary to raise the question of the conditions for the possibility of emancipation. Žižek relates a joke at the beginning of *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* that can help us to address this question. As Žižek remarks,

In an old joke from the defunct German Democratic Republic, a German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by the censors, he tells his friends: 'Let's establish a code: if a letter you get from me is written in ordinary blue ink, it's true; if it's written in red ink, it's false.' After a month, his friends get the first letter, written in blue ink: 'Everything is wonderful here: the shops are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, cinemas show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair-- the only thing you can't get is *red ink*.' The structure here is more refined than it might appear: although the worker is unable to signal that what he is saying is a lie in the prearranged way, he none the less succeeds in getting his message across-- how? *By inscribing the very reference to the code in the encoded message, as one of its elements...*

Is this not the matrix of an efficient critique of ideology-- not only in 'totalitarian' conditions of censorship but, perhaps even more, in the more refined conditions of liberal censorship? One starts by agreeing that one has all the freedoms one wants-- then one merely adds that the only thing missing is the 'red ink': we 'feel free' because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom (Žižek 2002b: 1-2).

This joke perfectly illustrates why the divided subject appears in the position of the product in the discourse of critical theory. If we recall that the discourse of immaterial labor functioned by excluding the divided, alienated subject, by excluding antagonism and tension by integrating it into the existing social network, then it becomes clear that the first step in emancipatory practice lies in the articulation of our unfreedom. Put otherwise, the discourse of critical theory provides a language through which our unfreedom can be articulated, discerned, and therefore engaged.

On the one hand, the production of a divided subject shifts the subject's relation to the symbolic from one of identification where the social order appears natural and as things should be, to one where the subject discerns the manner in which she is alienated in the symbolic order. On the other hand, and more profoundly, the production of the subject opens the space of the void where alternative possibilities of social organization might emerge. As Žižek remarks, "[t]he subject is nothing but the gap in Substance, the inadequacy of the Substance to itself..." (Žižek 2002a: 131). Here Substance should be understood as "social substance", the

State, or the body of codes that appear natural. If the subject is the gap in substance, then this is because it is in excess of any and all identifications, such that its status as a void opens a space where alternative possibilities of life might become possible.

The reason for the appearance of knowledge (S_2) in the position of truth now becomes clear. On the one hand, knowledge-- ideology --is what is excluded by this discourse in order to function. The ideological justifications for the existing social order are placed in brackets, called into question, revealed as riddled with contradictions and antagonisms. On the other hand, the pursuit of a different form of knowledge and new institutions is now what drives this discourse. This would be revolutionary knowledge that analyzes and engages the social field from the standpoint of its constitutive antagonisms.

Like the other discourses, the discourse of the critical theorist is characterized by both an impossibility and an impotence. On the one hand, the relationship between *objet a* and the master-signifier is characterized by impossibility insofar as no master-signifier is ever adequate to naming *objet a*. A remainder always returns that exceeds the organizing aims of the master-signifier. Here it will be noted that this impossibility perfectly captures Žižek's gloss on the discourse of the analyst, underlining the manner in which *objet a* or the Real and the master-signifier are separated from one another. On the other hand, the lower level of the formula is characterized by impotence insofar as ideology (S_2) perpetually fails in containing or mastering the divided subject, but also insofar as the pursuit of revolutionary knowledge aimed at by this discourse never completely responds to the subject's lack. As a result, the discourse of the critical theorist endlessly repeats without limit. Paraphrasing Beckett, the discourse of critical theory is characterized by the impossibility of going on, the necessity of going on, and the will to go on.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have attempted to show that the difference between Žižek and Lacan is to be situated not at the level of content, but of form. Where Lacan's thought engages the universe of mastery and the discourses that inhabit that universe, a structure can be discerned throughout Žižek's thought that engages a very different universe of discourse. Although Žižek does not explore all dimensions of this universe in depth, his work can be seen as a cartography of this new universe, both uncovering the mechanisms by which it functions and devising strategies for engaging with this universe with the aim of promoting emancipation by providing us with a language through which we might become capable of articulating our unfreedom. The

structure of the discourses that can be discerned at work in Žižek's thought reveals a very precise analysis of the structural organization of our historical present. However, these discourses also go well beyond Žižek, revealing a common ground among many very different forms of critical engagement, while also allowing us to discern the role that the unconscious and the real play within this new universe of discourse.

Appendix: A Brief Summary of Lacan's Structuralist Theory of Discourse

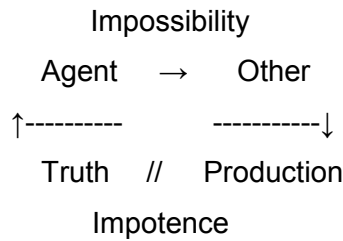
Lacan developed his theory of discourse between the years of 1969 and 1973, between Seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, and Seminar XX, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Unlike other theories of discourse, the focus is not on the *content* of discourse, but rather on the structural relation between the speaker of the discourse and the addressee of the discourse, such that 1) something is produced in the discourse, and 2) the discourse is always constitutively incomplete by virtue of the role that the unconscious plays in the discourse. As Alexandre Leupin nicely puts it,

What is a discourse? It is a formalizable structure that positions itself in between language and speech. It can subsist without being spoken by an individual (as in the case of an institution), but it is not the whole of a language: it inscribes itself in language as a fundamental relationship. Located between the generality of a given language and the speech act of an individual or the extreme singularity of each human subject, discourses define social groups (Leupin 2004: 68).

A discourse is thus not so much what a speech act is *about*, but is rather a particular form or structure taken by *social relations*, between institutions and other institutions, groups and other groups, institutions or groups and individuals, individuals and groups or institutions, and individuals and institutions. As a consequence, speech acts that are about very different things can embody one and the same *structure* of social relations. For example, workers might overturn the owners of the means of production, but institute a social order that has precisely the same structure, with masters commanding other workers so as to procure enjoyment. This seems to have occurred in Soviet socialism where the mode of production remained the same even though those in charge changed.

The formal structure of discourse or social relations as understood by Lacan is represented as follows:

Formal Structure of Discourse



In each discourse, an agent (individual, group, institution) acts upon or addresses an other (individual, group, or institution). Lacan claims that the position of the agent is a position of semblance, as any agent is ultimately governed or made to act by the unconscious or what Lacan refers to as the “truth” of the discourse. The position of truth is thus the real agent of discourse. It is simultaneously what the discourse must veil or hide, what the discourse must exclude, in order to function, while also being that which drives the discourse or functions as the “engine” of the discourse. For example, in the discourse of the master belonging to the universe of mastery, the subject divided between consciousness and the unconscious (\$) appears in the position of truth, while the master-signifier (S_1) appears in the position of semblance or agency. The master, leader, boss, or Oedipal father presents himself to the other-- in this case (S_2), standing for the servant, slave, worker, or child --as being complete and without any division by language. In order to function as the master, the agent of this discourse must veil or hide his division or lack. Yet it is the division or lack that drives this discourse. The master addresses the servant, commanding him to produce objects for his enjoyment. However, because the master, like any other subject, is divided by language, this command can never properly be transmitted, such that the object (a) produced in the discourse is never quite what the master asked for. As a result, the master continues to make commands, futilely attempting to surmount his division, becoming ever more alienated in language. Unlike theories of discourse premised on information theory where the focus is on how it is possible to transmit a shared, identical message to a receiver, Lacan begins from the premise that all communication is miscommunication or that all communication ultimately fails. It is for this reason that we continue to endlessly talk. As a consequence, each discourse is designed to account for this failure and why this failure (impossibility and impotence) generates the repetition of the various structured social relations.

Each discourse is thus determined by the position of one of four variables-- S_1 , S_2 , $\$$, and *objet a* --in relation to one another in the formal structure of discourse. S_1 stands for the master-signifier and can be anything from the master, the Father, the leader, proper names, to key ideological signifiers like "freedom", "democracy", the "United States", "environment", etc. These signifiers function to form a totality by relating all the other signifiers back to this originary master-signifier. For example, a Marxist links all of the world's social problems-- unemployment, ethnic and nationalistic tensions, gender inequality, looming environmental catastrophe, energy shortages, etc. --back to "capitalism" functioning as S_1 . In and of itself, the signifier "capitalism" means nothing, but it serves an organizational role with regard to all the other signifiers in the social field. Likewise, feminism might see "gender inequality" as the master-signifier underlying all of the signifiers composing the social field, e.g., environmental problems emerge from masculine attitudes towards nature that perceive it as a female body to be exploited. The discourse of the master in the universe of mastery is also a highly schematized representation of the Oedipal structure, where the name-of-the-father names the opaque desire of the mOther, instituting the Law, desire, and prohibition. S_2 stands for knowledge, the battery of signifiers composing language, the servant or worker that possesses "know-how", archives, bureaucracy, etc. $\$$ stands for the subject divided between consciousness and the unconscious, alienated subjects, subjects subordinated to other subjects, etc. Finally *a* stands for surplus-*jouissance*, the lost object, *jouissance*, commodities, and so on. Lacan employs algebraic symbols to emphasize structural relations, so that very different phenomena can be discerned as being organized by identical social relations. Consequently, the manner in which the variables are filled out by content will depend on the social formation being discussed. Sometimes S_1 will be the name-of-the-father, at other times the proper name, at yet other times, the master or monarch, and yet other times a boss or signifier central to an ideological formation.

The arrows on the left and right hand of each discourse indicate the direction in which the little machines work. The upward arrow on the left side of each discourse indicates the role that the unconscious plays in the discourse beneath the semblance defined by the position of the agent, while the downward arrow on the right side of each discourse indicates what is produced by the other in the discourse. Insofar as each discourse is constitutively incomplete due to possessing an unconscious element (the truth) that is veiled in the discourse, the relationship between the agent and other on the upper level of the discourse is characterized by "impossibility". The agent of the discourse can never fully transmit his desire to the addressee of the discourse because, as Lacan liked to say, "truth can only be half-said". Similarly, the relationship between the two terms of the lower level of each discourse is characterized by

“impotence” (represented by the two diagonal slash marks), because the product of each discourse is never what was desired in the position of truth for each discourse. For example, the knowledge (S_2) produced by the master (S_1) in the discourse of the hysteric is never the sort of knowledge that would provide a knowledge of *jouissance*, loss, or lack that drives the hysteric. The relation between a and S_2 is characterized by impotence. Thus, the doctor, political leader, therapist, father, scientist, etc., forever gives the wrong answer to the hysteric’s. If this is so, then it is so because the loss (a) driving the hysteric’s symptom (\$) is something that forever falls outside of language. Here it should be recalled that *objet a* is the remainder or constitutive lack produced when the living body is alienated in language. The more signifiers the master produces, the more alienated the hysteric feels insofar as proliferating signifiers increase the division in the subject, pushing the subject further and further away from the lost object... A paradox not unlike those described by Zeno.

The subsequent discourses belonging to each universe of discourse are found by rotating the terms of the initial discourse clockwise one position. Thus, for example, the discourse of the hysteric is found by shifting the divided subject (\$) from the position of truth in the discourse of the master to the position of the agent, shifting the master-signifier from the position of the agent to the position of the other, shifting the position of knowledge (S_2) from the position of the other to the position of production, and shifting *objet a* from the position of production to the position of truth. For each universe of discourse there are exactly four discourses and no more. The relations between the four terms remains identical for each discourse in a universe of discourse. Between the four positions of the formal structure of discourse and the four variables that can occupy these positions, there are 24 possible discourses and 6 possible universes of discourse. The discourses are thus what the branch of mathematics known as “group theory” refers to as “permutation groups”. Lacan proposed *five* discourses, the four belonging to the universe of mastery and a fifth called the “discourse of the capitalist” that cannot be derived in the universe of mastery. The discourse of the capitalist thus suggests an entirely new universe of discourse populated by 3 additional discourses not discussed by Lacan. Below readers will find the six possible universes of discourse within Lacan’s matrix. The additional four universes of discourse have not been named as it has not yet been established whether or not they, in fact, exist in our social world. They are virtual without being actual.

The Universe of Mastery

Discourse of the Master

Impossibility
 $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $\$ \quad // \quad a$
 Impotence

Discourse of the Hysteric

Impossibility
 $\$ \rightarrow S_1$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $a \quad // \quad S_2$
 Impotence

Discourse of the Analyst

Impossibility
 $a \rightarrow \$$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $S_2 \quad // \quad S_1$
 Impotence

Discourse of the University

Impossibility
 $S_2 \rightarrow a$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $S_1 \quad // \quad \$$
 Impotence

The Universe of Capitalism

Discourse of the Capitalist

Impossibility
 $\$ \rightarrow S_2$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $S_1 \quad // \quad a$
 Impotence

Discourse of Bio-Power

Impossibility
 $S_1 \rightarrow \$$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $a \quad // \quad S_2$
 Impotence

Discourse of Critical Theory

Impossibility
 $a \rightarrow S_1$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $S_2 \quad // \quad \$$
 Impotence

Discourse of Immaterial Production

Impossibility
 $S_2 \rightarrow a$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $\$ \quad // \quad S_1$
 Impotence

Third Universe of Discourse

Discourse 1

Impossibility
 $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $a \quad // \quad \$$
 Impotence

Discourse 2

Impossibility
 $a \rightarrow S_1$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $\$ \quad // \quad S_2$
 Impotence

Discourse 3

Impossibility
 $\$ \rightarrow a$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $S_2 \quad // \quad S_1$
 Impotence

Discourse 4

Impossibility
 $S_2 \rightarrow \$$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $S_1 \quad // \quad a$
 Impotence

Fourth Universe of Discourse

Discourse 1

Impossibility
 $S_1 \rightarrow a$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $S_2 \quad // \quad \$$
 Impotence

Discourse 2

Impossibility
 $S_2 \rightarrow S_1$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $\$ \quad // \quad a$
 Impotence

Discourse 3

Impossibility
 $\$ \rightarrow S_2$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $a \quad // \quad S_1$
 Impotence

Discourse 4

Impossibility
 $a \rightarrow \$$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $S_1 \quad // \quad S_2$
 Impotence

Fifth Universe of Discourse

Discourse 1

Impossibility
 $S_1 \rightarrow a$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $\$ \parallel S_2$
 Impotence

Discourse 2

Impossibility
 $\$ \rightarrow S_1$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $S_2 \parallel a$
 Impotence

Discourse 3

Impossibility
 $S_2 \rightarrow \$$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $a \parallel S_1$
 Impotence

Discourse 4

Impossibility
 $a \rightarrow S_2$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $S_1 \parallel \$$
 Impotence

Sixth Universe of Discourse

Discourse 1

Impossibility
 $S_1 \rightarrow \$$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $S_2 \parallel a$
 Impotence

Discourse 2

Impossibility
 $S_2 \rightarrow S_1$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $a \parallel \$$
 Impotence

Discourse 3

Impossibility
 $a \rightarrow S_2$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $\$ \parallel S_1$
 Impotence

Discourse 4

Impossibility
 $\$ \rightarrow a$
 $\uparrow \text{---} \text{---} \downarrow$
 $S_1 \parallel S_2$
 Impotence

¹ As Žižek puts it, “Lacan’s formula of the four discourses thus enables us to deploy the two faces of modernity (total administration and capitalist-individualist dynamics) as two ways to undermine the master’s discourse: doubt about the efficiency of the master-figure (what Eric Santner calls the “crisis of investiture”) can be supplemented by the direct rule of the experts legitimized by their knowledge, or the excess of doubt, of permanent questioning, can be directly integrated into social reproduction. Finally, the analyst’s discourse stands for the emergence of revolution-ary-
emancipatory subjectivity that resolves the split of university and hysteria. In it, the revolutionary agent-- *a* --addresses the subject from the position of knowledge that occupies the place of truth (i.e., which intervenes at the “symptomatic torsion” of the subject’s constellation), and the goal is to isolate, get rid of, the master signifier that structured the subject’s (ideologico-political) unconscious” (Žižek 2006: unpaginated).

² In the documentary *Žižek!*, Žižek argues that the goal of philosophy is not to *answer* questions, but both to pose questions and reframe the very nature of the questions being asked.

³ As such, Plato is directly at odds with Freud’s account of social dissatisfaction and conflict in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

⁴ Throughout this paper I distinguish between discourses and universes of discourse. A discourse is an individual structure such as the discourse of the master, the analyst, the hysteric, or the university. As Lacan attempts to demonstrate, the discourse of the hysteric, analyst, and university are permutations of the discourse master found by rotating the terms of this discourse clockwise one position forward. A universe of discourse, by contrast, is a set of structural permutations composed of four discourses taken together. Based on the four terms Lacan uses to represent the variables of any discourse, there are 24 possible discourses. However, these discourses form sets of permutations, such that there are only six possible *universes* of discourse. For a brief account of Lacan’s discourse theory and the six universes of discourses consult the appendix to this paper on page 53.

⁵ I name each of the six universes of discourse with reference to the first discourse from which the other three discourses are derived. The four discourses proposed by Lacan are named “the universe of mastery” because the initial discourse from which the discourse of the hysteric, the discourse of the analyst, and the discourse of the university are derived is the discourse of the master. Needless to say, not all of the discourses that populate this universe or group of permutations are themselves social relations that aim at mastery.

⁶ In Lacan’s formulation of the discourse of the capitalist in the Milan Discourse, the arrow on the left-hand side of the discourse appears pointing downward rather than upward. Lacan does not explain why the arrow points downward, nor does he, to my knowledge, ever again discuss the discourse of the capitalist using his mathemes. In keeping with Lacan’s treatment of the other four discourses belonging to the universe of mastery, I have opted to place the left-hand arrow pointing upwards rather than downwards. Readers themselves can judge whether or not this does interpretive violence to Lacan’s own formulation based on the commentary that follows.

⁷ It is noteworthy that despite Baudrillard’s own claims here and elsewhere that symbolic-value spells the ruin of Marx’s analysis of capitalism, the addition of symbolic-value does not destroy Marx’s understanding of the commodity. Marx very clearly argues that “needs” are not simply biological needs, but are also socially and historically produced needs, i.e., needs that are produced or manufactured. As Marx observes on the very first page of *Capital*, “The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the *imagination*, makes no difference” (Marx 1990: 125, my italics).

⁸ For an excellent discussion of the role played by the super-ego and *jouissance* in contemporary capitalism, see McGowan 2003.

⁹ Here Bourdieu’s analysis of educational institutions, class, and *habitus* is of great significance (Bourdieu 1988).

¹⁰ By “apolitical social sciences”, I understand those social sciences that take themselves to be producing a neutral knowledge of human beings, social relations, and social dynamics that have no political stake in this knowledge. In other words, such social sciences ignore the dimension of reflexivity or their own role in this knowledge production. This would be yet another reason that the master-signifier (S_1) appears in the position of agency in the discourse of bio-power, insofar as these forms of social science do not apply their own modes of analysis to their own position as observers in a sociological field.

¹¹ For an excellent account of the (non)-relationship between the subject and the body, see Johnston 2008.

¹² For a detailed treatment of this in formal terms, cf. Bryant 2007.

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