

The Varieties of Surplus

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The Paradox of Lustgewinn

Lacan begins the eleventh week of his seminar *Les non-dupes errent* (1973–74) with a straightforward question directed back at himself: “what was it that Lacan, who is here present, invented?” He answers the question “like that, to get things going: *objet a*” (Lacan 1973–74). His answer is not the idea that “desire is the desire of the Other,” or “the unconscious is structured like a language,” or “there is no sexual relationship,” or some other candidate from the list of usual suspects: Lacan immediately emphasizes that his choice is not just one among the possible ones but THE choice.

Objet a has a long history in Lacan’s teaching, preceding by decades his systematic references to the analysis of commodities in Marx’s *Capital* (Marx 1976). But it is undoubtedly this reference to Marx, especially to Marx’s notion of surplus-value (*Mehrwert*), that enabled Lacan to deploy his “mature” notion of *objet a* as surplus-enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*, *Mehrlust*). The predominant motif, which permeates all of Lacan’s references to Marx’s analysis of commodities, is the structural homology between Marx’s surplus-value and what Lacan’s baptized surplus-enjoyment. Freud called this phenomenon *Lustgewinn*, a “gain of pleasure,” which does not designate a simple stepping up of pleasure but the additional pleasure (the “bonus” or “yield of pleasure” in Strachey’s English translation) provided by the very formal detours

in the subject's effort to attain pleasure. Think of Brecht's *Me-ti* (see Brecht 2016) which, in its retelling of the history of revolutionary movements in Europe, transposes them into an imaginary China (Trotsky becomes To-tsi, etc.): our re-translation of pseudo-Chinese names back into their European original ("Aha, To-tsi is Trotsky!") makes the text much more pleasurable—just imagine how much *Me-Ti* would have lost if it were to be written as a direct report on European history. Or—the most elementary example—how much a process of seduction gains with its intricate innuendos, false denials, etc.: these detours are not just cultural complications or sublimations circulating around some hardcore Real. This hardcore Real is retroactively constituted through secondary detours—"in itself" it remains a fiction.

In libidinal economy, there is no "pure" pleasure principle undisturbed by the perversities of compulsion-to-repeat, which cannot be accounted for in the terms of the pleasure principle. In the same way, in the sphere of the exchange of commodities, there is no direct closed circle of exchanging a commodity for money in order to buy another commodity; the circle of simple commodity-exchange is not yet corroded by the perverse logic of buying and selling commodities in order to get more money, i.e., by the logic in which money is no longer just a mediator in the exchange of commodities but becomes an end-in-itself. The only reality is the reality of spending money in order to get more money. What Marx calls C–M–C, the closed exchange of a commodity for money in order to buy another commodity, is ultimately a fiction whose function it is to provide a "natural" foundation of the process of exchange ("It's not just about money and more money, the whole point of exchange is to satisfy concrete human needs!"). M–C–M' is the symptomal point at which a gap or reversal which was operative from the very beginning, even in the simplest commodity exchange, breaks out into the open.

In short, in the same way that *better is the enemy of good*, more pleasure is the enemy of pleasure... The process of the

“gain-of-pleasure” or *Lustgewinn* operates through repetition: one misses the goal and one repeats the movement, trying again and again, so that the true aim is no longer the intended goal but the repetitive movement itself of attempting to reach it. One can also put it in terms of form and content where “form” stands for the form, the mode of approaching the desired content: while the desired content (object) promises to provide pleasure, a surplus-enjoyment is gained by the very form (procedure) of pursuing the goal. Here is the classic example of how oral drive functions: while the goal of sucking a breast is to get fed by milk, the libidinal gain is provided by the repetitive movement of sucking which thus becomes an end-in-itself. Is something similar not at work in a (dubious) story about Robespierre often mentioned by the critics of Jacobinism? When one of Robespierre’s allies was accused of acting in an illegitimate way, he demanded (to the surprise of those close to him) that the charges be taken seriously and proposed the immediate constitution of a special commission to examine the allegations; when one of his friends expressed his worry about the fate of the accused (“What if he is found guilty? Will this not be bad news for the Jacobins?”), Robespierre calmly smiled back: “Don’t worry about that, somehow we’ll save the accused ... but now we have the commission!” The commission which will remain at the disposal of the Jacobins to purge their enemies—for Robespierre, this was the true gain of what appeared to be a concession to the enemies. Another figure of *Lustgewinn* is found in the reversal that characterizes hysteria: the surrendering to pleasure reverts into pleasure of/in renunciation, repression of desire reverts into desire of repression, etc. In all these cases, gain occurs at a “performative” level: it is generated by the very performance of working towards a goal, not by reaching the goal.

Imagine a Walmart store closing in the evening, with many shopping carts full of items thrown into them found among the shelves; they were mostly abandoned there by members of the newly impoverished middle-class families who are no longer able to buy things. A whole family might visit the store, go through the

ritual of shopping (throwing things needed or desired into a cart) and then just abandon the full cart and leave the store. In this sad way, they obtain the surplus-enjoyment of shopping in its pure isolated form without buying anything. And are we not often engaged in similar activities even if their “irrationality” is not so directly visible? We do something—including shopping itself—with a clear purpose, but we are really indifferent towards this purpose since the true satisfaction is brought about by the activity itself? The example of Walmart merely lays bare something that is already at work in “real” shopping. This example also enables us to perceive clearly the link between *Lustgewinn* and surplus-value: with *Lustgewinn*, the aim of the process is not its official goal (satisfaction of a need), but the expanded self-reproduction of the process itself. The true aim of sucking the mother’s breast, for example, is not to get fed by milk but the pleasure brought about by the activity of sucking itself. In an exactly homologous way, the true aim of the process of exchange is not the appropriation of a commodity that would satisfy a need of mine but the expanded self-reproduction of the capital itself. This process is by definition infinite, without a final point.

And does exactly the same not hold for bureaucracy? There are two memorable scenes in Terry Gillian’s *Brazil* which perfectly stage the crazy excess of bureaucratic *jouissance* perpetuating itself in its auto-circulation. After the protagonist’s plumbing breaks down and he leaves a message to the official repair service for urgent help, Robert De Niro’s character enters the apartment. He is a mythical-mysterious criminal whose subversive activity is that he listens in on the emergency calls and then immediately visits the customer, repairing his plumbing for free, bypassing the inefficient state repair service’s paperwork. Indeed, in a bureaucracy caught in this vicious cycle of *jouissance*, the ultimate crime is to simply and directly do the job one is supposed to do—if a state repair service actually does its job, this is (at the level of its unconscious libidinal economy) considered an unfortunate by-product, since

the bulk of its energy goes into inventing complicated administrative procedures that enable it to invent ever-new obstacles and thus postpone indefinitely the work. In another scene taking place in the corridors of a vast government agency, we meet a group of people permanently running around, a leader (big-shot bureaucrat) followed by a bunch of lower administrators who shout at him all the time, asking him for a specific opinion or decision, with him nervously spurting out fast “efficient” replies (“This is to be done till tomorrow latest!” “Check that report!” “No, cancel that appointment!” ...). The appearance of nervous hyper-activity is, of course, a staged performance which masks a self-indulgent nonsensical spectacle of imitating or playing “efficient administration” — again, a case of *Mehrlust*, of the surplus-pleasure gained by the very unending bureaucratic performance...

But if one wants to see a much more radical, clinically-clear case of the opposition of pleasure and enjoyment, it is enough to take a look at Joseph Goebbels’s (in)famous speech on total war (“*Wollt Ihr Den Totalen Krieg?*”, “Do you want a total war?”) delivered in *Sportpalast* in Berlin on February 18 1943. In it, Goebbels addressed the public shocked by the Stalingrad defeat: he fully admitted the difficult (if not desperate) situation, and then asked the public ten questions (and, of course, got an enthusiastic YES in response to each of them). Here are some fragments of the speech:

I ask you: Are you and the German people willing to work, if the Führer orders, 10, 12 and if necessary 14 hours a day and to give everything for victory? [...] I ask you: Do you want total war? If necessary, do you want a war more total and radical than anything that we can even imagine today? [...] I ask you: Is your confidence in the Führer greater, more faithful and more unshakable than ever before? Are you absolutely and completely ready to follow him wherever he goes and do all that is necessary to bring the war to a victorious end? [...] Tenth and lastly, I ask you: Do you agree that above all in war, according to the National Socialist Party platform,

the same rights and duties should apply to all, that the homeland should bear the heavy burdens of the war together, and that the burdens should be shared equally between high and low and rich and poor? [...] I have asked; you have given me your answers. You are part of the people, and your answers are those of the German people. You have told our enemies what they needed to hear so that they will have no illusions or false ideas. [...] Now, people rise up and let the storm break loose! (Goebbels 1998)

What these questions demand is a gigantic surrender to pleasure and more sacrifice, even sacrifice brought to extreme, “absolute and complete”; Goebbels promises a war “more total and radical than we can even imagine today” with the civilians working up to 14 hours a day. And yet, his ecstatically shouting voice and weirdly grimaced face at the climactic moments of the speech bear witness to a *jouissance* in renunciation itself which reaches beyond imagination and approaches the absolute. In these moments, the outwards-directed rage subtly turns into passivity, as if the face is twisted in an orgasmic way, passively experiencing a painful lust—a case of “pleasure in pain” if there ever was one, an expression of a distorted Kantian sublime in which the pain of renunciations coincides with an ecstatic witnessing of a noumenal dimension.

This is why the humanitarians who bemoan “the end of Europe” should be taught the great Hegelian lesson: when someone is painting a picture of Europe’s overall and utmost moral degeneration, the question to be raised is in what way such a stance is complicit in what it criticizes. No wonder that, with the exception of humanitarian appeals to compassion and solidarity, the effects of such compassionate self-flagellation are null. If we in the West really want to overcome racism, the first thing to do is to leave behind this Politically Correct process of endless self-culpabilization. Although Pascal Bruckner’s critique of today’s Left often approaches the ridicule, this doesn’t prevent him from occasionally generating pertinent insights—one cannot but agree with him when he detects in the European Politically Correct

self-flagellation the inverted clinging to one's superiority. Whenever the West is attacked, its first reaction is not aggressive defense but self-probing: "What did we do to deserve it? We are ultimately to be blamed for the evils of the world, the Third World catastrophes and terrorist violence are merely reactions to our crimes..." The positive form of the White Man's Burden (responsibility for civilizing the colonized barbarians) is thus merely replaced by its negative form (the burden of white man's guilt): if we can no longer be the benevolent masters of the Third World, we can at least be the privileged source of evil, patronizingly depriving them of their responsibility for their fate (if a Third World country engages in terrible crimes, it is never their full responsibility, but always an after-effect of colonization: they merely imitate what the colonial masters were doing, etc.). This privilege is the *Mehrlust* earned by self-culpabilization.

Along these lines, the Politically Correct logic often mobilizes the mechanism of what one could call "delegated sensitivity"¹: its line of argumentation is often "I am tough enough, I am not hurt by sexist and racist hate speech or by making fun of the minorities, but I am speaking for all those who may be hurt by it." The point of reference are thus the presupposed naive Others, those who need protection because they will miss the irony or cannot stand attacks. It's yet another case of what Robert Pfaller called "interpassivity" (Pfaller 2014): I delegate the passive experience of a hurt sensitivity onto a naive other, thereby enacting the other's infantilization. That's why we should ask ourselves if Political Correctness is really something that belongs to the Left—is it not a strategy of defense against radical Leftist demands, a way to neutralize antagonisms instead of openly confronting them? Many of the oppressed feel clearly how the PC strategy often just adds insult to injury: while oppression remains, they—the oppressed—now even have to be grateful for how liberals try to protect them...

¹ I owe this term and point to Jela Krečič, Ljubljana.

One of the most deplorable by-products of the wave of refugees that entered Europe in the Winter of 2015–16 was the explosion of moralist outrage among many Left liberals: “Europe is betraying its legacy of universal freedom and solidarity! It lost its moral compass! It treats war refugees like infested intruders, preventing their entry with barbed wire, locking them up in concentration camps!” But what if the authors of such appeals knew very well that they contribute nothing to the terrible plight of the refugees, that the ultimate effect of their interventions is just to feed the anti-immigrant resentment? What if secretly they know very well that what they demand will never happen since it would trigger an instant populist revolt in Europe? Why, then, are they doing it? There is only one consistent answer: the true aim of their activity is not really to help the refugees but the *Lustgewinn* brought about by their accusations, the feeling of their own moral superiority over others—the more refugees are rejected, the more anti-immigrant populism grows, the more these Beautiful Souls feel vindicated: “You see, the horror goes on, we are right!”

Surplus-Power, Surplus-Knowledge

The next step to be made here is to grasp the link between this surplus and lack: it’s not just that surplus fills in a lack, surplus and lack are the two sides of the same coin. Hegel produces here the exact formula of this paradoxical relationship between lack and surplus apropos “rabble”:

§ 245 When the masses begin to decline into poverty, (*a*) the burden of maintaining them at their ordinary standard of living might be directly laid on the wealthier classes, or they might receive the means of livelihood directly from other public sources of wealth (e.g. from the endowments of rich hospitals, monasteries, and other foundations). In either case, however, the needy would receive subsistence directly, not by means of their work, and this would

violate the principle of civil society and the feeling of individual independence and self-respect in its individual members. (*b*) As an alternative, they might be given subsistence indirectly through being given work, i.e. the opportunity to work. In this event the volume of production would be increased, but the evil consists precisely in an excess of production and in the lack of a proportionate number of consumers who are themselves also producers, and thus it is simply intensified by both of the methods (*a*) and (*b*) by which it is sought to alleviate it. It hence becomes apparent that despite an *excess of wealth* civil society is *not rich enough*, i.e. its own resources are insufficient to check excessive poverty and the creation of a penurious rabble. (Hegel 2008, pp. 221–2)

It is the very surplus that (re)creates the lack it is supposed to fill in, so that we should even radicalize Hegel's formulation: it is not only that "despite an *excess of wealth* civil society is *not rich enough*," *it is the very excess of wealth that makes it not reach enough* (to get rid of poverty). In other words, the key question is: if there is a surplus (excessive wealth) on the one side and a lack (poverty) on the other side, why can't we re-establish the balance by simple redistribution (taking the wealth from those excessively rich and giving it to the poor)? The formal answer: because lack and surplus are not located within the same space where they are just unequally distributed (some people lack things, others have too much). The paradox of wealth resides in the fact that the more you have the more you feel the lack—it's again the superego paradox (the more you follow the injunction, the more guilty you are) discernible also in the paradox of anti-Semitism (the more Jews are destroyed, the more powerful is the remainder).

A different version of this same logic of lack and its surplus was also at work in the everyday experience of life in the so-called "Really-Existing Socialism." In spite of the oppressiveness of the political regime and the profound distrust of the majority of the population towards the ruling power, a kind of unspoken pact held between those in power and their subjects. Most of the time, the basic feature of life was, of course, lack in the guise of

shortages—something was always unavailable in the stores and in public services in general, not enough meat or milk products, detergents, no room in hospitals, not enough apartments, etc. etc. In order to survive, the majority of the people had to turn to petty violations of the law (bribery, personal connections, moonlighting, black market and other forms of cheating) which were discreetly tolerated by the power—while people were aware that everyone could be prosecuted, almost no one really was prosecuted, so although people lived in relative poverty, almost everyone felt that he is at an advantage, that he somehow got more than his due. This situation gave rise of a unique combination of cynical distance and an obscene solidarity in guilt: people were grateful for not being prosecuted; they were satisfied by gaining small illegal profits... This perception of getting more than one's due was literally the obverse of the life of shortage; it was what made this life bearable.

The same co-dependence between surplus (of power) and its lack (impotence) characterizes the functioning of political power. To provide a somewhat simplified example of the excess constitutive of the functioning of an actual power, recall the traditional liberal notion of representative power: citizens transfer (part of) their power onto the state, but under precise conditions (this power is constrained by law, limited to very precise conditions of its exercise, since the people remain the ultimate source of sovereignty and can repeal power if they decide so). In short, the state with its power is the minor partner in a contract which the major partner (the people) can at any point repeal or change, basically in the same way each of us can change the contractor which takes care of our waste or health... However, the moment one takes a close look at an actual state power edifice, one can easily detect an implicit but unmistakable signal: "Forget about our limitations—ultimately, we can do whatever we want with you!" This excess is not a contingent supplement spoiling the purity of power but power's necessary constituent; without it,

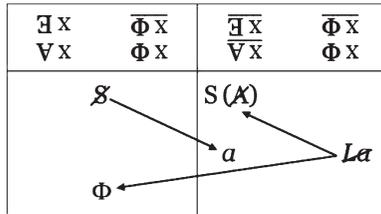
without the threat of arbitrary omnipotence, state power is not a true power, it loses its authority.

The “subject-supposed-to-be-in-power” is a structural illusion immanent to the functioning of power: the illusion that there is a bearer/agent of power, an entity which pulls the strings. Le Gaufey’s formula for overcoming this mirage is “*la toute-puissance sans tout-puissant*” (Le Gaufey 2014, p. 111): omnipotence is a fact of the symbolic universe in which we can retroactively change the past. According to the standard view, the past is fixed, what happened happened, it cannot be undone, while the future is open, it depends on unpredictable contingencies. What we should propose here is a reversal of this standard view: the past is open to retroactive reinterpretations, while the future is closed since we live in a determinist universe (see Ruda 2016 for a defense of determinism). This doesn’t mean that we cannot change the future; it just means that, in order to change our future, we should first (not “understand” but) change our past, reinterpret it in such a way that opens up towards a different future from the one implied by the predominant vision of the past.

The proper atheist/materialist position is thus not to deny omnipotence but to assert it without an agent that sustains it (God or another omnipotent Entity)—but is this enough? Do we not have to take a further step and assert the thwarted (inconsistent, constrained) character of the big Other *qua* depersonalized structure? And it is precisely this inconsistency/limitation of the big Other that resubjectivizes it in the sense of raising the question: “But what does the Other want?” And, of course, in a Hegelian way, this enigma of the Other’s desire is an enigma for the Other itself. Only at this level do we reach “symbolic castration” which does not stand for the subject’s “castration,” for his or her being at the mercy of the big Other, for his or her depending on its whims, but for the “castration” of this Other itself. The barred Other is thus not just the depersonalized Other but also the bar which cracks this depersonalized Other itself. Furthermore, the

specter of omnipotence arises when we stumble upon the limitation of the Other’s potency: *toute-puissance* (omnipotence) is *toute-en-puissance* (all-in-potentiality), the actualization of its power/potency is always constrained. As Le Gaufey argues,

Omnipotence is for Lacan not a kind of maximum, apex, or even infinitization of potency—to what one often reduces it in order to deny its actual existence—but a beyond of potency which only appears in the latter’s failure. It does not appear on the slope of impotence but on the slope of what remains “all in potency,” without ever passing over into the dimension of an act which belongs to the domain of some determinate potency/power. (Le Gaufey 2014, p. 20)



A reference to Lacan’s formulae of sexuation may be of some help here—it is crucial how we read the double line that points from the barred La to $S(A)$ and to capital Phi: we should not read it as a substantial division between two options (part of woman is subordinated to castration, caught into phallic economy of the symbolic order, while another part is outside, immersed in the unspeakable *jouissance feminine*). We should bear in mind that in both cases, Phi and $S(A)$, we are dealing with the same logic of the reflexive reversal of the lack of a signifier into a signifier of a lack—we are dealing with the same element in a different modality, maybe a little bit like the (in)famous soft-porn postcards from the pre-digital era with a woman who, when you look at the postcard from a certain edge, wears a T-shirt, and when you twist it around a tiny bit, her breasts appear naked... Recall that what Lacan calls “Master Signifier” is the reflexive signifier that fills in the very

lack of the signifier.² Spinoza's own supreme example of "God" is crucial here: when conceived as a mighty person, God merely embodies our ignorance of true causality. Examples from the history of science abound here—from phlogiston (a pseudo-concept which just betrayed the scientist's ignorance of how light effectively travels) to Marx's "Asiatic mode of production" (which is a kind of negative container: the only true content of this concept is "all the modes of production which do not fit Marx's standard categorization of the modes of production"), not to mention today's popular notion of "post-industrial society." All of these notions, while appearing to designate a positive content, merely signal our ignorance. Do we not get the same shift in Lacan's schema? The capitalized Phi is the fascinating quasi-divine presence, and just a slight shift in perspective makes it appear as a signifier of a lack. This brings us back to the link between omnipotence and impotence: the divine omnipotence is, as Lacan saw it clearly, a twisted mode of appearance of the divine impotence.

And does exactly the same not hold for knowledge? Is the "higher" metaphysical knowledge not a form of appearance of its opposite, i.e. of ignorance? More precisely, surplus-knowledge has two forms, masculine and feminine. The masculine form supplements ordinary knowledge of reality with another, higher knowledge as the exception (*gnosis*), while the feminine form is that of modern science where the surplus is inscribed into normal scientific knowledge itself which is constantly transforming/

² Let us imagine a mass political movement mobilized by "freedom and democracy": a closer look would quickly disclose that "freedom" does not mean the same thing to different parts of the movement, but insofar as they all identify with the signifier "freedom," an actual efficient social movement can emerge. What unites this movement is not its program but ultimately a signifier, and this signifier is literally the signifier of the lack/inconsistency of the Other: the excessive mythic resonance of this signifier ("freedom" as the name which makes us all tremble in enthusiasm, expressing something that cannot be put into explicit words, something "too deep" for that) is the form of appearance of a lack.

overcoming itself.³ There is a homology between the surplus-knowledge of modern science and the capitalist surplus-value: both are appropriated by the capitalist master. Until capitalism, knowledge was on the side of the servant—a master gave the order and the artisan servant was supposed to have the practical knowledge to execute it, a farmer was supposed to know how to grow crops, etc. With capitalism, the production process gets split from within, its scientific foundation and the organizational knowledge that regulates it are on the side of the capitalist and directed against the worker. As Lacan puts it:

I would call the state of knowledge before Descartes pre-accumulative. With Descartes knowledge, scientific knowledge is constituted on the mode of production of knowledge. Just as an essential stage of our structure that one calls social but is in fact metaphysical, and which is called capitalism, is accumulation of capital, the relation of the Cartesian subject to this being, which is affirmed in it, is founded on the accumulation of knowledge. After Descartes knowledge is what serves to make knowledge grow. (Lacan 1964–65, session 22)

If, then, the moment of Descartes stands for the primordial “accumulation of knowledge,” one should immediately raise the question: where is knowledge accumulated from? Not from ancient traditions: the new capitalist master appropriates it from worker’s artisanal *savoir-faire* and integrates it into science. Ancient wisdoms and teachings transferred to the initiated belong to masters and priests to whom operational expert knowledge appears as too low to care about, better left to the subordinated, while capitalists take expert knowledge from their servants/

³ The gap that separates Hegel and modern science is obvious: in Hegel, out knowledge progresses through self-relating critique, through the immanent analysis of its own inconsistencies, reflexively undermining every external measure of truth, while modern science is never a self-immanent movement, it needs some external measure, even in quantum physics where the observer seems to constitute external reality.

workers. Master's wisdom is repetitive, it functions as a fidelity to established tradition (if a revolution occurs, it has to appear as a return to true origins, as in Protestantism); it lacks the drive to self-renovation and expansion. In contrast to it, modern science is split between university and hysteria: like capitalism which can reproduce itself only through permanent expansion, scientific knowledge's mode of existence is self-expansion, permanent discovery, search for more knowledge, and this modality of knowledge is properly hysterical, a permanent experience of "This is not (yet) it!", a permanent search for more knowledge to be found elsewhere... One is tempted to propose here, in homology with the formula $M-C-M'$, the formula of the self-propelled accumulation of knowledge $K-H-K'$. In both cases, we have the same self-propelling circularity: money begets more money, knowledge begets more knowledge. In terms of the theory of discourses, this means that the university discourse in itself is not able to generate more knowledge out of itself, following its own logic. It has to make a detour through the discourse of hysteria the product of which is (new) knowledge:

Something changed in the master's discourse at a certain point in history. We are not going to break our backs finding out if it was because of Luther, or Calvin, or some unknown traffic of ships around Genoa, or in the Mediterranean Sea, or anywhere else, for the important point is that on a certain day surplus-*jouissance* became calculable, could be counted, totalized. This is where what is called the accumulation of capital begins. (Lacan 2007, p. 177)

This shift is the shift from the auratic *je ne sais quoi*, what Plato called *agalma*, i.e. that which in a charismatic person is "more than him- or herself," the surplus over measurable qualities, the mysterious ingredient which by definition cannot be measured (the X that makes a master a master, a star a star ... or, for anti-Semites, a Jew a Jew), to a purely quantified surplus, a surplus that can be measured in the guise of profit.

For Lacan, modern science is defined by two concomitant foreclosures: the foreclosure of subject and the foreclosure of truth as cause. A scientific text is enounced from a de-subjectivized “empty” location, it allows for no references to its subject of enunciation, it is supposed to deliver the impersonal truth which can be repeatedly demonstrated, “anyone can see and say it,” i.e., the truth should be in no way affected by its place of enunciation. We can already see the link with the Cartesian *cogito*: is the “empty” enunciator of scientific statements not the subject of thought reduced to a vanishing punctuality, deprived of all its properties? This same feature also accounts for the foreclosure of truth as cause: when I commit a slip of the tongue and say something other than what I wanted to say, and this other message tells the truth about myself that I am often not ready to recognize, then one can also say that in my slips the truth itself spoke, subverting what I wanted to say. There is truth (a truth about my desire) in such slips even if they contain factual inexactitude—say, an extremely simple example, when the moderator of a debate, instead of saying “I am thereby opening the session!” says “I am thereby closing the session!” he obviously indicates that he is bored and considers the debate worthless... “Truth” (of my subjective position) is the cause of such slips; when it operates, the subject is directly inscribed into its speech, disturbing the smooth flow of “objective” knowledge.

How, then, can Lacan claim that the subject of psychoanalysis—the divided subject, the subject traversed by negativity—is the subject of modern science (and the Cartesian *cogito*)? Is it not that, by way of foreclosing truth and subject, modern science also ignores negativity? Is science not a radical attempt to construct a (literally) truth-less discourse of knowledge? Modern science breaks with the traditional universe held together by a deeper meaning (like a harmony of cosmic principles—yin-yang, etc.), a universe which forms a teleologically-ordered Whole of a multiplicity of hierarchically ordered spheres, a Whole in which everything serves a higher purpose. In philosophical tradition,

the big vestige of the traditional view is Aristotle: the Aristotelian Reason is organic-teleological, in clear contrast to the radical contingency of modern science. No wonder that today's Catholic Church attacks Darwinism as "irrational" on behalf of the Aristotelian notion of Reason: the "reason" of which Church speaks is a Reason for which Darwin's theory of evolution (and, ultimately, modern science itself, for which the assertion of the contingency of the universe, the break with the Aristotelian teleology, is a constitutive axiom) is an "irrational" universe as a harmonious Whole in which everything serves a higher purpose.

Freud's arch-opponent Jung is on the side of this traditional universe: his approach to psychic phenomena is effectively that of "depth-psychology," his vision is the one of a closed world sustained by deeper archetypal meanings, a world permeated by spiritual forces which operate at a level "deeper" than that of "mechanical" sciences, a level at which there are no contingencies, where ordinary occurrences partake in a profound spiritual meaning to be unearthed by self-exploration. Life has a spiritual purpose beyond material goals, and our task is to discover and fulfill our deep innate potential by way of engaging in a journey of inner transformation which brings us in contact with the mystical heart of all religions, a journey to meet the self and at the same time to meet the divine. Rejecting (what he perceived as) Freud's scientific objectivism, Jung thus advocates a version of pantheism which identifies individual human life with the universe as a whole.

In clear contrast to Jung, Freud emphasizes the lack of any harmony between a human being and its environs, any correspondence between human microcosm and natural macrocosm, accepting without any reserve the fact of a contingent meaningless universe. Therein resides Freud's achievement: psychoanalysis is not a return to a new kind of premodern hermeneutics in search of the unknown deep layers of meaning which regulate the apparently meaningless flow of our lives, it is not a new version of the

ancient interpretation of dreams searching for deeper messages hidden in them; our psychic life is thoroughly open to unexpected traumatic encounters, its unconscious processes are a domain of contingent signifying displacements; there is no inner truth in the core of our being, only a cobweb of *proton pseudos*, primordial lies called “fundamental fantasies”; the task of psychoanalytic process is not to reconcile ourselves with the phantasmatic core of our being but to “traverse” it, to acquire a distance towards it... This brief description makes it clear how psychoanalysis relates to modern science: it tries to re-subjectivize the universe of science, to discern the contours of a subject that fits modern science, a subject that fully participates in the contingent and meaningless “grey world” of the sciences.

The question that arises here is: How does capitalism fit into this passage to modern science? Although capitalism is intimately linked to the rise of modern science, its ideologico-political and economic organization (liberal egotist individuals pursuing their interests, their messy interaction secretly regulated by the big Other of the Market) signals a return to premodern universe—but does this mean that Communism extends the logic of modern science also to the ethico-political sphere? Kant’s goal was to do exactly this, to elaborate an ethico-political edifice that would be at the level of modern science—but did he effectively achieve this, or is his theoretical edifice a compromise? Did he not openly state that his goal is to limit knowledge in order to make room for faith? And are Habermasians not doing the same when they exempt intersubjectivity from the domain of objective science? (And, in this vein, does Hegel not stand for a return to Aristotelian organic-teleological view of reality as a rational Whole? Is his thought not marked by a rejection of the universe of modern science characterized by meaningless contingency?) Which, then, is the ethico-political space that fits modern science—Kant’s or a new one to be invented (for example, the one proposed by philosophers of neuroscience like Patricia and Paul Churchland)?

What if the two are necessarily non-synchronous, i.e., what if modernity itself *needs* a pre-modern ethico-political foundation? What if it cannot stand on its own? What if the fully actualized modernity is an exemplary ideological myth?

The return of the traditional order in capitalism is thus not simply an indication that the logic of science is somehow constrained in capitalism. Rather, it is an indication that this containment is immanent to the universe of modern science, implied by the foreclosure of the subject. To put it bluntly, science cannot fully stand on its own, it cannot account for itself (no matter how much positivist accounts try to do it), which implies that the universality of science is based on an exception.

When, then, will “politics be consistently in sync with modern science and inhabit the same universe”? It’s not that the universe of modern science should directly impose itself onto the sphere of politics, so that social life will be regulated by the insights based on the cognitivist/biogenetic naturalization of human life (the tech-gnostic vision of society regulated by the digital big Other). It’s simply that the subject engaged in politics should no longer be conceived as the liberal free agent pursuing its interests but as the subject of modern science, the Cartesian *cogito*, which, Lacan *dixit*, is the subject of psychoanalysis. Therein resides the problem: can we imagine an emancipatory politics whose agent is the empty Cartesian subject? Jacques-Alain Miller’s answer is that the domain of politics is by definition the domain of imaginary and symbolic collective identifications, so that all psychoanalysis can do is to retain a healthy cynical distance towards the sphere of politics—psychoanalysis cannot ground a specific form of political engagement. The wager of the Communist hypothesis is, on the contrary, that there is a politics based on the empty Cartesian subject: the political name of the empty Cartesian subject is a proletarian, an agent reduced to the empty point of substanceless subjectivity. A politics of radical universal emancipation can only be grounded on the proletarian experience.

Beyond Homology

We have thus the surpluses of knowledge, of enjoyment, of value, and of power—and one can argue that we should add to the subject-supposed-to-know,⁴ subject-supposed-to-believe, and subject-supposed-to-enjoy, the subject-supposed-to-be-in-power. But how far can we push the homology between these couples: pleasure—enjoyment, use value—value, meaning—sense, power—excess-power? When the very renunciation to (or postponement of) pleasure can bring a surplus-pleasure; when the very consummation of use-value, the “official” goal of producing commodities, becomes a means (or a subordinate moment) in the expanded self-reproduction of value; when the breakdown of meaning (explicit referential sense), and the ensuing non-sense, give rise to the specter of a “deeper” sense; when the exercise of power pushed to the extreme of impotence gives birth to the mirage of omnipotence; are we in all these cases really dealing with the same matrix? The ultimate horizon of a truly materialist approach is never formal homology—therein resides the limit of the Marxist approaches of Alfred Sohn-Rethel (who deploys the homology between the universe of commodities and Kant’s transcendentalism) or Lucien Goldman (who deploys the parallel between early capitalism and Jansenist theology). (An extreme version of this parallelism is found in Ferruccio Rossi-Landi’s *Language as Work* in which he develops the notion of modes of linguistic production, proposing terms like linguistic capital, linguistic exploitation, etc.) One should pass from metaphor to metonymy, from homology to the immanent deduction of the very multiplicity of levels—say, it is not enough to articulate the homology between the universe of commodities and a certain

⁴ In his *Mother*, Brecht provides a nice formula against the subject-supposed-to-know: “What you do not know for yourself, you do not know. Check the bill. You will have to pay it.”

(Christian, usually) theology; one has also to deploy why the universe of commodities can only function if it redoubles itself in theology, why it cannot stand on its own. For Marx, it is not enough to reduce superstructural phenomena to their material base, one has also to deduce the need for superstructural phenomena out of the antagonisms of their material base. To do this, one should enact a transposition from metaphor to metonymy, something that Benjamin does apropos of translation: instead of conceiving translation as a metaphoric substitute of the original, as something that should render as faithfully as possible the meaning of the original, both original and its translation are posited as belonging to the same level, parts of the same field. The gap that, in the traditional view, separates the original from its (always imperfect) translation is thus transposed back into the original itself: the original itself is already the fragment of a broken vessel, so that the goal of the translation is not to achieve fidelity to the original but to supplement the original, to treat the original as a broken fragment of the “broken vessel” and to produce another fragment which will not imitate the original but will fit it as one fragment of a broken Whole may fit another. The same move is enacted by the early Hegelian Marxists (Lukács, Korsch) in their critique of the orthodox Marxist “theory of reflection” approach to knowledge (our knowledge mirrors external reality, asymptotically approaching it), so that the problem is how faithfully does the cognitive reflection mirror objective reality: for Lukács and Korsch, reality and cognition relate as a Whole and its part, i.e., the focus should be on the immanently-practical aspect of cognition: the way in which cognition itself is part of the process it mirrors (say, how does the class awareness transform its bearer into an actual revolutionary agent).

A truly dialectical-materialist approach should nonetheless go a step further than Lukács and Korsch. Acts of exchange (of products) cannot be constrained to the mediated satisfaction of needs (I give you what you need in exchange for getting from

you what I need—wheat for salt, etc.). Anthropologists like Lévi-Strauss have long ago demonstrated that there is always a “phatic” dimension at work in exchange of commodities: an act of exchange is always minimally self-reflexive, its goal is (also) to establish a social link between agents of exchange. But which excess is primordial, the excess of production (over the utility of products) or the excess of exchange (over the need for exchanged objects, but also the excess of symbolic exchange over the communicated content)? The automatic answer is, of course, that we have here a parallax structure: there is no choice to be made, the split between production and (symbolic) exchange is irreducible and constitutive for both of them; we are dealing with the same excess in its two forms, with the same entity inscribed into two different topologies... Such a solution is nonetheless all too easy—it leaves unexplained how the gap between production and exchange arises; ultimately, it leaves us in a position not unlike the one of Habermas who distinguishes between work (instrumental reason led by the norm of efficiency of domination and control) and language interaction (led by the emancipatory norm of free argumentation and mutual recognition). The standard Marxist solution is, of course, to assert the primacy of production, and to account for different modes of exchange in terms of different social organizations of production. Ultimately, the very appearance of the autonomy of exchange is the outcome of an immanent antagonism (“alienation”) in production.

Here, however, things get complicated: How does economic exchange relate to *symbolic* exchange? Can symbolic exchange also be grounded in social relations of production? While Marx’s position is clearly the predominance of production, Hegel—in the famous passage of his *Phenomenology*—conceives human labor as the outcome of the struggle for recognition, i.e., he asserts the primacy of intersubjectivity. Furthermore, there are some other options which should also be rejected, among them the thesis (popular in the heyday of discourse theory) that both speech

and labor are processes of production (of meaning, of objects), and the fetishist effect is crucial in both domains (the product obfuscates the production process); however, without specifying the precise difference between speech and labor, the homology is all too abstract.

The notion of *praxis*, of engaged activity that sustains a collective life-world, also remains rooted in the Aristotelian unity of soul and body. Recall the notion (elaborated by different authors from Bakhtin to late Wittgenstein) of language as an organic moment of social praxis, as an active moment of a life-world. The critical target of this approach is the allegedly “idealist” notion of language as a medium of designation of reality, as its mirroring and not a part of it and an active intervention into it. Language is primarily a way to interact in the world, to achieve something, say, to seduce a love partner, to exert domination, to regulate collaboration, to convince others, not just a passive medium designating it. Language, labor and other forms of human interaction all together form the living Whole of praxis. But, again, from the strict Lacanian standpoint, the proposed alternative of language which serves to talk about reality from a distance and of language as an organic moment of life-practice misses (or, rather, presupposes) something: the very opening of the gap that (potentially) separates words from things. In other words, the true question is how does the gap that allows a speaking being to acquire a distance towards reality arise within reality itself. Prior to functioning as a mode of active intervention into reality, language enacts a withdrawal from direct immersion into life-world activity. Prior to the safe distance there is thus a violent process of acquiring-a-distance, of tearing apart reality — this is what Lacan focuses on when he talks about “symbolic castration,” and this is what Deleuze is dealing with when he tries to discern the contours of the process by means of which the child-subject enters the order of sense proper, of the *abstraction* of sense, gaining the capacity to abstract a quality from its embeddedness in a bodily Whole, to conceive of it as a

becoming no longer attributed to a certain substance. As Deleuze would have put it, “red” no longer stands for the predicate of the red thing, but for the pure flow of becoming-red. So, far from tying us down to our bodily reality, “symbolic castration” sustain our very ability to “transcend” this reality and enter the space of immaterial Becoming. Does the autonomous smile which survives on its own when the cat’s body disappears in *Alice in Wonderland* also not stand for an organ “castrated,” cut off from the body? This is why “quasi-cause,” the operator of this abstraction, is Deleuze’s name for the Lacanian “phallic signifier”: the quasi-cause “*extracts singularities from the present*, and from individuals and persons which occupy this present” (Deleuze 1990, p. 166), and, in the same movement, provides them with their relative autonomy with regard to the intensive processes as their real causes, endowing these impassive and sterile effects with their morphogenetic power. Is this double movement not EXACTLY that of “symbolic castration” (whose signifier is phallus)? First, the impassive-sterile Event is cut off, extracted, from its virile, corporeal, causal base (if “castration” means anything at all, it means THIS). Then, this flow of Sense-Event is constituted as an autonomous field of its own, the autonomy of the incorporeal symbolic order with regard to its corporeal embodiments. “Symbolic castration,” as the elementary operation of the quasi-cause, is thus a profoundly MATERIALIST concept, since it answers the basic need of any materialist analysis. As Manuel DeLanda writes: “If we are to get rid of essentialist and typological thought we need some process through which virtual multiplicities are derived from the actual world and some process through which the results of this derivation may be given enough coherence and autonomy.” (DeLanda 2002, p. 115)

For decades, we have heard how language is an activity, not a medium of representation which denotes an independent state of things but a life-practice which “does things,” which constitutes new relations in the world—has the time not come to ask the

obverse question? How can a practice which is fully embedded in a life-world start to function in a representative way, subtracting itself from its life-world entanglement, adopting a distanced position of observation and denotation? Hegel praised this “miracle” as the infinite power of Understanding, the power to separate—or, at least, to treat as separate—what in real life belongs together. Mystics celebrate the inner peace we achieve when we withdraw from the immersion into the eternal crazy dance of reality where everything is caught in an incessant movement; Hegel and Lacan render visible the violent obverse of this inner peace. Language never “fits” reality, it is the mark of a radical imbalance which forever prevents the subject from locating itself within reality.

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The author acknowledges the project ("The Structure and Genealogy of Indifference," J6-8263) was financially supported by the Slovenian Research Agency.