

The Absent Universal: From the Master Signifier to the Missing Signifier

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Universality as Mastery

The commonsense conception of the universal associates it with the master signifier. We tend to think of universality as an overarching position that dominates all the particulars under its provenance just as the master signifier plays a determinative role for all other signifiers. The universal occupies a position of mastery relative to particulars and imposes an orientation on them. This equation of the universal with the master signifier is commonsensical because it seems utterly self-evident.

The link between the universal and the master signifier holds up under closer examination. Through recourse to the universal, we can recognize the nature of the particular's connection to other particulars. The universal assures us that particulars do not exist as isolated entities. Instead, identifying them requires taking other particulars into account. The fact that their relations to other particulars are inextricable from their own particularity becomes evident only through the appearance of the universal. A universal such as equality enables us to recognize how all particulars relate to each other. They relate as equals.

Similarly, the link between signifiers becomes evident only through the appearance of the master signifier. Without the master signifier, there are just a multitude of signifiers without any signification. This signifier offers a basis for signification. When I

define a specific signifier, I do so by using other signifiers. But the master signifier is the endpoint for this movement from signifier to signifier. It is the point at which the incessant movement from signifier to signifier stops and signification emerges.

Universals link disparate particulars together in the same way that master signifiers bind all other signifiers together and give them their signification. The universal and the master signifier both function foundationally relative to particulars and to other signifiers. We must define each signifier relative to the master signifier just as we must refer each particular to the universal in order to make sense of it. Though it is possible to imagine master signifiers that are not universals (such as “Germany” under Nazism), it appears impossible to conceive of universals that don’t operate as master signifiers.

If we examine the predominant master signifier in the contemporary capitalist universe, “freedom,” this structural overlap between the universal and the master signifier becomes clear. Freedom is the universal that underlies all particular struggles today, which testifies to its universal status. There is no struggle, no matter how particular, that does not take place under the banner of freedom. Even more than equality, it is the one universal today that has the ability to unite people together.

For instance, in 2003 the United States invades Iraq in the name of this universal—going so far as to title its invasion “Operation Iraqi Freedom”—while the same term at the same time also informs the worldwide opposition to the American war. George W. Bush could even celebrate a protest greeting him in London by identifying it with the freedom that the United States fights for. In another arena, this universal fuels both the drive for gay marriage and the conservative Christian resistance to it. Some want to be free to marry whom they want while others want to be free not to serve cakes to those they don’t want to serve because they are gay. This is not even to speak of the arena in which freedom plays the most substantive role: the capitalist economy. Proponents of

capitalism insist that it is the only system that leaves us completely free to produce and consume, while opponents see freedom in the future destruction of the capitalist system. Particular struggles going on now make reference to this universal in order to substantiate their appeal.

The contradictory nature of these examples reveals that freedom operates as a master signifier. Rather than having a clear signification like other signifiers (*birch tree*, for example, which allows us to classify birch trees as distinct from oaks), *freedom* has no signified at all. This absence of a signified enables those on opposite sides of political battles to use the same term without sensing that they are entering into enemy territory. Freedom can signify what the United States hopes to unleash in Iraq just as it can signify the fight against this offensive. I can want to marry another man in the name of freedom just as someone can refuse to bake our wedding cake while employing this same term. Its lack of any signified reveals that it is a master signifier, while its central position in contemporary political struggles testifies to its status as a universal. Freedom seems to place the complete coincidence of the universal with the master signifier beyond any dispute.

If the universal functions as a master signifier, then the danger associated with it becomes immediately apparent. As a master signifier, the universal would have an exceptional status. It would occupy a position apart from the other signifiers from which it would exercise a determinative effect on them. Particulars would lose the specificity and uniqueness of their particularity in the face of the universal's mastery. Just as the master signifier is indifferent to the singularity of any other signifier, the universal would be indifferent to every other particular. The suspicion that the universal arouses among theorists of emancipation stems directly from the belief that the universal is a master signifier. The universal suffers from guilt by association. Theorists respond accordingly.

Ernesto Laclau, for one, deals with this danger that the universal as a master signifier represents for particular identities by

highlighting the openness of the position of the master signifier, which he often calls the “empty signifier.” Laclau turns to the concept of hegemony in order to describe the process by which a particular comes to take up the position of the empty signifier and function as a universal. For Laclau, the universal is nothing but a particular that happens to temporarily occupy the structural position of universality. It is not, as a consequence, inherently universal.

Because any particular signifier can occupy the place of the master signifier and become the universal, political struggle plays the decisive role in establishing it. Through such struggle, a certain signifier comes to occupy the position of the master signifier, though its status remains contingent. At any time, another particular signifier can take its place as a result of a new political struggle. There is clearly something democratic about this conception, which makes it easy to understand the widespread appeal that it has.¹

Rather than conceiving the master signifier as an entrenched universal, one grasps its variability and fundamental openness. Radical democracy — Laclau’s name for his political project — thus entails accepting the evanescent particularity of every universal master signifier. Laclau claims, “the universal has no necessary body and no necessary content; different groups, instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representation” (Laclau 1995, p. 107). Once one adopts this position, one retains the mastery of the universal, but one exposes this mastery as mortally wounded.

The problem with Laclau’s tack is that weakening the universal is always, in the last instance, a conservative project. Even though Laclau identifies himself as a leftist theorist of emancipation, his particularization of the universal implicitly aligns him with the forces that he explicitly aims to combat. From Edmund

¹ Though Laclau has subsequently developed his conception of the shifting particularity of the master signifier, it receives its canonical articulation in the influential book that he co-wrote with Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Burke to Arthur de Gobineau to Carl Schmitt, conservative and reactionary theorists always insist that particularity trumps universality. The entire conservative project is an encomium to particular identity. Conservative political struggle consists in protecting and developing one's particularity against all other particulars that would threaten it. For conservative and reactionary theorists, the universal is anathema because it eliminates the borders through which particular identities define themselves. As they see it, a universalist world has limits but it doesn't have borders, and borders are necessary for particular identities to sufficiently distinguish themselves. Conservatism demands clear distinctions in order to ensure the continued existence of the particular identity it aims to protect.

Though Laclau is not some type of closet conservative, his attempt to undermine universality by exposing its underlying particularity runs counter to the emancipatory political project that he attempts to advance. Laclau's solution to the problem generated by the identity of the universal and the master signifier is to accept this identity as given and subsequently denigrate the universal in order to undermine its mastery. But we might take aim at this mastery in a more fundamental way by questioning the homology itself. Though it certainly makes sense to align the universal with the master signifier, this is a case where appearances lead us completely astray.

One of the key political struggles today—perhaps the key political struggle—consists in thoroughly divorcing the universal from the master signifier. The structural homology that exists between them obscures the profound difference in the way that they function. Though we use signifiers to articulate the universal—freedom, equality, solidarity—these concepts do not emerge out of signification. We don't find them by examining the positive structures or institutions that constitute our social order. Nor do we find them by searching in different societies or in the differences between societies. Universals are not only not master

signifiers. They are not present within the field of signification at all. Universals exist on the basis of what is missing in signification. We discover the universal through what cannot be said, even as we name this absence. Every authentic universal refers to a signifying absence.

What Drops Out

The master signifier plays a structuring role in signification. We cannot do without it and remain within the signifying field. But the master signifier is not a meaningful signifier. We cannot invest our hopes in it as the site of emancipation, but neither should we fear that it will contaminate all universality. While the master signifier grounds the signifying field, it does not have any significance within that field. To imbue this signifier with significance by treating it as a universal apes the conservative error, which reveres the master signifier as the source of substantial identity. In both cases, the error lies in seeing significance in an empty structural necessity.

It is not a question of doing without the master signifier but of looking elsewhere for universality. We can find a clue for distinguishing the universal from the master signifier in Alenka Zupančič's *What is Sex?* In this work, she locates the emergence of subjectivity in a lack in signification. It is not language that constitutes the subject but instead what is missing in language. Humanity becomes distinct from its animality at the moment of the unconscious recognition of a missing signifier. As Zupančič puts it, “the human (his)story begins not with the emergence of the signifier, but with *one signifier ‘gone missing’*” (Zupančič 2017, p. 47). The missing signifier is not just absent but inscribed within the signifying field as an absence. This is why the subject has an unconscious awareness of it. Signification is never complete but always, for Zupančič, “with without-one” (ibid., p. 48). What all subjects have in common is what they don't have.

The value of Zupančič's insight lies in what it indicates for political contestation. By noting the necessity of the missing signifier for signification to be possible, Zupančič puts us on the track of how to locate universality in a way that avoids the trap of identifying it with the master signifier, which represents perhaps the key political challenge, especially today, when universality has become completely imperiled. The missing signifier, not the master signifier, marks the site of the universal. Though Zupančič herself does not make this point, her account of the missing signifier and its effects makes the location of the universal visible.

The missing signifier is unavoidable for all subjects. It forms how they relate to themselves and to the social structure. The role of the missing signifier allows us to distinguish the universal from something held in common, which is precisely the conception of the universal that always sets us on the wrong path. The universal is not what subjects have in common but what they don't have in common, the cut that blocks the social structure's completion for the subject. It is an absence that all subjects partake in. This insight cuts against the commonsense conception of universality that associates it with the master signifier.

The universal is not a master signifier. It does not dominate particulars by imposing its own regime of significance on them. Instead, the universal is located in what is lacking in the symbolic structure. We are free, equal, and in solidarity—to take the universals articulated by the French Revolution—because we are all confronted with a missing signifier. We are free, equal, and united in our unending encounter with what is not there. As a result, no one can have a privileged relationship to the universal. All subjects relate to the universal as that part of themselves that they necessarily invoke without ever mastering. This lack is not the privilege of some but the burden of all.

Because the universal is a shared lack, one cannot articulate it directly. It is not as simple as saying, for example, that all people are free or everyone is equal. This attempt to transform

the universal, which is an absence in signification, into a positivity necessarily misses it. Rather than expressing universality, one erects a master signifier that functions through exclusion. If one formulates universality in this way, one instantly produces an exception to the universality that one proclaims. In the guise of formulating a universal, one constructs an exclusive particular.

For instance, if I proclaim something like, “all men are created equal” or “race doesn’t matter,” I believe that I am expressing universal equality. But the problem with these types of expressions is that they produce universality through exclusion—which is to say, they don’t produce universality at all. In these cases, subjects recognize that they participate in the universal only insofar as they distinguish themselves from others who do not belong. When installed as a master signifier, the universal ceases to be universal. This process makes clear that the identification of the universal with the master signifier marks a profound misstep.

When Thomas Jefferson claims that “all men are created equal” in the *Declaration of Independence*, everyone knows that this universality does not apply to women or slaves. But it is important to see that this exclusion is not merely historical or contingent. Some sort of exclusion is necessary when one establishes the universal as a master signifier, even if the specific exclusion itself (women and slaves) is historically contingent. By seeing that they are not women or slaves, men of Jefferson’s epoch can see equality among themselves where there is rampant inequality. The excluded other has the effect of quilting the universal identity. It functions as what Jacques Lacan calls the *point de capiton* or quilting point for the universal master signifier.²

The quilting point tells subjects what universal equality means by providing a barrier at which it ends. When one installs the universal as a master signifier, one consequently produces a quilting point that indicates where the universality stops. Just as

² For the explanation of the *point de capiton*, see Lacan 1993.

the master signifier “German” for the Nazis needs the quilting point “Jew” in order to define what it means to be German in their world, the master signifier “equality” requires “women” or “slaves.” Germans under the Nazis know they are Germans insofar as they know they are not Jews. Men know that they are equal insofar as they know they are not women or slaves. The quilting point operates as an absolute barrier that forms identity. It is not an optional addition to the master signifier but a necessary product of its installation, which is why universality cannot be identified with the master signifier. The quilting point necessarily involves exclusion, and exclusion runs contrary to all universalizing. One cannot have universality for some and not for others while remaining within the domain of the universal. Conceiving it in this way represents a flight from the universal to the confines of particularity.

The case of “race doesn’t matter” or colorblindness seems different from Jefferson’s statement in the *Declaration* but in fact follows the same logic. When I profess my colorblind universalism, there aren’t clear exceptions as there are in the case of the *Declaration*. I may imagine that I am including everyone in my statement. But nonetheless this attempt to articulate the universal directly transforms it into a master signifier that entails a requisite exclusion.

The colorblind position privileges not having a race when it professes that race doesn’t matter. But the trick is that I know that I don’t have a race—I know that color doesn’t matter—insofar as I see those who do have a race, who have a color. In this way, the position of colorblindness enables those who adhere to it to see themselves as partaking in the privileged position of the universal that excludes racialized others. This is why those who proclaim the universal of colorblindness inevitably attack those who are clearly racialized for preaching inequality or, more commonly, for reverse racism. These racialized others who display their race (whether they like it or not) play the role of the quilting point

for the colorblind subject. The colorblind subject needs them in order to be a colorblind subject just as the Nazi needs the Jew in order to be a German.

The misreading of the universal as a master signifier creates universality through exclusion. That is to say, it eliminates universality as such and transforms it into one particularity among others. The universality of the master signifier is not universality but a case of particularity passing for universality. Equality confined to property-owning men is no longer equality. It is instead one particular group using a purportedly universal master signifier to justify its political positioning. If one wants to discover and preserve the universal, one must look for it elsewhere than in direct expressions of it. Since the universal is an absence within signification, one must look for it in what is not said.

Leaving Wittgenstein

The problem of what cannot be said is not a new problem. But thinkers tend to view what cannot be said as an obscure particular that escapes the reach of universality. It always represents the limit on universalizing. From Hume's rejection of causality and Kant's critique of the overreaches of reason to Jacques Derrida's refusal of a metalanguage and Linda Alcoff's critique of speaking for others, philosophers preoccupy themselves with what they are unable to say. They often spend time identifying the border between what can be said and what cannot be said, in order to create a philosophy that remains within the limits of the sayable.

Ludwig Wittgenstein offers a paradigmatic statement about the fundamental border of all philosophy. In the final line of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein famously announces the need for philosophy to respect the boundary of what cannot be said. He enjoins thinkers not to say what they cannot say. In a paradoxical formulation, he states, "What we cannot speak

about we must pass over in silence.”³ Of course, Wittgenstein’s statement immediately prompts the question, “If we cannot say it, why do we need to pass over it in silence?” Because this is the final proposition of Wittgenstein’s book, he doesn’t provide an answer, but rather ends in the silence that he advocates.

Much like Kant before him, Wittgenstein wants to delimit the field of knowledge (the sayable) in order to make room for what goes beyond knowledge—faith, ethics, and feelings.⁴ Wittgenstein is less clear than Kant about what he locates beyond knowledge, but he is equally emphatic about the need to respect the border between the sayable and the unsaid. Even more than Kant, he worries that trying to cross this border will not only muddy our thinking, but will also taint what can’t be said, which is a more important realm than that of what can be said. We must confine ourselves to the sayable to avoid speaking destructive nonsense.

Wittgenstein’s insistence on not trying to say the unsayable rubs Theodor Adorno the wrong way. When Adorno lays out his philosophical program near the end of his life, he envisions his project as directly opposed to that of Wittgenstein. Where Wittgenstein demands that we remain silent, Adorno wants us to endeavor to speak. For Adorno, it is our attempt and failure to say what cannot be said that accomplishes the true aim of philosophy—to reveal the nonidentical without reducing it to the identical. As he puts it, “The task of philosophy, *pace* Wittgenstein, would be to say what cannot be said” (Adorno 2003, p. 186).⁵

³ Wittgenstein 1961, p. 74. The German reads: “*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.*”

⁴ Kant’s claim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that “I had to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*” (Kant 1998, p. 117) could serve as a motto for Wittgenstein’s project in the *Tractatus* as well.

⁵ In the text of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno makes the same point when he again claims that philosophy aspires “to counter Wittgenstein by uttering the unutterable” (Adorno 1973, p. 9). Wittgenstein’s logical positivist followers, like Rudolf Carnap, critique Wittgenstein from precisely the opposite direction. For them, when he says that we must silently pass over what can’t be said, he already gives too much ground to the unsayable, which has no role in philosophy at all.

Although Adorno believes that philosophy has hitherto failed at this task, he doesn't see it as an impossible one, since success ironically comes through failure. Philosophy has failed to fail at saying the unsayable, but Adorno believes that he can do so successfully, despite the apparent contradiction involved in this.

Adorno wants to say what cannot be said without reducing it to the domain of the sayable. While this appears to be an impossible problem, Adorno's solution is a formal one. By adopting the form of negative dialectics, by constantly undermining pretensions to universality while at the same time insisting on the necessity of universality, philosophy can articulate the unsaid. It occurs only through a process of unending self-critique that refuses to spare any position from its negation.

The problem with Adorno's method is that it hystericizes our relationship to the unsaid and thus to the universal. Because he sees the unsaid as the particular that resists the universal rather than the universal itself, Adorno doesn't recognize the possibility for articulating it as an absence. According to Adorno, any articulation of the missing signifier reduces it to the universality that one is attempting to avoid, which is why one must constantly unsay what one has just said in order to respect the unsaid. But when one sees the missing signifier as the signifier of the universal in its absence, this danger dissipates altogether.

One can only articulate universals as an absence. Expressions of universality are not unsayable, as Wittgenstein would have it, and they do not inevitably do violence to the absence, as Adorno would have it. Instead, they can hit the mark. They can articulate universality in the form of the missing signifier.

The example of the marriage equality movement reveals the possibility for this type of expression. Universality does not consist in the achievement of access to marriage for all. We don't achieve universality at the mythical point when all are included. The belief that this would be true universality follows from the idea that the universal is a master signifier. Universality becomes

evident rather in the claim made by proponents of marriage equality that the ban on gay marriage violates universal equality. By pointing out what is missing for the symbolic field—gay marriage—they articulate universal equality. By saying “gay marriage is marriage,” they say what is missing within the particularity of heterosexual marriage. The fact that gay marriage later becomes enshrined as law does not vitiate this articulation of universality because the achievement itself is the site of the universal.

As the fight for marriage equality shows, it is possible to say the unsayable without doing violence to it. It is possible because the unsayable is never just absent. It is always present within the signifying structure as an absence. When we express it, we express universality. The universal is the missing signifier within a particular structure—like gay marriage within the institution of marriage. Expressing it makes clear that the particular structure, despite whatever pretensions it might make to universality, is nonetheless particular. Prior to the marriage equality movement, purportedly universal marriage is simply a disguised form of particular marriage. Heterosexual marriage masquerades as universal marriage, but the marriage equality movement’s articulation of the universal gives the lie to the performance. This type of political gesture can occur only if the universal is not associated with the master signifier.

Saying What Can’t Be Said

Divorcing the universal from the master signifier does not imply that the universal must remain unarticulated or that we must pass over it in silence in order to respect its position properly. The point is rather that we access the universal through the exception that appears to be excluded from it, through the moment where the universal appears not to hold. Since what we have in common is what we don’t have, the universal can only emerge

through what is missing. The figures of the universal are not the supposedly privileged subjects in a society but those who do not belong. When subjects fail to register within the field of symbolic recognition, their absence aligns them with universality.

Those who appear as unequal and cast aside, for instance, are the figures of universal equality. The subject receiving unequal treatment from contemporary society—working for a pittance, enduring racist structures, or suffering from the threat of sexual assault—is at the moment of this exclusion and the struggle against it partaking in universal equality. Such subjects reveal that the universal becomes visible as a universal only through those who occupy the position of absence. They make evident the absence of universal equality as a presence within contemporary society, but by making evident the failure to constitute the universal, they articulate it in its true form. Because the universal is an absence rather than a master signifier, it appears where we assume it will not—in those struggling for universality rather than in those who believe they have attained it.

In the thought of theorists of political struggle, we can see this paradoxical dynamic at work. Thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Karl Marx unabashedly locate the struggles that they champion in universal terms. They articulate the universal not in the form of a master signifier but in the challenge that the colonized or the proletariat poses to the hidden particularity of European capitalist society. Through their exclusion, the colonized and the proletariat enable us to see the universal in the form of the missing signifier. Recognizing universality requires a radical shift in point of view: rather than looking at the excluded from the perspective of belonging, we must look at belonging from the perspective of the excluded.

When Frantz Fanon attacks Europe for its proclamation of universal values while perpetuating violent domination of the colonized, he gives expression to universal equality. This attack targets Europe for its reduction of universal equality to a master

signifier that entails the exclusion of colonized peoples. Fanon critiques Europe for its particularity. Fanon's aim is not to engender belonging for the colonized, to enable them to participate in European particularity, which is why he enjoins the colonized to abandon Europe. He proclaims, "Let us leave this Europe which never stops talking of man yet massacres him at every one of its street corners, at every corner of the world" (Fanon 2004, p. 235). This is not, contrary to appearances, a call for an abandonment of universality but for the rejection of European particularity and its attempt to promulgate this particularity through disguising the universal as a master signifier.

In the act of formulating this critique, Fanon indicates that the universal must be conceived differently. When Europe distorts it into the form of a master signifier, it ceases to be universal and produces exclusion—specifically, the exclusion of the colonized. All the attempts to include the colonized in this particularity disguised as universality are mere pretenses. As Fanon sees, the universal emerges not through a general statement about the indifference of race but through the recognition of the universal's absence. It is the struggle of the colonized against Europe, not the European colonial project, that embodies the universal values discovered in the Enlightenment and articulated by the French Revolution.

Fanon links universality to the struggle that testifies to its absence. One must struggle for it because it can only be present as an absence that we don't have. But the struggle does not aim at a universality to come.⁶ The struggle for universal equality is already the attainment of it, insofar as the universal cannot become

⁶ Fanon is not adopting the position of someone like François Julien, who theorizes the universal in terms of an ideal that remains ever out of reach. According to Julien, "the vocation of the universal: that of reopening a breach in all confining and satisfied totality, and reviving the aspiration towards it" (Julien 2014, p. 114). Julien theorizes the universal as a future state that recedes the closer we come to it. Fanon, in contrast, sees it as already actual in the act of struggling for it.

fully present. It exists only in the effort to realize it, not in its complete realization.⁷ To dream of a future when the universal would become fully present is to return to the illusion that we could install it as a master signifier.

Toward the beginning of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon discusses the link between the colonized recognizing their participation in the universal and their struggle against colonialism. He states, “at the very moment when they discover their humanity, they begin to sharpen their weapons to secure its victory” (Fanon 2004, p. 8). Seeing themselves as universal subjects functions as a weapon in the struggle against colonialism. Taking the side of those who don’t belong to the colonial project places one on the side of the universal, and, from the other side, recognizing the authentic universal inherently places one with the colonized in their fight.

For Fanon, the fight against colonial domination is a universal fight, a fight on behalf of universality. In contrast, colonial Europe’s expressions of universal equality betray authentic universality insofar as they constitute the colonized subject as an exception to this universality. According to Fanon, Europe tells colonized subjects that they must wait for this equality to come in the indefinite future, but this future time is infinitely receding. Europe can promise it because it will never arrive. This universality that the colonizer promises in the infinitely deferred future is universality in the form of a master signifier, which isn’t universality at all. Authentic universality resides in the struggle against this particularized universality of the master signifier.

Marx follows a vision of universality closely related to Fanon’s. When Marx identifies the proletariat as the universal

⁷ To invoke a distinction between *Realität* (reality) and *Wirklichkeit* (actuality) that Hegel makes in the *Philosophy of Right* and elsewhere, the universal’s lack of reality is its actuality. It becomes actual through its inability to realize itself.

class, this is what he's getting at. As Marx sees it, the proletariat partakes in the universal when it assumes the mantle of the leading force in the fight against class society. By struggling for its own equality, the proletariat simultaneously struggles for universal equality. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx makes this clear. He claims that "the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation" (Marx 1964, p. 118). By demonstrating their exclusion from the regime of purported equality, the proletariat demonstrates equality's absence from the capitalist system. In this way, they highlight universal equality.

Capitalism depends on the principle of universal equal exchange. At the nub of the capitalist system, the capitalist exchanges money to the laborer for labor power. From the perspective of the system itself, this is an equal exchange. Each side gives something of value to the other side without deceiving or cheating. But what Marx shows is that this exchange occurs against a background of inequality that enables inequality to enter to stain the entire process.

The worker comes to the exchange needing to work in order to survive, whereas the capitalist arrives looking for additional accumulation of capital. As a result, the capitalist always has leverage on the worker and sets the terms of the exchange in a way that enables the extraction of not just the labor paid for, but also the surplus labor that the worker provides. This surplus labor produces the surplus value that, according to Marx, is the basis for the capitalist's profit. Although the exchange of capital for labor time is fair and equal, the capitalist always receives something additional and not paid for in the bargain. This extra is the result of the capitalist's initial advantage, which resounds throughout the structure of the capitalist system. The discrepancy excludes the worker from the system's supposed equality.

Through class struggle, the proletariat draws attention to the absence of equality within the particularity of capitalist society. This struggle reveals equality as a universal through its absence. Capitalist society proffers equality as a master signifier. It pretends

to a universality that it does not have. Marx identifies the proletariat as the universal class because universal equality actually becomes evident only when this class points out that equality is missing in capitalist society. The proletariat is the universal class insofar as its fight touches on the unsayable.

In spite of this compelling formulation, Marx's diagnosis of the universality of the proletariat requires a slight corrective. Though he comes close to Fanon in his political project, he takes a misstep that Fanon does not. Marx doesn't see that this universality cannot lie in the moment of emancipation itself. For him, emancipation would represent the point at which we finally realized universality. Emancipation is what class struggle aims at, not class struggle itself. Marx fails to recognize that universality resides in the struggle for emancipation, a struggle that cannot attain a complete realization because universality is an absence in signification.⁸ The complete realization of the universal would be akin to Baron von Munchausen lifting the chair on which he sits.

If the universal derives from what is absent and not from what is present, it becomes impossible to possess. It is in the nature of the universal as an absence that we will never fully realize it. The failure to make the universal present is not, however, an external barrier to universality. It is fundamental to universality itself. The absence of a fully realized universal is the essence of universality because it derives its status as absent within the field of signification. As a result, we access it only through articulating the struggle to realize it, not through proclamations about its reality.

If universality requires struggle, this would seem to call into question its status as universal. It is surely the case that the universal cannot include an enemy and remain universal. Even though

⁸ Fanon does not make Marx's error because he is a Hegelian thinker before he is a Marxist. Unlike Marx, Hegel does not view emancipation as arriving at a future free from contradiction but rather recognizing the necessity of contradiction, which entails recognizing universality in struggle.

universality involves struggle against an oppressive structure, this struggle does not entail an external enemy. When Fanon conceives of the colonized as champions of humanity or Marx labels the proletariat the universal class, the opposition that these figures of the universal encounter is the universal's own internal limit. The universal struggles against a limit rather than an enemy, which is why universal struggles never exclude the conversion of their opponents to the side of the universal struggle. The opponents of the universal are not enemies, but potential allies who have not yet come around. The universal struggle has no necessary opposition, though the limit it encounters—and thus the struggle itself—is necessary.

The difference between struggle on behalf of the universal and particular struggles lies in the nature of what one struggles against. Particular struggles identify an enemy that they aim to vanquish in order to advance the interest of their particular identity. This is the case, for example, with the Confederacy in the American Civil War. The Confederacy did not fight for any universality but in order to maintain the integrity of its particular identity that faced external threats. From the perspective of particular identity, the enemy is just another particular—in this case, the North.

The opponent of universal struggle is not a particular, but rather the structure that obscures universality as an absence and insists on the insignificance of what is absent. The universal struggle aims at drawing attention to the universal as a lack in signification. It consists in showing that what is absent is actual. Its opponents are those who deny the existence of the universal because they cannot recognize what is lacking.

We gravitate to the idea that the universal is a master signifier because this simplifies our dealings with it. By doing so, we can dismiss it as a synecdoche for domination or embrace it as a shorthand for marginalizing all particular struggles. But equating the universal with the master signifier represents a catastrophic betrayal of its political charge. It is only by recognizing the

universal as what signification necessarily omits that we can access this political charge. Without the universal, there is no politics. But we never have the universal, which means that politics must be nothing but the fight on its behalf.

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