

2013

The real of the postmodern rabble : Žižek and the historical truth of the Hegelo-Lacanian dialectic

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THE REAL OF THE POSTMODERN RABBLE: ŽIŽEK AND THE
HISTORICAL TRUTH OF THE HEGELO-LACANIAN DIALECTIC

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies

by

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B.A., The George Washington University, 2011

May 2013

“There is a crack in everything God has made.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Falsehood is never in words; it is in things.” – Italo Calvino

“no use to make any philosophies here: I see no god in the holly, hear no song from the snowbroken weeds: Hegel is not the winter yellow in the pines” – A.R. Ammons

“If you have a good theory, forget about the reality.” – Slavoj Žižek

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER	
1 AN INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 HORWITZ, ŽIŽEK, AND THE HEGELO-LACANIAN UNCONSCIOUS.....	5
3 SUBJECT, SUBSTANCE, AND THE INSISTENT REAL.....	15
4 SUTURE AND THE RABBLE.....	24
5 POST-STRUCTURALISM, POSTMODERNITY, LATE CAPITAL... AND ŽIŽEK.....	38
5.1 Thinking the Antagonism.....	38
5.2 Yuppies, Psychotics, and the Political (non-)Subjects of Postmodernity.....	42
5.3 “What Kind of Reading?”.....	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	54
VITA.....	57

ABSTRACT

In this essay I attempt to answer a fundamental question about Žižek's heterodox reading of Hegel's dialectic: what project sustains this reading in the first place? That is, what is at stake for Žižek himself? The purpose of this essay is to develop in this fashion a reading of Žižek (since he does not programmatically answer this question), although not one that is necessarily meant to compete against other alternatives. My argument, then, is that Žižek's ontological and hermeneutical project is ultimately *political*, that when Žižek says we need Hegel "now more than ever," he has a political situation in mind. By finding an element of Hegel's thought, the political subjectivity of the 'rabble,' that resists the traditional picture of dialectical *system* (especially the *critical* picture of the post-structuralists), Žižek can overturn the distinction between Hegelian method and system by suggesting that there's no comprehensible distinction at all. And by politicizing Hegel and drawing out the seeds of Lacanian thought that were nonetheless incomplete *until* Lacan, Žižek's historiographical project takes on the character of ideological critique. As such, Hegel and Lacan reach us anew, as theoretical players in an anti-postmodern political gambit.

CHAPTER 1: AN INTRODUCTION

On their elaborately theoretical surfaces, Hegel and Lacan have little in common. Indeed, traditionally they would be placed in direct opposition: the philosopher of Absolute Spirit whose system captured all of reality, and the psychoanalyst whose far more modest ontological insights were applied to a wide range of aesthetic and political movements only by his enthusiastic followers. Hegel represents the apex of metaphysical philosophy traditionally conceived, and Lacan is one of the leading examples of 20th century *anti*-philosophy, whose Freudian influence rendered him attentive to the symptoms that escape the categories of reason and conceptual thought.

Of course, through the mediation of Alexandre Kojève, Lacan did indeed recognize Hegel as a legitimate influence on his earliest work. However, as Lacan's thought matured, his distance from the Kojevian Hegel (Kojève's interpretation of the *Phenomenology*) grew. It was Kojève who standardized the stakes of the Hegelian struggle between master and servant: the subject's readiness to sacrifice its material body asserts the spirit as a higher dimension of reality (and ultimately separable from material/biological life). Through language, the negativity of biological death is sublated and transformed into a positive order of conceptual Reason (the name of the thing extracts the thing's concept, leaving its inert materiality behind).¹

¹ Jameson, in *The Hegel Variations*, describes rather succinctly a common interpretation/reaction to Kojève's Hegel and the predominant reading of a world organized by Reason: "We thereby search the whole world, and outer space, and end up only touching ourselves, only seeing our own face persist through multitudinous differences and forms of otherness. Never truly to encounter the not-I, to come face to face with radical otherness (or, even worse, to find ourselves in an historical dynamic in which it is precisely difference and otherness which is relentlessly being stamped out): such is the dilemma of the Hegelian dialectic, which contemporary philosophies of difference and otherness seem only able to confront with mystical evocations and imperatives" (Jameson (2010), p. 131). But Žižek, as we'll see, attempts to confront this picture from an alternative, parallax angle.

If this is one example of the standard reading of Hegel (the reading Lacan accessed through Kojève), then the standard reading of Lacan seems to stand in stark contrast. The equally traditional psychoanalytic account (what we might call the Freudo-Lacanian position) maintains that any passage from the biological body to symbolization, from matter to ‘spirit,’ is accompanied by some remainder, some fantasmatic entity that stands in for what was lost in the process. Thus, the ultimate progress of the Hegelian and Lacanian dialectics seem to be markedly different.

Slavoj Žižek has made a career, however, out of reading the two together. Indeed, Žižek has suggested that his entire *oeuvre* works toward a primary end: the rehabilitation of Hegel in the history of philosophy. His work, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, represents such a possible end (and since it is his most recent work, we can easily and profitably treat it that way, at least for now). There, through the heterodox analysis of a breadth of Hegelian concepts, the key claim is continually advanced: *Hegel’s dialectic doesn’t work the way everyone thinks (or has thought) it does*. That is, the Hegel caricatured above, the Hegel whose system accounts for *everything*, for whom all difference is subsumed in the negation of negation, is the Hegel both of his traditional champions and most biting critics. But, Žižek’s reading suggests, all of them have it wrong; or, more accurately, they are right, but for the wrong reasons.

Žižek reads Lacan as a ‘repetition’ of Hegel, as a thinker who repeated Hegel’s great breakthrough in a new context. Indeed, the structure of *Less than Nothing* already suggests this historiographical point, as the middle two sections of the book (titled ‘The Thing Itself’) are devoted to Hegel and Lacan in order, only to be book-ended by, first, the entirety of the

preceding tradition ('The Drink Before') and, finally, whatever is left over from Lacan ('The Cigarette After').

In the critical secondary literature, two main responses to Žižek's approach emerge: 1. Žižek himself simply gets it wrong, or 2. Žižek locates something textually 'real' in Hegel, something largely missed or repressed alongside the parts of his work that have been combed over incessantly.² The first group ultimately argues that, when Žižek cites and quotes Hegel, he takes his words to mean something entirely alien to both the letter and spirit of the texts as a whole. The second group, which generally celebrates Žižek's reading, starts from the (general hermeneutic) principle that the text contains numerous (and equally valid) interpretative possibilities, and that Žižek is merely performing the actualization of one of those alternatives, drawing our attention to the fact that this is an inherent property of textuality.

The starting point of my own interpretation is the suggestion of a third way, and thus a third relationship between Žižek and Hegel: that Žižek is attempting to provide the 'truth' of Hegel, that his reinterpretation of Hegelian dialectics via Lacanian psychoanalysis is the 'final' act of Hegelian sublation (or at least, the ultimate Hegelian reconciliation *for our own time*). In this way, Žižek can situate the post-structuralist critique of Hegel (which reaches its unfortunate apex in the work of Gilles Deleuze) *within the dialectic itself*. Lacan represents, for Žižek, the closest we have come to mediating between 'Hegel proper' and the post-Hegelian attitude, which is why Žižek appears as an orthodox Lacanian (as opposed to a heterodox Hegelian); what is left to do is to draw out the key Lacanian insight that can stand in for the whole. To this end, I will begin with a Žižekian reading of Hegelian and Lacanian ontology, tracing their relationship as

² David Gunkel ("Žižek and the Real Hegel") generally discusses these types of approaches to Žižek's work, though in the second case, he focuses on the possibility that what Žižek 'retrieves' from Hegel is "more Hegelian than Hegel himself" (Gunkel, p. 2).

Žižek conceives of it. I will consider Noah Horwitz's critique of Žižek's comparison, drawing out the concepts of the unconscious in Hegel and Lacan (and marking the differences, which Horwitz ignores, between the unconscious in Lacan and Freud). This will allow us to understand how the relation between subject and substance (as well as between reality and the Real) operates in dialectic.

But the movement of this essay will resolve into an attempt to answer a fundamental question: what project sustains this reading in the first place? That is, what is at stake for Žižek himself? The purpose of this essay is to develop in this fashion a reading of *Žižek* (since he does not programmatically answer this question), although not one that is necessarily meant to compete against other alternatives. My argument, then, is that Žižek's project is ultimately *political*, that when Žižek says we need Hegel "now more than ever," he has a political situation in mind. By finding an element of Hegel's thought, the political subjectivity of the 'rabble,' that resists the traditional picture of dialectical *system* (especially the *critical* picture of the post-structuralists), Žižek can overturn the distinction between Hegelian method and system by suggesting that there's no comprehensible distinction at all. By politicizing Hegel and drawing out the seeds of Lacanian thought that were nonetheless incomplete *until* Lacan, Žižek's historiographical project takes on the character of ideological critique. As such, Hegel and Lacan reach us anew, as theoretical players in an anti-postmodern political gambit.

CHAPTER 2: HORWITZ, ŽIŽEK, AND THE HEGELO-LACANIAN UNCONSCIOUS

Horwitz, in his critique of Žižek, presents a reading that maintains the ‘traditional’ account of self-consciousness in Hegel, and opposes what he sees as a transformation of Lacanian psychoanalysis into a discourse of self-consciousness. His essay is a ‘rehearsal’ of the differences between Hegel and Lacan “on the nature of the unconscious and the relation between consciousness and the unconscious.”³ Horwitz attempts to show that “the specificity of Lacan must be maintained in order to attend to the new field of phenomena and analysis (the unconscious and the formation of the unconscious) opened by the Freudian/Lacanian moment.”⁴

First, Horwitz points to Lacan’s famous claim that “the unconscious is structured like a language”⁵ to show how a proper psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious relates to language. After all, from Freud we know that formations of the unconscious, like dreams, slips, or failed acts, are revealed through tropes of metaphor and metonymy (most systematically given in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, where the unconscious is located in the dream’s work of condensation (metaphor) and displacement (metonymy)). For Lacan, at least according to Horwitz, the effect of the move from nonsense to sense, which is the move of the subject *into* the order of language, involves the introduction of lack and negativity into the world. That is, the signifying opposition that distinguishes the space of language develops from a primordial lack (for Freud, the lack presented by the Mother’s inability to give everything, or by the hallucinatory recall of the breast to fail to provide satisfaction), and that lack is a signifier that represents the subject in the Symbolic order.

³ Horwitz, p. 25

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lacan (1988, II), p. 48

Horwitz argues that the Lacanian unconscious (as well as the Freudian unconscious, since he sees the two in this regard as part of the same ‘moment’) is a sort of ‘substance,’ something like a container with the property/ability to ‘store’ repressed memories, that disrupts (in phenomena like slips of the tongue) a subject’s conscious intention. That the unconscious is structured like a language suggests that the ‘aim’ of the unconscious intention is in the ‘big Other’ (Lacan’s term for the impersonal Symbolic-linguistic order that regulates speech and performatives). The unconscious is the fullness and completeness of the subject’s ‘originary situation’ that had to be renounced in the move into a language that marks lack. Consider Freud’s account of the child for whom pleasure is the only determining factor in the appropriation or expulsion of elements:

Expressed in the language of the oldest—the oral—drive impulses, the judgement is: ‘I should like to eat this,’ or, ‘I should like to spit it out’; put more generally: ‘I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out.’ That is to say, ‘It shall be inside me’ or ‘it shall be outside me.’ As I have shown elsewhere, the original pleasure-ego wants to introject into itself everything that is good and to eject from itself everything that is bad. What is bad, what is alien to the ego, and what is external are, to begin with, identical.⁶

Here, the first division in the ego (the first ‘cut’) is produced as the split between ‘inside’ and ‘outside.’ The next step is a bit more complicated: “It is now no longer the question of whether what has been perceived (a thing) shall be taken into the ego or not, but of whether something which is in the ego as a presentation can be rediscovered in perception (reality) as well.”⁷ Reality, as consisting of objects that do not provide immediate pleasure but, as it were, ‘re-found’ pleasures, as objects at a distance from the ego, is a necessarily *symbolic* space.

Horwitz, perhaps with this Freudian background in mind, says that the big Other as the Symbolic order (the always-present *rules* or, more accurately, *conventions* of language) conflicts

⁶ Freud, p. 439

⁷ Ibid.

with the subject's desire, so that a slip becomes meaningful against the presupposed convention (as when one says "I do declare this meeting closed" at the beginning of a meeting).⁸ Horwitz argues that "only [in] positing an unconscious, which thinks and is, in particular, structured like a language can one account for such slips of the tongue."⁹ Since the unconscious Real is renounced in the move to the Symbolic (since it is primordially repressed), its returns (often) appear as cracks in the edifice of language.

Hegel's unconscious (or what one might usefully designate as the unconscious in the dialectic), Horwitz argues, is *not* "structured like a language." In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel offers a critique of knowledge of sensory particulars by demonstrating how a contingent articulation necessarily becomes a knowledge of universals: "When one says 'this man is here', the term 'this man' can refer to any possible man, and 'here' means any time that is current."¹⁰ The contradiction is in "the desire to say something particular and the Other speaking through one and saying something universal."¹¹ The difference from the Freud-Lacanian slip is that, in this case, our desire is impossible to articulate, "rather than possible but repressed as unpleasant or inappropriate."¹²

Horwitz's claim is that the Hegelian unconscious is not structured like a language but, rather, "like the dialectic of universal and particular."¹³ The dialectic moves not because of a primordial repression, but "rather by the immanence of the whole":

The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only in the end is it what it truly is.¹⁴

⁸ Horwitz, p. 27

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hegel (1977), p. 60

¹¹ Horwitz, p. 27

¹² Ibid., p. 28

¹³ Ibid., p. 27

While there is something alien thinking through ‘me’ for Hegel, it is the whole, the Absolute as rational truth, not an “individualized unconscious.” Thus, what is unconscious for Hegel is rational, and it is the motivator for the ‘cunning of reason.’ The conflict of the subject (the way the subject is ‘split’) is between alienated consciousness and universal rationality, not between repressed desire and signifying convention.

With regard to the relationship between the conscious and unconscious, Hegel “posits a split within the whole that consciousness has immanent to it and thereby within itself”:
“Consciousness provides its own criterion from within itself, so that the investigation becomes a comparison of consciousness with itself; for the distinction made above [between knowledge and the object of knowledge] falls within it.”¹⁵ Anything external to consciousness is posited, “so that ultimately it is an object of consciousness.”¹⁶ Thus, the unconscious is “an unconscious for consciousness, a sublated unconscious.”¹⁷ For Lacan, the unconscious refers to that which is necessarily “cut off from consciousness”; it is found in “another place, another scene” (a *primal* scene). Horwitz thus argues that psychoanalysis posits a “split between the two, rather than within one.”¹⁸

Though Žižek constantly acknowledges Lacan’s (obvious and unquestioned) debt to Freud, we should find in his analysis a position markedly different from Horwitz’s assumption that Freud and Lacan are of one psychoanalytic ‘moment.’ As such, the composite ‘psychoanalytic unconscious’ Horwitz describes is nonexistent; Lacan’s unconscious is in some

¹⁴ Hegel (1977), p. 11

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 53

¹⁶ Horwitz, p. 29

¹⁷ This very formulation would apply perfectly to Lacan’s *Imaginary*, interestingly enough, were that Horwitz’s intention.

¹⁸ Ibid.

ways more Hegelian than it is Freudian. As a formal unconscious, it is precisely *not* ‘another place’ but a retroactive effect of subjectivization. As such, the assumption that the Real is a ‘place’, an ontological ‘domain’, that is somehow left behind in a ‘move’ into language is incorrect from a Lacanian perspective, and leads Horwitz astray in his critique of Žižek.

We should take seriously Horwitz’s interest in drawing out the *formal* differences between a Hegelian and psychoanalytic unconscious; the benefit of doing so is to develop an account of negativity in each ‘system.’ However, with Freud and Lacan, we are dealing with two thinkers who, while incontrovertibly linked, do *not* share the same account of the unconscious – it is all too convenient for Horwitz to assume this. On the one hand, we can take Hegel’s and Freud’s concepts of the unconscious to be opposites in at least one regard: “if Hegel discovers unreason (contradiction, the mad dance of opposites which unsettles any rational order) in the heart of reason, Freud discovers reason in the heart of unreason (in slips of the tongue, dreams, madness).”¹⁹ Thus, the ground of the unconscious for Hegel is *reason*, while for Freud it is *unreason* (or, put another way, Hegel finds contingency to be in service of necessity, while Freud finds necessity to be in service of contingency (in the last instance)).

Horwitz aptly points out that the Freudian unconscious is a *singular* unconscious, “a kind of contingent transcendental, a contingent knot-*sinthome* holding together the subject’s universe.”²⁰ In a slip of the tongue, a truth of the subject inaccessible to consciousness is registered in language. The unconscious of the dialectic, however, appears to be *purely* formal, systemic, “a universal symbolic form on which the subject unknowingly relies, not in the contingent ‘pathological’ desire which transpires in slips of the tongue.”²¹ In the

¹⁹ Žižek (2012), p. 484

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Phenomenology, Hegel speaks of *das Formelle* as something over and against appearance-for-a-subject,

the result which at any time comes about in the case of an untrue mode of knowledge cannot possibly collapse into an empty nothing, but must necessarily be taken as the negation of that of which it is a result — a result which contains what truth the preceding mode of knowledge has in it. In the present instance the position takes this form: since what at first appeared as object is reduced, when it passes into consciousness, to what knowledge takes it to be, and the implicit nature, the real in itself, becomes what this entity per se, is for consciousness; this latter is the new object, whereupon there appears also a new mode or embodiment of consciousness, of which the essence is something other than that of the preceding mode. It is this circumstance which carries forward the whole succession of the modes or attitudes of consciousness in their own necessity.²²

This ‘necessity,’ which is an origination of a new object (“which offers itself to consciousness without consciousness knowing how it comes by it”), goes on ‘*behind the subject’s back*’:

Thereby there enters into its process a moment of being per se, or of being for us, which is not expressly presented to that consciousness which is in the grip of experience itself. The content, however, of what we see arising, exists for it, and we lay hold of and comprehend merely its formal character [*das Formelle*], i.e. its bare origination; for it, what has thus arisen has merely the character of object, while, for us, it appears at the same time as a process and coming into being.²³

What is unconscious here is the *process* of mediation, the generation of new content for-consciousness out of the contradictions or deadlocks of the old content, which (at least initially) occurs unacknowledged.

Horwitz is right to recognize the significance of Lacan’s claim that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” but fails to understand why this very claim affects a break *from* Freud and back *to* Hegel. The claim does not simply imply that the unconscious Real is materialized in (returns in the guise of) language, but that “because of their linguistic nature the contents of the unconscious are organized and transformed *according to the laws of language*.”²⁴

²² Hegel (1977), p. 53

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Raffoul, p. 66 (quoted from Antoine Vergote)

François Raffoul picks up on this point: “[To] contend that the unconscious is structured like a language does not simply amount to establishing a parallel between the order of the unconscious and that of language, not to conform the former to the latter, but rather *derives the very possibility of the unconscious from the effects of language on the subject.*”²⁵ So we should say, rather, that Lacan does not see the slip (as Freud does) as a symptom of any ‘return’ of the repressed from the basement of the subject’s unconscious; there is a sense in which the signification of the subject (and the Symbolic proper) *produces* the unconscious.²⁶

Lacan himself responds to critics of his theory of the signifier (in particular, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe) in a way Žižek might respond to Horwitz:

Beginning with what distinguishes me from Saussure, and what made me, as they say, distort him, we proceed, little by little, to the impasse I designate concerning analytic discourse's approach to truth and its paradoxes... It is as if it were precisely upon reaching the impasse to which my discourse is designed to lead them that they [Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe] considered their work done...²⁷

This is the Lacanian procedure *par excellence*: what appeared to have been a problem (that a theory of the signifier is inconsequential insofar as it is a secondary formation that reflects a *pre-Symbolic* ontological space) is itself its own solution.²⁸ Both Hegel and Lacan read Plato’s

²⁵ Ibid., italics mine

²⁶ Pippin, in his study of Hegel’s claim in the *Phenomenology* that “self-consciousness is desire,” argues that: “In general we have a picture of a self or subject of experience and action estranged from, or divided within itself (without, as Hegel put it, a ‘unity’ that ‘must become essential to it’) but conceived now in a way very different from Plato’s divided soul, divided among distinct ‘parts’ in competition for rule of the soul as a whole, and in a way very different both from other forms of metaphysical dualism, and from what would become familiar as the Freudian mind, split between the conscious and distinct unconscious mind, or most explicitly for Hegel (and for Schiller) in distinction from the Kantian conception of noumenal and phenomenal selves...Hegel treats this division *as a result*, not in any factual historical sense but as a disruption of natural orectic unity that must always already have resulted, and can only be rightly understood as effected” (Pippin, p. 51).

²⁷ Lacan (1978), p. 204

²⁸ And is it not here, at least, with Lacan’s own ‘cunning of reason,’ that he is undoubtedly Hegelian?

Parmenides, but for Lacan, his interest was in the way that dialogue left behind Plato's key ontological error of the Idea (which was repeated as error by Kant in his first critique):

There is not just the interplay of appearances, there is a Real – this Real, however, is not the inaccessible Thing, but the *gap* which prevents our access to it, the 'rock' of the antagonism which distorts our view of the perceived object through a partial perspective. The 'truth' is thus not the 'real' state of things, accessed by a 'direct' view of the object without any perspectival distortion, but the very Real of the antagonism which causes the perspectival distortion itself.²⁹

So how does the perspective/parallax distortion work, and how is Horwitz subject to it in his own way?

Lacan's well-known scheme of the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real (ISR) shifted its accent throughout the course of his career. The Real is always that which 'resists symbolization absolutely'; however, it was only in his latest period (Lacan's *third* period) where Real as impossibility (as the impossibility of symbolization) is fully articulated.³⁰ Horwitz's interpretation remains at the level of the early Lacan (*Lacan at his most Freudian*), where reality *becomes* symbolized, and where the Real is in some sense temporally prior to the Symbolic. Here, that language contains a lack means that there is an ontological space that is not lacking, and the Real is impossible insofar as it's that very space to which the subject can never return (as in the primordial relationship with the Mother).

This is a metaphysical story of the temporalizing of the Kantian Thing-in-Itself, where the Real is that thing beyond language that we can't get *back* to (so that before the subject was a

²⁹ Žižek (2012), p. 48

³⁰ Where *exactly* the breaks occur is an open question among scholars (who accept this rough periodization), though Žižek locates a fundamental shift between *Seminar X* (1962-1963) and *Seminar XI* (1964): "*Seminar X* marks the lowest point of nightmare, the confrontation with the Real of anxiety, while, in *Seminar XI*, the mood changes – stylistically also – from the tragic-pathetic elaboration of concepts that characterizes Lacan's 'mature' seminars of the late 1950s and early 1960s, to the hermetic 'playfulness' of the seminars that follow the eleventh" (Žižek (2012), p. 761).

linguistic subject, it was ‘there’ in some sense). The shift in perspective occurs first at the level of the psychoanalytic language:

Until the end of the fifties, the pleasure principle was identified with the imaginary level: the symbolic order was conceived as the realm ‘beyond the pleasure principle’. But starting from the late fifties (the Seminar on *The Ethic of Psychoanalysis*), it is, in contrast, the symbolic order itself which is identified with the pleasure principle: the unconscious ‘structured like a language’, its ‘primary process’ of metonymic-metaphoric displacement, is governed by the pleasure principle; what lies beyond is not the symbolic order but a real kernel, a traumatic core. To designate it, Lacan uses a Freudian term: *das Ding*, the Thing as an incarnation of the impossible *jouissance*[...] ³¹

What this suggests, in the Real of *jouissance* as ‘beyond the pleasure principle,’ is the Real as the point of the Symbolic’s failure, of its inconsistency (since the death drive marks the point at which the homeostatic cycle of generation and corruption is itself suspended). ³² It is a break in the *logic* of the signifier, and thus (in the formal sense) comes *second*.

Lacan eventually posits the Real as something with no existence beyond its *effects* in language and in the phenomenal (in reality). As such, it *insists* upon reality: it has no substantial being. The ISR relation is eventually articulated along these lines (in a temporality that is finally ordered I-S-R): the symbol suggests something in the Imaginary element (in the visual profile of the object) that cannot be seen. That is, the symbol (the *name*) turns the object into an appearance of something beyond it, a something that is ‘in it more than the object itself’ (*more* than its properties). The Real, then, is (according to Žižek, at least) *appearance as appearance*.

Here is Jacques Alain-Miller on the Imaginary and the Symbolic:

³¹ Žižek (1989), p. 132

³² At its most extreme, this is the Sadian notion (understood by Lacan) of an absolute crime that liberates Nature itself from its cycle of growth and decay. There, contrasted with ‘natural death’ (the corruption that follows generation) is ‘absolute death’ (the eradication of the cycle itself which unleashes the creative forms of life anew). The sexual victim in Sade is sublime only insofar as she can suffer any torture and retain her dignity; she appears to possess a body beyond her merely natural one.

When Lacan spoke of the imaginary register, he was talking about images that could be seen. The pigeon is not interested in the void; if there is a void in the place of the image, the pigeon does not develop there, the insect does not reproduce. But it is a fact that Lacan does not stop talking about the imaginary once he has introduced the symbolic...How is the concept of the imaginary transformed after the symbolic has been introduced? In a precise way. The most important part of the imaginary is what cannot be seen...In Lacan's celebrated observations and theorizations on the mirror stage, Lacan's imaginary register was essentially linked to perception. While now, when the symbolic is introduced, there is a disjunction between the imaginary and perception, and in some way this imaginary of Lacan is linked to the imagination...This implies the connection of the imaginary and the symbolic and thus a thesis is separated from perception: *the image is a screen for what cannot be seen.*³³

The error built in to Lacan's system (the productive impasse that Horwitz misses entirely) is that the Real is not the Thing behind the screen but the screen itself, the gap between the phenomena and the Thing that we are forced to presuppose as subjects of the signifier. The illusion to which the subject is 'subjected' is *not* that the phenomena appears real while it is only a copy of the Thing; rather, the illusion is that there is a Thing behind the veil at all. And yet, for structural reasons, the illusion is a necessary one.

³³ Miller (2009), p. 39 (italics mine)

CHAPTER 3: SUBJECT, SUBSTANCE, AND THE INSISTENT REAL

The metaphysical problem for Lacan isn't in distinguishing reality 'for-us' from reality 'in-itself'; *that* problem ignores the *curvature* constitutive of the subject, the fact that the impossible object that *is* the subject (impossible because subjectivity relies upon its elision from the field of phenomena) must be excluded from reality. The object that must be erased in order to open up the subjective space (in order for there to be any subjective space whatsoever) is the Lacanian *objet a*, which is inscribed into the field of phenomena as the 'object-cause of desire,' or the unnamable thing in the object of desire that is 'in [the object] more than the object itself.' The *objet a* is a piece of the Real on the side of the Symbolic, a specter that haunts the subject and discloses the inconsistency of the Symbolic in which the subject is represented *as a subject* (the Lacanian Master Signifier, in contrast, is a piece of the Symbolic on the side of the Real, which *disguises* the Symbolic's (or the big Other's) inconsistency).

However, calling the *objet a* 'a piece of the Real' may be misleading, since it is not a part of some substantial Real-beyond-language that's been chipped off an edifice and found in another place, like a piece of plaster fallen from a dilapidated ceiling. Rather, the *objet a* is a 'stand in' for the *unconscious* Real, a Real that's inside the subject rather than outside the correlation of subject-object, as it has been problematically conceived in the discourse from the Kantian *Ding an sich* to the renewed attempts of Meillassoux and the 'speculative realists' at breaking the correlation.³⁴ For Lacan, *das Ding* is an impossible-Real reference point of desire,

³⁴ Adrian Johnston, in his book on Žižek no less, describes the position of 'transcendental materialism' as an inscription of the 'correlation' into the In-itself ("[the] path to the In-itself leads through the subjective gap," as Žižek states (Žižek (2012), p. 906). The Kantian language is significant for Johnston, for whom "Žižek's 'monstrosity,' his heterodox Hegel, is the figure who accomplishes the fulfillment of Kant's 'Copernican Revolution,' à la the transcendental turn (bringing to fruition that which is 'in Kant more than Kant himself')" (Johnston, p. 128). Johnston's reading of Lacanian subjectivity in Žižek is not fundamentally different from my

and the *objet a* is a reference to the Thing beyond phenomenal reality that has been primordially lost and which constitutes the aim of desire. However, the Thing is not an essence but a retroactive effect of subjectivization, since the relationship to a term that remains outside of its constructed reality (*das Ding*) is constitutive of the subject itself. Why is this the case? Because *subjectivity is nothing other than an object's inability to objectify itself*.

Žižek mobilizes Hegel's precursor, Fichte, in order to draw a parallel between the Fichtean *Anstoss* and the Lacanian *objet a*:

Insofar as the 'subject' is the name for self-relating absolute negativity, *Anstoss* as the minimal form of not-I is not a (logical) negation of the subject's (full and only) reality, but, on the contrary, the result of the negation of the negation which 'is' the subject. One does not begin with a positivity which is then negated; one begins with negation, and the object's positivity is the result of the (self-related) negation of this negation. Or, to put it in Lacanese, the object *a* has no substantial being of its own, is nothing but the positivization of a lack: not a lacking object, but an object which positivizes a lack (negativity), whose positivity is nothing but a positivized negativity.³⁵

So it is not that the *objet a* stands in for an actually-lost Thing, but that the *objet a* stands in for a (no)Thing. Fichte's account of subjectivity informs the Lacanian (and, as we will see, the Hegelian) picture and its reliance upon the notion of curvature (mentioned above), twist, or magnetization. The moment we begin dealing with thinking and a relation *to* reality (the moment the subject appears), we are confronted with objects that are 'no longer' immediate; in the psychoanalytic sense, sources of pleasure have been pushed to an 'outside.' Here is Alenka Zupancic describing Freud's account of this 'process':

The first mythical difference between inside and outside is not yet a real difference, but a process of differentiating the indifferent, or the indistinct, led by the primary process of the pleasure principle. The latter operates, so to speak, with its head on in the indifferent that it separates, but the difference itself, the furrow that it leaves behind, at no point

own, and it is important to acknowledge the significance of Kant in Žižek's reading of Hegel (that Hegel himself internalized the ontological breakthrough Kant made but didn't adequately carry through).

³⁵ Žižek (2012), p. 175

enters its horizon. The *Ich* only first encounters it in the second step, when it returns in its footsteps, but no longer finds the world as it has been “before.” Now there is difference, the difference between inside and outside, yet it no longer coincides with the difference between good and bad (or pleasant and unpleasant); for the condition of the good, and of experiencing pleasure, is now precisely in finding the object *outside* (in reality). The object of representation has to be found outside or else it is of no use to us. What has once been inside needs to be found outside. This outside is hence very much subjectively mediated, which is why psychoanalysis situates the real in neither this (subjective) outside nor in the pure inside, but precisely in the impossible space created by their twist and torsion.³⁶

The Real, far from being a primordial, pre-subjective pleasure source, is the ‘twist and torsion,’ the cut that always-already marks the inside-outside (it is what Zupancic calls the *with-without*). The Freudian term that marks the process, *Ausstoßung*, or ‘pushing out,’ the Fichtean self-positing of an outside, suggests an emptying of once-occupied space. However, one need not conceive of this space as having been ‘actually occupied.’

The cut between inside and outside “does not produce two things but three: 1) affirmation (some positivity); 2) negation (absence, what is not); and 3) the *place*, or *locus*, of their difference.”³⁷ The move from pleasure-ego to subjectivity proper is *not* the actual ‘pushing out’ of parts of the original subject beyond a boundary that marks the ‘beginning’ of an outside, but the ‘taking in’ of the third term, the cut that separates ‘me’ from ‘not-me’:

The negativity included in the subject at its very affirmative constitution is not this or that negativity (exteriority), but the very form of negation which reveals here its real structure, namely and precisely that of *with-without*. The cutting off (of the future outside reality) leaves a mark, a trace, which is precisely what the subject relies upon in its constitution. The constitutive affirmation, *Bejahung*, (inevitably) also takes in this supplement, the materialization of its own limit. And it is this limit that constitutes that peculiar third dimension, which is neither outside nor inside, neither subject nor object, neither something nor absence; rather, it has the precise structure of the “with-without,” and of the curve that this expression indicates or traces. This is what henceforth curves the given structure or space, magnetizes it.³⁸

³⁶ Zupancic, p. 33

³⁷ Ibid., p. 34

³⁸ Ibid.

The ‘mark’ or ‘trace’ left by subjectivization is the *objet a*, which points toward an outside, a primordial harmony without division, that never was. The original *Lust-Ich*, or pleasure-ego, is a mythological entity.

The result(s) of subjectivization are corresponding splits – there is a split inherent to *substance* (the traditionally conceived subject-object relation) and a split inherent to the *subject* (the conscious-unconscious relation). The former relation is the ‘reality’ of the correlation, and is associated with the Lacanian Symbolic. The latter, which also grounds the distinction between the enunciation and the enunciated (the *act* of saying against the (Symbolic) content of the utterance), gives us the (ego-)subject and its objectal shadow (the *objet a*). Thus, the relation between substance and subject is grounded in an *overlapping of two lacks* – the subject loses something in order to emerge as a subject of the signifier, and the big Other lacks something, something is excluded in symbolically-structured reality, in order for reality to emerge for the subject at all. This overlap is nothing other than Lacan’s *objet a*.

But what exactly is it that the subject ‘loses,’ and why must it lose anything in the first place? In order for the subject to relate to a field of elements, an object must be excluded from its place – this object is that which the subjective position *replaces* in subjectivization.³⁹ That is, the

³⁹ In his film theory, Žižek locates the *objet a* in the images of excess at the heart of the (filmic) subject’s experience, in “an intensity that cannot be contained within the narrative line and continuously threatens to explode it” (Žižek (2001), p. 96). In the films of David Lynch, this is often performed through a motif of fire; cuts to a burning candle (*Blue Velvet*) or match (*Wild at Heart*). But more relevantly, in film one can demonstrate the subjective *experience* of the lost object through sound, since the relationship between vision and sound “is mediated by an impossibility: ultimately, we hear things because we cannot see everything” (Žižek (2012), p. 669). In Kieslowski’s *Blue*, a particular (unfinished) symphony emanates from a gap in the structure of the visual field *and* (in a kind of supervenience relation) from a place in the protagonist’s character-unconscious. It is as if she “is undergoing a fading (*aphanisis*), losing consciousness for a couple of seconds...when she gathers herself again and successfully represses the insurgency of the musical past, the lights are turned on again, the previous scene continues” (Žižek (2001), p. 165).

lost object is the object *that is now subject*, and as such, the impossible object that the subject itself *is* but cannot fully relate to. To be a subject is to fail at objectifying oneself; more radically, the subject is *nothing other than* this failure of self-objectification. The excluded/replaced object, the *objet a*, appears to the subject as the ‘object-cause of desire’ that exceeds the positive (phenomenological) characteristics of the field it relates to. Since the *objet a* is the impossible foundation of reality’s appearance of consistency (for a subject), it is pushed out from the ‘inside’ of the subject to appear in the field itself. In desiring something (or someone), the subject desires that which is in the object beyond its positive qualities, and thus in desiring attempts to reclaim the ‘lost’ object, which is why it sees in its object of desire its gaze looking back at it (making *it* an object of the Other’s desire):

The *objet a* is thus not the core of reality which resists being subsumed by the conceptual frame imposed by the subject; it is, on the contrary, the objectivization of the subject’s desire: the status of that which makes me desire an object is irreducibly linked to my ‘subjective’ perspective, it is not simply an objective property of the beloved – that X which fascinates me in the beloved exists only for me, not for an ‘objective’ view. We can even go a step further and argue that the subjective mediation here is *double*: far from simply standing for the excess in the object eluding the subject’s grasp, the *objet a* is, at its most elementary, what I see in the other’s gaze. In other words, what eludes me in a libidinal object is not some transcendent property, but the inscription into it of my own desire: what I see in the other is his or her desire for me; that is, I read in his or her eyes my own status as an object (of desire), the way I appear to the other.⁴⁰

The Real is not a ‘transcendent property’ of the object, or a primordial substance that is actually ‘lost,’ but a *product* of subjectivization (and corresponding sexualization). It appears in reality as a stand-in for that which was lost, but it was never lost; rather, it is that *which we cannot get rid of*. The *objet a* is a lack that continually haunts the subject in its constitutive failure to objectify and thus complete itself, in its failure to fully *know* itself, which, once externalized, takes the form of the desire for sexual completion.

⁴⁰ Žižek (2012), p. 666

Žižek describes the relationship between the subject and its ‘objectal correlate’ as “a kind of negative correlation, an impossible link, a non-relationship, between two moments which can never meet within the same space (like subject and object), not because they are too far away, but because they are one and the same entity on two sides of a Möbius band.”⁴¹ Traditionally, the psychoanalytic account of this paradoxical relationship posits this split *within* the subject as formally prior to the subject-object split (as Freud’s account of ego-formation shows). If this appears to be fundamentally different from the Hegelian account whereby subjective alienation succeeds the alienation of Absolute substance, it is important to note that the overlapping of *objet a* and the barred subject (the pure void of the subject) bears witness in the first place to the incompleteness of reality: “the very distance which separates us from the In-itself is imminent to the In-itself, makes us (the subject) an unaccountable/‘impossible’ gap or cut within the In-itself.”⁴²

The subject, whose split allows for an opening-up onto a field of positively existing phenomenal elements (beings) as well as a transcendent dimension within reality itself (mediated by desire), is in the first place the site of ontological incompleteness. We can contrast this Hegelo-Lacanian move with the Fichto-Freudian alternative, where the absolute, positing I recuperates all things outside of itself as its own presuppositions. Since the subject dwells within phenomena, since it is itself an object it cannot fully reflect upon, one can conclude that “the limitation of phenomena is not external but internal,” not epistemologically beyond the subject’s limitations but ontologically inconsistent, containing a node (the subject) that functions as a gap or cut within the phenomenal. This conforms to the Lacanian logic of the ‘non-All’:

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 958

⁴² Ibid., p. 956

There is no need for any positive transcendent domain of noumenal entities which limit phenomena from outside – phenomena with their inconsistencies, their self-limitations, are “all there is.” The key conclusion to be drawn from this self-limitation of phenomena is that it is strictly correlative to subjectivity: there is a (transcendental) subject only as correlative to the inconsistency, self-limitation, or, more radically, “ontological incompleteness,” of phenomenal reality.⁴³

If we were to conceive the inconsistency of phenomenal reality as secondary, as the mere *effect* of the subject’s epistemological limitations in the face of the In-itself, the subject would either become “a mere epi-phenomenon” or a solipsistic Absolute.

Žižek’s critique of a Kantian metaphysics that suggests otherwise, that posits the real-beyond-reality as a complete and consistent domain out of the range of an incomplete reality-for-a-subject, is also a critique of a metaphysics of the remainder, where language and conceptual frameworks always fall short of capturing the full *richness* of reality. For Hegel *and* Lacan, the Real is not something outside of the concept or primary to it but the formal/conceptual impasse itself. Clearly, for Hegel, reality itself is conceptual; for Lacan, there is reality in the first place because the Symbolic (language) cannot fully grasp itself (it is ‘non-All’). The claim that the unconscious is “structured like a language” is significant because it reclaims the unconscious from an irrationalism that merely thinks the domain that is ‘deeper’ than thought or structure.

Hegel’s insight that “when we think, we think in language against language”⁴⁴ follows from this view of the unconscious/Real, which “can only be demonstrated through formal logic, not in a direct way, but negatively, through a deadlock of logical formalization”: the Real is what ‘insists’ as a gap or antagonism. The ontological status of the Real is that of an obstacle, “a cause which has no positive ontological consistency in itself but is present only through and in its

⁴³ Ibid., p. 283

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 876

effects.”⁴⁵ When one tries to ‘touch the Real’ in language, to formalize it, one fails, and the *failure itself* is the Real, which is “simultaneously what cannot be symbolized *and* the very obstacle which prevents this symbolization.”⁴⁶ According to Žižek, the coincidence of a Thing with “the very obstacle which prevents our access to it,” and the resolution of the epistemological obstacle into ontological impossibility, is the greatest of Hegelian dialectical insights.⁴⁷

This brings us to “the core of Hegelian Christology,” which functions (at least on Žižek’s reading) as an exemplary case of substance’s split and the way in which this split *produces* the subject. In Christianity, “our alienation from God coincides with the alienation of God from himself.”⁴⁸ If it is Hegel who would claim that “our re-presentation of God is God himself in the mode of representation, that our erroneous perception of God is God himself in erroneous mode,” cannot one extend this insight into a radical sublation of epistemological failure by ontological incompleteness? Žižek’s claim is that, “If we can *think* our knowledge of reality (the way reality appears to us) as having radically failed, as radically different from the Absolute,

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 841

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ In his *Logic*, Hegel hints that the ancient materialists provided one way to think of the gap of negativity as that which holds together paradoxical terms of the dialectic: “The atomistic principle, with these first thinkers, didn’t remain in exteriority, but apart from its abstraction contained a speculative determination, that the void was recognized as the source of movement. This implies a completely different relation between atoms and the void than the mere one-beside-the-other [*Nebeneinander*] and mutual indifference of the two... The view that the cause of movement lies in the void contains that deeper thought that the cause of becoming pertains to the negative” (Hegel (1969), p. 185; translated by Dolar). Mladen Dolar writes: “However far and wide we seek a minimal element, we never arrive at one minimal and indivisible, but rather at the division as irreducible. The minimal element is this division itself, not any positive entity. The void is, as it were, the Platonic missing half of the element as one, and it answers this description by indeed being missing. Hegel’s atom, his elementary particle, is thus the atom itself in this precise sense: that which cannot be divided any further is the division, the split on which any unity is premised” (Dolar, p. 46).

⁴⁸ Žižek (2012), p. 612

then this gap (between For-us and In-itself) must be part of the Absolute itself, so that the very feature that seemed forever to keep us away from the Absolute is the only feature which directly unites us with the Absolute.”⁴⁹ This gap is the prime mover of the dialectic, and is clearly operative in the Christian experience, where the God-substance is separated from itself in the figure of Christ: “the point is thus not to ‘overcome’ the gap which separates us from God, but to take note of how *this gap is internal to God himself* – only when I experience the infinite pain of separation from God do I share an experience with God himself (Christ on the Cross).”⁵⁰

If the subject is substance’s bearing witness to itself, or the gap in the Absolute that is nonetheless included within it, then the subject’s alienation is a product of its inclusion within ‘true’ reality (rather than its distance from it). But then how can a reconciliation with the Absolute, a shuffling off of the subject’s alienation, be conceivable without losing the subject altogether (for it is clear that, for Hegel, reconciliation is *not* the same thing as the subject’s dissolution)? Here, Žižek himself introduces the *symptom* (which, since it is not a Hegelian concept, functions as the pivot toward a necessarily Lacanian Hegel). Absolute knowing that retains the subject is a knowing that includes the inconsistency of substance, since what it is to be a subject is to be unable to locate oneself as an object in reality (it is to be a self-reflexive loop, articulated by Lacan in his distinction between the ‘subject of the enunciated’ and the ‘subject of the enunciation’); Absolute knowing is ‘absolute’ in the sense of *an inclusion of every symptom*. Thus we can begin to think of the subject itself as symptom, or at the very least as something that *comes second* (that the outcome of ‘subjectivization,’ the formed personality-ego, succeeds the pure void of the ‘barred subject,’ the irreducible gap in substance itself).

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 636

⁵⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4: SUTURE AND THE RABBLE

The objective of Miller's essay, "Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier)," is to "articulate the concept of suture which, if it is not named explicitly as such by Jacques Lacan, is constantly present in his system."⁵¹ Indeed, the essay served to draw something implicit in Lacanian thought to the surface, under an auspiciously simple name. What Miller started to describe, and what Žižek has continually elaborated upon, was a 'general' logic, "in that its functioning is formal in relation to all fields of knowledge including that of psychoanalysis which, in acquiring a specificity there, it governs."⁵² This logic thematizes the Lacanian *point de capiton*, or the 'quilting point' of so many esoterically formal Lacanian graphs and diagrams.

The operation of the suture is the introduction of self-reflexivity into the signifying order (into the Symbolic): "if the identity of a signifier is nothing but the series of its constitutive differences, then every signifying series has to be supplemented – 'sutured' – by a reflexive signifier which has no determinate meaning (signified), since it stands only for the presence of meaning as such (as opposed to absence)."⁵³ According to the structuralists, the signifying series is what constructs language and discourse; however, in order to maintain the arbitrariness of the signifier, in order to account for the formal distance between signifier and signified, some signifier must 'float,' existing without a corresponding signified and marking the absence (the outside) of the series. Levi-Strauss likened this exceptional signifier to 'mana,' or "a *zero symbolic value*, that is, a sign marking the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content over and above that which the signified already contains."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Miller (1977), p. 2

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Žižek (2012), p. 584

⁵⁴ Levi-Strauss, p. 64

Lacan's *point de capiton* involves the stabilization of the floating signifier: "the 'quilting point' sutures the two fields, that of the signifier and the signified, acting as the point at which, as Lacan put it in a precise way, 'the signifier falls into the signified.'"⁵⁵ So the suture, in effect, does two things: first, it stabilizes the signifying chain of a discourse (it 'completes' an artificial language, holding all of its differential structures in place), and second, it links that discourse to the field of signifieds.⁵⁶ This double duty can be imagined as the stitch that holds, on the one hand, a string (of signifiers) in the shape of a closed loop, as well as that loop in connection with an umbilical cord (connecting the field of signifiers to some point in the field of signifieds). The result is an overlap (in the *point de capiton*) that presents the necessity of the link between the Master Signifier and the *objet a* – the former represents lack as the suture in the field of language (the signifier without any corresponding signified), while the latter appears as the lack, the stain of desire, in phenomenal reality (the signified without any corresponding signifier).

The hole in phenomenal reality, the point of the object-cause of desire, is a corresponding structure of the formal Master Signifier in discourse. As such, there is an intimate link between the conceptual logic of the signifier and its material positivization; the *objet a* is a material

⁵⁵ Žižek (2012), p. 586

⁵⁶ Žižek notes that in *Difference and Repetition* (the seminal work of the 'good' Deleuze, from Žižek's point of view), Deleuze posits a 'paradoxical mark' that inscribes itself both in a corresponding series of causes *and* effects, termed the 'dark precursor.' Its description suggests a direct affinity with the Lacanian logic of the signifier: "[Given] two heterogenous series, two series of differences, the precursor plays the part of the differentiator of these differences. In this manner, by virtue of its own power, it puts them into immediate relation to one another: it is the in-itself of difference or the 'differently different' – in other words, difference in the second degree, the self-different which relates different to different by itself. Because the path it traces is invisible and becomes visible only in reverse, to the extent that it is traveled over and covered by the phenomena it induces within the system, it has no place other than that from which it is 'missing,' no identity other than that which it lacks: it is precisely the object = x, the one which is 'lacking in its place' as it lacks its own identity" (Deleuze, p. 119). In the *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze applies this signifying structure to language (so that the short-circuit between two verbal series is what generates sense, or the sense-effect).

symptom to which the formal-Symbolic matrix that structures reality is necessarily connected (it is a symptom of reality's incompleteness, the fundamental lack in the Other). As it is often argued in the psychoanalysis of the cure, disturbing the place of the symptom, *moving it* in some way, changes the very structure of that matrix.⁵⁷ What Žižek attempts to do here, then, is mirror the radical inconsistency that sets the logic of the signifier (and, correspondingly, the Hegelian dialectic) in motion with the *social* antagonism, or the split within the social body that sets ideological discourse (and its associated struggles) in motion. Then, the positivization of the symptom in society would be related back to a gap in its ideological structure.

The complication over the use of the term *material* here is, of course, an important one. One should not only wonder whether Žižek loses Hegel altogether by grounding the movement of the dialectic around an irreducible material component (as many already have), but should also ask how the psychoanalytic insight that reality is structured around the place of the subject (that we can't conceive of reality in the first place without a subject) could have a materialist basis. It is important, once again, to distinguish reality (that which cannot be conceived without a subject) from the Real, which is the trans-subjective *process*, lost once the subject appears, of the subject's emergence (along with its necessary world-correlate). It is precisely by positing this process, as opposed to the Real as noumenal essence, that Žižek can begin to generate a materialism consonant with Hegelian dialectics: we can account for the subject's (spirit's) generation out of substance in a way that doesn't require the addition of a divine domain over-

⁵⁷ This operation, which modern institutions have been designed to discourage, and which the tradition of political theory has excluded as a moment of madness or chaos, is a kind of *revolutionary* violence fundamentally different from the *constituted* violence of the historical structures themselves. As Jameson notes, “[History] is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its ‘ruses’ turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention” (Jameson (1981), p. 102). Is this not simply a re-conception of Hegel's verdict that history is “the slaughter-bench”?

and-above reality. We can also note the similarity between Žižek's and Marx's respective approaches to dialectics: both construct the movement of the conceptual apparatus on a purely *immanent* plane.⁵⁸

Now, if 'materialism' requires its particular specification in the Hegelian dialectic, so does 'suture' (although while the former appears to be a direct contradiction in the traditional account, the latter is simply absent). Žižek would not be justified in reading the Lacanian conceptual apparatus back into Hegel were there not something in Hegel's account that requires 'filling out.' Since the traditional account views the Hegelian historical process teleologically (and thus, predicts the eventual erasure of anything that might be translated into *objet a*, any obstacle to dis-alienation on the level of subjectivity), addressing this point is the first step in recovering some gap in the Hegelian edifice. Terry Pinkard's reading of Hegel provides a preliminary key:

[Hegel's] mature philosophy of history, sketched at the end of the published *Philosophy of Right* and elaborated at length in his lectures in Berlin, is a reconstruction of the history of political communities (states). His point is that the narrative of history of *political communities* has come to an end; it is a *story* that is over. The mature philosophy of history thus extends the kind of philosophical history that he practiced in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*...*Philosophical* history is concerned not with what caused one form of life to supplant another (what caused Rome to supplant Greece) but with the ways in which what a later form of life takes to be authoritative for itself can be understood only in terms of how it came to see the accounts given by earlier forms of life as insufficient. It is not as if one form of life is *fated* to be replaced by another.⁵⁹

Pinkard positions this move (from a focus on cause to retroactive reconstruction of the contradiction) as the major shift from the *Phenomenology* to *Right*. Here, something is a

⁵⁸ Although, of course, Marx incorporates the notion of 'real abstraction' into his analysis of exchange-value and reification, the concept is not in any way constructed as a transcendence of the material conditions of production. Rather, abstractions are 'real' because they contain performative power.

⁵⁹ Pinkard, p. 332

“rational successor” of something else if it can be seen to “*complete* the former stage,” to create a social space wherein the internal contradictions of the former have been removed:

When a form of life develops a certain set of reflective practices, such as occurred in ancient Greece, it generates a skepticism about its own practices and its own accounts of what counts for it as authoritative; these skeptical doubts are the self-generated “negations” of the accounts they had given themselves, and they motivate that form of life to try to reassure itself that what it has taken as authoritative is indeed true, is well founded. In trying to reassure itself, a form of life will deploy a set of strategies and new accounts. If they succeed in offering a satisfactory reply that allays these doubts, they *renew* their form of life; if they fail, then there is a breakdown of the reason-giving activity.⁶⁰

In the case of breakdown, the members of the social organization develop “unhappy consciousness,” or alienated consciousness, which can only be allayed by “the generation of new types of accounts whose internal aims are consistent with what the old account *actually* accomplished...or new accounts whose internal new aims supersede the old aims by including them as components of itself.”⁶¹

Žižek admits, in agreement with Pinkard’s reading, that Hegel’s logic is minimally ‘transcendental’ (in the Kantian sense). The notional-historical network is indeed constitutive of reality itself. But what sets the movement of the network in motion is an irreducible tension in the ‘status’ of every category: “each concept is simultaneously *necessary* (i.e. indispensable if we are to conceive reality, its underlying ontological structure) and *impossible* (i.e. self-refuting, inconsistent: the moment we fully and consequently ‘apply’ it to reality, it disintegrates and/or turns into its opposite.”⁶² This applies to the dialectical movements described in the *Phenomenology* and in *Right*; in both cases, the notional contradiction is not the *failure* of thought to grasp reality (ontological or structural-political) but “the ultimate proof that our

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 333

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 334

⁶² Žižek (1999), p. 99

thought is not merely a logical game we play, but is able to reach reality itself, expressing its inherent structuring principle.”⁶³

The paradoxical union of necessity and impossibility is articulated by Hegel in the relationship between the Universal and its particular content. Žižek finds here a similarity between the Universal/particular relation in its abstract articulation and Ernesto Laclau’s concept of (political) hegemony:

[The] Universal is empty, yet precisely as such always-already filled in, that is, hegemonized by some contingent, particular content that acts as its stand-in – in short, each Universal is the battleground on which the multitude of particular contents fight for hegemony... [There is] no content of the Universal which would be effectively neutral and, as such, common to all its species (we can never define any features which are common to all humans in absolutely the same modality): all positive content of the Universal is the contingent result of hegemonic struggle – in itself, the Universal is absolutely empty.⁶⁴

On this account, the Universal subsists (manifests itself concretely) as some particular content that stands in for (in some sense ‘falsely’ embodies) Universality itself; all other elements related in the field are then mere particulars by comparison.⁶⁵ This, then, is to read Hegel’s ‘concrete universality’ not, as it has been traditionally conceived, as “the organic articulation of a Whole in which each element plays its unique, particular but irreplaceable part,” but as the articulation of an *exception* that, simply by virtue of its occupying a unique place in the formation of a field or discourse, by standing in for the outside of the field (by virtue of its *not* having an obvious role in the field), attains the level of Universality.⁶⁶

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 101

⁶⁵ “[The] universal results from a constitutive split in which the negation of a particular identity transforms this identity into the symbol of identity and fullness as such” (Laclau, p. 89).

⁶⁶ In *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek constructs an example of this from the history of music: there is a sense in which one might treat the violin concerto as a concrete universal. How? Not when it’s categorized according to a matrix of styles (the Classical concerto, the Romantic concerto, etc.), but when the various forms and styles are themselves thought of as many (failed) attempts to

The key here, though, is to pay attention to the *falsity* of the element's rising to the level of the Universal notion. Lacan's analysis shows how the Symbolic establishes the level that things (and names) constitutively fail to reach. Žižek asks, "What are the consequences for psychoanalysis of the purely logical point that the true of a universal affirmation does not imply that a particular element which exemplifies this truth exists?"⁶⁷ For Lacan, every particular father is revealed as impotent, as inadequate, against the universal notion of father:

[The] order of the function which we introduced here as that of the name-of-the-father is something which has universal value, but, simultaneously, puts on you the charge to control if there is or not a father who fits this function. If there is no such father, it still remains true that the father is God, it is simply that this formula is confirmed only by the empty sector of the square.⁶⁸

So no father is truly a father except for the mythical 'primordial father' whose death assures the force of Symbolic Law (under the Name-of-the-Father). This parallax analysis is shared between Lacan and Hegel through the dialectic of the Universal and particular (the Lacanian version ignored, as we've seen, by Horwitz). Žižek, then, wants to emphasize this relation in order to find a *political* body that is sufficiently radical *and* in the position to 'rise to the level of its notion' by virtue of occupying the space of society's concrete universal. One must first, however, get away from the notion of concrete universality as an organic articulation of civic space; this is to prefer an antagonistic structure over and against a differential one (the latter as

perform the universality of the concept. In a concerto, the violin, conceived by Adorno as the instrument most associated with subjectivity, can interact with the *substance* of the orchestra in various ways (Beethoven's concertos demonstrate the excess of subjectivity, Brahms's counter with the dominance of an orchestra swallowing the violin melody, Schumann empties the orchestra altogether, Bartók eliminates the solo, etc.). Žižek's claim is that "there never has been a violin concerto that fully 'realized its concept' (a dialogue engendering a productive tension and reconciliation between violin and orchestra, Subject and Substance): every time some invisible hindrance prevents the concept's fulfillment" (p. 102).

⁶⁷ Žižek (2012), p. 761

⁶⁸ Cited by Žižek (2012), from Lacan, seminar of January 17, 1962, in *Le séminaire, Livre XI: L'identification* (unpublished)

concerned solely with the series of metonymic relations within a field, and the former as concerned with the negativity that the field domesticates *a priori*).

The point at which Žižek makes the leap from these formal relations (the dialectic of the Universal and particular in Hegel, already read in consonance with the logic of the signifier in Lacan) to political ones is in a reading of Hegel's 'rabble' (*Pöbel*). The rabble, treated briefly in *Right*, is interpreted as a symptom of the modern state, the 'irrational' excess of the supposedly rational political body that has all the characteristics (in actuality) of the *objet a*: they have no firm place in society, they are formally excluded, though they subsist necessarily on the boundary between the inside and outside of the system (they are, as Ranciere would put it, its "part of no-part"). As such, the rabble embodies the concrete universal, but only if we read that in the antagonistic (as opposed to the differential) sense, precisely because they belong to no coherent 'estate.' Unfortunately, Žižek's treatment of this symptomatic point, as important as it seems to figure in his move from the abstract dialectic to political analysis, mirrors Hegel's in its brevity. Therefore, before we can even begin to see how the status of the rabble works into a critical analysis that's relevant to a contemporary situation, we must look at Hegel's *Right* more closely, in order to discern the viability of the general link Žižek seeks to draw.

The emergence of the rabble is described by Hegel in paragraph 244:

When the standard of living of a large mass of people falls below a certain subsistence level – a level regulated automatically as the one necessary for a member of the society – and when there is a consequent loss of the sense of right and wrong, of honesty and the self-respect which makes a man insist on maintaining himself by his own work and effort, the result is the creation of a rabble of paupers. At the same time this brings with it, at the other end of the social scale, conditions which greatly facilitate the concentration of disproportionate wealth in a few hands.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Hegel (2008), p. 150

Immediately, the ‘problem’ of the rabble is a problem associated with poverty. The language here is (to be kind) ambiguous as to the moral status of this group: the standard of living can fall in a number of different ways (perhaps due to “contingencies, physical conditions and factors grounded in external circumstances”⁷⁰), though this is also accompanied by “a consequent loss of the sense of right and wrong, of honesty [and self-respect].”⁷¹ Of course, a Marxist should be overjoyed, at least initially, at Hegel’s suggestion that the “concentration of disproportionate wealth in a few hands” occurs not in an accidental relation with the emergence of the rabble, but in a seemingly necessary one.

The production of the rabble is part of the *internal* mechanism of society. Nonetheless, the moral principle of civic society is that, given enough ‘honesty,’ ‘self-respect,’ and ‘effort,’ one’s labor is enough to secure some form of estate. There are three different types of estates: “1. the immediate or substantial estate that is dedicated to the formation of its own land – its real estate – and which is dependent upon products of nature; 2. the reflective or the formal estate that mediates the formed natural material into mediation through the needs and works of others and therefore becomes differentiated/gets split up into the estate of artisans, manufacturers and commerce; 3. the general estate that is relieved of direct labor by private property or by state supply and that fulfills political-representative functions.”⁷² To which estate a person belongs does not matter, but he *must* belong to one, since “when we say that a human being must be a ‘somebody’ (*etwas*), we mean that he should belong to a specific estate, since to be somebody means to have a substantial being.”⁷³ A person without a corresponding estate invites that most

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 219

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ruda, p. 13

⁷³ Hegel (2008), p. 197

chilling of all Hegelian insults: “A person with no estate is a mere private person and does not enjoy actual universality.”⁷⁴

It appears that we have moved back into the traditional organic picture of the state: “The concrete state is the whole, articulated into its particular groups. A member of a state is a member of such a group, i.e. of an estate, and only as determined in this objective way does he come into consideration in relation to the state.”⁷⁵ This analysis, coupled with the denial of universality for the ‘private person,’ appears to undercut any notion of the rabble as concrete universal.⁷⁶ In paragraph 245, Hegel considers possible solutions to the ‘problem’ of the rabble:

When the masses begin to decline into poverty, (a) the burden of maintaining them at their ordinary standard of living might be directly laid on the wealthier classes, or they might receive the means of livelihood directly from other public sources of wealth (e.g. from the endowments of rich hospitals, monasteries, and other foundations). In either case, however, the needy would receive subsistence directly, not by means of their work, and this would violate the principle of civil society and the feeling of individual independence and self-respect in its individual members. (b) As an alternative, they might be given subsistence indirectly through being given work, i.e. the opportunity to work. In this event the volume of production would be increased, but the evil consists precisely in an excess of production and in the lack of a proportionate number of consumers who are themselves also producers, and thus it is simply intensified by both of the methods (a) and (b) by which it is sought to alleviate it. It hence becomes apparent that despite an excess of wealth civil society is not rich enough, i.e. its own resources are insufficient to check excessive poverty and the creation of a penurious rabble.⁷⁷

It is clear that Hegel views the rabble as a structural position, and not simply the collection of society’s poor in their material condition. If civil society is based on the activity of mutual

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 294

⁷⁶ Another initial worry is that that the traditional struggle for recognition between master and servant restricts domination to a hierarchical structure that differs in kind from the bourgeois distinction between citizens engaged in mutual recognition and a proletarianized rabble (Žižek (2012), p. 256). Jameson argues that the passage here is to a ‘cultural equality’ which is “infused with a powerful hatred of hierarchy and special privileges and with a passionate resentment of caste distinctions and inherited cultural superiority. It is permitted to be wealthy, so long as the rich man is as vulgar as everyone else” (Jameson (2010), p. 101).

⁷⁷ Hegel (2008), p. 150

recognition among its members, the rabble is that body which is denied recognition (and thus, the rabble has a distinct *subjective* position). But Hegel does not (or *can* not) conclude that, as society's irrational 'with-without,' the rabble stands in as its Universal. One of the few places Žižek fully grants Marx his critique of Hegel concerns this point: "the 'proletariat' designates such an 'irrational' element of the 'rational' social totality, its unaccountable 'part of no-part,' the element systematically generated by it and, simultaneously, denied the basic rights that define this totality; as such, the proletariat stands for the dimension of universality, for its emancipation is only possible in/through the universal emancipation."⁷⁸

On the one hand, there is a sense in which the dynamic of Hegel's dialectic in *Right* inherently suggests this type of conclusion, despite his saying otherwise. In his discussions on the police, Hegel makes clear that the police's role in civil society involves not merely the traditional tasks of supervision, but "the far-reaching task of generally regulating the interests of consumers."⁷⁹ The police are in charge of regulating "street-lighting, bridge-building, the pricing of daily necessities, and the care of public health."⁸⁰ Ultimately, the police are in charge of managing poverty, and in developing the institutions whose functional ends are "to prevent the formation of a pauperized rabble."⁸¹ And yet, it is clear that Hegel believes this police activity to be steeped in necessary failure, since society's dynamic drives it "beyond its own limits"⁸²:

The fact that its own dialectical dynamic leads to the permanent resurfacing of instability and impoverished masses does not change when this dynamic is extended as a model to cover other states and is under the control of a monitoring institution. The regulating power of the police has the principle and the laws of a dynamic of civil society itself as

⁷⁸ Žižek (2012), p. 433

⁷⁹ Ruda, p. 28

⁸⁰ Hegel (2008), p. 218

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 219

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 222

its inner limit...[The] police constantly struggles with the tendencies and the effectivity of civil society, under conditions that a priori make it impossible for it to win.⁸³

Police administration attempts to recuperate the rabble, integrate it back into society's corporate body, but runs up against a structural deadlock.

In the addition to paragraph 244, Hegel articulates the contradiction at the heart of the rabble:

Poverty in itself does not make men into a rabble; a rabble is created only when there is joined to poverty a disposition of mind, an inner indignation against the rich, against society, against the government, etc...In this way there is born in the rabble the evil of lacking self-respect enough to secure subsistence by its own labour and yet at the same time of claiming to receive subsistence as its right. Against nature man can claim no right, but once society is established, poverty immediately takes the form of a wrong done to one class by another.⁸⁴

The rabble errs by accusing the existing state of affairs (society as system) of violating its rights to subsistence while also importing the very concept of rights from said socio-political matrix.

The existing structure of rights does not recognize the rabble's material situation as a violation of any sort, does not give its members' privations any legal recognition. Since what it is to have *right* is determined in advance by the existing rational order, to accuse the rational order itself of violating one's rights is simply nonsensical.

Now, we are confronted with Hegel's limit: the demand of the rabble, paradoxical as it is, is something that *Hegel's system cannot put up with*. Situating the rabble in the entirety of Hegel's *oeuvre*, it appears to be the concrete universal of (the perfect stand-in for) his many conceptualizations of the absolute negation of positive determinations. And yet, Hegel domesticates this insight through moralization, or the suggestion that the rabble is, in some

⁸³ Ruda, p. 31

⁸⁴ Hegel (2008), p. 221

sense, *evil*.⁸⁵ The point that Žižek seeks to make is that, insofar as Hegel retreats to a condescending, corporatist position with regard to the rabble, he is *not Hegelian enough*, betraying his fundamental dialectical insights on substance-subject and Universal-particular.

Although Hegel recognizes the structural character of the rabble, that its existence derives from the conditions of modern society, he does not go to the end here: the rabble is a *symptom* of the state, of ethical-political society at a certain historical moment. Its existence is tied directly to *failure*, of the constitutive impossibility of realizing one's freedom within the confines of the state; and yet that is exactly what Hegel prescribes. The rabble is the point at which his categorizations fail, "as he can no longer describe poverty being artificially produced by civic economy as a natural lack":

For [the rabble] emerges due to a genuinely subjective operation which Hegel calls attitude, then there appears with it the demand for a right, which enables us to classify the impossibility linked to poverty as a wrong, and posits a right valid for anyone against the existing right. Hegel encounters an impossibility of categorization because he cannot dismiss the *un-right* of equality and justice which the rabble claims as a merely particular demand.⁸⁶

The rabble is the point from which political demands that have been pushed to the outside of civil society emanate (and appear, shockingly, *within* civil society). The rabble is the point at which Absolute synthesis runs up against its formal limit.

To further illustrate the claim that the rabble contains society's Universal dimension, Ruda develops a "logic of double latency," in which "anyone in the state is latently poor and therefore latently rabble" (since the rabble *results from* the material structures of production).

That anyone can be rabble, that all members of civil society contain the ontological possibility of

⁸⁵ Shouldn't we take Hegel at his word when he elsewhere states that evil resides in the 'innocent' gaze that perceives evil all around it, and suggest that, here, *Hegel is at his most 'evil,'* occupying the position of the police/capitalist's gaze toward the rabble/proletariat?

⁸⁶ Ruda, p. 166

rabble-consciousness, *is the formula of political equality*. However, Hegel makes equality subservient to freedom:

For if Hegel attempts to develop the state in a way that in it any subject should realize its own freedom actively and this realization is guaranteed by the universalized right and the statist institutions, then in the impossibility of realizing one's own freedom on the part of the poor, it becomes manifest that the appearance of the state – in civil society – necessarily produces suspensions of equality and justice.⁸⁷

Insofar as this suspension creates an irreducible contradiction in the logic of the state, it materializes the negativity (the rupture) that Hegel had heretofore articulated in past synchronic moments of history. This, then, is the *antagonism* of the modern Hegelian state, which runs across its entire field and provides a point of access for further sublation.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

CHAPTER 5: POST-STRUCTURALISM, POSTMODERNITY, LATE CAPITAL...AND ŽIŽEK

5.1 Thinking the Antagonism

If Hegel provides a political vocabulary in his articulation of the rabble and the state apparatuses over-and-against the rabble, it nonetheless doesn't contain *revolutionary force* until one dispenses with the latently bourgeois assumptions of Hegelian freedom. The excluded position of the rabble in Hegel's politics, which results from an ignorance of the structure of the symptom, must be sublated and drawn once again into the dialectical process (instead of positing civil society as an ideal of the whole to approximate). If the Real of the antagonism *comes first*, the organic ideal is generated contingently and retroactively; antagonism is what refracts the field so that the subject emerges as a symptom of the field's incompleteness. To say this about the subject is to say that it exists for revolution, and *solely* for revolution, since it gains its consistency and coherency only as the paradoxical position of with-without, as the symptom that discloses the contradiction of the political space, and can't exist in any other way but as a site that breaks up the dominant discursive hegemony.

Žižek's Lacanian interpretation of the dialectic between the Universal and particular is to assert that structure precedes the content which fills it out (the Master Signifiers), with the implication that we can never ultimately dissolve the return of some repressed (materialized politically by the violence of the rabble) by "clarifying our relationship to it"; there is a primordial, undoable repression insofar as there is any subjectivity in the field (political or otherwise). Thus, the dialectic and the political struggle can never end:

It is not that, first, we repress some traumatic content, and then, since we are unable to remember it and thus to clarify our relationship to it, this content continues to haunt us, repeating itself in disguised forms. If the Real is a minimal difference, then repetition (which establishes this difference) is primordial; the primacy of repression emerges with the "reification" of the Real into a Thing that resists symbolization – only then does it

appear that the excluded or repressed Real insists and repeats itself. The Real is primordially nothing but the gap that separates a thing from itself, the gap of repetition.⁸⁸

Žižek speaks generally here but he nonetheless provides the tools for a political translation: the antagonism that is nothing but the incompleteness of the political-discursive space (or substance) precedes the reification of a symbolically excluded class, a ‘rabble’ or ‘proletariat,’ which then (after the fact) haunts the state as its symptom which must be ‘dealt with.’

Here, the categories of psychoanalytic thought are indispensable: insofar as the reified rabble corresponds to society’s *objet a*, as a remainder that points back to the ‘barred’ subject, the political act and critique can correspond to the structures of desire and drive. If desire situates the mode of action on the part of the rabble (the maddening compulsion to break the coordinates that set their position as the structurally unemployed, the economy’s reserve army), drive situates the mode of critique, as a quest not initially for the impossibly lost Thing (some originary situation of equality), but as the enactment or positing of loss itself (the gap of antagonism):

While, as Lacan emphasizes, the *objet a* is also the object of the drive, the relationship is here thoroughly different: although, in both cases, the link between object and loss is crucial, in the case of the *objet a* as the object-cause of *desire*, we have an object which is originally lost, which coincides with its own loss, which emerges as lost, while, in the case of the *objet a* as the object of the drive, the “object” is *directly the loss itself* – in the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the *lost object* to *loss itself as an object*.⁸⁹

It is from this taking of loss, of irreducible antagonism, as the object of critique that one can operate in dialectics, since taking the situation of *egaliberte* as something that was lost and that we must return to (the Thing as the object-cause of desire) is doomed to fail – the big Other always-already contains a lack. Only by thematizing antagonism-as-object can the *fidelity* (a term Žižek appropriates from Badiou) of the revolutionary subject appear, namely, as fidelity to the particular subjective state itself, and by extension the Universality of (civil) society.

⁸⁸ Žižek (2012), p. 614

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 639

Like the Lacanian subject of desire, the political subject's desire-engagement is its *a priori* condition, as opposed to an empirical pathology or an outcome of self-interest. Lacan showed us how the subject of desire is structured (and Žižek's adherence to this picture is nothing if not dogmatic), but Hegel showed us how the subject emerges from substance. If Hegel's *Right* is the place where system and synthesis runs up against its limit (where Hegel was closest to thinking, despite himself, the symptom and the irreducibility of the *objet a*, where the final synthesis isn't global but involves a reconciliation with its own failure), then Žižek can locate the authority to re-think the traditional picture of Hegelian recognition to account for a desire that's always-already structured by the social field: "It is only with Hegel that the fundamental and constitutive 'reflexivity' of desire is taken into account (a desire which is always already desire of/for a desire, that is a 'desire of the Other' in all variations of this term: I desire what my Other desires; I want to be desired by my Other; my desire is structured by the big Other, the symbolic field in which I am embedded; my desire is sustained by the abyss of the real Other-Thing)." ⁹⁰

Hegel's notion of identity posits all *concrete* identity as an exception (relative to the level of the abstract notion), while Lacan's Master Signifier universalizes the exception as an *exception to the exception*; "the logic of exception is taken to its reflexive extreme," since only here can we explicitly posit the 'with-without' as the stand-in for Universality (universality-in-reality). Žižek takes this move, which follows the insight contained in Hegel's rabble to its logical extreme, to be conducive to the development of a subject of an otherwise dominating (political) structure:

To grasp this logic of subjectivization, ones has to introduce the difference between the enunciated (content) and its process of enunciation, that is, Lacan's difference between

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 706

the subject of the enunciated and the subject of enunciation: *the exception with regard to the universal order is the subject itself*, its position of enunciation. To put it in somewhat simplistic terms, insofar as universality is in front of me, the object of my thought or speech, I occupy by definition a place of minimal externality with regard to it – no matter how much I locate myself as a *res cogitans*, as a determinate object within the reality I am grasping, that tiny spot in my world is not me as the point of “self-consciousness,” the point from which I speak or think.⁹¹

Only from a position formally removed from the picture can totality/Universality (or any ‘picture’ whatsoever) appear at all. A ‘subject’ as a particular moment of an organic totality cannot coherently occupy a space where substantial reality appears within its horizon (it would be fully, instead of partially, *embedded*). Such a subject would be neither a subject of action nor critique, but one of obedience and complacency.

The paradoxical position of the political subject can be read alongside the paradoxical nature of the sexual relationship (for Lacan):

Each sex is not the negation of the other, but an obstacle to the other: not something whose identity is established through its difference to the other, but something whose identity is thwarted from within by the other. For such a (non-)relationship which eludes differentiability, Ernesto Laclau reserved the term “antagonism.” Antagonism is, at its most radical, not the opposition or incommensurability of the Two, but an effect or articulation of the inconsistency of the One, of its deferral with regard to itself.⁹²

Like in the case of sexual difference, political antagonism is immanent to a field (male-female are opposed attempts to answer the ‘question’ of gender). The revolutionary political subject occupies the space opened by a primordial antagonism (the formal antagonism, the site of the “inconsistency of the [organic] One”) that distributes across the social field a hierarchy of ‘estates’ and classes. A primordial repression (Symbolic castration) resulting from the *a priori* inconsistency of the field, or the split in state-substance, is what renders harmony (in politics, like in love) possible, because it originates the desire for union/completion, and impossible,

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 764

⁹² Ibid., p. 771

because subjectivity itself is sustained by the exception. This is the tragic situation (again, in politics as in love) that interpellates revolutionary activity in the evanescent point of society's self-reflection (the rabble); here we transform *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel* ("there is no such thing as a sexual relationship," from *Seminar XX*) into *il n'y a pas de rapport de classe* ("there is no such thing as a class relationship").⁹³

5.2 Yuppies, Psychotics, and the Political (non-)Subjects of Postmodernity

The focus on formal antagonism functions as a break from post-structuralist politics.⁹⁴

Žižek finds in Lacan's *Seminar XVIII* an identification with dialectical materialism in his rejection of nominalism:

If there is something I am, it is clear that I am not a nominalist. What I want to say is that my starting point is not that the name is something like a nameplate which attaches itself, just like that, onto the real. And one has to choose. If one is a nominalist, one has to renounce completely dialectical materialism, so that, all in all, I evidently reject the nominalist tradition which is effectively the only danger of idealism which can arise in a discourse like mine. The point is not to be a realist in the sense in which one was a realist in Medieval times, in the sense of the realism of the universals; the point is to emphasize that our discourse, our scientific discourse, can only find the real insofar as it depends on the function of the semblant... What is real is what opens up a hole in this semblant, in this articulated semblant which is the scientific discourse... All that matters is that its network, its texture, its *lattice*, as one is used to say, makes the right holes appear at the right place. The only reference reached by its deductions is the impossible. The impossible is the real.⁹⁵

⁹³ Were we to further formalize these phrases in an attempt to highlight the *logical* nature of the impasse, we might say, "there is no such thing as a formalizable rapport between the genders/classes."

⁹⁴ Žižek is rather straightforward with regard to the Lacanian insight's implications for a post-structuralist feminism: "Judith Butler's performative constructivism as an idealist denial of the Real of sexual difference" is contested in favor of a 'binary logic' that is nonetheless not a harmony but an "asymmetric duality in which the Same confronts the place of/as its own lack" (Žižek (2012), p. 778).

⁹⁵ Lacan (2006), p. 28

What nominalism misses, for Lacan, “is the *Real* of a certain impossibility or antagonism which is the virtual cause generating multiple realities.”⁹⁶ Žižek, however, is not interested in nominalism *tout court*; rather, he finds this type of disavowal of the antagonism in the postmodern/post-structuralist universe of the multiplicity of subject-positions, which *reinforces* capitalist power structures and dissolves the revolutionary potential of the political subject.

Žižek opens the final chapter of his book on Deleuze, *Organs Without Bodies*, with a passage of Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s which considers the scene of a yuppie on the Paris underground reading Deleuze and Guattari’s *What Is Philosophy?*:

The incongruity of the scene induces a smile – after all, this is a book explicitly written against yuppies... Your smile turns into a grin as you imagine that this enlightenment-seeking yuppie bought the book because of its title... Already you see the puzzled look on the yuppie’s face, as he reads page after page of vintage Deleuze.⁹⁷

But, Žižek asks:

What, however, if there is no puzzled look, but enthusiasm, when the yuppie reads about impersonal imitation of affects, about the communication of affective intensities beneath the level of meaning (“Yes, this is how I design my publicities!”), or when he reads about exploding the limits of self-contained subjectivity and directly coupling man to a machine (“This reminds me of my son’s favorite toy, the action-man that can turn into a car!”), or about the need to reinvent oneself permanently, opening oneself up to a multitude of desires that push us to the limit (“Is this not the aim of the virtual sex game I am working on now? It is no longer a question of reproducing sexual bodily contact but of exploding the confines of established reality and imagining new, unheard-of modes of sexual pleasures!”).⁹⁸

When Žižek refers to post-structuralism proper, he is almost always referring exclusively to Deleuze (rather than to Derrida or Foucault, who receive their critiques, appropriately, by name). Of course, it was Deleuze whose project was to write Hegel out of the history of philosophy altogether, so it is perhaps fair to lay the rehabilitation of Hegel at his most creative critic’s feet.

⁹⁶ Žižek (2012), p. 781

⁹⁷ Lecercle, p. 44

⁹⁸ Žižek (2004), p. 183

Nevertheless, Žižek is making a serious point here: if the theoretical problematic is in locating a revolutionary subject, which would exist practically as the stand-in for the social antagonism, all post-structuralist attempts to dissolve the subject into an immanent network of affective intensities (to show that, now, there is no unified subject, no site of collective subjectivity, just a dispersed ether of subject-positions to be occupied and discarded) should be resisted. The ‘yuppie’ should not feel at home in our critiques.

The post-structuralist critique of psychoanalysis, against the ‘phallic economy’ and Oedipal structures from the position of multiplicity, reaches its apex in Deleuze’s later works: “according to the standard view, the task of the phallic economy is to mold the dispersed pre-Oedipal plurality of subject-positions into a unified subject subordinated to the rule of the Name-of-the-Father (the bearer and relay of social authority) and is as such the ideal subject of (social) Power.”⁹⁹ But what characterizes postmodernity and postmodern capital, Žižek seems to say, is Power well-attuned to the “plurality of subject-positions.” That is, *Power addresses us as split subjects* (“in order to reproduce itself, it relies upon our splitting”). Postmodern discourse is always-already inconsistent, split between an ‘official’ position (the ‘rules’) and a fantasmatic underside. Though one could argue that this has always been, necessarily, the case, postmodernity is unique insofar as this dynamic goes *unhidden*; the cynical, postmodern subject is all-too-aware of the gap between the enunciation and enunciated at the heart of political discourse. Further, “the ‘postmodern’ subject is directly, at the level of the public discourse itself, constituted as an inconsistent bundle of multiple ‘subject positions’ (economically conservative but sexually ‘enlightened’ yuppie, etc.).”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Žižek (2012), p. 682

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 683

Žižek describes the cynical, postmodern subject as marked by the logic of disavowal: ‘I know very well that [the political process is completely fraudulent], but I continue to accept it anyway (because there’s no superior alternative).’ It is clear that this form of subjectivity is anti-revolutionary, despite its inherent acknowledgement of the contingency/falsity of the Master discourse in operation. “[What] the revolutionary subject rejects,” then, “are *habits*,” which stem from the meta-rules which tell us how to apply/interpret society’s explicit rules and norms. “These ‘meta-rules’ always involve *jouissance*, the adhesive enjoyment,” that links subjectivity to ideologically-structured behavior. Because of the inconsistency at the level of Power and discourse, the revolutionary’s task is no longer to break the rules but to subvert their “ideological underpinning, rupturing with those hidden rules that really do the ideological work.”¹⁰¹

Though he does not explicitly say so (or does not say the following in quite this way), Žižek clearly sees the nature of postmodern capitalism as *psychotic*. Consider his claim about the ‘effect of the Real’:

Usually we say that we should not mistake fiction for reality – remember the postmodern doxa according to which ‘reality’ is a discursive product, a symbolic fiction which we misperceive as a substantial autonomous entity. The lesson of psychoanalysis here is the opposite one: *we should not mistake reality for fiction* – we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it.¹⁰²

For Lacan, the psychotic is someone who never acceded to the domain of the Symbolic law. More generally, psychotics “dwell in the dense symbolic space of the primordial ‘full’ (maternal) big Other, they do not assume symbolic castration in the proper sense of a loss which is in itself liberating, giving, ‘productive,’ opening up the space for things to appear in their (meaningful)

¹⁰¹ Noys, p. 95

¹⁰² Žižek (2002), p. 19

being; for them, a loss can only be purely *privative*, a question of something being taken from them.”¹⁰³ Lacan described the associated (non-castrative) form of signification in *Seminar III*:

The rainbow, *it is just that* [*c'est cela*]. And this *it is just that* implies that we will engage ourselves to our last breath to learn what is hidden behind it, what is the cause to which we can reduce it. Note how what from the very beginning characterizes the rainbow and the meteor – and everybody knows this, since it is for this reason that we call it a meteor – is precisely that there is nothing hidden behind. It is entirely in this appearance. What makes it persist for us, to the point that we never cease to ask questions about it, consists solely in the originary *it is just that*, that is to say, in the nomination as such of the rainbow. There is nothing else but this name.¹⁰⁴

When a psychotic uses language, what he ‘misses’ are the meta-rules of usage, the ‘libidinal resonance’ that derives from the castrative dimension of the Symbolic. Here, the signifier which stands-in for the incompleteness of the big Other is foreclosed, so that incompleteness is not registered: “the psychotic’s problem, then, is not that he dwells in a truncated symbolic order (Other), but, on the contrary, that he dwells in a ‘complete’ Other, an Other which lacks the inscription of its lack.”¹⁰⁵

The result, extrapolated to the Symbolic in its higher-level manifestation, is that the psychotic ‘mistakes reality for fiction,’ accurately recognizing that the social space is a constructed space, but erring in his inability to contract with the *necessity* of construction (this is why the psychotic is often also a paranoiac: by refusing to be interpellated by the big Other, he posits another, higher-order big Other that runs the show, either aliens or the CIA or something else entirely). This is the meaning of Lacan’s *les non-dupes errent*: those who do not let

¹⁰³ Žižek (2012), p. 861

¹⁰⁴ Lacan (1981), p. 358

¹⁰⁵ Žižek (2012), p. 863

themselves be caught in the Symbolic fiction (and recognize the Real in their experience of the fiction) and are the ones who err most.¹⁰⁶

The point, of course, is that cynical, postmodern capitalism is itself psychotic, and breeds psychotics. This is also the lesson of Baudrillard's hyper-reality, wherein our real experience (as consumers, whether of commodities or of television and Hollywood cinema) is indistinguishable from a simulation of experience. The cynic is absorbed in reality but affects an inner distance from it, which is not an aberration or pathology but an extension of the superego injunction to 'Enjoy,' since the subject is caught in a place where he must retain a shred of individuality while surrounding himself with (and coming to rely upon) mass-produced commodities. But, most importantly for our purposes, this analysis of the contemporary, postmodern moment-of-Power clearly relies upon the ontological insight of Hegelo-Lacanian subjectivity that Žižek has taken great interpretative pains to develop.

The fantasy figure of 'the Other of the Other' that structures the paranoid experience of the psychotic, the virtual agent that pulls the strings and orients political history, serves the ideological function of papering over the inconsistency of society.¹⁰⁷ That there is supposedly

¹⁰⁶ Of course, in the last instance, the revolutionary (the one who *refuses* the social logic) is in a sense, by a matter of necessity, psychotic for a brief moment. Or, perhaps, the act of refusal is better characterized as 'childish'. Eagleton, writing on Brecht, claimed that "amateur actors, like political revolutionaries, are those who find the conventions hard to grasp and perform them badly, having never recovered from their childhood puzzlement... The revolutionary questioner sees the world with the astonishment of a child ('Where does capitalism come from, Mummy?') and refuses to be fobbed off by the adults' customary Wittgensteinian justification of their practices: 'This is just what we *do*, dear'" (Eagleton, p. 636).

¹⁰⁷ Don DeLillo's *Libra*, generally considered to be an unproblematic example of postmodern literature at its height, both performs and unmasks this ideological operation: "DeLillo subverts the fantasy frame of conspiracy theories by demonstrating the role of contingency, what he refers to as 'chance and coincidence,' in the assassination of JFK. While this emphasis on the role of contingency undermines conspiracy theories, DeLillo also unravels the contingency theory unveiled by the Warren Commission by illustrating the ways in which Oswald is a necessary product of the American social system, rather than an external element introducing corruption

something *behind the mask*, some substantial agent that intentionally invests the meta-structures with *jouissance*, renders the subject hysterical and *disengages* it from actual political activity. It is in precisely the same sense that a ‘Lacanian’ Hegel locates the Real of the dialectic as *insistent* upon reality, as the retroactive torsion that lends reality its (contingent) consistency, and through which we are able to reject the Real as some noumenal beyond or *prior* substantial harmony, that a now-‘Hegelianized’ subject can traverse the ideological fantasy of postmodernity. This is not to choose reality *over* the fantasy, but to identify with the fantasy that structures society’s symptom (the situation of the proletarian subject itself), to recognize the inter-mixture of (political-ideological) truth and fiction, since Lacan’s maxim that “truth is structured like a fiction”¹⁰⁸ reaches its apex in a society of the ‘hyper-real.’ For the symptomatic subject to insert itself into the political frame, to move from ‘with-without’ to ‘with-within’ at a time when subjectivity is characterized by psychotic/cynical inner distance, it must *see itself*, in an eventually collective sense, as *objet a*, as both remainder (of society’s repression) and the point whose movement and engagement can potentially alter the structure (of society’s relations of production), since it’s been cast into the place of the concrete Universal.

The multiplicity that structures postmodern neo-liberal society (both social pluralism and in the active flows of capital across borders, on a level as foundational, expansive, and international even as Hardt and Negri’s ‘Empire’¹⁰⁹) as well as the immanent multiplicities of

into an otherwise sound social fabric. For DeLillo, Oswald represents a ‘symptom’ of American society...Oswald embodies not only the social antagonisms, such as class struggle, repressed in fantasy conceptions of the idyllic American way of life, but also the social contradictions inherent to consumer capitalism...” (Willman, p. 408).

¹⁰⁸ Or, to formalize the line from *Television* (p. 1), “truth avers itself in a fictional structure.”

¹⁰⁹ For Hardt and Negri, the passage to Empire occurs “when language and communication, or really when immaterial labor and cooperation, become the dominant productive force. The superstructure is put to work, and the universe we live in is a universe of productive linguistic networks. The lines of production and those of representation cross and mix in the same

post-structuralist ontology present themselves as so many returns of a repressed antagonism.¹¹⁰

The way Žižek makes use of Lacanian subject/reality formation supposes Lacan as a radical Hegelian in order to critique the problematic (and often unacknowledged) alliance between post-structuralist critique and postmodern capital:

[There] is multiplicity because the One does not coincide with itself. We can now see the precise sense of Lacan's thesis according to which what is "primordially repressed" is the binary signifier (that of *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*): what the symbolic order precludes is the full harmonious presence of the couple of Master-Signifiers, S1-S2, as *yin-yang* or any other two symmetrical "fundamental principles." The fact that "there is no sexual relationship" means precisely that the secondary signifier (that of the Woman) is "primordially repressed," and *what we get in place of this repression, what fills the gap, are the multiple "returns of the repressed," the series of "ordinary" signifiers.*¹¹¹

Whether one resorts to Deleuzian intensities, the deconstruction of binaries, or the Derridean-Levinasian ethical injunction of responsibility toward the Other, the result is to "abandon the dimension of universality" that remains formally operative in political structure, so that what appears as a gesture of critique and refusal is instead a white flag to Power, or at best, a hysterical reaction to Power that recognizes every site of freedom in the system as always-already subsumed (whether in the colonization of the unconscious, the gentrification of urban

linguistic and productive realm" (Hardt, p. 385). What's so problematic about this account of postmodernization is their claim that it is now "no longer possible to identify a sign, a subject, a value, or a practice that is 'outside.'"

¹¹⁰ What the post-structuralist critique appears to be doing *explicitly*, however, is performing a sort of 'accelerationism,' whereby the contradictions inherent to capital are assumed (often in an orthodox Marxist fashion), and their traversal depends not upon a positing of a non-contradictory logic, but with an exaggeration of those contradictions (a *pushing* of those contradictions) to the point of collapse. This strategy is perhaps most obvious in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, but also characterizes the approach of Negri, Lyotard, and Baudrillard: "In particular they reply to Marx's contention that '[t]he *real barrier* of capitalist production is *capital itself*,' by arguing that we must crash through this barrier by turning capitalism against itself. They are an exotic variant of *la politique du pire*: if capitalism generates its own forces of dissolution then the necessity is to radicalize capitalism itself: the worse the better" (Noys, p. 5). Accelerationism, of course, is wholly alien to Žižek's project, which relies upon a negative relation to the logic of capital in the final instance.

¹¹¹ Žižek (2012), p. 587

spaces, or the exploitation of once-common ‘natural’ ground), so that resistance is nothing more than a series of anarchic gestures, terroristic exploits, or ethical pleas that are designed to be rejected. Yes, Žižek seems to say, of course Universality is impossible – “every universality is exclusive, it imposes a particular standard as universal”:

The question to be posed here is whether every ethical universality is really based on an exclusion of the abyss of the Neighbor, or whether there is a universality which does *not* exclude the Neighbor. The answer is: yes, the universality grounded in the “part of no-part,” the singular universality exemplified by those who lack a determined place in the social totality, who are “out of place” in it and as such directly stand for the universal dimension.¹¹²

Revolutionary politics, then, is not about positing ideal structure-less states without transcendental repression that, like the Derridean Messiah, would disappoint us only if it actually showed up.¹¹³ Rather, it posits an immanence of the Real as the curvature of the space of state and system itself, and thus, a *process* of constant self-revolutionizing (oriented around the space of the subject) to actually rival late-capital’s own brand of perpetual revolution (of crises postponed by innovation, of new productive models proliferating and quickly becoming obsolete).

¹¹² Ibid., p. 831

¹¹³ Eagleton, once again, provides the clever formulation here, in which we can link the following “poststructuralist fantasy” to the underlying fantasy of postmodernity’s neutered radicalism: “an opposition without anything as distastefully systematic or drably ‘orthodox’ as an opposition, a dissent beyond all formulable discourse, a promise which would betray itself in the act of fulfillment, a perpetual excited opening to the Messiah who had better not let us down by doing anything as determinate as coming” (quoted by Noys, p. 42). Of course, this is a caricature of the ‘(Derridean) Messiah,’ and the relationship between the opening toward and the possible arrival of that which is *to come* (for Derrida at least) is far more complex than Eagleton (or myself, or Žižek) suggests here. Nonetheless, the general difference between the post-structuralist approach and Žižek’s committed brand of vanguardism should continually be noted (even if *sometimes* in caricature).

5.3 “What Kind of Reading?”

In excavating the political critique that, perhaps, sustains Žižek’s readings of Hegel and Lacan, we can begin to see how Žižek provides one possible interpretation of the *truth* of Hegel. That is, since his critical contest is with postmodernity (both its ideological and associated subjective structures) as well as post-structural theory (which unknowingly sustains the former), we could say that his psychoanalytic interpretation of the dialectic works as a sublation of the gap between Hegel traditionally-conceived and the anti-Hegelianism, still largely articulated in the language of Deleuze’s critique which reaches back all the way to Kierkegaard, of the late-20th and early 21st-century. This sublation, then, serves critico-political ends, since the alternatives of a traditional, ‘fascist’ Hegel whose end of history involves an organic, corporate civic body against a post-structuralist Hegel who serves as the straw man for a theory of capital’s creativity squeeze out any productive theory of radical subjectivity as their excluded middle. If the state is the Symbolic authority that produces the Real as a pre-political multitude (against the popular theories of this picture’s *vice versa*), there is no *actual* (substantial) multitude upon which we fail to apply concepts without remainder (as those same theories would have it). Placing the concept and the structure *first* and the irrationality of the remainder (the ‘rabble’) second, as a Lacanized Hegel orders us to do, is the way out of politics as a game of illusions (and the deeply related ennui of post-political cynicism). Politics may indeed be a contest of hegemony, of locating antagonisms and asserting new forms of Universality in the field that obscures it, but radical success can only occur for the subject who takes the Universality upon which it acts seriously, who does not take failure as a given (and postmodernity can be characterized as a fetishization of failure, a culture of failure for its own sake), who recognizes in its finitude the very condition of subversion and revolution.

Gunkel, in reading Žižek and Hegel, transforms the most common inquiry on the subject into a far more relevant one: “The question, then, is not simply ‘how accurate are Žižek’s readings of Hegel?’ but ‘on the basis of what kind of reading do we deploy and value this concept of accuracy?’ and ‘how has this expectation already determined critical procedures and outcomes?’”¹¹⁴ The ontological assumptions that ground the traditional reading of the dialectic are not only themselves too ‘metaphysical,’ in the sense of that burdensome shibboleth of post-structuralist critique, but *not sufficiently political*. This is to say that, beyond merely the choosing of sides, for-Hegel or against-Hegel, there is the matter of what kind of reading carries a sufficient sense of *authority* for us, prior to the differentiation and dissemination of critical subject-positions.

Žižek’s favorite joke (we might assume, given its constant surfacing and re-surfacing, both in *Less than Nothing* and in nearly all of his other works), involves a man, Rabinovitch, who wants to emigrate from the Soviet Union for two reasons:

“First, I fear that, if the socialist order disintegrates, all the blame for the communist crimes will be put on us, the Jews.” To the state bureaucrat’s objection: “But nothing will ever change in the Soviet Union! Socialism is here to stay forever!” Rabinovitch calmly answers: “This is my second reason.”¹¹⁵

The joke exemplifies a mature reading of the Hegelian dialectic, where the only support for (a retroactively constituted) synthesis is a passage through error. One can imagine Žižek as Rabinovitch here, asked why, after the post-structuralists villainized Hegel so effectively, he would want to attempt his rehabilitation:

“First, it is through a careful psychoanalytic reading of Hegel via Lacan that I can develop an accurate re-construction of Hegelian politics.” To the critic’s objection: “But Hegelian politics is inherently conservative! The organic social body of Hegel’s final

¹¹⁴ Gunkel, p. 21

¹¹⁵ Žižek (2012), p. 242

civic harmony has nothing to do with our contemporary situation!” Žižek calmly answers: “This is my second reason.”

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