

On Ridiculous Master

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We live in an age dominated by ridiculous masters. Or so it seems.

Such masters are found primarily in politics and are characterized by their saying and doing things that are shockingly outrageous, bizarre, and obscene from the standpoint of modern democratic and cultural standards. In other words, as elected political leaders, they say and do things in public that are appalling and divisive. It seems that the existence of similar political leaders is nothing new; history is full of tyrants, authoritarians, despots, dictators, and totalitarians. But after the defeat of Nazism and Fascism in WWII, it seemed that extremists, who will always exist in parliamentary democracies, were consensually consigned to the periphery and margin of the political sphere. The postwar period was committed to the motto: Never again! After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the possibility of this changing was announced by cases such as Berlusconi in Italy and Milošević in Serbia. Many did not take them seriously. It was, “Oh yes, that’s Italy.” Or, “But of course, it’s the Balkans!” However, around the turn of the millennium, when the SPÖ under Jörg Haider became involved in the Austrian government, a moral panic broke out in the EU. Suddenly, what had been declared forbidden, became reality. Many similar cases followed and over the last two decades we have seen the same pattern almost everywhere: to prevent “extremists” from coming to power, “democrats” of all stripes have banded together by participating in elections. Thus came the domination of the “extreme center,” as Tariq Ali called it (see Ali 2018), which

not only failed to prevent non-democrats from coming to power, but also shared responsibility for what happened next: democracies began to implode, demagogues of all kinds boomed, violent words were followed by violent actions and incidents, and the already prevailing general mood of apathy, despair, and depression was joined by the belief that everything was going down the drain. There are many reasons for this, especially the spiral of various crises (economic, social, environmental), the systemic crisis of capitalism and the power of neoliberalism, the general disillusionment with politics and democracy with increasing anti-politics, the sterility of liberalism and political correctness in various forms, etc. It was in such a context that the new breed of masters rose. They came to power first on the periphery of the West, with Victor Orbán in Hungary and the Kaczynski brothers in Poland, but then they seized power throughout the world: Erdoğan in Turkey, Duterte in the Philippines, Modi in India, Xi in China, Putin in Russia, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Vučić in Serbia, Janša in Slovenia, and so on and so forth. Finally, with Brexit and Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom and Donald Trump in the United States, “core democracies” succumbed as well. Despite the fact that now Johnson and Trump are no longer in power, we have a situation in which new, non-democratic masters can potentially emerge anywhere now. And that is something new.

The West, or more precisely, the better part of the West, the guardian of the holy grail of democratic wisdom and tradition, has long been convinced that because of its democratic tradition and institutions, it is immune to such phenomena. But now a certain line has been irreversibly crossed. What are the consequences? I cannot offer a thorough analysis of all that here. I also will not be interested here in dealing with the problem of satire, parody, laughter, or comedy that has accompanied and mocked the figure of the master since ancient times, but with the master as a public and political figure, or, more precisely, with its recent changes in the form of “ridiculous masters.” I do not claim that all politicians and masters as such are ridiculous, still

less that they are all ridiculous masters. In what follows, I will be interested in what characterizes the ridiculous masters, what their most distinctive traits are, and what conclusions emerge, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, about the figure of the master in general. Although I have no time or space to elaborate it further, my whole intervention here is to be understood in the context of and as a comment on one specific point of Lacan. In his seventh seminar, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan namely points out that for Hegel history is defined

in terms of a radical decline of the function of the master, a function that obviously governs all of Aristotle's thought and determines its persistence over the centuries. It is in Hegel that we find expressed an extreme devalorization of the position of the master, since Hegel turns him into the great dupe, the magnificent cuckold of historical development, given that the virtue of progress passes by way of the vanquished, which is to say, of the slave, and his work. (Lacan 1992, p. 11)

As we might expect, Lacan had no (Hegelian) illusions here, let alone did he think that the time had come to mock and ridicule masters. Premature celebration of the master's death can quickly backfire, and this is true not only in politics. The main problem is that in a certain way we cannot do without masters, even if we want to get rid of them in the end. That is why the figure of the master is one of the most controversial and contested elements of intersubjective relations, not only in politics, but also in society, science, culture, art, education, philosophy, family, sports, etc.

Ridiculous Masters

What comes to the fore with the new, ridiculous masters? As Alain Badiou recently put it, with them we are witnessing the emergence of

strange persons who are very difficult to understand: they are politicians, but they are in some sense like new gangsters. This was the case with Berlusconi in Italy. Berlusconi was the first to represent the victory within the democratic system of somebody who was openly a gangster and with the same characteristics as Trump: vulgarity, sexism, complete contempt for intellectuals, and so on. And Nicolas Sarkozy was not unlike this gangster figure. (Badiou 2019, p. 43)

What Badiou highlights here is the novelty, indeed the oddity and the weirdness of the new political leaders. As public and political figures, they appear bizarre and alien; the focus is not on their political vision, but on them as personae and as characters. The prevailing logic of the general democratic consensus with its sterility and impotence even demands that such bizarre personalities become more prominent. Or, as Orbán put it in an interview (for the *Weltwoche*, 12 November 2015): “To put it bluntly: what today dominates in European public life is only European liberal blah blah about nice but second-rank issues.” (Quoted in: Lendvai 2017, p. 202) Although their individual stories differ, these new masters all use their strangeness and weirdness as a brand, or better, as a distinctive mark of their radical difference and separation from the prevailing democratic consensus, the ruling classes, and the elites. Thus, their special political status as outsiders and underdogs, which they carefully cultivate and never forget to present to the general public. The latter is just baffled, confused, perplexed, and embarrassed by them – those who are not immediately won over wonder how the success of such figures in politics is possible in the first place. Especially here and now, in democracy, after all these years since the defeat of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. Another problem is that these new masters make no secret of their authoritarianism. On the contrary, they emphasize it, they make no secret of it, just as they make no secret of the fact that they are personally convinced that they are “great historical figures.” So, everything is there quite openly, nothing is hidden: arrogance, presumption, ambition, self-absorbed grandiosity.

What would be simply ridiculous under other circumstances and in other historical moments is now taken seriously by their followers and by themselves. The champion of this is, of course, Trump, but there are others as well. As Orbán put it:

People like me would like to do something meaningful, something extraordinary. History grants me this opportunity... In the leadership position I have always been confronted with historic challenges... In a crisis you don't need governance by institutions. What is needed is somebody who tells the people that risky decisions must be taken... and who says to them follow me... Now strong national leaders are required. (Orbán quoted in: Lendvai 2017, p. 144)

What are these “people like me” all about? What are they a symptom of? For Badiou there is no doubt about Trump, he is not “a very, very dangerous guy but a symptom of a bad situation” (Badiou 2019, p. 68), and he must “be interpreted as an ugly symptom of the global situation, not only of the United States but of the world, the world in which we are living today.” (Ibid., p. 27–28) Of course, these assessments by Badiou must be seen in a certain context and framework – they were originally part of his lectures in the U.S. that took place shortly after Trump came to power, and it seems that Badiou wanted above all to keep a calm head and a rational view of the situation. With a defined political goal of how to fight Trump. But Trump is just one example among many, and the fact that there are several examples of similar policies and politicians puts things in a different light. What to make of them all? Gideon Rachman recently described them as “strongmen,” as

the rise of a new generation and type of nationalist and populist leader, linked by their contempt for liberalism and their embrace of new methods of authoritarian rule. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the strongman phenomenon has taken hold in almost all the world's major power centers: the US, China, Russia, India, the EU and Latin America. (Rachman 2022)

Many other commentators went further and immediately invoked similar phenomena from the past for a comparison. They actually seem to be familiar, known, and something already seen, and yet somehow new. Critics claim they are: the new populism, the new authoritarianism or illiberalism, the new post-fascism, the new Bonapartism, the new despotism, and so on (See Traverso 2019; Keane 2020; Mastnak 2021). Old names are put forward, and yet there is a growing conviction that here we have something that was not seen before.

What is so new and unprecedented? Perhaps we can list a few features here. Throughout history masters have been mocked and parodied. More or less openly. But in our modern times it is different, because the new masters are ridiculous by themselves alone: by their own deeds, by their own actions, by their own statements.¹ In this case, reality does not need to be mocked or ridiculed, it is itself already much stranger than fiction. The new masters are predominantly men, and that – especially in the times of the #MeToo movement² – also plays an important part. They

¹ Indeed, the situation here resembles what Foucault calls “grotesque sovereignty” in his *Lectures on the Abnormal* from 1974-1975. Foucault emphasizes that “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 [...] unworthiness of power, from despicable sovereignty to ridiculous authority [...] is one of the essential processes of arbitrary sovereignty.” (Foucault 2003, p. 12) Foucault at the same time says that he has “neither the strength, nor the courage, nor the time to devote this year’s course to such a theme,” but rather wants to devote his time to more pressing questions such as “What takes place in that discourse of Ubu at the heart of our judicial practice, of our penal practice? The theory, therefore, of the psychiatric-penal Ubu.” The idea of “grotesque sovereignty,” which may be intriguing, despite Foucault’s generalization and transhistorical use of the term (for a critique, see: Dolar 2021, pp. 172-174), only partially overlaps with the phenomena of “ridiculous masters.”

² An interesting counterpart to both this movement and the new masters (and conservative men in general) is a new generation of angry white women in the right-wing populist parties of the West, “mamma grizzlies” in Sarah Palin’s

present themselves as “men who made it,” as success stories, as self-made men, “men with a mission,” saviors, and at the same time, paradoxically, as outsiders and underdogs. Their adversaries are immediately described by them as “enemies of the people,” while they present themselves as opponents of the ruling elites and friends of the people, of the poor and the oppressed (if the latter have the right racial or national color, of course). Yet they themselves are not and have never been poor – if they have not just become rich through their sudden rise to power and politics, they were rich before, mostly as businessmen of various kinds. In presenting their success stories, however, they regularly “forget” where they got the money for their ventures. This part of their story is always blurred, as are their current connections to the illegal underworld and corruption. They are men of deal and transaction, everything can be negotiated and bargained away, or, as Keane puts it in this context: “[d]espotisms are systems of patron-client connections” (Keane 2020, p. 38), i.e. the new masters are bosses who in a certain sense “take care” of their loyal subjects, not some tyrants only looking out for their own benefits and power. The new masters also claim that they are “the only option in town,” (Trump publicly declared himself to be a very stable genius). Like any populist, they are the true “men of word and deed,” the true saviors – in this context, it is worth recalling Berlusconi’s claim to be “the Jesus Christ of Italian politics,” which referred to his role as savior of the nation and his martyrdom at the hands of the leftist press and judiciary (Cf. Ruth Ben Ghat 2020, p. 88). In modern societies characterized by irreconcilable differences, stalemates, and impasses of political forces, invoking the “savior Trump card” is crucial – if your name happens to be

self-designation, who are rising to leadership positions, such as Marie Le Pen in France, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Alice Weidel in Germany, Pia Kjaersgaard in Denmark, Siv Jensen in Norway, etc. This is also an important part of the story of the new masters in politics, which I will leave aside here, as it is a case in itself.

Trump and you have built your entire career and brand on it, you are the man. Here's where another important characteristic of the new masters comes into play: before they were major political figures, they were all already celebrities (as businessmen, politicians, real estate developers, TV personalities, actors, celebrities, mayors, well-known troublemakers, recalcitrant members of ruling parties, etc.). However, although they present themselves as protectors of "the little man" and protectors of their nations, one can find a recurring refrain in their appearances: "I, me, mine!" as the Beatles would put it.

This feature is most prominent in Donald Trump. As Christian Fuchs nicely describes it:

Hyper-individualism is Trumpology's first element. Trump is a brand. Trump is a strategy. Trump is entertainment. Trump is a spectacle. Trump is politics. Trump is the instrumentalization of everything surrounding him. Trump is the absolute commodification of the self. Donald Trump has made a career by branding and selling himself. His presidential campaign was also focused on Trump as brand, celebrity, billionaire and political leader. As a consequence, Trump likes talking in the first-person singular. "I," "me," "my" and "mine" are among his most frequently used words. Trumpology is about possessive individualism, the individual as owner. (Fuchs 2018, pp. 166–167)

Trump always underscores that "a big ego is a positive thing." His entire communication is indeed very egocentric, since he primarily talks about himself, presents himself as a boss, a leader, and an authority. This is at once Trump's best sales strategy and an important element of any authoritarianism – already Adorno argued that an authoritarian leader frequently and characteristically "indulges in loquacious statements about himself." As Fuchs showed, this is easiest on Twitter as a "me-centered medium that lives through the accumulation of followers, likes and retweets. The custom of liking and retweeting on Twitter appeals to Trump's

narcissism. Twitter enables him to enjoy his status as a celebrity, brand and political leader.” (Ibid., p. 211) The only politician in the entire world that surpasses Trump’s obsession with Twitter is probably the Slovenian politician and three times ex-head of the government Janez Janša. Both Janša and Trump have been anonymously “awarded” the unflattering title of being a “Twittler.”

However, Trump is a special case of his own, also with one other important feature, namely his emergence on the political scene – Australian anthropologist Norman Abjorensen compares it with the rise of punk music in the 1970s. Just as punk appeared against a backdrop of overly polished and sophisticated sympho- and art-rock music, Trump appeared against the backdrop of a somewhat jaded and unimaginative political establishment. There are many good arguments to discuss Trump from this point of view, especially the emphasis that it is not Trump who is the problem, but (US) politics itself, which gets lost in its dead ends, quibbles, and tinkering, always just fixing small flaws in the existing political and economic system without the will to ever radically change it. But at the same time, it is important to point out some limitations of such a perspective. Punk was primarily a youth movement, perceived as a generation without prospects and without its place in society. Trump’s supporters, on the other hand, are mostly middle-aged and older, have their best years behind them, and perceive themselves as something the establishment has forgotten and most likely even wants to get rid of. In Trump, they see someone who will listen to them and who will stand up for them. Being rich (but not in the way he boasts) and famous, he has spent years building his brand – but he would never have become who he is without his father’s support. For decades, he has been recognized in public by his figure and silhouette – the orange hair on his forehead, the pinched face, the wobbly index finger on his hand, the plump figure cleverly concealed by a carefully tailored and ever-present jacket. Add to this the image of an entrepreneur with the numerous self-help books he has written,

his interviews and public appearances, his participation in the reality show “The Apprentice” with its signature slogan “You’re fired!” – and there you have it. But the problem is the game itself, the capitalist system in which such figures not only become success stories, but are obviously needed as new leaders. Trump is neither an outsider nor a misfit in such a system, but one of its cornerstones. From the perspective of the political establishment, on the other hand, Trump is an outsider, a lone wolf playing a game that, to the horror of many, is unpredictable – at least that is how it seems from the standpoint of political rationality. Beyond that, the rationality – if there is one – driving Trump is different: it is entrepreneurial; it is about business and trade, not politics. Everything is a matter of an agreement, deal, or contract between two parties. Everything can be negotiated and bargained for. In such a context, unpredictability and shock work well, even if a handshake is needed at the end. The problem is that there is only room for one here – the one and only Trump.

Be that as it may, for the majority of the new masters we can say that they are cases of what in theory is called “narcissistic leadership.” Of course, most of them hide it and hasten to add that they want to save the people, their nation, the West, and true (Western, Christian) values and religion. But eventually they cannot hold back – they never lack superlatives about themselves. While some might be reserved about it, others loudly proclaim that they are the best, the smartest, the most capable – of all times, of course. However, this is not just a sign of their narcissism, but also a fundamental feature of any propaganda, as was convincingly shown by Victor Klemperer’s *Lingua tertii imperii* on the case of Nazi propaganda (see Klemperer 2013, pp. 221-230). Today’s new masters constantly resort to superlatives, which might turn out to be ridiculous, yet they are very effective: *Never before...* or *For the first time in the history of mankind (our nation, country) ...* Those active in Eastern Europe point out something additional – their outcry is that despite being democratic for a long time, nobody

in their countries is yet really free from the shackles and tentacles of the former socialist regimes (which have been gone for about three decades now). We are not truly free yet, is their motto. Or better, we have never been free, to paraphrase Latour. In short, exaggerations and superlatives are now, after they proved their role in modern brand selling and the marketing of celebrities and fame (or infamy), a legitimate part of political propaganda, frequently bordering on ridiculous.

Another crucial feature of the new masters is that they blatantly lie in public without scruples and without shame. Of course, their lies are not called lies, but “alternative facts” and “alternative truths.” Some have even hastened to claim that we have entered the age of “post-facts” and “post-truth.” The new masters consider themselves to be a real alternative to the mainstream media, which according to them are dominated by the elites and conspiracies. That is why their own lies are, in their view, actually liberating. In doing so, they have adopted (or rather, joined) the slogan of the neo-Nazi extremists of the early 1990s: “*Wahrheit macht frei!*” (“The truth liberates!”). But what kind of truth is that? Here the Russian language can be of help, because it contains two words for truth: *istina* and *pravda*. This distinction was already aptly used by Soviet dialectical materialism and Stalinism: while there are facts at the level of truth in the sense of *istina*, while there is scientific truth, there is also a higher level of truth in the sense of *pravda*, where the truth of the one who is right, just, and honest (i.e. our new masters, of course) is vindicated and confirmed (as right) by a higher authority: justice, history (or the Big Other in the Lacanian sense). No wonder the great Soviet daily was called *Pravda*. In any case, a similar distinction is used by our new masters, since their truth is never just “their” truth or something subjective. Their truth, however, is also not objective or “another or alternative objective truth” either. Their truth is not *istina*, because their truth is not scientific truth; recall in this context that their anti-elitism is joined by a fierce anti-intellectualism as well

as contempt for intellectuals and experts of all kinds. Their truth is rather *pravda*, truth which is “on the/their side” and which is “backed up” by a higher instance (our history, nation, people, God). That is why they are always right – even when they are not. Not only are their statements never “just statements,” they are always disclosures which reveal and expose the true state of things. Of course, all this willingness to reveal the truth (as in Andersen’s story of the emperor’s new clothes) is really deception and fetish – its goal is to cover up what is really at stake: the usurpation of power and the dismantling of the state, the subjugation of all branches of government, and the destruction of the free press, the media, and the public.

In this context, the new masters often speak of (fallen off) masks, of unmasking and of false designations. Everything that confronts them is exposed as false, as something that is only pretended and therefore misnamed. That is why they use the adjective “so-called” – everything is fake, there are “so-called experts,” the “so-called public,” “so-called judges,” etc. And here we can introduce another well-known tool of Stalinism – even if their opponents are not aware of it, they are puppets (of somebody, of a conspiracy which differs from case to case: for Orbán this is George Soros, for Erdoğan it is either Gülen or the PKK, for Vučić “foreign forces” such as Croats, Albanians, or the CIA, etc.). In other words, their opponents are “objectively” just marionettes of forces that remain in the background (i.e. conspiracies). Even if something is true or sincere, it is “objectively in the service of the enemy,” the enemy of the people. Who decides what is true, on both the verbal and factual levels, is obvious – the new masters, of course. They are masters of language, or, to use Trump’s phrase, they have the best words (“I know words. I have the best words.”)

But what is obvious to them might not be evident to everyone. That is why they have to fight for their truth. They are fighters, crusaders, men with a mission. This is only possible if they subjugate all the media, even if they first start and stick with new

social media, which always allow them to spread their messages live and without intermediaries. Being without an intermediary, editor, or censor is the key. Because their mighty weapon is the use of obscene, scandalous, abusive, and violent language. They deliberately utter inappropriate and scandalous statements, statements that no one else would have dared to make publicly, statements that are full of vulgarities, obscenities, and bizarreries. Whether or not this is a preconceived calculation, it has its effect: it attracts attention (bad publicity is better than none at all), but it also gives the impression of someone who fearlessly and uncompromisingly breaks taboos and the rule of the (cultural, political, national, global) elites. In reality, none of their acts are revolutionary, even if their intention is to bring about a certain overthrow – like Erdoğan bringing back the Muslim religion after it was expelled from the Turkish secular state; or those who want to re-Catholicize the Polish, Hungarian, or Slovenian nations; or those that stand up for supremacist (“true,” male, white, Christian (Catholic or Orthodox), European) values; or those that introduce chauvinism under the guise of patriotism, such as Modi in India or Vučić in Serbia. The main purpose is to trigger strong emotions and affects. To divide and “to set the house on fire.” After that, they, the pyromaniacs, can perversely pretend to be the only true firefighters and peacemakers. Or, as Badiou puts it:

For these new political figures, the aim of language is no longer to explain anything or to defend a point of view in an articulate manner. Its aim is to produce affects, which are used to create a fleetingly powerful unity, largely artificial but capable of being exploited in the moment. In Trump, we find once again the deliberate vulgarity, the pathological relation to women, and the calculated exercise of the right to say publicly things that are unacceptable to a large portion of humanity today that we also see in Hungary with Orbán, in India, or in the Philippines, as well as in Poland or in Erdoğan’s Turkey. (Badiou 2019, pp. 13-14)

Politically, the new masters have turned out to be conservatives and supporters of the extreme right despite presenting themselves as being at the (political) center. Democratic consensus and political correctness are actually their perfect partner here – they present themselves as “democrats” and “non-extremists,” and at the same time as an alternative to the already existing ones. This duality, this sitting on two chairs, is not accidental. Even when they are in power, they complain that they have no real power and that the people must join their fight against those who really have power, that is, against the elites, the conspiracy. Even when they are in power, they pretend to be in opposition – their great enemy is actually the State, which they are dismantling and turning into a state of control and war. So, their alternative is actually “fake” – they do not want to present any real alternative, let alone an alternative to capitalism or power relations; they only want to dominate and exploit them. Instead of class warfare, they foment identity and culture wars; the old mantra of “*divide et impera*” applies here very well. They usually acquire their wealth in semi-legal or illegal ways, and once in power, corruption and the mafia can breathe freely, even if they sometimes play the card of fighting the latter to consolidate their own power. They contribute to the implosion of the existing system, even if they always and everywhere try to keep order. Their message is: we need *more (of our kind of) order*. This means following number one, the “commander,” i.e. “me,” “the boss of all.” They want to be leaders (even if many are not called leaders, as Mussolini was called “Il Duce,” Hitler “the Führer,” and Franco “El Caudillo”). However, it is interesting to note that many times their names have meaning, which can be exploited for their own purposes such as Trump (trump) or Johnson (penis in the vernacular). The word “trump” is not only a wild card in some card games, but ironically also means “a helpful or admirable person,” while “to trump” someone means “to surpass something by saying or doing something better.” More generally, the word “trump” can refer

to any resource that gives one a distinct advantage. Therefore, it is not so far-fetched when supporters of Trump claim: “Donald Trump is our secret weapon.” However, there are no “Trumpists” – as Moisés Naím mentions in his recent book *The Revenge of Power* (2022), the name of a leader is frequently used to name his followers:

Beppe Grillo’s followers are Grillini, Chávez’s are Chavistas. Trump’s supporters don’t adopt his name as such, but they identify themselves entirely with his slogan, to the point of transforming ‘MAGA’ from an acronym to a collective noun. Salvini’s fans identify him with a kind of honorific title, ‘Il Capitano’ (The Captain), while Berlusconi’s call him ‘Il Cavaliere’ (The Knight), and Chávez’s supporters called him ‘El Comandante’ (The Commander). (Naím 2022, p. 67)

We should see in these obsessions testimony of the ridiculous fact that new masters desperately want to be perceived and understood as Leaders. This is their “true calling” and there never was any doubt that one day they would be at the top or in power. John Keane’s anecdotal and multi-layered account of Orbán when he was just a chairman of the Fidesz political party and once spent the night at his friend’s house, is in this context quite revealing:

Next morning, to [Orbán’s] surprise, the lawyer’s wife began cleaning his shoes. “What are you doing, Mrs. Irenke?,” he asked, to which she answered, “I’m cleaning your shoes so that I can one day say: I cleaned the shoes of Hungary’s prime minister!” The true man of the people responded by fetching Mrs. Irenke’s shoes and set about cleaning them. “What are you doing?” she asked in surprise. “I’m cleaning your shoes,” Orbán replied, “so that you can say one day: Hungary’s prime minister cleaned my shoes.” (Keane 2020, p. 93)

The surmise that Orbán will be Hungary’s prime minister one day is unshatterable in both participant’s views. However, Orbán

himself does not forget to add that he will not do it out of his lust for power, but because he “only wants to serve you, the people.” That is why in the text Keane refers to him as “the true man of the people.” If this anecdote testifies to anything, it is that the new masters are by no means rigid, stupid, or uncreative. It also proves that the spontaneous ideology that fascist, proto-fascist, or post-fascist leaders (and their followers) can be recognized by their humorlessness or rigid nature is completely wrong. The new ridiculous masters are very “human,” they like humor and they like to laugh – “as Slavoj Žižek and others have tirelessly pointed out, one of the great liberal myths about totalitarianism [is] that it can’t take a joke.” (Mazzarella in: Mazzarella, Santner, Schuster 2020, p. 122) It is true, though, that the jokes and humor of the new masters are mainly at the expense of their adversaries. In his book, Fuchs cites many examples of how Trump insults, demeans, and ridicules his opponents, e.g. he calls them “Little Michael Bloomberg,” the “clown Chuck Schumer,” “Pocahontas aka Elizabeth Warren,” “disgusting (check out sex tape and past) Alicia M,” “#failing@ nytimes,” “failing @CNN,” “Crooked Hillary.”, etc. (Cf. Fuchs 2018, p. 230 and in more detail pp. 216-236) Ridiculous masters do not consider themselves to be ridiculous, they hate being ridiculed themselves, but they love to ridicule, humiliate, hurt, and insult others. They just cannot help it and have to “sting” and “stab” their opponents – never in person, but always “from a distance,” preferably via Twitter (Janša, for example, was condemned in court for his remark about the journalists of the Slovenian public television RTV Slovenia as “press-titutes”). Whenever they can, they will. And why? Because they enjoy it, of course. But also because they really enjoy being the constant focus of public and national attention. And it is really ridiculous, if anything, that obsession makes them ridiculous masters.

Masters, Ridiculous: A Terminological Detour

These, then, are some basic characteristics of the new, ridiculous masters. What are their consequences for our contemporary societies and for the figure of the master himself? Can a detour through the terminology of the words “master” and “ridiculous” help us understand and show what is at stake here?

In trying to clarify the word “master” terminologically, we will take a short walk in four steps – the number itself is contingent and much could/should be added. The first step is to attempt to circumscribe our term through different languages. The English word master has a double origin: it comes from the Latin *dominus*: master, owner, and lord; and from *herus*: master of the house and lord. In the Middle Ages, *dominus* became a feudal title: lord, which is equivalent to *seigneur* in French and *Herr* in German. However, the equivalence, as we will see, is only conditional. While the French *seigneur* somehow equates with a feudal lord (and while *Le Seigneur*, the Lord, God, was above all), *seigneurie* (a large piece of land) was conferred by the governor. *Seigneurs*, however, were also of a different kind, they were namely not only nobles, but also merchants and religious dignitaries who had received a fief from the French crown with all the attendant rights to person and property. So, there were seigneurs and “seigneurs,” those who “deserved it” (why, really?) and those who did not. In short, not all seigneurs were on the same level and this also holds in more general terms for masters. If we take the German word for master, *Herr*, things are even more complicated.³ The term cannot be unambiguously translated back into English because it means not only “master” but also “lord,” “patron,” and “owner.” Moreover, the word *Herr* affirms the autonomous status of a free subject (to be one’s own master, “*sein eigener Herr sein*”); one is

³ I am relying here partly on the article “Herrschaft” written by Marc de Launay in *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (See Cassin 2015, pp. 433–436).

the master of both oneself and of one's emotions (to be the master of one's senses, "*Herr seiner Sinne sein*") and of a situation in which one finds oneself (to be master of the situation, "*Herr der Lage sein*"). It should be noted that in German the word *Meister* is preferred here instead of the word *Herr*, since one of its meanings refers to someone who is competent, who knows what he is saying, and who has something to say (see: Stoellger 2022, pp. 224-225). In Old German, *Herr* is an adjective meaning "gray-haired," "worthy," and was used to denote the dignity of one who, being old, is morally honorable and wise. This referred to the authority that the father of the family, as head of the clan, exercised over his own family and servants, as well as the ruler of his lands. Later, the word *Herr* became generalized in a sense and came to refer to someone we call a gentleman; in conversation it still means to address someone as "sir," "gentleman," "man." Its derivative, the word *Herrschaft*, which in English corresponds to the terms "mastery," "dominion," "power," "command," "authority," "lordship," remains notoriously slippery. For example, English translators of Max Weber's work sometimes render it as "authority" and sometimes as "domination"; another example are Hegel's terms "*Herrschaft*" and "*Knechtschacht*" from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: some translate them as "master/slave," others as "lord/bondsman."

So, what has this first step shown us? That the function of a master is internally split and refers to different meanings. This becomes even clearer with the second step. Indeed, there are not only different kinds of masters (ruler, lord, sovereign, boss, chief, leader, director, patron, manager, etc.), but also different purposes of the master: the master not only dominates or subdues, but in some cases also empowers, helps one to become one's own master. Let us look at the French word *maître*: it refers to master in the above senses (i.e. someone who rules, governs, controls) and adds some other commanding functions (*maître* can be *capitaine*, *principal*, *directeur*, *patron*, *commandant*). In

this sense, *maître* can be someone who is in charge or in control of something (*maître de*): “*maître d’hôtel*” is someone who is the “master of the house” (who runs a hotel or restaurant, being the lead or head waiter, or who is responsible for putting food on the table, etc.). In addition to that, *maître* can refer to a teacher (who can also have different roles, such as *professeur*, *instituteur*, *maîtresse*, or *éducateur*). It can also refer to a university degree (master) or to a title for a function one performs in the university process (*maître de conférences*, lecturer, or associate professor). The essential point here is that the master, in his role as teacher, can also be someone who empowers us and thus helps us achieve autonomy. Someone who, like Wittgenstein’s proverbial ladder, can be thrown away in the end.

But here there are important further variations, and this we learn with the third step. As Peter Sloterdijk underscores in his work *You Have to Change Your Life*, originally published in 2009, there are many different kinds of masters in terms of personal growth and personal will to change; there are namely different kinds of personal teachers, trainers, and leaders. Sloterdijk lists no less than ten of them (See Sloterdijk 2013, pp. 271–297). The first five of these are associated with spiritual practices and progress along the path of thought – there is the guru, the Buddhist master, the apostle, the abbot, and the philosopher. Each of them works in a different way, in a different cultural, religious, and/or spiritual context and in a different relationship with his disciples or students, and each learning process ends differently, especially as regards the master-teacher relationship. The second five concern the status of knowledge and also a different way of addressing the audience or addressees, which Sloterdijk names here as a coach of athletes, a master craftsman, an academic professor, a secular teacher, and an Enlightenment writer. It would be interesting to follow Sloterdijk’s analysis in detail and perhaps build on it. But that is not our goal here; we just want to show that a master can address his students, followers, or supporters in different ways.

He can empower them in different ways, but he can also make them dependent on him in different ways. It is certainly interesting that Sloterdijk does not list more figures here, such as a doctor, a psychiatrist, or a psychoanalyst, but the reasons for this would take us too far afield. What is important from our point of view is that the functions of the master can really have different purposes, aims, goals, and results.

Our next and last step problematizes things right from here. In other words, with it all the previous steps are measured from the perspective of the logic inherent in a master: the place he occupies as an element that fills that place. The master is nothing but an interplay between the place and the elements that fill it. Here, everything revolves around the conditions of “being someone’s master” and its consequences: “being someone’s master” can only take place if one is – to state this with reference to structuralism – in a certain place. As Marx writes in footnote 22 of the first chapter in his *Capital Volume 1*:

Such expressions of relations in general, called by Hegel reflex categories, form a very curious class. For instance, one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is king. (Marx 1995, p. 55)

Although the “occult quality” of “being a master” seems to be “inherent” in someone, it is rather a quality projected onto someone by others. No one can simply declare himself to be an authority or a master, but others make him so. Or, in other words, someone is a master not only because of the place he occupies (in the structure, the organization, the institution, the intersubjective relations), but it takes something else, a certain excess, a surplus – one “has it”; one must have “charisma,” as some put it. The master is made a master by his subjects or subordinates, and this paradoxically provokes a constant hysterization on the part of the master: “Do I still/really have something special about me?” In

other words, there is no necessity in becoming and remaining a master. Of course, coercion, power, and violence play a role here, but not for long and not forever. The precarious thing about the master is the fact that he depends on his subjects, on their love and transference. Any master is a reflexive category – if his subjects lose “faith” in him, the show is over. The problem is that in love and transference, the *objet petit a* – that special, ridiculous object of Lacan’s that cannot be mastered, controlled, or dominated – plays the crucial role. In this sense, the topography of the master is, as Lacan would put it, “between the two walls of the impossible” (Lacan 1998, p. 167). The figure of the master as such involves “tarrying with the impossible,” to paraphrase Hegel.

The above-mentioned interplay between a place and the elements filling it provides a nice starting point for the treatment of the term “ridiculous.” The latter namely highlights precisely the gap between them. In other words, the adjective “ridiculous” suggests that something or someone is “out of place,” “odd,” “excessive,” “in the wrong place.” In this sense, the ridiculous master is someone who is in the wrong place, in a place where he should not be, or rather, someone who functions excessively and incorrectly in the place where he is. This gap provokes laughter, which is otherwise listed by many English dictionaries as the main meaning of the term. According to a typical dictionary, the verb “to ridicule” means: to make fun of, mock, deride someone.

However, the most useful definition for our purposes comes from Alexi Kukuljevic:

As its etymology attests, from the Latin *ridiculosus*, the ridiculous is bound up with the laughable. Manifest in that which is out of place, the peculiar, the odd, the incongruous, the awkward, and all that lacks conformity, in the malformed or the deformed, the non-sensical and the absurd, that which is ridiculous suffers from an often sudden depreciation, a loss of value, or a lack in logical form, as in *reductio ad ridiculum*. Laying bare a void in the structural order of things or a deformation of an object’s appearance, the ridiculous

punctuates the reduction to nothing of something with a burst of laughter, that uneasy discharge that signals that something is awry. (Kukuljevic 2017, p. 52)

The above explanation seems particularly appropriate when one considers the phrase “ridiculous masters.” Indeed, at first glance it seems an oxymoron to speak of “ridiculous masters.” In a way, the expression presupposes not only that the masters are idiots or morons, but also that they are so incredible that they absurdly contradict reason, common sense, and all experience. One simply does not know whether to laugh at them or burst into tears. As Kukuljevic states later in the work cited above, “the ridiculous appears as a discrepancy between the form of an appearance and its manner.” This once again underscores our intention to understand “ridiculous” here as “extremely silly or unreasonable,” “absurd.” Similarly, in Slovenian you can call someone ridiculous or absurdly beautiful, as in the pop song by Voranc Boh “*Absurdno lepa.*”

The ridiculous is something that is so silly and foolish that it can be made fun of. It is worth noting that some common synonyms for ridiculous include funny, comical, laughable, and ludicrous, and suggest extreme absurdity, stupidity, or contemptibility. Perhaps we should add here another dimension of the term “ridiculous.” As a colloquial term, ridiculous in fact means “unbelievable or amazing” and can refer to things that are incredibly good or incredibly bad. Here we come to an important dimension that is not usually emphasized – the ridiculous is essentially ambivalent. It can mean the best or the worst, or even both at the same time: the meeting of opposites, when the highest and the lowest coincide. No wonder the most ridiculous of all modern state leaders seems to be Trump – with him the highest and the lowest coincide. He is someone so full of ... what? Shit and gold, his incredibly ridiculous self-aggrandizement coincides with the lowest of the low. By the way, this is already indicated by his name. Besides the meaning of the name “Trump” already mentioned

above, there are some other meanings that should be mentioned. As David Cay Johnson points out, there is “the bridge player’s definition of trump: a winning play by a card that outranks all others.” However, there are other definitions of “trump,” including “a thing of small value, a trifle” and “to deceive or cheat,” as well as “to blow or sound a trumpet.” As a verb, “trump” means “to devise in an unscrupulous way” and “to forge, fabricate, or invent” as in “trumped up charges.” (Cay Johnson 2016, p. 33) So it’s no coincidence that comedian John Oliver created the satirical name “Donald Drumpf” on the HBO show *Last Week Tonight* by taking a cue from the history of family names: “[...] it turns out the name ‘Trump’ was not always his family’s name. One biographer found that a prescient ancestor had changed it from – and this is true – ‘Drumpf’. [...] And Drumpf is much less magical. It is the sound produced when a morbidly obese pigeon flies into the window in a foreclosed Old Navy. Drumpf!” (Quoted in: Fuchs 2018, p. 255) Therefore, we can paraphrase Hegel’s famous saying, “Spirit is bone” to, “Spirit is Trump.” To make a long story short: It is no accident that with the ridiculous masters we get the oscillation between shit and treasure that is so characteristic of Lacan’s *objet petit a*.

Master and Parallax

This ambivalence is an important feature of “ridiculous masters,” since they appear ridiculous for two opposing reasons: either they seem to be unchallenged, absolute masters reviving ancient forms of despotism, or they seem to fail completely in doing so. The paradox, then, is that today’s new masters are ridiculous for two completely opposite reasons: either because they are in fact tyrants and despots (and strictly speaking no longer masters), or because they are in fact poor substitutes for masters and are not yet real masters but clowns, buffoons, idiots (nincompoops, as Roger Waters recently put it). The figure of the contemporary

master is thus split – into the mafia despot who rules with a hard hand (Xi, Putin, Lukashenko, Erdoğan, Orbán, Modi, Janša, Vučić) and the proto-fascist clown (Berlusconi, Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro, but also Janša and Vučić). As we can see, some are listed in both groups, they are not all just strongmen, but even if they are, they also seem ridiculous. There's more to this story of overlapping, but we simply do not have the space to discuss it here – our main point is that through the prism of the ridiculous we get a perfect example of what Slavoj Žižek defines as a “parallax gap,” the confrontation of two irreconcilable perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible. (See: Žižek 2006, p. 4) For Žižek, the minimal parallax constellation is in fact a framework with or without which we can view things. This leads to the conclusion that there is no “neutral” reality within which gaps occur between two processes, within which frames isolate areas of phenomena. Every field of “reality” (every “world”) is always already framed, seen through an invisible frame:

The parallax is not symmetrical, composed of two incompatible perspectives on the same X: there is an irreducible asymmetry between the two perspectives, a minimal reflexive twist. We do not have two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see from the first perspective. (Žižek 2006, p. 29)

Two important consequences follow from this. The first concerns the nature of the ridiculous masters, that is, it explains why they are so divisive and polarizing: either one is for them or against them. The second consequence, however, is more important because it reminds us that what we have tried to describe as something special and particular, namely ridiculous masters, also concerns the genus itself, the species itself, the masters themselves. It will be seen that, on the one hand, ridiculous masters are not so extraordinary as to be masters, and, on the other hand, that ordinary masters themselves are much more extraordinary than

we usually imagine. In other words, they are connected to the ridiculous, in Hegelian terms, the genus encounters itself as a species in the particular case it is reflected in. Ridiculous masters, then, remind us of the ridiculousness of the master himself. Indeed, the reference to parallax implies that ridiculous masters only seem to contradict the “normal” or “usual” function of the master. In other words, the very designation ridiculous master(s) tries to imply that they are different from masters in the usual or normal sense. But what are they, i.e. what is a “true,” “real,” “ordinary” master at all?

Compared to a ridiculous master, a master would be someone who is not ridiculous. Of course. A true or real master is neither an idiot nor a moron; he is to be respected, loved, revered. Sometimes he may be funny, sometimes he may be feared, but behind his back, behind the public scene, he might be mocked and ridiculed, but a true master is never a ridiculous public figure. That is what we assume when we speak of a master. Of a normal or usual one. We expect a master to be a (true, real) master. What does Lacan teach us in this regard? In his Seminar XVII Lacan reduces the master to a sign, but this sign is crucial because it makes things work:

In the master’s discourse, for instance, it is effectively impossible that there be a master who makes the entire world function. Getting people to work is even more tiring, if one really has to do it, than working oneself. The master never does it. He gives a sign, the master signifier, and everybody jumps. That’s where you have to start, which is, in effect, completely impossible. It’s tangible every day. (Lacan 2007, p. 174)

Lacan continues:

A real master, as in general we used to see until the recent era, and this is seen less and less, doesn’t desire to know anything at all – he desires that things work. And why would he want to know? There are more amusing things than that. (Ibid., p. 24)

The master, and this is a constant in Lacan's work, only wants to see that "the work goes on," that "the show goes on," that production in the sense of the material production of goods, services, and commodities never stops:

What is Alexander's proclamation when he arrived in Persepolis or Hitler's when he arrived in Paris? The preamble isn't important: "I have come to liberate you from this or that." The essential point is "Carry on working. Work must go on." (Lacan 1992, p. 315)

Leaving aside the question of why Lacan singles out these two individuals in particular, and any other questions that might arise therefrom, we should perhaps point out something obvious but, to our knowledge, not sufficiently problematized: that he takes two examples from the past, and that this is a common phenomenon when it comes to masters. We have already mentioned above that the phenomenon of new masters is attempted to be explained by "old names." We should see in this something structurally necessary, something that on the one hand is revealed, but on the other hand is concealed by the expression "ridiculous masters." In fact, it is quite common that when looking for a suitable figure of the master in the present, one spontaneously suspects that such figures do not exist today, and one reaches into the past. It is a habit to say that such figures are no longer made. What is this whole process of relating and comparing about? Here it is helpful to refer to a well-known first assertion about authority by Hannah Arendt from her text "What is Authority?":

In order to avoid misunderstanding, it might have been wiser to ask in the title: What *was* and not what is authority? For it is my contention that we are tempted and entitled to raise this question because authority has vanished from the modern world. (Arendt 1961, p. 91)

Arendt somehow points us in the right direction: it seems that the ultimate zero point of any authority (and thus of a master)

is in fact built from the beginning on a loss, an impossibility – masters *were*. And nostalgia: once upon a time, sometime in the past ... there was authority, there were (true, real) masters. The criterion of what a (normal, usual) master is and what he should be is necessarily immersed in the mythical mist of the past. In other words: new masters, precisely because they are new, are measured by the standards of the past (and of past masters). New masters are used, invoked, in the name of present corruption and disorder – their starting point is “the supposition that there once was an order, which we missed, so now we live in a time that is already corrupt. There once was a proiper past, but the present is diminished, degraded, reduced, decayed in relation to it; it has always begun with degradation.” (Dolar 2020, p. 33) New masters either promise to finally restore the glory of the past (masters) and renew the figure of the master, or they fail to do so and are nothing more than a caricature, a farce, a burlesque, a travesty, a ridiculousness, a parody, etc. Hence this reference to something that does not exist now or no longer exists, but which existed in the past.

We will come back to this, and perhaps three remarks are in order to avoid possible misunderstandings. First, we should not conflate this with procedures that are based on a myth or myth of origin. Let us recall here Freud’s thesis (from *Totem and Taboo*, 1913) that civilization as such is based on the murder of the primordial father, the *Urvater*. Freud departs from a loss that never was and he is not alone in that; recall modern theories of the social, from Hobbes and Rousseau to Kant and Hegel, who have attempted to describe the conditions for the emergence of society and social order by invoking a myth of origin (Hobbes’s or Rousseau’s state of nature, Hegel’s struggle between master and slave, etc.): “Once upon a time, there was an X.”

Of course, all this has certain consequences, but they are different from what actually happened in history – and to which, of course, we ourselves do not want to return. Or rather, we fear

that it might return. That “there were masters” in the past immediately reminds us that they were not “normal” masters who fit into democracy, but brutal, cruel masters of the past who ruled with coercion and violence. We do not want them to return, we do not want the return of a Freudian version of the primordial father/master, the return of an authoritarian, totalitarian master. We prefer “a normal master.” But is there one?

We can never safely play the game of normality with the master as such. As Paul Valéry once said, every ruler or master knows how fragile the authority of rulers is – except for his own. (Quoted in: Sennett 1980, p. 141) Every master believes he is an exception. Each offers himself as a remedy for the precariousness and fundamental impossibility of masters as such. Each has the illusion that he will be the exception, the only one – the One. In other words, there is no middle ground, no balance, no Aristotelian “golden mean” in dealing with a master – the master as such is accompanied by a certain exaggeration, excess. The master is inseparable from it, more than that, it is the exaggeration that is exemplified, embodied, incarnated. The master exaggerates, which means that normality and excess are not to be considered as two opposites, but as two sides of the same coin. Any master is about fame, glory, mana, charisma. Everything depends on how a master implements it, how he relates to it, how he deals with it – in short, how he manages it, to use Santner’s term of mana-gerism (See Santner: Mazarrella, Santner, Schuster 2020, especially pp. 34, 41–43, 57, 70).

The problem, again, is that this excess and this surplus that we encounter in every master are dual in nature, or rather, divided between two poles, a minus (-1) and a plus (+1). The space between these two poles is occupied by the *objet petit a*, the ridiculous object that plays the main role here. And this perhaps has an important consequence: every master is indistinguishable from ridiculousness. This is our most important point in this context: the master is ridiculous or is not a master. And this point

also has many sides and consequences. Not only that the master as such is always ridiculous in one way or another, but that it is ridiculous that there are (still) masters at all. And that it is always ridiculous that someone is a master. But the consequences of the above point actually go in two directions at once: that there will always be masters, and at the same time that (maybe) there are no more (true, real) masters. At least not here and now.

We should connect all this – and this is our third remark – with the above-mentioned minus (-1), with the complaint about the loss of masters, which actually consists of reference to masters of the past, to past masters. This reference is a kind of constant when speaking about masters. And it implies that there is no reference to masters without reference to other masters. However, when we emphasize that any talk of masters is actually a reference, we should not forget that this reference is also a reference to someone who really believed in it, i. e. who truly believed in masters. It is a reference to a naive believer (in masters), a reference that is outsourced, so to speak (to the past, to another place). Benjamin Noys developed the thesis that authority is always outsourced (See: Noys 2014). But this outsourcing of authority, and the need for it, needs to be defined more precisely. I propose to use here the concept of “illusions without owners” elaborated by Robert Pfaller (See: Pfaller 2014): belief or illusion cannot be directly referred to itself; we always need a hypothesis about a naive believer who sincerely and naively believes that we ourselves could also believe as well (via this inexistent intermediary). This assumption of a naive believer is the basis of every authority and every master, which is also why Arendt outsources it – into the past. Herein lies another answer why masters are considered ridiculous today: we no longer believe in naive believers. We cannot believe that anyone, even a hypothetical naive believer, can believe or even has believed in a master. To believe that someone can blindly and naively believe in a master is simply considered ridiculous. Hence, ridiculous masters.

Today no one wants to be deceived, duped. But the paradox is that people err today more than ever. As Lacan warned long ago: “*Les non-dupes errent.*” (“The unduped wander/are mistaken.”) If you do not want to be cheated/duped, you are really screwed, because you are going to be cheated/duped big time. Take the wild proliferation of conspiracy theories lately – many interpreters have stressed that people fall for them because everything is much easier when you do that, “suddenly everything becomes clear.” But this is “clear” precisely because it is a fantasy – according to Lacan, “we only understand our fantasies,” so that is why here “everything is clear.” Furthermore, if you believe in conspiracies, you also belong to a group of believers – suddenly you have a bunch of naive believers in front of you. The proof being in the form of believers who believe in hidden masters (conspiracy) and believers who believe in a master who fights these masters. Maybe I can be wrong, but they are not, they sincerely and truly believe in it – why should not I? Something incredible, almost impossible, which otherwise would be considered ridiculous, is being incarnated (virtually or physically). Maybe this reference is a revelation in another sense: not only that the master as such is always a reference, but that this works also in relation to those who are behind a plot or conspiracy. Often, perhaps even in most cases, the failure or success of (previous, past, other) masters is the starting point for a new master – the new master promises to restore order where there were chaos, disorder, confusion, stagnation, blockage, and impotence. Where there was chaos, a master shall become (paraphrasing Freud’s famous dictum: *Wo Chaos war, soll Herr werden*). As we see, the master as such is constantly moving in a strange time and place: he is never really here and yet he is always there.

A consequence of this is that the impossibility associated with the master has its flip side – we never get rid of the master. The paradox of the master is that as a function it is at the same time very fragile, precarious, and yet indestructible. We do away with

one master after another, and yet the figure of the master itself seems to be indestructible – that is why Mladen Dolar earlier at the conference called the master “undead.” The master is a bone in the throat of *Aufhebung* (if this pun on the account of the organizers of the conference is permitted⁴). The master always sneaks up as the odd man out (to use the title of a book by Alenka Zupančič) – and he is, by definition, ridiculous. So why are the new ridiculous masters of today only frowned upon, while those who eagerly support them are either ridiculed or pitied? One thing is namely certain: if there is anything ridiculous here, it is definitely the premature celebration of the end of the figure of the master. Ridiculous masters are simply a new form of the master figure, and ways must be found to confront and combat them, to overcome them, to get rid of them.

In general, it is not easy to get rid of masters. Freud famously declared mastery to be one of the three impossible professions, along with education and psychoanalysis. However, upon closer examination of his statement (from the seventh chapter of his *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, 1937), one finds that things are rather tricky for Freud. He wants to emphasize the indeterminate status of the three professions, and this is reflected in his words for them (“*Analysieren, Erziehen, Regieren*”), which are actually verbs used as nouns to emphasize their indeterminate status and activity. Moreover, his own term for mastery, *Regieren*, refers to reigning, governing, or ruling over something. Thus, it

⁴ This paper is a thoroughly revised talk delivered at the conference “The Master/s: On the Contemporary Structures of Power” organized by the *Aufhebung* Association in Cankarjev dom, Ljubljana, 22-24 September 2022. Dolar’s talk was entitled “The Master is Undead.” I would like to take this opportunity to thank the organizers again for inviting me and preparing a great event. I would also like to thank Eric Santner, Aaron Schuster, Arthur Bradley, Gregor Moder, Andrew Cole, Henrik Jøkker Bjerre, Yuval Kremitzer, Frances Restuccia, and Alenka Zupančič for their questions following my talk, which helped me to further develop my arguments, and Dean de Vos for polishing up my English.

does not apply to every form of domination and mastery. The German term, while in principle covering all forms of governing, refers more to governing by consensus, reason, and insight, and is more on the side of democratic governing or enlightened absolutist governing, as opposed to *Herrschen*, where the emphasis is more on power and force. Furthermore, the word “impossible” is actually in quotation marks in Freud’s text, perhaps because it is constantly shifting and reappearing in new forms. For this reason, the results of the three professions are without a proper *Abschluss* (or final closure, conclusion, graduation, or certificate). The work is never done in these professions, which are not actually professions in the usual or ordinary sense of the word. They are jobs where you are well paid for what you do, but they are not ordinary work; they also require certain personal skills and abilities that are not only tricks of the trade, but strictly speaking cannot be learned – either you have them or you do not. Thus, these professions are somewhere between business and art, and they also require a certain vocation and calling – after all, they are a profession, *Beruf* (a calling and call: *Ruf, rufen*). Although lumped together by Freud, they all work and function in very different ways. But the problem is that they still work. Somehow. And last but not least, as Aaron Schuster recently noted, for Freud all three of these impossible professions are somehow, paradoxically,

fundamentally engaged in promoting autonomy. They involve a use of authority that is meant to undermine the grip of external authorities and lead beyond them, to support the subject’s exercise of his own reason. However, and this is the crucial point, if the process is short-circuited and an egalitarian relation directly asserted, the result is often an even more severe hierarchy and despotism. Authority is necessary, but it must also be analyzed, worked through. The impossible professions can neither dispense with authority nor totally align themselves with it; they are neither pro- nor anti-authoritarian. They rather require a specific use of authority, one that is capable of deconstructing itself without pretending that authority can disappear. (Schuster 2017, p. 94)

So, what does all this talk about masters and especially ridiculous masters teach us? At least a few things. That there is nothing self-evident, permanent, or certain about the function of the master. Therefore, one must always expect surprises, strange coincidences, and unexpected creations that can never be fully predicted, planned, controlled, or calculated. Yes, it is possible to get rid of the master, but it is also difficult and time-consuming. And it is never something permanent or irreversible. In other words, there is no guarantee that we will not “fall for the master’s trick” again. Or for the trick of another master. Just as there is no guarantee that we will not fall for the same trick over and over again. Although some may never fall for such a trick.

In short, what seems obvious and natural to one master may seem absurd or ridiculous to another. Of course, just because something seems ridiculous or absurd does not mean that we have nothing to do with it and consider our supposed distance as a sign of liberation from it – there is always the unconscious, which manifests itself often through the absurd and ridiculous. In other words, a master can be ridiculous, but that does not mean that he is no longer a master. Freud teaches us that with the master there is always comedy and confusion, which is why the master and the category of the ridiculous go well together. Although Freud himself does not mention this, let alone speak of or consider the possibility of ridiculous masters, it can be inferred from his theses. Moreover, if Freud and psychoanalysis can teach us anything about the master, it is that the master always has one foot in the improbable, the unbelievable, the incredulous. The master is by definition ridiculous, and yet we should beware of ridiculous masters and take them seriously! In other words, even if they are ridiculous, they are masters. And that is precisely why they are dangerous.

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