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The Four Fundamental Concepts of Slavoj Žižek's Psychoanalytic Marxism

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Everyone knows and everyone admits that psychoanalysis and Marxism should be able to find the meditations necessary to allow a combination of the two. Everyone adds, of course, that psychoanalysis is not primary, but that correctly coupled and rationalized with Marxism, it can be useful...Everyone, in fact says it—but who has tried to do it? – Sartre (1975)

In *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Frederic Jameson discusses the production of theoretical discourse. He writes, “New theoretical discourse is produced by the setting into active equivalence of two preexisting codes, which thereby, in a kind of molecular exchange, become a new one” (Jameson 1991: 394). Following this formula, we can read the history of Western Marxism as a series of productive exchanges between Marxism and a variety of theoretical codes. As Jameson writes in *Marxism and Form*, “Marxism as such, for whatever reason, does not seem to exclude the adherence to some other kind of philosophy” (Jameson 1971: 207). Thus, for whatever reason, we have witnessed the development of several hybrid forms of “philosophical” Marxism, of which Jameson provides an extensive list that I quote at length with a few of my own additions:

a positivistic Marxism (Engels), a Kantian Marxism (the Second International), a Hegelian-Marxism (Lukács), [a Freudo-Marxism (Marcuse)], a pragmatist Marxism (Sidney Hook), and so on down the various phenomenological, existentialist, religious, [structuralist (Althusser)], yes even poststructuralist or postmodern, Marxism of the post-War period [the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe]. (Jameson 2001: ix)

This essay examines how Slavoj Žižek sets Lacanian psychoanalysis into active equivalence with Marxism to produce a new theoretical discourse in the history of Western Marxism, a “cultural psychoanalysis.” It explores how Marxism adheres to psychoanalysis in Žižek’s theory to the point where we can speak of a new theoretical discourse, a Lacanian Marxism. As Jameson states in an interview with Xudong Zhang, “Žižek now wants to tell us that Lacanism is just such a translating code, or better, one that includes the dialectic and Marxism” (Zhang 1998: 366). Ernesto Laclau denies the equivalency of this exchange, claiming that Žižek’s “discourse is schizophrenically split between a highly sophisticated Lacanian analysis and an insufficiently deconstructed traditional Marxism” (Laclau 2000: 205). In Žižek’s estimation, however, the corrective for this “insufficiently deconstructed traditional Marxism” is precisely Lacanian psychoanalysis itself. Žižek employs Lacan to answer the unresolved questions of the Marxist tradition of thought concerning ideology, hegemony, and class struggle.¹

Though Lacan remains a vital reference for Žižek, he admits, “I don’t think that Lacanianism, even Lacanian psychoanalysis can directly substitute for a proper Marxist social analysis” (Beaumont and Jenkins 2000: 183). Many misconceptions about Žižek could be avoided if we acknowledge the primacy of this “proper Marxist social analysis” in his theoretical work. Criticisms of his work in recent collections like *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek* (2005) and *The Truth of Žižek* (2007) often follow Laclau’s move to undercut Žižek’s theoretical edifice in one fell swoop. Instead of looking for a fundamental problem with his theory, it behooves us to foreground the fundamental problem that his work addresses: the truth of capitalism.

This article wagers that in addition to foregrounding capitalism as the central problem for Žižek, it would be beneficial to attempt a “formalization” of the fundamental concepts with which his theoretical discourse attempts to traverse the fantasies of the capitalist world-economy, fantasies propagated by its defenders and critics alike, as well as by capitalism itself. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan states that the aim of his seminars is to train psychoanalysts, an endeavor he views as essential to praxis (Lacan 1998a: 2). The following “formalizations” assume that Žižek not only finds the meditations necessary to allow a combination of Marxism and psychoanalysis, but that he does so with the aim of training Marxist social analysts. Žižek rationally couples psychoanalysis and Marxism by demonstrating how the Marxian concepts of commodity fetishism, surplus-value, class struggle, and base/superstructure can be superimposed with the Lacanian notions of symptom, surplus-enjoyment, drive, and the Real.² The aim of this article is to decode these transcodings.

Symptoms, Symptoms, Everywhere

In what is perhaps still the most famous piece of writing in his oeuvre—the first section of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*—Žižek follows Lacan in accrediting Marx with having invented the symptom as it pertains to the field of psychoanalysis. This section introduces how the concept “symptom” functions for clinical versus cultural psychoanalysts. We will examine how the symptom serves as the central hermeneutical concept that connects psychoanalysis and Marxism as immanent *Ideologiekritiken*, and question what might it mean to identify with the social symptom from a perspective informed by Žižek’s Lacanian Marxism.³

In the medical clinic’s depth model of analysis, a symptom refers to any manifest abnormality in the condition of a patient that a doctor interprets in order to diagnose a latent malady. Contrary to the received perception of psychoanalysis and Marxism as 19th century deterministic “depth model” theories, Žižek identifies *the point of the symptom with the truth of the system* each interrogates—the libidinal economy for Lacan and the political economy for Marx. The key difference resides in the location of truth. Instead of referring to the content behind or below the manifest surface—as in patristic models of interpretation—the truth of a system (or structure) is to be found at the same formal level as its symptom. Analysis unveils “*the ‘secret’ of this form itself*” (Žižek 1989: 11).

In the psychoanalytic clinic, symptom refers to a ciphered message that the analyst interprets in order to diagnose the structure of an analysand’s desire. In Lacan’s structuralist phase, these messages are thoroughly linguistic. “Symptoms,” writes Lacan, “can be entirely resolved in an analysis of language, because a symptom [like the unconscious] is itself structured like a language” (Lacan 2006: 223). Symptoms take the form of metaphorical or symbolically overdetermined significations that betray an analysand’s neurotic structure. They come in the form of dreams, jokes, slips of the tongue, verbal tics, bungled actions, and other parapraxes of the pathology of everyday life. The interpretation of these symbolic symptoms is not isomorphic with the indexical practice of medical diagnostics for two main reasons. Since psychoanalysis operates on the surface and not under the dictates of a depth model, 1) “all neurotic symptoms are unique”: and 2) “there is no fixed one-to-one link between neurotic symptoms and the underlying neurotic structure” (i.e. “no neurotic symptom is in itself hysterical or obsessional”) (Evans 1996: 204). Therefore, “the analyst can only arrive at a diagnosis” argues Dylan Evans, “by identifying the fundamental question that animates the neurotic’s speech” (Evans 1996:204).

In the “Lacan of the Real,” symptoms become enigmatic, not undecipherable but immune to the effects of the most heroic hermeneutical efforts. The symptom becomes that which interpretation stumbles over, a substantive kernel of enjoyment or piece of embodied *jouissance* that persists despite our best attempts to dissolve it through an “analysis of language” (or “gentrify” it, as Žižek metaphorizes with a connotation that foreshadows his interest in the social symptom (Žižek 1989: 69)). In addition to maintaining a symbolic status as a ciphered message, the symptom as Real carries an ontological weight; it is the substance of enjoyment that confers on existing phenomena their consistency (Žižek 1989: 72). Speaking in a manner only somewhat facetiously, we can compare the symptom to a functioning alcoholic’s drink. This symptom-drink allows the alcoholic to sustain his or her experience of “normal” everyday reality—albeit a “functional” existence chock-full of problems—but when removed, its absence results in “total catastrophe.” In withdrawal, the drunk completely falls apart in a sort of Armageddon of the self, a description reminiscent of the upheaval in the subject at the conclusion of analysis that “clinicians refer to as the ‘twilight of the world’” (Lacan 2006: 477).

This example should not give the impression that the symptom happens to be an unfortunate problem isolated to a particular group of negligent individuals. To the contrary, the fact that the symptom holds an ontological standing means that it is “pandemic.” Regarding this universalization of the symptom, Žižek states that “almost everything that is becomes in a way a symptom...we can even say that ‘symptom’ is Lacan’s final answer to the eternal philosophical question ‘Why is there something instead of nothing?’—this ‘something’ which ‘is’ instead of nothing is indeed the symptom” (Žižek 1989: 71-72). At this juncture—where the symptom transforms from “a particular, ‘pathological’ signifying formation, a binding of enjoyment, an inert stain resisting communication and interpretation,” to the positive ontological condition of not only discourse but “reality” itself (in the Lacanian sense of the term, i.e. the symbolic order)—Žižek mobilizes Hegelian logic to buttress this move to universalization (Žižek 1989: 75). He writes: ‘The “symptom” is, strictly speaking, a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus...a point of breakdown *heterogenous* to a given ideological field and at the same time *necessary* for that field to achieve its own closure, its accomplished form.’ (Žižek 1989: 21). The phrase “strictly speaking” is code for “philosophically speaking,” for Žižek’s recourse to dialectical logic to obtain a universal definition of the symptom. The symptom abstracted from all particular, “pathological” contents can now be defined as a constitutive exception that is necessary for a formal field to find closure.

The above elliptical quote from Žižek intentionally cuts out his explicit reference to the Marxian critique of ideology in order to highlight how Žižek’s Marx is always already Hegelian

(much like Jameson's). Indicative of his Hegelian-Marxism, Žižek intertwines the formalized definition of symptom with its prototypical Marxist example: "the pathological imbalance which belies the universalism of bourgeois 'rights and duties'" (Žižek 1989: 21). Liberal capitalism's usual suspects, its "sublime objects of ideology"—liberty, equality, the pursuit of happiness, democracy, etc.—would equally suffice, but Žižek chooses "freedom" to exemplify this socioeconomic order's contradictory or "false" universalism. In the series of freedoms we enjoy, one in particular sticks out that subverts the universal notion of freedom: the freedom of a worker to sell his labor on the market. With the addition of this particular right, the wolf of enslavement appears in freedom's sheep's clothing. This wolf represents the symptom of bourgeois society, the structurally necessary exception to the chain of equivalent freedoms bleating in our sleep. The right to freely sell one's labor exposes the truth about freedom under liberal capitalism.

To this example, Žižek adds the emergence of labor as a commodity which represents "the internal negation of the universal principle of equivalent exchange of commodities," and, in his most extended illustration of the social symptom, Žižek follows Lacan's claim that Marx discovered the symptom when he conceived of the structural shift in fetishism that occurred in "the passage from feudalism to capitalism" (Žižek 1989: 23, 26). Whereas in feudalism fetishism takes place in a "relation between men," in capitalism it occurs in a "relation between things." In a feudal society, "relations of domination and servitude" are immediately transparent (the king rules over his subjects because they recognize him as king, and vice versa), while in a capitalist society these power relations are repressed by the institution of commodity fetishism (the capitalist, despite his conspicuous consumption, is hidden by the fact that he or she enjoys the same formal rights as the rest of us). Although these fetishistic structures are mutually exclusive, they follow the same logic. Fetishism:

consists of a certain misrecognition which concerns the relation between a structured network and one of its elements: what is really a structural effect, an effect of the network of relations between elements, appears as an immediate property of one of the elements, as if this property also belongs to it outside its relation with other elements. (Žižek 1989: 24)

Rephrased in Hegelian terms, this misrecognition concerns the relation between the Universal and the Particular. The Universal is really a structural effect, an effect of the network of relations between particularities, but in fetishism the Universal appears as an immediate property of a particularity, as if this property also belongs to it outside its relation with other particularities. For

example, the abstract, universal exchange-value appears as the immediate property of, say, a \$50,000 luxury sedan or a \$1 loaf of bread.

Žižek's primary contribution to the Marxist theory of commodity fetishism consists in reminding us of the objective status of the misrecognition constitutive of fetishism. Recall the shift in the status of symptom from a ciphered message to an embodied piece of *jouissance* that resists psychoanalytic interpretation. In a homologous way, the social symptom, "the point of emergence of the truth about social relations," shifts from being a case of ideological misrecognition or "false consciousness" that we can dissolve through the traditional form of Marxist ideology criticism, to become embodied in the reified (the "objectively subjective") social reality of the world of commodities (Žižek 1989: 26). "It is this world," Žižek writes, "which behaves 'idealistically'" (Žižek 1989: 32). We no longer have to believe in the magical aura emanating from luxury sedans, the cars themselves believe in their thaumaturgy for us. Žižek underscores this split in belief when he points out that "a typical bourgeois subject is, in terms of his conscious attitude, an utilitarian nominalist—it is in his social activity, in exchange on the market, that he acts *as if* commodities were not simple objects, but objects endowed with special powers, full of 'theological whimsies'" (Žižek 2002: unpaginated). We propagate commodity fetishism through our daily monetary transactions regardless of whether we believe in pragmatic solipsism or socialism.

Commodity fetishism as the social symptom of capitalism requires us to adopt an awry perspective that transposes the prioritization of epistemology over ontology so endemic to postmodernist sophistry (even of the Lacanian variety). The ontological status of the social symptom entails that, as Jameson writes apropos of Althusser, "ideology is institutional first and foremost and only later on to be considered a matter of consciousness" (Jameson 2001: xii). Such an admission does not amount to an irreconcilable divorce of practice from theory or theory from practice. It simply means that when it comes to ideology, doing "speaks louder" than knowing.

Still, important questions remain unresolved with regard to the transcoding of symptom from the psychoanalytic clinic to its role in the practice of cultural psychoanalysis. If analysis aims for the analysand to identify with his or her symptom, then what might it mean to identify with the social symptom? I think Žižek is right when he states that "to 'identify with a symptom' means to recognize in the 'excesses,' in the disruptions of the 'normal' way of things, the key offering us access to its true functioning" (Žižek 1989: 128). This recognition of the truth in excess serves as the basis for symptomatic readings (whatever form this excess might take: strikes, depressions, natural or manufactured catastrophes, etc.). But does it make sense to talk

about a social *sinthome*? Lacan coined the term *sinthome* to conceptually account for patients whose symptom persisted beyond interpretation. The *sinthome* is “literally our only substance, the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject” (Žižek 1989: 75). What would it mean to identify with a social kernel of enjoyment that absolutely resists interpretation?

Žižek has used the example of single black mothers to represent the social *sinthome*, “a knot, a point at which all the lines of the predominant ideological argumentation (the return to family values, the rejection of the welfare state and its ‘uncontrolled’ spending, etc.) meet” (Žižek 2000: 176). This example strikes me as perspicacious if we consider the *jouissance* structuring the predominant ideology, but it seems to remain at the level of a social symptom from a progressive perspective. In other words, the example of the single black mother is still interpretable, we can identify with how she interrupts the “service of goods.” What about a social *sinthome* that provides the substance that gives consistency to our “collective” subjectivity? What about commodity fetishism as the definitive social *sinthome* of capitalist society? As Žižek reminds us, for Marx:

there is one exceptional “pathological,” innerworldly particular content in which the very universal form of reflexivity is grounded, to which it is attached by a kind of umbilical cord, by which the frame of this form itself is enframed; for Marx, of course, the particular content is the social universe of commodity exchange. (Žižek 2000: 278)

The enjoyment derived from commodity fetishism persists beyond interpretation. Unlike the symptom which loses its enjoyment factor when we gain knowledge of it, the *sinthome*, as the fully acknowledged “frame” of our existence, maintains its libidinal position. The particular knot of the “social relations between things” confronts us with the impotence of our critico-political activity. We identify with the pathological point of the social universe of commodity exchange simply by selling our labor power, not to mention the innumerable ways we enjoy this social *sinthome*. In a topsy-turvy world where not just wooden tables but direct experiences stand on their head, are not the commodities themselves—like Žižek’s celebrated example of canned laughter in television shows—enjoying for us? Do they not function as the “quanta of enjoyment” in late capitalist society, to paraphrase Žižek’s recent analogy that *sinthomes* are the “Freudian equivalent of superstrings” (Žižek 2006a: 78)?

How do we cut the umbilical cord that attaches us to the social universe of commodity exchange despite our conscious resistance? Žižek’s recent work displays an acute awareness of this predicament. He frames the problem by drawing an analogy to the psychoanalytic process. He writes, “Just as the unconscious and not the patient must be brought to the truth,

the real task is to convince not the subject, but the [commodities]: not to change the way we talk about commodities, but *to change the way commodities talk among themselves*" (Žižek 2006b: 352). As in the example of the chicken and the man who believes himself to be a grain of seed, we must convince not ourselves but the chicken-commodities that we are not grains of seed in order to defetishize the social universe of commodity exchange.

The Homology Between Surplus-Enjoyment and Surplus-Value

Any discussion of the homology between surplus-enjoyment and surplus-value must begin with the psychoanalytic understanding of ontological difference. Contrary to popularly held theories that disclaim any notion of human nature, psychoanalysis posits a "minimal difference" that enables us to recognize a specifically-human dimension. For Žižek, the key to the zero-degree of "humanization" is to be found in the Freudian notion of "death drive." Death drive represents:

the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny excess of life, for an "undead" urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never "just life": humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things. (Žižek 2006b: 62)

The "minimalist anthropology" of death drive—the psychoanalytic conception of ontological difference—allows Žižek to develop the idea of surplus-enjoyment, Lacan's equivalent term for Marx's concept of surplus-value. There is a certain elegance to this homology: just as surplus-value sets capitalist production in motion, surplus-enjoyment provides the object-cause of human desire, what Lacan designates *objet petit a*. In Lacan's hands, surplus-value becomes a subsequent instantiation of surplus-enjoyment, with the implication that the latter exists as an eternal condition of human existence. (At one point in *Seminar XVII*, Lacan jests that Marx would have invented the concept of surplus-*jouissance* if he had not had to "invent" capitalism.)

Žižek uses Coca-Cola to exemplify surplus-enjoyment ("Coke is it," but what is "it" exactly?) eBay's 2005 "it" advertising campaign also captures the essence of the *objet a*. eBay is an online marketplace where subscribers pay a minimal fee to sell items to other subscribers who either bid on these items or buy them outright. Almost anything can be and has been sold or purchased on eBay, from a set of toenail clippings to a yacht. To portray the plethora of goods available, eBay's 2005 run of television commercials and magazine ads depicted consumers doing the normal things consumers do: receiving packages, opening presents, shopping, etc. The catch is that instead of carrying out these consumptive duties with products

that fit the actual contexts of their activities, the consumers handled the word “it.” Appearing in the font, shape, and color of the company’s logo, the blocked letters “i” and “t” took the place of actual commodities. “it” literally embodied the empty commodity form, which from the Marxist perspective, is never simply a matter of supply filling demand but the surplus-value extracted from the laborers who produce these commodities in the first place.

Objet a introduces an important distinction in the economy of enjoyment. *Objet a* represents the object-cause of desire, not the object of desire. The object of desire is simply the material object, the body of another, etc. The object-cause of desire, on the other hand, is the *je ne sais quoi* of this object, what is in a product more than the product itself. In the latter sense, *objet a* signifies the promise of enjoyment-in-the-Real, of an experience of full *jouissance*, total fulfillment and satisfaction. The impersonal pronoun starring in the eBay ads works because it represents this object-cause of desire as opposed to the objects of desire available at the click of a mouse button. The “it,” the commodity form, is empty precisely because it can never deliver on its promise of *jouissance*; the *objet a* can never coincide with the object of desire.

Lacan frames the commodity quandary in a way that resonates with eBay’s campaign. He writes, “‘That’s not it’ is the very cry by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected... ‘That’s not it’ means that, in the desire of every demand, there is but the request for object *a*, for the object that could satisfy *jouissance*” (Lacan 1998b: 111). If eBay promises to make “it” accessible, this promise entails the collapse of an irreducible split between what is obtained from what was expected, what was requested from what proves to be ultimately unsatisfactory. In Lacanian terms, the commodity form obfuscates the difference between desire and demand by asserting the possibility of their equivalence. Against this marketing deception, we should assert that the demand for “it” is always an obfuscated desire for *objet a*. Moreover, when eBay delivers on our demand—when we obtain that obscure something that we have wanted since a time before we can remember—we can rest assured that our desire will remain as restless as it was before the purchase. *Objet a* is the name for why we respond to “it” with “that’s not it!”

The fact that “it” appears in the form of its negation does not mean that we do not receive some amount of enjoyment from “it.” On the initial flyby, *objet a* signifies the inherent obstacle to *jouissance*, the metonymy of nothingness, the lack in the symbolic order (Literally, *a* = positivized loss.). However, on the next pass, *objet a* appears minimally different. It becomes the indivisible reminder of *jouissance*, “the excess that cannot be accounted for by any symbolic idealization” (Žižek 2000: 156). *Objet a* marks the coincidence of limit and excess, of lack and surplus. The parallax of *objet a*, how it appears at once negatively in the form of lack and

positively in the form of excess, accounts for “the point of Lacan’s concept of surplus-enjoyment,” which, as Žižek states, lies in how “the very renunciation of *jouissance* brings about a remainder/surplus of *jouissance*” (Žižek 2000: 291). Once we renounce the empty promise of an unmitigated *jouissance*, we receive, in turn, a minimal surplus of enjoyment. In this way, enjoyment only emerges in surplus; it is constitutively an excess.

Psychoanalysis argues that if we take away the obstacle to enjoyment, the very potential for enjoyment dissipates. The “Pauline” paradox to be grasped is that enjoyment derives from prohibition. Hence Lacan’s reply to Dostoevsky’s, “If God does not exist, everything is permitted.” Lacan disagrees and inverts this conclusion: “If God does not exist, everything is prohibited.” When we are bombarded with enticements and incited to enjoy as we are in late capitalist society, enjoyment frustratingly eludes us. The key to this irony, what Marcuse referred to as “repressive desublimation,” resides in the general shift from a restrictive to an all-permissive society. Žižek references the explicit prohibitions of “precapitalist” societies against *jouissance*. He writes, “the entire precapitalist ethics aimed to prevent the excess proper to human libidinal economy from exploding” (Žižek 1993: 210). Obviously, the libidinal economies of precapitalist societies took many forms, some of which continue in the present. The point of Žižek’s sweeping historiography is not empirical accuracy, but to highlight the radical change introduced by late capitalism. Subjects are no longer required to renounce their personal *jouissance* in order to join the symbolic order or to fulfill a symbolic mandate, a renunciation which, as previously mentioned, yields a remainder of *jouissance*. The process becomes inverted in late capitalism: the duty of subjects is to indulge in the multifarious desires. The duty is to “Enjoy!”

“What happens when the system no longer excludes the excess, but directly posits it as its driving force,” Žižek asks, “as is the case in capitalism which can only reproduce itself through its constant self-revolutionizing, through the constant overcoming of its own limit?” (Žižek 2005a: 242). What happens when enjoyment becomes the mandate of an entire symbolic order? One result of the shift from a superego that fosters guilt to one that demands enjoyment is the emergence of new forms of subjectivity. As Jameson and other theorists of postmodernity have argued, the symptomatic subject of late capitalism is schizophrenic. Yet, prior to schizoid-normativity, it was Lacan who postulated that the appearance of hysteria was concomitant with the burgeoning of consumer society. Hysteria emerges at a specific time in history when the symbolic order could no longer guarantee an answer to the subjective question, “What does the Other [the symbolic order] want from me?” The radical cutting of traditional social bonds that occurs with the rise of capitalism universalizes this adolescent question and renders it

permanent. The hysteric is no longer able to rely on the symbolic order to structure his or her desire, but suffers from a so-called “identity crisis.” Capitalism exploits the hysterical response to the waning of the symbolic order’s efficiency to create meaningful identifications for the subject. Žižek writes, “The excess of doubt, of permanent questioning, can be directly integrated into social reproduction” (Žižek 2005a: 228). We can refer to the excess of doubt and permanent questioning that capitalism exploits as the “infinite metonymy of desire.”

Capitalism feeds off the historical opening up of this infinite metonymy of desire. “Lacan designated capitalism as the reign of the discourse of the hysteric,” writes Žižek. “The vicious circle of a desire whose apparent satisfaction only widens the gap of its dissatisfaction...is what defines hysteria” (Žižek 1993: 209). We can now see how the surplus-enjoyment of *objet a* connects with the basic functioning of capitalism. The hysteric-consumer, in his or her permanent quest to fill the lack (a lack shared by hysteric and symbolic order alike), searches for the object cause of desire in the endless aisles of mega-marts, department stores, antique shops, thrift stores, etc. Through purchases the hysteric begins to construct an identity, but this identity is provisional and always open to alterations.

The seemingly infinite malleability for the hysterical subject to make and remake him- or herself through consumerism (the infamous lifestyle branding heralding a new step in this logic), mirrors capitalism’s constant revolutionizing of its own conditions. “The explosion of the hysterical capitalist subjectivity,” writes Žižek, “reproduces itself through permanent self-revolutionizing, through the integration of the excess into the ‘normal’ functioning of the social link (the true ‘permanent revolution’ is already capitalism itself)” (Žižek 2005a: 228). The normalization of this excess signals a primary (if not *the* primary) contradiction of capitalism. What does it mean to cement the social link in surplus-enjoyment? Žižek acutely describes the unparalleled moment we currently live in, and I quote at length:

Capitalism is not just a historical epoch among others...a certain excess which was, as it were, kept under check in previous history, perceived as a local perversion, a limited deviation, is in capitalism elevated into the very principle of social life, in the speculative movement of money begetting more money, of a system which can survive only by constantly revolutionizing its own conditions—that is to say, in which *the thing can survive only as its own excess*, constantly exceeding its own “normal” constraints (Žižek 2006b: 297).

Žižek’s wager is that the “micro” libidinal economy of the hysteric parallels the “macro” political economy of capitalism. Both are characterized by a permanent process of self-revolutionizing through the integration of an excess, surplus-enjoyment for the hysteric and surplus-value for capitalism, and both can survive only by exceeding their own normal constraints. The hysteric

paradoxically maintains his or her desire by rummaging through a constant parade of object-products in desperate search of “it,” the object-cause of desire. By comparison, the capitalist contradiction centers on *objet a*: “this inherent obstacle/antagonism as the ‘condition of impossibility’ of the full deployment of the productive forces [that] is simultaneously its ‘condition of possibility’” (Žižek 2005b: unpaginated).

Acknowledging that these surpluses are homologous presents a great challenge for the desire called utopia. Žižek writes:

If we subtract the surplus we lose enjoyment itself, just as capitalism, which can survive only by incessantly revolutionizing its own material conditions, ceases to exist if “stays the same,” if it achieves an internal balance. This, then, is the homology between surplus-value—the “cause” which sets in motion the capitalist process of production—and surplus-enjoyment, the object-cause of desire. (Žižek 1989: 52)

To repeat Marx but not to fall into the evolutionist trap of believing that communism will spontaneously arise out of capitalism, we must envision a symbolic order that somehow eliminates surplus-value while preserving a certain degree of surplus enjoyment. Such is one task of utopian thought.

The Limit of Drive is Drive Itself

Žižek’s more recent theorizations of capitalism have turned away from the Lacanian notion of desire to the concept of drive. The previous section discussed the reflexivity of desire, how desire is desire for the object-cause of desire, *objet a*. We saw how this desire could not be satisfied in any lasting way, that it was infinite, an infinite metonymy of desire. Drive distinguishes itself from desire in a short-circuit of sorts. Its object is the loss itself of *objet a*, not the fantasmatic *objet a* that never yields its promised *jouissance*, but what Žižek calls the “object-loss of drive.” He writes, “in the case of *objet petit a* as the object of drive, the ‘object’ is directly loss itself—in the shift from desire to drive we pass from the *lost object to loss itself as an object*” (Žižek 2006b: 62). Where desire suffers from the repetitive failure to obtain full *jouissance*, drive finds triumph in this very failure. Desire acquiesces to the surplus-enjoyment it receives from partial objects that are metonymies for the impossible Thing; drive finds satisfaction in the loop around an object.

To concretize this rather abstract distinction, let us take a modernist painter. At first, this painter experiments with several styles. His paintings also rapidly change subjects—country landscapes, flowers, the female figure, etc. Then one day this restless search all of the sudden

ends when he drips some paint on a blank canvas. He spends the rest of his career action painting, or maybe even painting the same abstract mountain. Modernist painting provides several examples of this repetitive loop of subject-matter. This is drive at its most elementary: how our libido gets stuck to a particular object, condemned to circulate around it forever. The aim of drive is not its goal but circulation itself.

If the hysterical libidinal economy of desire works in cahoots with capitalism to produce and reproduce consumer society, then drive may offer a possible way to break out of this endless chain of metonymic commodities. Žižek writes:

drive is literally a counter-movement to desire, it does not strive towards impossible fullness and, being forced to renounce it, gets stuck onto a partial object as its remainder—drive is quite literally *the very “drive” to break the All of continuity in which we are embedded*, to introduce a radical imbalance into it, and the difference between drive and desire is precisely that, in desire, this cut, this fixation on a partial object, is as it were “transcendentalized,” transposed into a stand-in for the void of the Thing. (Žižek 2006b: 63)

The above passage posits drive in opposition to desire, which, in turn, is represented as creating a transcendental world of partial objects, all of which sustain the illusion of the “Thing as the filler of its void” (Žižek 2006b: 63). Desire, in fact represents the horizon of Lacan’s early theorizations of psychoanalysis, which remain thoroughly Kantian. In this early stage, Lacan posits a lost *jouissance* of the inaccessible “maternal” Thing with *objet a* serving as a leftover or remainder of this primordial enjoyment. The regulative ideal implicit in this formulation requires the subject to renounce the Thing and accept substitutive satisfactions in its stead. Hence, the stoicism often associated with the Freudian field (the point of maturity where we accept the fact that “it” never is “It!”).

The drive disrupts the homeostasis implicit in the position that one must keep a proper distance to the Thing lest one gets burned by it. Žižek replaces this “Golden Mean” or “Goldilocks effect”—in Freudian terms, the “pleasure principle”—with a notion of drive which “suspends/disrupts the linear temporal enchainment” (Žižek 2006b: 63). In order to “break the All of continuity in which we are embedded,” the subject of the drive tarrys with the negative and becomes caught up in a repeated circuit of *jouissance*, a self-propelling loop beyond the pleasure principle. Drive exists in both a pre- and post-fantasmatic space, at once prior to the passionate attachments of desire and beyond them. The realm of the drive is a primordial abyss of dis-attachment in which the subject exists out-of-joint with its environs.

Such a description of the drive, however liberating we might imagine it, smacks of a romantic, individualistic form of resistance, a critique that has been cast at Žižek (especially in

his examples of the psychoanalytic act). The subject of the drive sounds awfully like the existential artist-hero who withdraws from society and its fantasmatic lures, confronts the void, and in true Nietzschean fashion fully affirms the eternal recurrence of the same. Žižek, however, is far from proffering the drive as a line of flight from the deadlocks of desire. The opposite, in fact, is the case. “The lesson of drive,” he writes, “is that *we are condemned to jouissance*: whatever we do, *jouissance* will stick to it; we shall never get rid of it; even in our most thorough endeavor to renounce it, it will contaminate the very effort to get rid of it” (Žižek 2000: 293). What at first glance appears to be a radical act to break out of the linear continuity of the hysterical economy, now becomes a compulsion to repeat, to obtain *jouissance* by circulating around the goal-object.

Žižek puts an end to all flirtations with the transgressive nature of the drive when he associates it with the machinations of capitalism. After acknowledging that capitalism addresses individuals on a subjective level when it “interpellates them as consumers, as subjects of desire, soliciting in them ever new perverse and excessive desires,” he claims that:

Drive inheres to capitalism at a more fundamental, systemic level: drive is that which propels the whole capitalist machinery, it is the impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of expanded self-reproduction. We enter the mode of drive the moment the circulation of money as capital becomes “an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital has therefore no limits.” (Žižek 2006b: 61)

At the level of drive, capitalism does not address individuals. In a sense, capitalism addresses itself. Drive inheres to capitalism in a quasi-objective manner. “The capitalist drive belongs to no definite individual,” writes Žižek, “rather, it is that those individuals who act as direct ‘agents’ of capital (capitalists themselves, top managers) have to display it” (Žižek 2006a: 61). These acephalous agents are the ones we see flailing around the stock market floor or rushing through airports juggling their techno-gadget accoutrements.⁴

Capital as Real: The Marxian Parallax

The more fundamental and systemic mode of the capitalist drive no longer operates in the symbolic order where individuals are interpellated as subjects of desire. To be clear about where the mode of drive operates in capitalism, another term needs to be introduced: the Lacanian Real. In Lacanian psychoanalysis the Real is a purely formal concept; it is nothing more or less than the inherent limit of a symbolic order, that which must be repressed so this order can function. Because the Real is “*simultaneously* the thing to which direct access is not

possible *and* the obstacle which prevents this direct access,” it can only be experienced in its symptomatic effects (Žižek 2007: 243).

Žižek identifies two homologous forms of the Real, which are “detectable within the Symbolic only under the guise of its disturbances”: the traumatic core of sexual antagonism and the social antagonism of “class struggle” (Žižek 1994: 30). Both of these conceptions of the Real may be said to comprise the “minimalist” or “negative” anthropology of Lacanian Marxism. It is the Real of sexual antagonism, for instance, which prevents “it” from being “It”: *objet a* will always thwart the coincidence of the object of desire with the object-cause of desire. Likewise, the Real of social antagonism will always prevent the formation of a fully (self-)transparent utopian society. Reminiscent of Althusser’s claim that ideology is eternal, psychoanalysis holds that a minimal degree of misrecognition, reification, and fetishistic disavowal—“I know very well what I am doing, but I am doing it anyway”—is endemic to all symbolic orders. Although antagonism is eternal, Žižek adamantly disclaims that the sociotranscendental status of the Real denies the existence of History.⁵ The Real does not replace temporality with synchronicity or cyclicity. Rather, historical change derives from the emergence of new symbolic formations to deal with the traumatic core of sexual and social antagonism.⁶

Žižek’s conception of a thoroughly historical Real and his rejection of a transhistorical Real (Real as *das Ding an sich*) allows for a properly dialectical, or Marxist, understanding of historical change. By referring to social antagonism as “class struggle,” Žižek repeats Marx and Engels, for whom “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of the class struggle” (Marx and Engels 1998: 50). Symbolic orders differ from one other in the ways in which they have structured themselves in response to this social antagonism. Since the 16th century, however, historical shifts have predominantly occurred within the horizon of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls the capitalist world-economy (and what Jameson reminds us is “a singular modernity”). We might say that quantitative changes have certainly occurred, but none have resulted in a qualitative alteration to capitalism which rendered it no longer capitalism as such, e.g. communism did not evolve out of a qualitative shift in capitalism. Social antagonism assumed its specifically modern form of “class struggle” during this period when capitalism replaced feudalism (the same moment when the structure of fetishism also shifted from men to things). Because we still live within a world-economy structured by the “class struggle” inherent within capitalism, Žižek calls it the Real of our epoch. He writes:

The universality of capitalism resides in the fact that capitalism is not a name for a civilization, for a specific cultural-symbolic world, but the name for a truly neutral economico-symbolic machine which operates with Asian values as well as with others...

The problem with capitalism is not its secret Eurocentric bias, but the fact that it *really is universal*, a neutral matrix of social relations—a *real* in Lacanian terms. (Žižek 2005a: 241)

This quote evokes our previous discussion of commodity fetishism as the social *sinthome* of capitalist society. Is not commodity fetishism another name for this universal neutral economic-symbolic machine/matrix of social relations? As Žižek states, “the structure of the universe of commodities and capital in Marx’s *Capital* is not just of a limited empirical sphere, but a kind of sociotranscendental a priori, the matrix which generates the totality of social and political relations” (Žižek 2006b: 56). Thus, Žižek transcodes the Marxist concepts of “commodity fetishism” and “class struggle” into the Lacanian notion of the Real. Where the older Marxist terms have long since been confused with empirical entities like the “working class” and actual commercial goods, the Lacanian Real has the benefit of emphasizing the purely formal, and therefore universal, status of capitalism and its overdetermination of the totality of social relations.

If we no longer accept a linear model of economic determinism where the economy directly causes sociopolitical events, how are we to understand the ways in which capitalism as Real overdetermines the totality of social relations? Žižek adopts Althusser’s causal model of overdetermination: if “‘the logic of capital’ is a singular matrix which designates [capitalism’s] real,” then it operates precisely as the *absent cause* of the *totality-effects* that occur within the sociopolitical realm (Žižek 2007: 211). In the Lacanian Marxist base/superstructure model, as in its Althusserian predecessor, economic events of the Real do not cause Symbolic phenomena directly. Contrary to Althusser’s subject-less base/superstructure model, however, Žižek’s model maintains the subjectivity of the social antagonism of “class struggle” at the heart of the economy by introducing the concept of “parallax.” The “Marxian parallax” refers to the irreducible gap between Real absent cause and Symbolic totality-effect. He writes:

...the ultimate parallax of the political economy [is] the gap between the reality of everyday material social life (people interacting among themselves and with nature, suffering, consuming, and so on) and the Real of the speculative dance of Capital, its self-propelling movement which seems to be disconnected from ordinary reality....Marx’s point here is not primarily to reduce the second dimension to the first (to demonstrate how the supernatural mad dance of commodities arises out of the antagonisms of “real life”); his point is, rather that *we cannot properly grasp the first (the social reality of material production and social interaction) without the second*: it is the self-propelling metaphysical dance of Capital that runs the show, that provides the key to real-life development and catastrophes. (Žižek 2006b: 383)⁷

Put succinctly, Žižek affirms Marx's basic thesis that the political and the economic are inextricably intertwined. We cannot make sense of today's political struggles without reference to the capitalist economy, and we fail to grasp the logic of capitalism if we do not take these political struggles into account. Unlike its determinist and structuralist predecessors, Žižek's parallaxal base/superstructure model allows for historical change to be instigated from either direction (top-down or bottom-up): depressions need not strike for New Deals to be enacted. On the contrary, Žižek agrees with Gramsci that in the dance of the political economy, politics should lead: "With regard to this split, today, more than ever, we should return to Lenin: yes, the economy is the key domain, the battle will be decided there, one has to break the spell of global capitalism—but the intervention should be properly *political*, not economic" (Žižek 2006b: 320).

Whither drive in Žižek's conception of the Marxian parallax? What role might drive play in a properly political "intervention"? The missing connection between drive's inherence to capitalism and the "ultimate parallax of the political economy" in Žižek's work proves frustrating, but we may broach two tentative conclusions. The location of drive and desire with regards to capitalism seems to fall on either side of the political economy parallax, i.e. from the perspective of the economic Real, drive describes the self-propelling movement of the metaphysical dance of Capital. Desire, on the other hand, describes *the same process of endless circulation* but from the perspective of the libidinal economy of surplus-enjoyment and the symbolic order of consumer society.⁸ Both sides of this parallax are economically and politically necessary: financial speculation ceases to exist if there is no hysterical consumer society; no understanding of the personal lure of commodities is possible without reference to the impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of expanded self-reproduction.⁹

The distinction between drive and desire also provides a gauge for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions to break the spell of global capitalism. Žižek raises the possibility of resistance on the level of desire when he claims that critiques of capitalism from stable ethical positions appear to be the exception in the "carnivalized" world of late capitalism (Žižek 2007: 235). By harkening back to an ethics of moderation, for example, we might curtail the normal functioning of capitalism to self-revolutionize through the incorporation of ever new forms of surplus-enjoyment. If we opt out of enjoyment (through elective poverty, for example), do we not throw a wrench in the gears of capital's incessant circulation? Although resistance on the level of desire sounds feasible, it also smacks of a nostalgia for times that are irrecoverable on a large scale. Capitalism also has an uncanny ability to create new markets out of even the most heroic of bohemian efforts. The scope of a stable ethics to combat capital would be parochial at best, and Žižek's interest lies with something more radically transformative.¹⁰

The kind of resistance Žižek envisions would be as large in scale as Capital itself because it seeks to intervene on the level of drive. Žižek frames the question of the possibility of resisting the capitalist drive as follows: “how are we to formulate the resistance to the economic logic of reproduction-through-excess?...how, then, are we to revolutionize an order whose very principle is constant self-revolutionizing? This, perhaps, is *the* question today” (Žižek 2006b: 321, Žižek 2007: 235). With a question big enough to be *the* question today comes no easy answers, only more questions. Does such a thing as a Leftist drive exist? What would a form of resistance on the level of drive look like? Where exactly would this form of resistance intervene?

Can drive fight drive?

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Endnotes:

¹ In an interview with Matthew Beaumont and Martin Jenkins, Žižek states: “Lacan enables us to break the deadlock between classical—you could say also dogmatic—Marxism, Soviet Marxism and Western Marxism. From our position, we clearly saw the insufficiency of the official dialectical materialism, but the opposition between official Marxism and Western, humanist Marxism was another false antagonism for us, and Lacan, through Althusser, allowed us to break out of it” (Beaumont and Jenkins 2000: 182).

² “Ideology” or “social fantasy” could replace “symptom” as the first fundamental concept of Žižek’s psychoanalytic Marxism, but ideology has already received a systematic treatment by Žižek and his commentators. In addition to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, exemplary works by Žižek include: “The Spectre of Ideology” in Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright’s *The Žižek Reader* (1999), and “The Seven Veils of Fantasy” in *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997). Robert Pfaller is one of the foremost explicators of Žižek’s concept of ideology. See “Where is Your Hamster? The Concept of Ideology in Žižek’s Theory” (2005).

³ Here is good place to once again mention Jameson’s work for, in many respects, Žižek’s psychoanalytic Marxism parallels Jameson’s “narrative as a socially symbolic act” project. In Jameson’s famous essay on Lacan, he formalizes the connection between these two codes:

Marxism and psychoanalysis indeed present a number of striking analogies of structure with each other, as a checklist of their major themes can testify: the relation of theory and practice; the resistance of false consciousness and the problem as to its opposite (is it knowledge or truth? science or individual certainty?); the role and risks of the concept of a “midwife” of truth, whether analyst or vanguard party; the reappropriation of an alienated history and the function of narrative; the question of desire and value and of the nature of “false desire”; the paradox of the end of the revolutionary process, which like analysis, must surely be considered “interminable” rather than “terminable”;... For what is scandalous for contemporary philosophy in both of these “materialisms”—to emphasize the fundamental distance between each of these “unities-of-theory-and-practice” and conventional philosophy as such—is the stubborn retention by both of something the sophisticated philosopher was long since to have put between parentheses, namely a conception of the referent. (Jameson 1988: 106)

Sean Homer explores the affinities between Jameson and Žižek in “Narratives of History, Narratives of Time” (2006). See *On Jameson: From Postmodernism to Globalism*. Eds. Caren Irr and Ian Buchanan. Albany: SUNY, 71-91.

⁴ Paul Thomas Anderson’s recent film *There Will Be Blood* (2007) has been received with almost unanimous praise, though several critics admit to feeling perplexed by the film. Such a response should not be surprising since the film is at once hyper-realistic and allegorical. Is the main character Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis) a psychotic or symbolic of a psychotic system? Psychoanalysis provides us with a way out of this formalist bind. If Plainview does not represent the capitalist drive itself, then he is the perfect cinematic example of an individual who acts as a direct “agent” of capital.

⁵ Jameson equates the Real with History: “it is not terribly difficult to say what is meant by the Real in Lacan. It is simply History itself” (Jameson 1988: 104).

⁶ Žižek addresses the historicity of the Real in one of his conversations with Glyn Daly: “Of course, Real-as-impossibility *is* an a priori, but there are different constellations as to how you deal with the Real....The point is that the Real-as-impossible allows for radically different social constellations....What all epochs share is not some trans-epochal constant feature; it is, rather, that they are all answers to the same deadlock” (Žižek and Daly 2004: 74, 75, 76).

⁷ Žižek also describes the Marxian parallax of the political economy as follows:

If, for Lacan, there is no sexual relationship, then, for Marxism proper, there is no relationship between economy and politics, no “meta-language” enabling us to grasp the two levels from the same neutral standpoint, although—or, rather, because—these two levels are inextricably intertwined. The “political” class struggle takes place in the midst of the economy...while, at the same time, the domain of the economy serves as the key that enables us to decode political struggles. No wonder the structure of this impossible relationship is that of the Möbius strip: first, we have to progress from the political spectacle to its economic infrastructure; then in the second step, we have to confront the irreducible dimension of the political struggle at the very heart of the economy. (Žižek 2006b: 320)

⁸ Desire and drive may operate in a similar way to Marx’s description of production and consumption in *Grundrisse*, “each of them, apart from being immediately the other, and apart from mediating the other, in addition to this creates the other in completing itself, and creates itself as the other” (Marx 1973: 93).

⁹ The schizoid consumer society represents an extension of the “normal” hysterical consumer society. This postmodern supplement impedes the process of circulation less, it marks the emergence of a purer form of capitalism characterized by an intensification and acceleration of reification. Can we now talk of consumers who act as direct agents of capital themselves, not just capitalists and top managers?

¹⁰ In one of his rarer systematic moments, Žižek makes an exhaustive list of contemporary stances on resistance in his review of Simon Critchley’s book *Infinitely Demanding*, which can be accessed at: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n22/zize01_.html.