

Earthlings and Spacemen: Life-and-Death Struggle

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1. *Space Odyssey*

There are two fantasies building up the West's collective unconsciousness today. One is the fantasy of the ultimate recovery of the "humanized" planet—a fantasy of a *return to Paradise*. The other is the fantasy of *Noah's Ark*—the beginning of space imperialism. The function of both is, of course, to cover the real with the phantasmal shield, for sustaining life in space is far from possible and, likewise, recovering humanity-friendly conditions on Earth is proving difficult. We might suggest, though, that these two fantasies point to the emerging class division of the 21st century: the few who can, hypothetically, count on the space asylum, and the rest who cannot—*spacemen* and *earthlings*. Masters and slaves.

We know the figures of the masters: Elon Musk (Tesla, SpaceX), Jeff Bezos (Amazon), and Richard Branson (Virgin Galactic), the three richest men in the world,¹ the three space dreamers and the three space investors.

The figure of the master, however, is not the same as his symbolic place. The master's figure is the king, symbolic place is the place from where the figure is being moved.²

¹ According to Forbes' Real-Time Billionaires list (<https://www.forbes.com/real-time-billionaires/#5ffc02213d78>).

² Here, we are speaking about Lacan's differentiation between the imaginary and the symbolic. As shown in his optical model of a phantom bouquet,

The master has instituted himself by risking his life. With this—and with the slave getting terrified of death and thus, in a forced choice, choosing life, but an impoverished life, a life without freedom—the master-slave dialectic has been established *qua* symbolic relation.³ Now, the real question is: is the master ready to risk his life to maintain the symbolic order (and his own symbolic position within it) or is he not? It is not about the life of the figure on the chessboard—a risk that might be compared to the investment risk about which the capitalist masters, today turning into spacemen, like to boast and by which they justify their position, stating something like “I risked everything I had (that is, all my means of survival, that is, my life), so I am rightly the king of the world and you have nothing to reproach me for.” It is not this kind of abstracted, symbolized risk of life—but it is the *real* risk of life (confronting one with the horrifying inconceivability

imaginary is always structured by the symbolic (cf. Lacan 1988). The game of chess can well be interpreted as a metaphor of the master-slave dialectics or a “wheel of history”—as was rather popular among the proponents of historical materialism (remember Benjamin’s comparison of historical materialism to “The Turk,” the fraudulent, always winning chess automaton that allegedly defeated Benjamin Franklin and Napoleon Bonaparte). In such interpretations, the pieces on the board serve as imaginary representations of symbolic places understood as positions in the social structure. But the key to Lacanian reading is, in contrast, the idea of an always failed representation. In the manner the symbolic structures the imaginary, there is always a certain blinding effect at work. If there is anything fascinating about chess, therefore, it is the way in which the symbolic struggles with the imaginary: the potency of how symbolic places and structures that exist strictly as relations without any positive content can show themselves not only as figures but also as moves, that is, as spatio-temporal constellations. A game of chess should therefore not be taken as a metaphor for symbolic relations in the social structure, but rather as their metonymy: it doesn’t represent them, but functions exactly in the same way.

³ The main point of reference in this article is Hegel’s famous supposition of the life-and-death struggle in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and its interpretation put forth by the Ljubljana School (cf. Dolar 1992, Žižek 1998). The Ljubljana School leans in large part on Lacan’s own interpretation (he himself, again, is leaning on Kojève’s), especially in his theory of the four discourses (cf. Lacan 2007).

of the real, that is, the void), like the risk of the chess player in occupied Sarajevo during the Balkan war from Josip Osti's poem who would not move to the basement during the bombing attack so as to be able to continue the game, to defend its symbolic order: "without knowing what happened / the other continued to move the figures / defended and attacked / already with a dead opponent / fought" (Osti 1993, pp. 98–99). A rhetorical question pops up here: which billionaire is ready to die for capitalism?

The thing is that as soon as the master is established as a symbolic place, he⁴ no longer needs to be justified in the real. He no longer needs to prove—like Zelensky—that he is willing to sacrifice his life. Even more: the more he wants to prove that he is willing to risk his life (say, for the nation), the more suspicious he appears. People speculate, for example, that "he must be cheating, only performing his warrior's and leader's bravery, while in reality, he is bribed and protected by the Americans." Moreover, even if he proved his willingness and eventually died for Ukraine, still nobody would accept it, assuming his death must have been a scam.

The master is the *dead-living* because his physical death changes nothing—even if he is dead, he keeps on living: it matters little if the master dies or not as long as his symbolic function is sustained. It is only symbolic death that kills the master.⁵

⁴ For ease of reading, from this point onwards in the text, male pronouns shall also be considered to include both sexes.

⁵ Symbolic death, of course, is not a physical death that is elevated to the level of the symbolic—with ceremonies, funerals, gravestone inscriptions, and so on—but just the opposite, an erasure from the symbolic order, a *damnatio memoriae*. Symbolic death is a removal of master-signifiers, their excommunication (as it is done, for example, with the surnames of the "enemies of state" in all different systems—one of the many examples is the case of Nikolai Yezhov, Stalin's head of secret police (NKVD) nicknamed by historians as "The Vanishing Commissar"). In the internet era, symbolic death seems to be difficult to achieve—everyone knows that even a verbal massacre (which is very popular in today's era of rumors, gossip, and the reign of opinions), which seeks to destroy

The function of the master in a socio-economic order is maintained by his symbolic place even after the physical death of the figure associated with that place. Examples are numerous: after the death of a great leader, master-signifiers of political dynasties—such as the Kennedys or the Kim family—consolidate the abstracted, contentless positions of power; the “great entrepreneurs,” like Steve Jobs, John D. Rockefeller, Henry Ford, or Walt Disney, are kept alive as the “fathers” of companies, which are fueled by their fathers’ “personality” (that is, by their specific symbolic and imaginary features) long after their death; the same goes for the iconic founders of the fashion empires—the “kings and queens” like Karl Lagerfeld, Coco Chanel, Vivienne Westwood, or Christian Dior; and so on.

The slave, on the other hand, is the *living-dead*. Even when living, he is already dead—sticking to the sorrow of his own finitude, he is subordinated to death as to his absolute master.⁶ The slave, however, does not only fear his own physical death but equally also the symbolic death of the master: the slave might well feed his masochist enjoyment by wishing for his master’s physical death, but once the master dies, the slave will do everything to keep him alive in the symbolic (take, for example, the conspiracy theories about Hitler’s death, or the famous Balkans conspiracy about Tito’s death).

Of course, the life-and-death struggle is nothing but a mythical presupposition, a natural assumption of the always already

an individual’s dignity, does not contribute to their symbolic death, but, on the contrary, even revives them. However, operations with “big data” and numerous options for big-scale manipulation can make the internet, especially with the development of AI, the perfect field of ideological censorship—not only for a symbolic death but even for a symbolic genocide.

⁶ As Dolar writes in his *Samozavedanje: Heglova Fenomenologija duha II*: “The master appears as the postponement of this absolute master and thus subject to economy in his symbolic presence” (Dolar 1992, p. 29). Here, the master-slave dialectics is set as something that has always already been defined by the symbolic order and what, at the same time, determines the symbolic order itself.

established master-slave dialectics. What sustains the master as a master is his very symbolic place: just as money begets money, positions of power consolidate positions of power. The master solidifies his symbolic place with his imaginary features—the master is the one who shows himself as a master (as wealth equals power, imaginary features of the master are mainly the material representations of his super-wealth like megayachts, private jets, and private spaceships)—as well as with master signifiers that maintain his power in the realm of the discourse, e.g. his name (Zuckerberg, Putin), and the names of the company, products, or state that are put in associative bond with his name (Musk's masterstroke was to name his company after Tesla, by which he repeatedly triggers the subconscious idea of his alleged intellectual supremacy); altogether, they create a signifying cluster associated with wealth, power, and excessive enjoyment. We come to a certain perverse inversion here: the imaginary features and the master signifiers indicating wealth, power, and excessive enjoyment, which in reality are the effects of the exploitation of the slave, appear as the very cause of the right to exploitation, that is, as the very thing by which he justifies his wealth, his excessive enjoyment, and his right of exploitation.

The slaves, in contrast to the masters, have no publicly recognizable figure and no master signifiers to keep them present and powerful in the realm of discourse. To receive recognition, the master must keep the slave alive—but this is a recognition of someone whose place in the symbolic is weak. It is purely an empty place, the place of the subject who establishes himself as an ephemeral, barred entity ($\$$) emerging through the quilting points in speech (S_1). It is not difficult to see that, just as the master maintains his symbolic place by a certain self-referential logic (the positions of power consolidate the positions of power), the same self-referential logic repeatedly prevents the slave from entering the symbolic. The cunning thing here is that the only master-signifier that is connected to the slave and that, as a kind

of permanence, embeds him in the symbolic network is the one that defines the very impossibility of the slave's inscription in the symbolic. The self-referential logic preventing the slave's inscription in the symbolic stems from the simple fact that the master-signifier connected to him is in itself a contradiction. It is a name that institutes the very absence of a name: *the anonymous*. This master-signifier functions as a barricade that inscribes the slave in the symbolic precisely by cutting him off.

From the master's point of view, three things are important: first, the slave is inscribed in the symbolic, because this is the condition of the master's recognition and his own presence in the symbolic, second, the symbolic place of the slave is as fragile as possible because this is how the slave is kept on the other side (of the discourse), and third, that the slave exists as a living being, that he is physically alive, i.e. functional as a working force, on sale as a commodity, and consuming in order both to maintain his means of subsistence and to feed his enjoyment (which goes, as Freud famously noticed, *sensu stricto* against the preservation of life).

While modern slaves are bound by fear of death—and with the danger of the global environmental and social catastrophe existential threats are all the more visceral for those inhabitants of Earth who cannot count on escaping into space (in accordance with the leftist chase of the universal political subject, we can say that *earthling* is the universal political subject of the now)—the masters of the 21st century are not concerned with physical death at all. Not because they have overcome their fear of death (this is only their mythical justification, which does not need to be proven), but because they mean to overcome death itself. Their masterplan is twofold; they plan to overcome death by fleeing into space and thus avoiding the cataclysm of the planet on the one hand, and by achieving biological immortality on the other. The immortal Master living on Mars—this must be the ultimate dream of the spacemen. Branson, for example, is hellbent on establishing a human colony on Mars in about twenty years, while Grimes,

the mother of Elon Musk's children, who recently renamed herself as *c*, speaks about reaching immortality by self-replicating herself with the help of the AI, and, at the same time, of dying on Mars—holding on to Branson's plan—if her self-replicating fails and she is still to die at the end of her biological life.⁷

2. *Life as a Commodity*

The life-and-death struggle, which is inherent to the establishment of the master-slave dialectic *qua* symbolic relation, is, with the development of biotechnology, pushed over some unexpected edge: technology now allows humans not only the *indirect* production of life through the production of the means of subsistence (maintaining thereby favorable conditions for biological reproduction), as was the case in the industrial era, but weighs towards a *direct* production of life. As the first phase of sexual reproduction is already completely in the hands of technology with the process of artificial insemination—accompanied by a perverse legal business of private semen banks, where a woman

⁷ Simoniti reads this possibility as a peculiar *reductio ad absurdum* of Fichte's imperative to subdue the world: "In Fichte's time, a man died, but he could always count on humanity continuing, and this was especially developed by Hegel with the idea of a spiritual community that preserves the memory of its deceased member. Lately, however, it seems that unconsciously we are almost betting on the opposite card, whereby the race will go extinct, but it may still be possible to survive as an individual. For it is precisely at the moment of the world's end approaching that an elitist life-extension industry is developing, promising ten, twenty, fifty more years, or even relative immortality in the future. We could therefore conceive the scenario in which we will achieve individual immortality the moment we experience collective death; so, while in ourselves immensely young and healthy, we will nonetheless die as a race which runs out of oxygen and overheats in its own atmosphere. It is also possible that humanity will not take every member to the grave after all, as a few people might escape this planet and live out their lives of somewhat more asocial infinity on some spaceship, hoping to colonise another world." (Simoniti 2022, p. 196)

can buy semen as a product on a sales shelf with an indication of the particulars of the semen's owner (not its donor because he is selling it), such as skin color, provenance, education, intellect, and even a photograph of him as a child—ectogenesis is also seeing major improvements with the invention of a complete external womb. While, at this moment, the mother's body is still a necessary domicile for the embryo for at least a few months, the biotech machinery will soon be able to grow human embryos outside of the human body, the whole way from its conception to birth. With the recent technology of volumetric and bioprinting, lab-grown organs and organoids (eyes, hearts, liver, skin, bones, muscles, and even brains in an early embryonic stage) are allowed to be printed from a patient's own cells, facilitating thereby the true revolution of regenerative medicine: from the bioprinted cells, stem cells are created, which can develop into various cell types and eventually into tissues and organs. In some other direction than the growth of "organs without bodies," genetic research for the prevention of aging has reached a crucial milestone with a recent successful experiment in reversing the process of aging in mice.

This, of course, does not lead to a happy ending in the alleged ultimate success of medicine reaching the final goal of general human immortality, bringing us equality and eternal peace. Overcoming death as the internal limit of physical life and directly controlling the production of living human beings does not mean the end of the life-and-death struggle. On the contrary, as always already symbolized, the master-slave dialectic, which is instituted on this struggle and this struggle represents its condition of possibility, will maintain its logic even when on the physical scale an individual's death could be technically postponed unto infinity and the master-slave dialectic would lose its raw naturalist justification.

Insofar as from the viewpoint of the aspiration to immortality aging is perceived as disease, disease, on the other hand, is seen as obsolescence, a malfunction. A human body must thus, on the one

hand, be eternally young, immortal, and well-functioning so that it can be enjoyed indefinitely, and, on the other hand, it must be equally well-functioning and incorrupt, but mortal, so that it can work efficiently and, when it breaks down, can be replaced by a new life. Marx's interpretation of the substitution of machines for human labor has been given a further upgrade here. Not only in the direction that human labor is ever more replaceable by machines (in the 21st century not only physical human labor but also intellectual work has been replaced, with the revolution of the AI ahead), but also in the direction that a human being as such, on the other hand, has been transformed into a machine—not only in the way that they have become mechanical, cyborgian, but even more so in this way that their biological, organic life has become the “life of a machine,” that is to say, technologically controlled, repairable, and with spare parts. This life, as commodified, is the bearer of nothing but its own functionality (expediency in serving the master) and perishability on the side of the slaves, and of its infinite reparability and self-sufficiency on the side of the masters.

When life as such becomes a commodity, the slave, who was, in a capitalist production process, alienated from his life, his work, and the products of his work, is now alienated also through his work on his own life—he literally produces himself, and like his other products, which must have a shelf-life for production to continue, he must also have a shelf-life himself. The gap between today's masters and slaves is the gap between those to whom belongs *the right to immortality* as a radically naturalized (i.e. absolutely profaned) form of freedom and those who *process their own life as a thing*, as a commodity, which, as part of capitalist production, is created for death.

This very gap points to the fact that in capitalist production, a human's life factually splits into *two lives*: the life of a slave and the life of a master. Because they differ not in certain qualities or particularities but in their structural determinations, they make two radically different forms of life. The two lives that capitalism

creates are rooted in the fictitious split between production and consumption, which creates the impression that capitalism is an equal give-and-get relationship: I work (I give), I receive payment, which I spend on my own needs (I get). But the truth is, of course, that the relationship, for workers, takes the form of give-and-give, while for capitalists it is get-and-get. Not only is the production itself—in this case, the worker’s labor—in fact already a form of consumption because the worker “consumes the means of production with his labour, and converts them into products with a higher value than that of the capital advanced” (Marx 1976, p. 717)—Marx calls this *productive consumption*—but also what appears as *individual consumption*, i.e. the fact that the worker “uses the money paid to him for his labour-power to buy the means of subsistence” (Ibid.), is in fact already a production. This means, in real terms, that the capitalist “profits not only by what he receives from the worker, but also by what he gives him” (Ibid.). The fictitious split between production and consumption, which determines the worker’s life as fundamentally different from that of the capitalist, works successfully towards exploitation because it rests on an actual difference perceived by the worker—the difference between the worker’s productive and individual consumption: “In the former, he acts as the motive power of capital, and belongs to the capitalist. In the latter, he belongs to himself, and performs his necessary vital functions outside the production process. The result of the first kind of consumption is that the capitalist continues to live, of the second, that the worker himself continues to live” (Ibid.).

From a broader perspective, that is, from the perspective of the capitalist production itself, “the capital given in return for labour power is converted into means of subsistence which have to be consumed to reproduce the muscles, nerves, bones and brains of existing workers, and to bring new workers into existence” (Ibid.). As Marx never tired of repeating, the production of capital has as its fundamental and most necessary condition the

incessant *reproduction of a worker*: “Within the limits of what is absolutely necessary, therefore, individual consumption of the working class is the reconversion of the means of subsistence given by capital in return for labour-power into fresh labour-power which capital is then again able to exploit. It is the production and reproduction of the capitalist’s most indispensable means of production: the worker” (Marx 1976, pp. 717-718). The fact that the worker enjoys his individual consumption, i.e. that he carries out his individual consumption in his own interest, and not to please the capitalist, of course, does not change anything from the point of view of capital and exploitation—all enjoyment is masochistic enjoyment in any event: “The consumption of food by a beast of burden does not become any less a necessary aspect of the production process because the beast enjoys what it eats” (Marx 1976, p. 718).

As technology itself, according to Marx, is a means of the “large-scale industry,”⁸ its recent development towards complete biotechnological management of human life directly confirms his thesis of two forms of human life under capitalism. The shift from the indirect to the direct production of life brought about by biotechnology seems radical: technology not only indirectly stimulates a worker’s life in the form of healthcare, good nutrition, etc, or, conversely, destroys it through poor working conditions, as was the case before the biotech era, but it literally *produces* that life. It can (or soon will) artificially create a human being and

⁸ Large-scale industry, says Marx, “tore aside the veil that concealed from men their own social process of production” (Marx 1976, p. 616). Because of this veil, the individual branches of production were puzzles to each other—this is why, says Marx, they were called “mysteries” (*mystères*). The principle of large-scale industry, which is “to view each process of production in and for itself, and to resolve it into its constituent elements without looking first at the ability of the human hand to perform the new processes” brought into existence the “modern science of technology” as a “systematic specialised application of the natural sciences” (Ibid.).

reproduce them directly without human sexual reproduction (by cell division on the one hand and by artificial “sexual” reproduction on the other). Moreover, it can prevent a human being from dying—not only temporarily, but for eternity, as it were—and it can, on the other hand, make them perishable, that is to say, it can set them an expiration date. However groundbreaking and, for that matter, horrifying or exciting this may seem, it is rather obvious that, from the point of view of capitalist production, the shift from indirect towards direct production of life is not at all a radical leap, but rather a logical, that is, a necessary continuation. In this way, capital has ensured itself the most consistent provision of its condition of possibility: the maintenance and reproduction of the working class.

In the background of the biotechnological development, another crucial shift happened in the 1970s: a living being was allowed to be registered as a patent.⁹ This, as precedence, provided

⁹ The story of Ananda Mohan ‘Al’ Chakrabarty (1938–2020) is the proto-story of a science whose field of knowledge as absolute knowledge, i.e. absolutely independent knowledge, has surrendered itself to the mechanism of capital. It is the story of a scientist who is, after all, nothing but a serf to the oil industry, against which his intelligence, his personal integrity and his ethics are utterly powerless. As summed up in the *Nature Biotechnology* journal: “Al’s scientific journey continued for another five decades. As a research scientist at General Electric’s Research & Development Center, he did not enjoy his initial project: to convert cow manure to more proteinaceous cattle feed using bacteria. At the same time, serious oil spills were becoming more regular and having adverse impacts on the environment. On weekends and evenings, he began studying degradative pathways of hydrocarbons in *Pseudomonas* with the hope that one day a genetically modified form of the bacteria would help clean up oil spills. By inserting into the bacteria multiple circular DNA molecules (known as plasmids), each with genes encoding different enzymatic functions in hydrocarbon degradation, he and his team were able to create a new variety of *Pseudomonas* that could degrade crude oil in Petri dishes. This was a eureka moment for Chakrabarty, who was especially excited to present his findings at scientific meetings and conferences. But his bosses at GE had a different idea. Compelled by the potential commercial application of Chakrabarty’s discovery, they wanted him to file a patent on his bacteria. Chakrabarty filed a patent

not only a technological but also a legal (which today reads as “ethical,” although we know from Hegel that the rule of law is exactly a complete emptying of the ethical substance) basis for understanding life as a commodity. The masters of capitalism are committed to law, which is put in place to protect private property expressed in the form of *rights*—both for Hegel and Marx, this is one of the fundamental missions of law in general.

The dark history of capitalism is not only the history of colonialism and legalized slavery (not only black slaves in the Americas but equally also white human trafficking in Europe, especially with children and women), but it is also a history of legal exploitation of workers in the name of their freedom. With forced laws that are sometimes instituted, says Marx, capital creates capitalists’ “proprietary rights over the free worker” (Marx 1976: 719). It is precisely in light of the fact that the law protects the capitalist’s rights (i.e. the property) that the principle of patents operates today. A patent, as it works in the US legal system, confers the inventor’s right “to exclude others from making, using, offering for sale, or selling the invention throughout the United States or importing the invention into the United States.”¹⁰

With the institution of intellectual property, a patent is protected against its commercial use (abuse). This right, however, is limited to 15–20 years—a patent has an expiration date. After that period, it is free to go into business. Patent protection in the US, therefore, promotes scientific and technological development, but

application in 1972 with the help of GE attorney Leo MaLossi, knowing full well that the US Patent & Trademark Office had never before granted a patent on a living organism. After eight years of legal battle, the US Supreme Court ruled in a 5–4 decision that his invention was indeed patent eligible, granting him the first ever US patent on a living organism.” (Davey, N., Rader, R.R. & Chakravarti, D. Ananda Mohan ‘Al’ Chakrabarty 1938–2020. *Nature Biotechnology*, 39, 18–19 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41587-020-00785-4> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41587-020-00785-4>)

¹⁰ United States Patent and Trademark Office. <https://www.uspto.gov/patents/basics/manage#rights>

not as the common good of society, but rather as the legal base of private business.

Once a lifeform is patented, as happened for the first time in the history in case of Chakrabarty, the ethical barrier that has hitherto told judges and juries, as an unwritten ethical law, that life cannot be patented, falls. Hypothetically (i.e. legally), a new species or even a new race (we are not far here from some sort of biotech eugenics) could be made intellectual property, that is, sold to a company for commercial use. With this, any form of life can turn into a commodity, which Marx defined as “an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind” (Marx 1976, p. 125), and which has a use-value and an exchange value. While a patent itself might well be what Marx called a pseudo-commodity, that is, a kind of thing that is not a product of human labor but can be traded as if it were nonetheless a commodity as long as property rights can be attached to it, the living being when directly produced, on the contrary, is a commodity proper. The differentiation between commodities and pseudo-commodities, however, has weakened nowadays in the face of increasing technological labor, i.e. technological self-reproduction, which progressively excludes human labor.

What appears to be Marx’s uncanny ability to predict the future — *Marx the Prophet* — is in reality his insight into the structural predispositions of capitalism. Today, we look at things from a crooked perspective: what we see as a consequence of capitalism is in fact its fundamental condition. The history of capitalism has shown the proper features of Hegel’s dialectics, meaning that what appears to be its developed phase has been included in its very beginning: the fundamental predisposition, the sine qua non of capitalism, is *exponential growth*. This is due to its elemental economic equation based on the surplus value. The practical realization of this equation is the invention of a new form of production, which is not conservative (that is, preserving both the equilibrium between work as a contribution of the worker to the

common social well-being and a reward he receives for it, and the equilibrium between what is taken from nature and what is given back), as all the previous forms of production, but revolutionary: “Modern industry never views or treats the existing form of a production process as the definitive one. Its technical basis is therefore revolutionary, whereas all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative” (Marx 1976, p. 617).¹¹ What is absolutely crucial here is that it is exactly this revolutionary fundament of technological production that produces the two forms of life in capitalism and forms the class division, which does not—as it might have seemed in the optimism of the 1960s—tend toward the well-being of one single class, the golden middle class, but is exponentially, as it were, increasing the gap between the two classes: the masters and the slaves. Earthlings and spacemen are the name of this gap. They are the name of its inability to ever be sewn or transgressed within the reign of capital.

Revolution (i.e. permanent re-invention) is inscribed in the technological and productive basis of capitalism—therefrom also stems its magic ability to (somewhat in advance) appropriate each social uprising. The real problem, of course, is not that “capitalism and neoliberalism dialectically take on itself every resistance or digression,” as is the well-known self-victimizing mantra of the leftist scene, but in the very nature of this resistance and

¹¹ Or, as put forth in the famous lines of the *Communist Manifesto*: “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” (Marx 1973, pp. 70-71)

digression. The thing is that the true revolt that is to overturn the capitalist system must systematically transform the form of production in the first place. Here, the key is to bear on the apparent paradox of *progressive conservatism*—strange as it may sound, today one must be revolutionary in the way that they are strictly conservative. What is of utmost importance is a differentiation between the level of ideology, that is ideas and beliefs, and the level of production: instead of ideological conservatism in combination with productional progressivism (which is today called the right wing), one must be a proponent of ideological progressivism exactly in the manner of arguing for (and inventing!) a new conservative form of production.¹²

In the present state of the world, we can clearly see two things:

Firstly, a certain maximization of what follows from Marx's recognition of the structural, that is the *inner determinations* of capitalism. Exponential growth, on the one hand, freely continues its path: an accelerated increase in the exploitation of natural resources (the material footprint of raw material consumption from 1910 was 10 billion tons per year, while today it is as large as almost 100 billion tons per year), exponential growth of the world population (1.5 billion in 1910, 8 billion today), and a fast-growing inequality from the 1960s on (today, the 1% of the "super-rich" owns 50% of the world's total wealth while 50%

¹² Exactly this, bringing forth a new conservative form of production that would realize progressive ideas and would also include technological and cultural development of all kinds, was, for Marx, the goal of proletarian revolution. Of course, Marx was wrong in that capitalism would turn into communism by structural necessity—here was his idealistic note (however, it is time to return idealism to its positive value). Socialism, especially the great Yugoslavian experiment with self-management, to a certain extent managed to bring the new conservative form of production into practice. Today, of course, not only the internal limit but also the external one (that is, the limits of the planet) must be taken into consideration for the invention of such a form of production. Today, ever more elaborated studies and local practical attempts with both marxist and anarchist orientation are working toward this direction.

of world population altogether owns 1% of it).¹³ What grew proportionally with the latter is the extent of what Marx called the *surplus population*, which we call today “the unemployed,” “the migrants,” and the “third world population.” The growth of the surplus population is inscribed in the very conception of capitalism as proportional to the growth of capital. This is so, says Marx, according to the *general law of capitalist accumulation*: “The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the greater the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productivity of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, also develop the labour power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation*” (Marx 1976, p. 798).

On the other hand, by breaking certain technological and ethical boundaries, the exponential growth of capital was also able to do what was unimaginable for Marx but what equally stems from its inner determinations: direct production of life, turning a living being into a commodity, linking man and machine in biotechnological “living machines,” and creating artificial intelligence which is likely to overrun humanity on all scales of our cognitive abilities. Recently, we have been experiencing the most radical turning points to hit humankind in its long history. They are radical because they shatter the fundamental determinations of

¹³ For more data and further references see Jason Hickel, *Less Is More* (Hickel 2022) and World Inequality Lab.

the (Western) man that have hitherto seemed irrefutable: 1. Man is the master of nature, which is an inexhaustible resource. 2. Man is subordinate to nature only in that he is himself a living being and is therefore subject to individual death. 3. What justifies man's lordship over nature is that he is the most intelligent being on Earth.

Secondly, we can see the effects of a certain transformation of what was, from its very outset, set as the "outside" of capitalism. The idea that capitalism has no outer limit has been the argument used for decades both by capitalism's eager proponents and its eager critics: for its proponents, capitalism was "the great equalizer," the practical institution of freedom and the ultimate transgression of ideological differences, which is the final stage of human economic and cultural development that will last forever (cf., e.g., Fukuyama), while for its critics, its alleged infinity was named the greatest misfortune of humanity, as it involves in its structure the impossibility to be transgressed (cf., e.g., Jameson). However, the alleged infinity of capitalism, which is not only contained in its conceptual assumptions (infinite openness of the market, infinite freedom, infinite development) but is also visible in its material, physical expansion, has, as has been shown in the recent decades, an outer limit, which, of course, is turning into its own inner negation. There was, from the very outset, something that was set as "the otherness" of capitalism. Marx's entire concept of *alienation* rests upon it: what is left on the other side is that from which humanity has alienated, what Marx calls the "external nature," inorganic and organic, and life forms of all kinds, including the life of a human. From a Hegelian perspective, the perspective of the development of consciousness through the self-development of the spirit, this otherness is included in the very process of its becoming. What we should also learn from Hegel, though, is that what consciousness sets as its otherness has a dialectical development on its own, which is, in the form of a double negation, intertwined with the dialectics of consciousness itself. This dialectics of both consciousness and its radical otherness is

fundamental and has its ontological counterpart in the dialectics of being and non-being, as presented in the first chapters of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. This means that what is left on the other side also transforms and changes in its own path and in resonance or an echo to the human economic and technological doing.

What we witness today is how this transformed otherness started showing its immense power and posited itself as the *outer limit* of capitalist human development. What we experience lately on a daily basis are the limits of the bearable human life on the planet. Here of course, the main question remains whether what clearly shows itself as the outer limit of humanity (and of many other forms of life on Earth) is also the outer limit of capitalism—in pace with Jameson's proverbial saying that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The reason why the modern masters are nowadays turning into spacemen lies exactly in their striving to preserve capitalist apparatus regardless of the unbearability of human life on the planet (an unbearability that can be, again, used to their advantage). As humanity, that is, the industrial reserve army, is a necessary condition for capital growth, we could of course say that the threat to humanity represents a direct threat to capitalism. However, there are two questions that exceed our prophetic abilities: 1. Is there a future of capitalism without humanity? 2. Are the limits of the planet truly the limits of capitalism? As the first question is the question of technology, the second is the question of the dialectics of digital capitalism.

What we can say for sure is that what we are experiencing today is the immense *roar of otherness*: extensive dying-off of the numerous life forms, the exhaustion of what capitalism called “natural resources,” the heating (or, as recently named, the “boiling”) of the planet and the related climate changes, and, least but not last, the waste. The sensuous thing, which, along with life, plays an integral role in Hegel's master-slave dialectics as the object of consciousness, is in capitalism, on the one hand, included

in the production process and turned into a commodity, but on the other hand, as a used commodity with no more use value and therefore no more exchange value, turns into waste. Garbage is (literally) a plastic representation of what has set itself as the outer limit of capitalism. It is a concrete exemplification of the transformation and development of what was, as its pure externality, long inexistent from the perspective of capital.

3. *Dialectic of Garbage*

Capitalism is, as we know, a morbid practice. It feeds on dying and its products are corpses of all kinds. In contrast to the crafts and the goods created by humans for their own use or delight, into which their makers have breathed life and which are made to be, to last, the products of industrial production are made to die, that is, to expire or to break down—as has become explicitly obvious with the practice of planned obsolescence. Humanity has surrounded itself with corpses of things and a human life is one spent among garbage dumps. The development of capitalism can be easily seen through the *dialectic of garbage*. From the being-in-itself of early industrial capitalism, where tones of industrial leftovers stood in the open and transformed the natural landscape as part of the state of things but were, as absolute otherness, completely unnoticed, unthought of, and uninteresting, to the being-for-itself of the early postindustrial capitalism and consumerism, where the leftovers of the consumed goods were noticed and considered as a disrupter of the clean and orderly world and have been, as such, literally suppressed: the rubbish was compacted, hidden from view, buried in caves, or dumped in remote, third-world places. Here, otherness was recognized but neglected as a pure externality: in a form of self-deception and self-blinding, it was made invisible. And finally, in the last turn, we came to the perverse inversion of being-in-and-for-itself of

late, postindustrial capitalism and consumerism, where garbage was recognized as our very otherness, as our internal externality. In the psychoanalytical rubbish processes dealing with dung and manure, it was dug out and dealt with, worked through the (re) cycling mechanisms of the human mind and garbage industry. The waste was made present, and presentified, together with guilt and fear imposed on the consumer slaves and with the obscene anal enjoyment of the magnificence and sublimity of human leftovers, which transcends nature in the colorfulness of contingency, as is the case, for example, in “poorism” as the hottest form of tourist tours to the rubbish dumps (which are considered to be sexy and photogenic) in the guise of a do-gooder mission.

In our time, the dialectic of garbage has come to an end. We are at the beginning of a new dialectical turn; a turn that will be either a turn of garbage without man or a turn of man without garbage. The hand-painted message on the railing of a precipitous road somewhere in southern Dalmatia is in this sense indicative: *Don't throw litter (*into the precipice)! If you do toss it, jump also yourself.*

4. Consumption Machines

In industrial production, the sensuous, natural thing has alienated itself from the worker and taken on a life of its own (as Marx showed beautifully in his writings on commodity fetishism), only to become bound to him again as the worker's inner otherness — the *waste*. At the same time — and this is the flip side of the dialectic of garbage — the worker, whose own life has become a commodity, is turning into a thing: he himself is a product, as well as a piece of junk.

Apart from the reproduction of the worker, the second fundamental condition (and law) of industrial capitalism is, according to Marx, *the self-reproduction of the machines*. What we see today

as so-called “planned obsolescence”—the fact that appliances, machines, smart machines, and computers of all kinds are made to break down shortly after the expiration of their warranty—is not some isolated phenomenon of capitalist greed, but is instituted in the machines’ law of self-reproduction. It is a logical and inherent consequence of this law.

The first thing Marx dismantles when he talks about machines is *a dream about machines replacing human labor*. The kernel of this dream, which is gaining popularity again today, in particular with the recent emergence of simple AI tools like ChatGPT, is the idea of the worry-free life of a human, the master, who enjoys the full service of robot slaves. Marx traces the sprout of this dream back to Aristotle’s *Politics*: “If every tool, when summoned, or even by intelligent anticipation, could do the work that befits it, just as the creations of Daedalus moved of themselves, or the tripods of Hephaestus went of their own accord to their sacred work, if the weavers’ shuttles were to weave of themselves, then there would be no need either of apprentices for the master craftsmen, or of slaves for the lords” (Aristotle 1946, p. 10).

This dream is, says Marx, at least in the framework of capitalism, complete nonsense. This is because of a certain paradoxical dialectic of the machines, which concerns what Marx calls the *moral depreciation of the machine* and which plays a key role in the very mechanism of industrial capitalism. Besides the material wear and tear of the machines, the machine depreciates also morally, meaning that as soon as the machine starts operating, its exchange value begins to decrease. The weird thing that happens with a machine at the very moment it is put in place is a certain transposition of its value: “however young and full of life the machine may be, its value is no longer determined by the necessary labour-time actually objectified in it, but by the labour-time necessary to reproduce either it or the better machine” (Marx 1976, p. 528). This means that every machine, besides being a working force, is itself also a product, a commodity. Because the

exchange value of the machine depends not only on the labor-time the machine needs to produce a certain commodity, say, a toothbrush, but also on the labor-time it can produce itself, a certain *machine urge to self-reproduce* is inscribed in their capitalist use. Out of this, it follows that the machine is the “imminent competitor of the worker” not only because it can do in one hour what a worker can do in one week, or, what is the same, because it can do in one hour what will, in the same time frame, be done by 40 workers, but also because it competes against its own capacity for the ever-faster production of itself. This means that, by capitalist necessity, machines as self-producing commodities tend to exclude the worker from the production process.

But there is yet another thing: as machinery comes into general use in a particular branch of production, says Marx, the following law asserts itself: “surplus value does not arise from the labour-power that has been replaced by the machinery, but from the labour-power actually employed in working with the machinery” (Marx 1976, p. 530). This means, of course, a drastic devaluation of human labour, which is, because of the machines’ moral depreciation, exponential. With the mechanization and computerization of capitalist society, human labor is exponentially losing its value. The machines, says Marx, far from taking the burden off man’s shoulders, install the “economic paradox that that the most powerful instrument for reducing labour-time suffers a dialectical inversion and becomes the most unfailing means for turning the whole lifetime of the worker and his family into labour-time at capital’s disposal for its own valorization” (Marx 1976, p. 532).

While the dream of machines replacing humans is an illusion altogether, the fear that machines will displace humans is equally unfounded. Quite the opposite: it is far more likely that workers will ultimately replace the machine—precisely by becoming machine-like themselves. As the essence of the machine is that it is both a commodity and a labor force, a human becomes machine-like as soon as their body serves not only as the labor force, as was

the case in industrial production, but, in the postindustrial biotech era, their life itself turns into a commodity. With this, the worker is suddenly caught in the dialectic of the self-reproduction of the machines—he himself is subject to material and moral depreciation.

However, there is one thing that fundamentally distinguishes the worker from the machine. Machines are means of production and of *productive consumption*. But the key to capitalism is also *individual consumption*, which in late capitalism, where the consumer's need is replaced by the invocation of desire and by the injunction to enjoy, reaches far beyond satisfying the worker's primary needs. Enjoyment, of course, has no necessary connection with one's physical well-being. Both desire and enjoyment are insatiable—they are mechanisms that are asymptotically approaching an ever-elusive goal, that is, they are infinite: in contrast to the finite pleasure as the measure of the fundamental well-being of an organism connected to its basic needs being met. A crucial element of capital growth is the capacity of spending—having an ever-increasing population that is capable of continuous, endless spending is clearly the prospect of postcapitalist consumerism. What post-capitalist production tends towards, ultimately, is efficient incision between the *worker's productive consumption*, where the worker self-reproduces like a machine, that is, both as a working force and as a commodity, they repair their own body with the help of (reproductive) medicine, creates their own life, and programs their own death, and their *individual consumption*, where they enjoy indefinitely and, as enjoyment is nothing but a radical transgression of the biological determinations of one's own body, work for capital without being in any way distracted by their own life. It is precisely on this line that the delicate masters' management of the slaves as producers on the one hand and as consumers on the other hand takes place. It is all about fine-tuning the ratio between the slave's concern for self-preservation (promotion of self-care, body fitness, healthy food, nutritional additives, medicines, cosmetics, etc.), which contributes to the capitalist's

gain from the labor force, and the slave's destructive enjoyment, where the slave fills the master's pockets as an individual consumer (video games, social media addictions, pornography, all sorts of digital industries, the preponderance of private or intimate communication, as well as civil issues, political organizing, art, shopping, and the rest of the endless list).

People in digital capitalism differ from a machine exactly in their capacity for enjoyment, which gives them a special place in the mechanism of capital: they are not just machines, but machines driven to spend money—a *consumption machine*. They are biotech creatures that are not fundamentally determined by the fact that they live, feel, and think, but by the fact that they produce, enjoy, and consume. This creature is no science fiction: a brain-computer interface, developed by Elon Musk's Neuralink, was recently given approval from the US Food and Drug Administration to begin trials in implanting computer chips into human brains.

5. Life as a Substance

In his analysis of the chapter on self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Dolar draws attention to the fact that Hegel's notion of life has a certain double meaning. On the one hand, it is bound up with *substance*, and it represents the endless flux of births and deaths pervading all there is, but on the other hand, it is also bound up with the *subject*, where it means something that ends in death. Dolar names the first *life as a substance* and the second *life as a living thing*.¹⁴

¹⁴ "Life can be observed from two sides, the 'substance' side and the 'subject' side. On the one hand, it is an eternal cycle, self-reproducing and self-preserving as continuity through self-dissolution. On the other hand, the living individual establishes himself precisely by confronting the totality of life as discontinuity." (Dolar 1992: 15)

Taking a closer look, we can see what is going on in the background of biotechnological development: while turning life into a commodity, the capitalist machinery aspires to take control not only over life as a living thing, that is, over the specific lives of individuals, but also over life as a substance, that is, over the entire process and the mystery of what *is* life. However, just as the alleged eternity of capitalism is grounded in the adamant idea of the eternal being of perishing,¹⁵ so is the idea of some eternity of life beyond death—terrestrial or, for that matter, spatial—grounded in the fallacy that within life, which is the flow of passing and

¹⁵ In the insistence on the qualitative difference between being and nothing, which for Hegel is a fundamental fallacy but at the same time also one of the most adamant ideas of philosophy, being is thought to be eternal and absolute, while nothing is perceived as an absolute negation of being and its attributes. Accordingly, this fundamental fallacy brings along another falsification: the insistence on a qualitative difference between finitude and infinity. Here, the finite is considered to be restricted and perishable, pertaining to nothingness, while the infinite is unlimited and eternal, pertaining to being. “The falsification [*die Verfälschung*],” states Hegel, “that the understanding perpetrates with respect to the finite and the infinite, of holding their reciprocal reference fixed as qualitative differentiation, of maintaining that their determination is separate, indeed, absolutely separate, comes from forgetting what for the understanding itself is the concept of these moments” (Hegel 2010, p. 116). The most infamous example of such a qualitative difference between the finite and the infinite, which Hegel explicitly criticizes, is the idea that *everything perishes yet it is the very perishing that is eternal*. In this view, the *eternal being of finitude* is insisted on, which is precisely its *transitoriness* [*die Vergänglichkeit*]: “Their transitoriness would only pass away in their other, in the affirmative; their finitude would then be severed from them; but this finitude is their unalterable quality, that is, their quality which does not pass over into their other, that is, not into the affirmative; and so finitude is eternal” (Hegel 2010, p. 102). It is not hard to see that this is exactly the idea adopted by capitalism—the limitless production of finite things doomed to extinction (the sooner they spoil the better) is made *the eternal being of capitalism*. The idea of novelty promising progress towards the absolute wellbeing of humanity is promoted only to hide the morbid fact that it is decay and breakdown that are the drivers of capital—*capitalism cannot die precisely because it itself feeds on dying*, on finitude. For a detailed elaboration on this topic, cf. Bara Kolenc, “Is It Too Late?” (Kolenc 2020).

becoming, there is an unchangeable, absolute being that can be grasped and held to as its very essence. But insofar as death is the destruction of life on the level of life as a living thing, it is the very condition of life as a substance. As was clear to both Hegel and Freud: the essence of life is death, the vanishing that alone makes becoming possible.¹⁶

By turning life—or rather, a human being as a living thing—into a product, which is the ultimate goal of the biotechnological revolution, the space masters are trying to rise above death as a sorrowful determination of the existent things, and, with this, also above the very dialectic of life and death. They aspire to transcend *life as a living thing* by taking it in hand, by technically managing it, and thus to become, not only symbolically but also physically, the masters of *life as a substance*. But they essentially fail.

In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for the consciousness experiencing the dialectic of master and slave, its privileged object is life, this movement of becoming and passing away that is in

¹⁶ Freud's category of life can be said to have two dimensions: *life that wants life* and *life that wants death*. Or, more precisely, the category of life is divided into *the general concept of organic life*, which contains both the aforementioned sides, including death—where death is not the antithesis of life but its event, one chapter of a never-ending *perpetuum*—and *the specific concept of life that opposes death*, i.e. the side designated as “life that wants life.” Speaking in the categories of the dualism of the principles, life in the narrower sense of the word is that force that abides by the pleasure principle, that stems from the principle of constancy and opposes the principle of inertia; in the broader sense of the term, on the other hand, life is a fluctuating movement of both these principles. From this point of view, the phenomenon of life is an expression of both the necessity of the continuation of life and the necessity of death. However, in the broader conceptualization of life, Freud's crucial innovation lies in that—regardless of the notion of life as some kind of immortal movement, where death is included in life as its event—death also represents life's horizon, a perspective never to be reached. That which life unsuccessfully strives for is to end: *the goal of all life is death*. Lacan, following Freud, tacitly develops the following distinction: life as such, life in the organic sense, is embraced entirely by the self-preservation trend, while the proclivity for death is precisely that which transcends the organic and invades it from the domain of speech.

itself self-sufficient. Consciousness, whose object is self-sufficient, is self-sufficient itself. However, in order to arrive at its truth, it must receive recognition from another self-sufficient entity, which must also be a thinking entity. And here comes the life-and-death struggle. The main question of this struggle is not who will win, but for which of the two entities is life more essential than recognition. The choice is as follows: either I exist as a non-self-sufficient entity because in not being recognized I cannot come to my truth, or, in order to get to my truth I am willing to give up the very thing that sets me up in my existence, i.e. life. That which sets me up in my existence must become insubstantial to me, I must go into death, into my own existential annihilation (of life as a living thing), in order to arrive at my essence and to continue on the path of self-development (of life as a substance).

But the dialectic of master and slave is a stalemate, an unresolvable situation (and it is precisely in this unsolvability that the fundamental social scheme is also found) because the struggle between life and death must not end in a fatal outcome, which alone would make it possible to radically affirm the insubstantiality of existence as opposed to the essentiality of self-consciousness arriving at its own truth, which conditions the possibility of its further development. The closest approximation to death, to the complete self-annihilation that is the path to freedom, is thus only a fundamental, existential fear, a fear of death as the absolute master in which “all of one’s being trembles.” This radical annihilation, however, is not experienced by the master, even if he is the one who was ready to risk his life, but by the slave.

Although turning life into a product seems like a titanic victory for the master, the mastery of humanity over nature, it is, in truth, nothing but a confirmation of the masters’ subservience to the concern for their own lives. Because they do not risk their life but rather try to possess it, the biotech space masters do not pertain to true sublation. Hegel says it all: “it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is established” (Hegel 2018b, p. 78). Only in staking one’s life, namely, with Hegel’s words, “the essence for

self-consciousness is proven to be not *being*, not the *immediate* way self-consciousness emerges, not its being absorbed within the expanse of life” (Hegel 2018a, p. 111), but rather, and this is crucial, that “there is nothing present in it itself which could not be a vanishing moment for it, that self-consciousness is only pure *being-for-itself*” (Ibid.). The self-conscious needs to recognize its very being as something vanishing and perishable. It needs to take upon itself the fact that it is its own mortality, its subjection to the sorrow of finitude, that is the stepping stone on the road to freedom. Trying to avoid mortality, to transcend the vanishing inscribed in the very being of subjectivity, is an essential failure of this fundamental recognition.

The space masters of today can be, therefore, seen as the true slaves: the slaves of their addictions, of their obsessive enjoyment, and of their possessive bondage to their own physical existence, which is symptomatically disclosed in their excessive engagement with their physical appearance, in a cult of youth, in promoting aging as illness, and in their investments in research on extreme longevity. Enslaved by the falsification of capitalism about the idea of the eternal being of perishing, they are caught in a fantasy that eternal life can be achieved beyond the dialectic of life and death. But the truth is that it is not beyond, but rather within finitude that infinity can ever be achieved: only by risking life can one kill death.

6. *Envoi*

For Lacan, the crucial trouble of the Western world is a certain disappearance of truth. All the four discourses that institute today’s society revolve around a certain robbery of knowledge, that is, the master stealing knowledge from the slave and establishing a *tyranny of knowledge*, which “makes it impossible that in this place, over the course of the movement of history, as we were perhaps hoping, the nature of truth might appear” (Lacan 2007,

p. 32). The germ of truth, says Lacan, is not to be searched for in the realm of knowledge, but it is “to be produced by what has come to be substituted for the ancient slave, that is, by those who are themselves products, as we say, consumables every bit as much as the others” (Ibid.).¹⁷ This truth, however, is always to some extent ineffable as it emerges in the notch between the symbolic and the real, traversed and stapled by desire, that is, by the subject’s (im)possible relation to its object.

As Dolar points out, the notion of *life* is a central concept for Hegel, with which he aimed to oppose the to-date metaphysics

¹⁷ In his twelfth seminar, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan famously connected Marx’s surplus value and surplus enjoyment: “Of course, it wasn’t Marx who invented surplus value. It’s just that prior to him nobody knew what its place was. It has the same ambiguous place as the one I have just mentioned, that of excess work, of surplus work. ‘What does it pay in?’ he says. ‘It pays in *jouissance*, precisely, and this has to go somewhere.’ What’s disturbing is that if one pays in *jouissance*, then one has got it, and then, once one has got it it is very urgent that one squander it. If one does not squander it, there will be all sorts of consequences” (Lacan 2007, p. 20). The question of whether the dialectic of master and slave still works for Lacan in today’s capitalism, or whether it is the tyranny of knowledge at work in the dominant discourse of the university today (meaning 50 ago, as Lacan was talking about this topic between 1968 and 1972) that has completely restructured capitalist relations, is answered by Samo Tomšič in his book *The Capitalist Unconscious*: “The university discourse was not Lacan’s final word on capitalism. A further development took place in 1972 when he determined the foreclosure of castration as the defining feature of capitalist discourse, and in a conference in Milan proposed its formula, which many consider an independent structure, the fifth discourse” (Tomšič 2015, pp. 219-220). What Tomšič puts forth is that the “fifth discourse” is actually a transformation of the discourse of the master set around the foreclosure of castration: “Lacan’s formula of the capitalist discourse continues the line according to which capitalism essentially tends towards the foreclosure of castration. Its worldview strives to heal the subjective split by way of the fetishisation of the object, which would establish a univocal relation between the subject and *jouissance*. Of course, the foreclosure of castration does not imply that *jouissance* becomes accessible. On the contrary, the foreclosure radicalises the deadlock of *jouissance* and turns the superego into an insatiable demand for *jouissance*.” (Tomšič 2015, p. 226)

leaning firmly on the opposition between subject and object, between interiority and exteriority as the “paradigm of all other divisions” (Dolar 1992, p. 12). In Hegel’s conception of life, in contrast, “the subject is included in its object,” says Dolar, which means that “outside and inside, and identity and difference pass directly into each other” (Ibid.). Dolar also points to the connection or a transition between the concept of life as a substance, which is the subject, and its realization in the concept of spirit: “The great advantage that Hegel sees in the concept of life is that it allows for the first realization of the slogan ‘the substance is the subject’. It will turn out, however, that this realization is not yet sufficient and that the concept of life, if it is to fulfill this lofty task, must undergo another reflexive turn—and this is precisely what the phenomenological ‘deduction’ of self-consciousness from life aims at: it is only in self-consciousness that life comes to its truth and thus becomes spirit, and it is only spirit that is the true medium of the realization of the Hegelian project, and it is only for the ‘spiritual substance’ that it is really true that the substance is the subject” (Ibid.).

Life as a living thing has become part of the mechanism of capital. Following Marx, we could say that man, in capitalist production, has become alienated from his own life, and that what is at work between “historical man” and “external nature” is a devastating process of mutual annihilation. On the other hand, a Hegelian critique of capitalism would go the other way: the problem of today’s world is not that we have become alienated from the nature to which life as a living thing allegedly belongs, but it is the very substancelessness of human society. What we need to reappropriate, therefore, is not “nature” (which is itself a mythical construct, that is, a name of a human deviation from other forms of life on the planet, while a return to whatever nature in itself is supposed to be is not possible anyway according to the irreversibility of the human imprint on the environment), but *life as substance*, that is, the life of substance—the spirit.

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