

# The Master Is Undead

*Mladen Dolar*

Since our gathering takes place in Slovenia, and since this conference deals with the problem of the Master and largely involves psychoanalysis, let me start with an anecdote that links Freud and Slovenia in a rather spectacular way, and which can serve as a sort of parable, maybe the best entry point into our subject of the status of the Master.

Freud was our compatriot; he spent most of his life as a citizen of Austria-Hungary, which included present-day Slovenia. He traveled through Slovenia a number of times on the way to Italy, but on one occasion he stopped for his one and only attested visit to this country. In the beginning of April 1898, Freud spent his Easter holidays on a trip to the Adriatic coast with his brother Alexander, and on the way back they visited a couple of subterranean caves in the Slovene karst. Freud reports about the trip in a letter to Fliess dated April 14, 1898. I will leave aside Freud's remarkable and hilarious encounter with the Slovene guide, Freud's only documented encounter with a Slovene, and focus on his visit to the spectacular Škocjan caves, a major tourist attraction already then, and still bigger nowadays (it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site).

The caves of Škocjan [...] are a horrifying freak of nature – a subterranean river running through magnificent vaults, with waterfalls and stalactites and pitch darkness, and a slippery path guarded by iron railings. It was Tartarus itself. If Dante saw anything like this, he needed no great effort of the imagination for his Inferno. (Freud 1977, p. 253)

The tourist trip suddenly turns into something like a metaphysical journey, a descent into the abyss, a visit to Tartarus, the Acheron, the Dantean Inferno. (Dante allegedly traveled through this area, and there are about a dozen caves which claim that this is the very spot where he got inspiration for the *Inferno*.) The time of this visit was the period of gestation of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (published a year and a half later, in November 1899). Though it may be a bit far-fetched that Dante got his idea for the *Inferno* in those caves, it's perhaps less far-fetched that Freud got his inspiration for the epigraph to *The Interpretation of Dreams* on this occasion, an epigraph that inaugurated psychoanalysis, a line taken from Virgil, Dante's guide in the *Inferno*: "*Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo*," "If I cannot bend the Higher powers, I will move the Infernal Regions" (*Aeneid* VII, 312; Freud 1977a, pp. 31, 769).<sup>1</sup>

So what did Freud find at the bottom of this Slovene Inferno? His account of it to Fliess continues like this: "The ruler of Vienna, Herr Dr. Carl Lueger, was with us in the cave, which after three-and-a-half hours spewed us all out into the light again" (*ibid.*, 253). This inconspicuous line contains big drama. At the bottom of the abyss, Freud met the *Herr von Wien*, as he says, namely the burgomaster of Vienna, one of the best known and most notorious political figures of the time in that part of the world. Their common descent into the Slovene hell was their only meeting; they would never come face to face in Vienna. They had to come to this *anderer Schauplatz*, this Slovene other scene, they had to take a vacation from the center of the *Zeitgeist* to meet on the outskirts of the Empire.

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<sup>1</sup> One should be reminded that the originally intended epigraph was to be taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: Let us consult "what reinforcement we may gain from hope, if not, what resolution from despair." (I, 189–191) This is appropriately put in the mouth of the devil. The alternative motto seems most apposite for our times.

Who was this person and why is this encounter in hell so emblematic? Dr. Carl Lueger (1844–1910) was the burgomaster of Vienna from 1897 until his death and the head of the Christian-Social Party. He was a very popular and populist leader, most notorious for his blaring anti-Semitism.<sup>2</sup> The best clue to his significance is to be found in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. Adolf Hitler spent his youthful years roaming the streets of Vienna (1907–1913), the same Vienna that produced all those great intellectual and artistic figures—the notorious cunning of reason must have been playing some sort of trick there. We find out in *Mein Kampf* that Hitler had one great role model at the time, his Ego-ideal: he found a great source of inspiration in that “greatest German burgomaster of all times,” “the real genius of a burgomaster,” “the great and genial reformer,” and particularly the great promoter of anti-Semitism. Lueger was the one who opened his eyes to the true nature of Jewry, he claimed. Hitler particularly praised Lueger’s ability to stir the feelings of the masses and address them beyond the treacherous parliamentary politicians and parties. It was from Lueger, he says, that he learned everything he needed to know about anti-Semitic propaganda.

Quite apart from this very drastic sequel in the history of fascism—this is retrospective knowledge, not available in 1898—Lueger’s anti-Semitism was already so notorious at the time that the first time he got elected, in 1895, Emperor Franz Josef himself refused to appoint him. Freud says that he celebrated this occasion by indulging in an extra cigar. The Emperor actually refused to appoint Lueger three more times, but he eventually had to give in to the “democratic will of the people” (after an intercession by the Pope). Why did the Emperor so adamantly refuse the nomination? No doubt he was led by conservative reasons; he wanted Vienna to be ruled by a decent aristocrat, not an upstart, a

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<sup>2</sup> For Lueger’s political and cultural background and impact, cf. Schorske 1980, pp. 119–139 and *passim*.

troublemaker and hate-monger who spurred divisions and catered to zealots. The Emperor instinctively opposed the kind of politics that abandoned all decency, manners, and decorum—everything that Hegel brought together under the heading of *Sittlichkeit*; he opposed a politics that contravened the unwritten laws that form the fabric of society and built its success on these contraventions. There is something highly emblematic in this constellation: Franz Joseph was arguably the last emperor, the last figure of the ruler as father, the Father of the nation, the epitome of stability. He ruled for sixty-seven years (surpassed in length only by Louis XIV and Elisabeth II), and Freud was born and spent three quarters of his life under this rule. In this dispute about investiture, so to speak, the last model of the old authority confronted virtually the first example of a new type of authority, quite literally the figure that would serve as a direct model of the catastrophic rise of a new type of leader. The Emperor did what he could to stop this ascent—a historic moment that can be regarded as the swan song of the old authority. It is furthermore significant that Lueger was regarded as *populist* already back then.<sup>3</sup> It is as if the advent of populism as a political concept and a political logic reaches directly from those times into ours, while also strangely framing the fate of psychoanalysis.

Freud's encounter with Lueger in the Slovene underground has, as I said, the value of a parable. In a dramatic echo of this encounter, Freud will have to flee Vienna in 1938 and finish his days in exile on account of Lueger's pupil recapturing Lueger's Vienna, almost exactly forty years after Freud met his master in the Slovene cave. And this can serve as an inaugural image of psychoanalysis and its political mission: confronting the problem

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<sup>3</sup> The term populism apparently first emerged with the rise of the People's Party in the US at the end of the nineteenth century, mostly with positive connotations (indeed, the members themselves used the term Populist Party), but the dark underside was very quick to follow.

of authority after the downfall of old authorities, in the historical moment of the rise of new authorities (*ersatz*, fake masters?)—a mission which directly translates and reaches into our present turmoil.

Here is my first point: there is widespread criticism of psychoanalysis going around (most conspicuously by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, Foucault, a large part of feminism, etc.), saying that it ultimately presents the father as the clue to every authority—even though diluted and sublated into the mere signifier of the Name-of-the-Father, it is still a father, thus perpetuating the patriarchal tradition—and, in a larger scope, that it reduces the vagaries of human desire to a family drama, to Oedipus—even though this is the most dysfunctional family in human history. As opposed to this, I would argue that Freud discerned the function of the father and its vicissitudes precisely at the time when this traditional account historically lost its sway, at the point of the decline of traditional sovereignty. It's not about extolling and preserving the father, but about taking stock of the father function after its demise, as the afterlife of authority, not its reduction to a premodern figure. To be sure, Freud proposed the myth of the murder of the father, of the dead father acquiring more power than the living one, ruling as the Name of the Father, as the symbolic authority underpinning the authority of the symbolic, etc. But one could say (I am repeating the formula I used before, but this is a useful shorthand) that with the advent of modernity *it was the dead father himself who died*. He lost his symbolic impact, his name stopped being the foundation of authority, it was revealed as an imposture. These massive historic presuppositions made it possible for Freud to identify the father not as a source of authority, natural, religious or symbolic, but in the contingency of his function. It was not that any father or ruler could no longer measure up to his function, but rather that the symbolic function itself lost the power of measure. Lacan, with his knack for slogans, proposed an excellent catchphrase, which

works well in French: *père ou pire*, father or worse. The rule of the father, the paternal authority, the patriarchal order, etc., was bad enough, but we are heading for worse. This is why this accidental encounter can be seen as the return of the repressed, the return of what modernity seemed to have done away with, namely masters based on transcendence, in the natural order or in their assumed position of exception. The promise of modernity was that they would all be swept away in the name of reason and knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

But here is my second point: to say that this is the return of the repressed, the recurrence of the Master who should have met his demise with modernity, a Master not realizing that he was dead—all this is misleading, because what we are dealing with is not a regression to a constellation where sovereignty still rules supreme, as if the old Master figures could make their comeback with a vengeance. This is the fundamental enigma one is confronted with, and this is the subject of our conference: the new figures of masters may put on a charade or a travesty of sovereignty, but they are inherently products of modernity itself, perhaps precisely of what Lacan, in a shorthand, called the university discourse. Lacan's theory of the four discourses was proposed in 1969, more than half a century ago, in what now seems to be another world, in the immediate aftermath of May '68, in a historical moment which seemed to promise a possibility of radical change. This was the most elaborate, complex, and sophisticated theory of power, domination, and authority that psychoanalysis ever proposed; it set a standard. But what to make of it, how to abide by it half a century later, in the historic moment of closure, when all possibilities seem exhausted, worn out, and drained?

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Santner developed a compelling argument about this shift, an argument that underlies much of his oeuvre, but is particularly prominent in *The Royal Remains* (2011). Put briefly, once transcendence is reduced to immanence with modernity, what emerges is what he calls "the surplus of immanence," which makes its way as the seeming recurrence of the royal. The subtitle of his book is *The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*.

The theory of the four discourses was premised on the break of modernity. It was only from the vantage point of that break that one could envisage the discourse of the Master as the clue, the underlying structure of premodern social ties, bringing them to a minimal common core, with the structural function of the master signifier, what Lacan called *le signifiant maître*,  $S_1$ , in the position of the agent. And as opposed to it, there was his proposal of the university discourse, which spelled out the major claims of modernity, placing knowledge,  $S_2$  in his algebra (I don't want to go into the technicalities), in the position of the agent, proposing a general framework that would accommodate the unprecedented rise of science and technology, and at the same time a political form, a social bond based on legitimation by competence, knowledge, expertise, a collective rationality that would prevail if allowed unrestricted public use.<sup>5</sup> But the critical point of this mechanism was that it doesn't entail that the master has vanished—in Lacan's scheme it is now rather pushed under, out of sight, concealed at the place of the hidden truth of the discourse of knowledge, its suppression conditioning the very advent of the universality of knowledge, lying low, waiting to come out, but not as a return of the past, rather as a future prospect. Master or worse, *ou pire*, and it's the travesty that makes it worse. What appears now is rather a fake, a counterfeit master—should one say the Master and its double? But the double in psychoanalysis is never a mere copy; it possesses an eerie quality that exceeds the alleged original, a surplus, and one can be reminded of the long history of doubles which proliferated precisely at the break of modernity.

The first one who had to confront this new constellation, the quasi-return of a quasi-master, was actually Marx in his *Eighteenth*

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<sup>5</sup> If one wants a contemporary version of this, there is Steven Pinker's (2018) bestseller *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*. It promotes something like capitalism "within the bounds of reason alone," to use Kantian parlance, with little concern for the reemergence of the Master and new forms of domination.

*Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (2019). And he gave us, already with the opening salvo, a simple canonical formula that can serve as a general guideline: first as tragedy, then as farce. Instead of Napoleon, there is the pitiful figure of his nephew, a caricature deserving of scorn and derision. But the problem is that this figure cannot be cast aside as an oddity or an accident; it must be treated as a symptom, and this is how Marx treated it only a few months after its emergence (indeed, Lacan hailed Marx, not Freud, as the inventor of the symptom). It is the symptom of the then ascending liberalism, which was established as a political concept precisely in that period, at the same time as Bonapartism, which figures as its double in disguise, its farcical other face. This is not a return of the Master, but a farce, and it is through this farce that the new bourgeois order could survive, consolidate, and flourish. It was under the auspices of the farce and caricature that the expansion of industrialization and modernization could occur, mixed with plunder and arbitrary caprice. And quite tellingly, there was an inherent connection between this fake master and the lumpenproletariat, the outcasts of all social classes, as Marx pointed out, a structural connection one can pursue to this day. The figure of Louis Bonaparte may seem to be as far removed as possible from the university discourse (based on knowledge, reason, science, expertise), but it is this farce that brought out its presuppositions and functioned as its extension. It is therefore no coincidence that Bonapartism later served as a model for analyses of fascism, and continues to be sporadically evoked today as a tool for understanding the new populisms. Still, although the problem is, in a nutshell, structurally the same, one should not make haste with such parallels: first, because the figure of the farcical master has drastically evolved since then (the rise of media, and then of social media, has added a staggering dimension to it and imposed a different logic); second, because the nature of the global spread of capitalism and its antagonisms, which this apparent regression enables and perpetuates, is of a different order of quality and



magnitude; and third, because the nature of repression has taken a very different form: the hidden underside seems to be publicly displayed in full view, transgressions of the written and unwritten laws are manifest, while this coincides not with the lifting of repression but brings about its heightening and reinforcement.<sup>6</sup> For my present purpose, it suffices to point out that Marx was the first to confront this problem in one of his most brilliant political texts, which remains a point of reference. And as is true of all subsequent quasi-regressions, Bonapartism came precisely as a response to the failed revolution of 1848, with so many failed revolutions to follow. It was the first occurrence of what would become a rule, the rule of the unruly, the recurrence of the excess over the rule.<sup>7</sup>

Freud's encounter with Lueger roughly coincided with an artistic production that took place in another part of Europe, namely with Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi, King Ubu* (or *Ubu the King* or *Ubu Rex*),<sup>8</sup> produced in December 1896 in Paris. "The production's single public performance baffled and offended audiences with its unruliness and obscenity," says our wiki-oracle. Indeed, this seems to have been the literal staging of our problem, the farce of sovereignty subtly detected by a young man of twenty-three,

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<sup>6</sup> One of the most elucidating papers on this is Yuval Kremnitzer's "The Emperor's New Nudity: The Media, the Masses and the Unwritten Law." I draw on the English manuscript; it has so far been published only in Hebrew and in the Slovene translation (Kremnitzer 2020), soon to appear as a book with The MIT Press.

<sup>7</sup> For both brief comments on Marx and on Foucault, I am indebted to the insights of Frank Ruda's paper on grotesque sovereignty (2021), a manuscript not yet published in English. Ruda develops both lines of argument systematically and pursues them with vigor.

<sup>8</sup> Ubu, Trump—what's in a name? They both give the impression of being onomatopoeic expressions, but if onomatopoeia aims at imitating natural sounds, what is this the imitation of? What do these names evoke? I can fondly recall that the excellent production of *King Ubu* in the Slovene National Theatre in 2016 marked precisely the beginning of the Trump era (with the unforgettable late Jernej Šugman as Ubu), establishing a short circuit between the two.

subtly precisely in its utter lack of any subtlety, giving us a blunt spectacle of arrogance, stupidity, shamelessness, egotism, greed, cruelty, vulgarity, and debauchery.<sup>9</sup> Sovereignty in its undiluted form, with the implication that this seemingly premodern excess of authority (authority being excessive by its very nature) may well be the hidden secret of the deceptive modern ways of power.

I am mentioning this because, maybe surprisingly, Foucault, in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1975 (titled *Abnormal*), briefly touched upon this problem under the label of “grotesque sovereignty” and proposed Ubu as a model.

I am calling ‘grotesque’ the fact that, by virtue of their status, a discourse or an individual can have effects of power that their intrinsic qualities should disqualify them from having. The grotesque, or, if you prefer, the ‘Ubu-esque’, is not just a term of abuse or an insulting epithet [...]. Ubu-esque terror, grotesque sovereignty, or, in starker terms, the maximization of effects of power on the basis of the disqualification of the one who produces them. I do not think this is an accident or mechanical failure in the history of power. [...] I do not think that explicitly showing power to be abject, despicable, Ubu-esque or simply ridiculous is a way of limiting its effects and of magically dethroning the person to whom one gives the crown. Rather, it seems to me to be a way of giving a striking form of expression to the unavailability, the inevitability of power, which can function in its full rigor and at the extreme point of its rationality even when in the hands of someone who is effectively discredited. (Foucault 2003, pp. 11–13)

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<sup>9</sup> I can add that the same Alfred Jarry also proposed a new discipline, which he called ‘pataphysics (note the apostrophe!); whereas metaphysics deals with the rule and the universal, the domain of ‘pataphysics is the exception, the unruly, the glitch, the abnormal. The ‘Pataphysical College (founded in 1948 in Jarry’s spirit) had many illustrious members, such as Marcel Duchamp, Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, Raymond Queneau, Boris Vian, Man Ray, Italo Calvino, the Marx Brothers, Jean Baudrillard, etc. For a curious connection between Jarry and Lacan, cf. Paul Audi, *Le théorème du Surmâle: Lacan selon Jarry* (Lagrasse: Verdier 2011).

For Foucault, grotesque sovereignty is the inherent and constant possibility of all sovereignty. It is sovereignty brought to its pure form, a manifestation of the fact that all sovereignty is based on the grotesque, on the theatrical, and thus ultimately groundless—the grotesque reveals its *ex nihilo*, the pure and crude display and performance of power as such. The grotesque sovereign, in his obtuseness and obscenity, displays the nature of power as such (and Foucault uses the terms “clown” and “buffoon,” which are in vogue with the current grotesque figures). Every sovereign is ultimately an Ubu in disguise, but when the disguise is taken away, this paradoxically doesn’t undo but reinforces his position; it doesn’t disqualify him. Even if this grotesque nature is brought to light for all to see, even if it is deliberately displayed, this has no consequences. I mentioned the theory of the four discourses, and Foucault proposes a fifth one in passing: “Ubu’s discourse,” *le discours d’Ubu* (ibid., p. 14). If Lacan, too, famously suggested a fifth discourse—just once, though, like a *hapax legomenon* not to be pursued further—namely the discourse of capitalism, then this can be taken as Foucault’s complementary addition, its abstruse double, forming an unexpected pattern: calculation, profit, technological progress, etc., on the one hand, and the vulgar, the obscene, and the grotesque, on the other. Maybe one could propose “Adam Smith *avec* Ubu.”

This is a lucid and maybe unexpected insight, but I think there are two problems with it. First, for Foucault the grotesque appears as the naked and raw truth of sovereign power manifesting itself, something always potentially present and occasionally coming out. But is there, can there be a bare truth of power, power fully exposed, deployed undiluted, in its sheer inevitability and absurdity? This is the paradox I hinted at before: the more everything is exposed, the bigger the deception; the more all inhibitions are lifted in this display, the bigger the repression. Ultimately, there is no power without obfuscation, no naked truth of power, since nudity can function as the ultimate and best disguise. And second,

Foucault, so keen on historicity and the careful scrutiny of historical breaks, analyzing them with subtlety and meticulous precision, is here acting in a surprisingly abrupt ahistorical manner. The grotesque is presented as a transhistorical category, stretching from Nero (according to Foucault, the first major instance of grotesque sovereignty) via Shakespeare's tyrants to Mussolini, all of whom serve equally well as examples, indiscriminately of the old sovereign power and the new biopolitical one. But our problem is the way in which the university discourse of modernity inherently produces these figures of grotesque sovereignty, as symptoms of its internal tension, manifesting how  $S_2$  cannot measure up to its position of agent—Ubu's discourse, with all its crass ignorance and stupidity, is an offspring of the university discourse of knowledge, its disavowed bastard.

But tellingly, Foucault points to another problem, another symptom, namely that the dimension of the grotesque doesn't concern only the sovereign (or the fake sovereign) but also the rule of bureaucracy—bureaucracy precisely as the monstrous extension and expansion of  $S_2$ , knowledge run amok. It's not only the grotesque master but also the apparatus which should run the modern state that can go berserk. This was, by the way, Hegel's wager, his strategy in dealing with the relation between the master and knowledge: to keep the master, but to reduce him to a minimum, to a mere signature, to dotting the i's, while the administration is supposed to run the state with its know-how. Yet the moment the master is removed, knowledge itself shows a propensity to run wild on its own. It turns out that knowledge, sustained by its own resources, may not be quite the epitome of rationality proposed by the Enlightenment.

Since the nineteenth century, an essential feature of big Western bureaucracies has been that the administrative machine, with its unavoidable effects of power, works by using the mediocre, useless, imbecilic, superficial, ridiculous, worn-out, poor, and powerless

functionary. The administrative grotesque has not been merely that kind of visionary perception of administration that we find in Balzac, Dostoyevsky, or Kafka. The administrative grotesque is a real possibility for the bureaucracy. Ubu the 'pen pusher' is a functional component of modern administration. (Ibid., p. 12)

So here we have it: given Lacan's structural determinants of  $S_1$  (the master signifier) and  $S_2$  (the chain of knowledge), we have, on the one hand, the Master and his double, the coming out of the master in grotesque sovereignty, and then  $S_2$  and its double, knowledge run amok: it's the redoubling, the travesty, that will get us in the end. First Ubu as the sovereign, then Ubu as the administrator, the public servant, the pen pusher. Ubu as the grotesque version of  $S_1$  mirrored by the grotesque version of  $S_2$ . In Lacan there is a purely signifying logic which produces the necessary doubling of  $S_1$ - $S_2$ , the elementary signifying dyad, but then there is the redoubling of this redoubling, where it appears as though the phantom-like double adopts the double nature of the signifier. It's the redoubling—the fake, the pastiche, the caricature—that may prove fatal.

After the Master and his double, and knowledge and its double, let's consider the third in the line of structural elements that form the building blocks of the theory of the four discourses: jouissance and its double. Jouissance, enjoyment, is what comes with surplus—arguably all jouissance is surplus jouissance. It is implied by, produced by the signifying logic, yet heterogeneous to it, seemingly a surplus over it. It was one of Lacan's great feats to connect the question of (surplus) enjoyment to the problem of Marx's surplus value, which provides an entry point into his theory of capitalism. In one of the most important pronouncements in the seminar on the four discourses (Seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan 2007), Lacan maintained that what defined capitalism, the invention of a new economic order, was that at some point (initially in the sixteenth century)

“something changed in the master’s discourse at a certain point in history [...] the important point is that on a certain day surplus jouissance [*le plus-de-jouir*] became calculable, could be counted [*se comptabilise*], totalized. This is where what is called the accumulation of capital begins” (ibid., p. 177; Lacan 1991, p. 207).

The statement is staggering, for it encompasses the advent of capitalism, Marx’s theory of surplus value, and Lacan’s take on the concomitant surplus jouissance, all in one go. It goes very far (as far as Lacan would ever go, I guess) in spelling out a key feature of capitalism<sup>10</sup> by this far-reaching proposal: capitalism is obviously about the production and accumulation of surplus value, this is its (Marxian) definition, and Lacan coined the psychoanalytic notion of *plus-de-jouir* (with all its ambiguity in French) based on Marx’s model. Now, if surplus value can be counted, calculated, accumulated, turned into profit, this has a parallel (homology, says Lacan) in surplus jouissance; the economy extends to the economy of jouissance, or the economy of jouissance subtends economy, so the surplus jouissance also becomes calculable. The contention is perplexing and paradoxical, because the very definition of jouissance is that it always comes in excess, that it derails, that it cannot be contained in the domain of the pleasure principle, that it is non-economical by its very nature, that it’s always out of place and out of joint, transgressive, traumatic, repetitive, etc. So how can it be counted, *comptabiliser*, says Lacan? If we are to follow this suggestion, then capitalism succeeded in an incredible feat. It managed to tame the untamable beast, to submit it to counting and measure, to count the uncountable, to measure the

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<sup>10</sup> To be sure, there is the famous attempt by Lacan, in 1972 (cf. Lacan 1978), to propose the fifth kind of discourse, precisely the capitalist discourse (which features  $\$$  and  $S_2$  on the upper level, and  $S_1$  and  $a$  on the lower), but it is a *hapax legomenon*, a one-time occurrence, and although many people tried to do something interesting with it, I rather believe that Lacan tried this out, saw that it doesn’t quite work, and abandoned it. (I will let myself be persuaded if a convincing reading is presented.)

immeasurable, to economize the non-economical, to bring the excess to the boundaries of the pleasure principle. But did it really succeed? The problem is that this is not quite the taming that would go in one direction alone; it also produces a reverse effect in that capitalism is inherently driven by excess. It was never to be contained within the pleasure principle (it was always beyond), it never relied on hedonism (despite appearances in consumerist society, etc.). Making *jouissance* countable also turned the count into something excessive, always driven by surplus, “irrational,” unlimited. It infinitized the count. Putting *jouissance* in the service of economic accumulation (which seemed to contradict its nature) also “contaminated” the economic realm itself, into which it was inscribed. Its excess could be capitalized, but capital itself became permanently driven by this excess.<sup>11</sup> Enjoyment is homogenized, so to speak, through subsumption to accumulation, but this is exactly what derails the supposed homogenization. This, then, would be the great achievement of capitalism: what should derail the whole through the excess is internalized as its inner condition and fuel. Hence, any crisis of the unmanageable surplus becomes the generator of an ongoing drive; any radical or even revolutionary innovation or subversion can begin to serve as the fresh blood of this drive. Hence the futile expectation of the last century and a half that some final crisis would now emerge, the moment of the finally manifested truth. Instead, what we witnessed was capitalism’s capacity to integrate all the subversive gestures and movements that seemed to radically oppose it, including (and especially) May ’68 (the historic moment when Lacan proposed this theory).

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<sup>11</sup> Lacan places this divide within the master’s discourse (“something changed in the master’s discourse”), well before the later advent of modernity and the university discourse. Did one have to “invent” the discourse of the university in order for this excessive mechanism to function properly? The agency of  $S_2$  in the place of  $S_1$ , replacing and repressing the traditional master?

Now, *jouissance* and its double—does this mean that we have two kinds of *jouissance*, the authentic and the fake one, *jouissance* that can be functionalized and counted, and *jouissance* that cannot be? The one serving the capitalist economy, the other in excess over it? Or is it rather that this apparent split is itself already inscribed in the accumulation driven by surplus *jouissance*, so that everything that resists it is already part and parcel of its drivenness?

Here is how Lacan himself points very precisely to this (seeming?) split:

What Marx denounces in surplus value is the spoliation of *jouissance*. And yet, this surplus value is a memorial to surplus *jouissance*, its equivalent of surplus *jouissance*. ‘Consumer society’ derives its meaning from the fact that what makes it the ‘element’, in inverted commas, described as human is made the homogeneous equivalent of whatever surplus *jouissance* is produced by our industry – an imitation surplus *jouissance*, in a word. Moreover, that can catch on. One can do a semblance of surplus *jouissance* – it draws quite a crowd. (Lacan 2007, p. 81)

Lacan uses the expression *un plus-de-jouir en toc* (Lacan 1991, p. 93), which indeed means imitation. The dictionary also gives être *du toc*, “to be fake,” and “sham” for *toc*. So in another most important pronouncement, we have it all spelled out—the imitation of *jouissance*, a fake *jouissance*, a semblance of *jouissance*, the homogeneous equivalent. Briefly, *jouissance* and its double. But—and this is the problem—this doesn’t mean that there is some authentic *jouissance*, of which this would be a mere imitation, a *jouissance* which would be lost with the consumerist fake. The mirage of the loss of proper *jouissance* comes in the same package and rather sustains the *toc*; the authentic/fake split figures as an internal split of the same process, the countability and homogenization of the surplus turning surplus into the key asset of its opposite, capitalizing on the very impossibility to make it countable and homogeneous (cf. Zupančič 2006).



Does this logic have a limit, is there a way of getting out of it? I'm afraid it does, I'm afraid there is, but not quite the way we would wish for. The limit may well be something that is increasingly being manifested, in full view, something that perhaps characterizes our present moment. The question can be formulated like this: is there an excess over the excess? A surplus over the surplus? Are we facing an over-accumulation of the side-product of this integration of the excess into the profit-making machinery, to the point that it can no longer be absorbed? Perhaps something shifted in the half-century that separates us from that moment, a period marked by the steep rise of neoliberalism (to make it quick), and perhaps a process is underway that will gradually (or even suddenly?) make this infinite capacity for integration impossible. Something happened to the surplus *jouissance* and its accumulation, so that the surplus of the surplus can no longer be recuperated and threatens to shatter or paralyze the machinery and its framework. It is as if crises and excesses no longer function as a way of recuperation and renewal, but rather threaten with the collapse of the social bond. Maybe the symptomatic economy of surplus enjoyment in the so-called consumerist society Lacan had in mind no longer defines our habitus; we may have reached a different stage of dealing with (the surplus over) the surplus, and a far more dangerous one.

For the present purposes, we can propose a very rough empirical observation. The long decades of neoliberalism have produced an affective surplus that manifests itself in two seemingly opposite reactions: endless fatigue and accumulated rage. Fatigue, tiredness, exhaustion,<sup>12</sup> burnout, depression — not as a widespread psychological condition, but as a socially necessary form of affect, not an individual shortcoming. We are witnessing an extension,

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<sup>12</sup> There is a difference between tiredness and exhaustion. If one is tired, one cannot realize various possibilities, but exhaustion means that the possibilities themselves have been exhausted — no amount of rest would remedy this.

exacerbation, and generalization of depression, which has reached pandemic global proportions in the last thirty or forty years, well before Covid, and the spectacular rise of which coincides and intersects, fatally, with the rise of neoliberalism, presenting its affective counterpart. On the other hand, there is an excess of rage, anger, wrath, fury, of seeking an outlet, which is constantly lying low and flaring up in unexpected manifestations of inarticulate violence. There is something like a “free-floating” excess that can be quickly channeled and directed at various surrogate targets.

The affective surplus takes two seemingly opposed forms, an “active” and a “passive” one, but they are ultimately two sides of the same coin. In short, depression can be seen as rage that has been arrested and stuck in the throat, turned inward, so that it immobilizes, paralyzes, and blocks its bearer. The oscillation between the two is structural, and there seems to be no dialectical mediation between the two extremes. This duality largely defined the Covid moment in recent years, though the process began much earlier, with Covid acting only as a magnifying glass, condensing what had accumulated over the decades.

The syndrome of “depression-rage” also directly concerns the fate of psychoanalysis in the last half-century. This massive twin pathology seems to have largely overshadowed the basic pathological structures pinned down by psychoanalysis (the trinity neurosis-psychosis-perversion), as well as their more recent transformations and extensions (the pathological narcissist, the borderline, “universalized foreclosure,” universalized perversion, etc.). It is not that these are new clinical entities (depression has a venerable, long history under the guise of melancholia, acedia, etc.), but rather that there is a sheer quantity of accumulated social affect that goes far beyond the boundaries of psychoanalysis as a clinical practice. One reason that psychoanalysis has been marginalized in recent decades is connected to the stunning rise of the pharmaceutical industry, which offers a wide range of chemical means for these massive and acute afflictions (amassing

equally massive profits), while psychoanalysis is expensive, time-consuming, and socially limited. The world has been flooded with antidepressants and anesthetics in one form or another, with pills that, on the one hand, try to wake us up and stimulate us, and on the other, to calm us down and anaesthetize us, to the point that there is hardly an individual left in developed societies who is exempt from this onslaught. The zero form of subjectivity is the anaesthetized and stimulated individual, to the extent that an overall diagnosis of our age can be designated as narcocapitalism (cf. Sutter 2018).<sup>13</sup>

These may be somewhat naïve empirical observations about the general nature of affect affecting our time, but what I am trying to single out as the surplus over the (usual) surplus is directly related to our topic of the new type of master. The rise of populism in the past few decades has been largely conditioned by this dual affect, and populism is precisely a way to use it, channel it, exploit it, capitalize on it—it is the very stuff that provides it with fuel. If the pharma industry largely serves pacification, populism thrives on excitation. It systematically capitalizes on the production of rage, its spread and intensification. The new type of fake masters can be seen as a direct social expression of this surplus over the surplus, its exploitation and expansion. The rage is directed at easily interchangeable targets, those who are allegedly stealing our enjoyment (immigrants are always at hand, Islam, China, “cultural Marxism,” political correctness, LGBTIQ+, the elites,

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<sup>13</sup> But what is the pharma industry other than a further implementation of science, with its supposed capacity to affect the psychical by direct chemical and biological means? After all, it can perversely appeal to the old Enlightenment materialist premise that the psyche (“spirit”) is subject to material causality, like everything else, and that it can be influenced in material ways, accounted for by neuroscience, etc. It is as if one side of the Enlightenment, producing anesthetic effects, stands against the other heir of the Enlightenment, which demands radical awakening. In any case, we have not left the university discourse—its new functioning is also defined by the way in which science takes care to pacify the effects produced by this discourse itself.

the deep state, all haphazardly mixed together to meet the needs of the moment), combined with the absence of a political program (Trump's MAGA is the most conspicuous model). The function of a populist leader is ultimately to use this excitation and rage to reinforce precisely the structure that produced the surplus over the surplus, thus offering the prospect of a self-propelling vortex. Leftist and liberal politics is increasingly not only having to compete with it; rather, populism has begun to define the very backdrop against which political struggles are fought. What looks like populist excess is in fact a product of the contradictions of the apparently normal course itself, drastically exacerbated in the fifty years that separate us from Lacan's conceptual proposal. The surplus of surplus spills over into something one could call the crisis of crisis, for the disintegration of the social bond that increasingly looms is something quite different from crisis as a way for capitalism to recuperate the excess and integrate it back into its movement. The paradox is that the grotesque, the double, and the fake have to sustain the structure of what is ultimately still the rule of the university discourse. (Is this another instance of the Hegelian infinite judgment?)

Lacan practically never undertook the risky business of predicting the future, except, perhaps astonishingly, with his predictions of the rise of new racisms and increased segregation. As early as 1967, he claimed: "Our future of common markets will be counterbalanced by the increasingly crude expansion of the processes of segregation" (Lacan 2001, p. 257). He related this to "the consequences of the way that science rearranges social groupings, and in particular the universalization it introduces" (*ibid.*).<sup>14</sup> He would return to this proposition in the famous television interview in 1973 (*ibid.*, p. 534) and several other times. In 1967 there was still no talk of the four discourses, but the

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. also p. 588, where he qualifies Nazism as "a reactive precursor" of the segregation to come.

general point is clear: the university discourse is the agent of the implementation of science, of the universalization it entails, and at the same time of common markets and globalization, but the more these twin processes progress, the more the tension will intensify, the more the problem of surplus enjoyment will come to the fore, the bigger the prospect of segregation. The more the problem of the theft of enjoyment and of the others who enjoy at our expense will spread, the more globalization will erect ever new walls against the segregated. Lacan envisaged segregation as the structural consequence of the university discourse. His predictions are, to be sure, very general, but we can see that they have unfortunately turned out to be true. We have not got out of what he termed the university discourse half a century ago, but have been subjected to its consequences in very drastic forms. With the new figures of fake masters—where the grotesque and the caricature rule supreme, where lifting the mask functions as the best mask—the excess over the excess, or the surplus of surplus, entails the repression of repression. Although populist excesses may look like the lifting of repression, they occur under the tutelage of the new master, whose function is to ensure that they inflexibly turn into new forms of repression, thus producing more surplus of surplus.

The paradox is that now that with the advent of internet and new social media—another huge step in universalization—there is more communication than there has ever been in human history, we may well be facing the prospect of the disintegration of the basic social bond.

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*The contribution is a result of the research work conducted within the research program “Philosophical investigations” (P6-0252) and research project “The Theatricality of Power” (J6-1812), financed by the Slovenian Research Agency.*