

# On Žižek's Dialectics

Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation

Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy



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## Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy

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## Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation

Fabio Vighi



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# Introduction

## Not only as value, but also as surplus

This work is inspired by Slavoj Žižek's critique of capitalism and by Lacanian epistemology. Both fields are discussed in their broad theoretical significance as well as in specific connection with the notion of surplus, which constitutes the basis of my analysis of Žižek's dialectics. The division of the book into two parts reflects my intention to situate the question of surplus within capitalism first, and then in relation to dialectical thought. The overarching discussion developed in Part 1 stems from the consideration that the axis Marx-Lacan, which Žižek has undoubtedly strengthened and popularized, needs to be eviscerated in epistemological terms rather than as a straightforward political constellation. In the seminars immediately following the events of May '68 (*Seminar XVI* and *XVII*) Lacan developed an intriguing critique of Marxism founded upon the following epistemological axiom, which can be said to lie at the heart of his psychoanalytic teaching: *the weight of knowledge is unconscious*. If, in Marxian terms, labour and the knowledge thereby registered is the quantifiable common denominator of all human activity, for Lacan such equivalence needs to be reformulated in light of the inclusion of a supplement he calls surplus-*jouissance*, the senseless libidinal excess emerging with, and disturbing, all attempts at signification. I argue that Lacan's homology between Marx's notion of surplus-value (based in the capitalist's expropriation of the worker's labour-power) and surplus-*jouissance* should be grasped, first and foremost, as an attempt to demonstrate the preponderance of *jouissance* over value. Lacan shows how work, like the knowledge from which it arises, cannot be reduced to a value, for it does not coincide with its measure but is instead traversed by an entropic and recalcitrant surplus which defies quantification. Put differently, intrinsic to work is a degree of opacity which speaks for the unconscious roots of any knowledge-at-work. It is from this awareness that Lacan launches his scathing attacks against the dominance of value within the university



discourse (the hegemonic discourse of modernity), which is precisely where the capitalist function is nestled.

From Lacan's epistemological perspective, the production of a piece of conscious knowledge is always, in its deepest configuration, the result of a *revelation* whose unconscious resonance cannot be obfuscated by the introduction of credit points in the university, or by the ubiquitous valorization of experience imposed by capital. In this respect, Marx's surplus-value effectively performs a kind of "epistemological violation" of surplus-*jouissance*, despite being rooted in and drawing its strength from the latter. Lacan's key political wager, which he makes throughout *Seminar XVII*, is that the capitalist utopia of a fully valorized universe can only fail, since the indigestible remainder of the process of valorization *is* the point of universality of each and every discourse, including the capitalist one. Significantly, Lacan shifts the emphasis from the Marxian quandary concerning surplus-value to the question of human surplus, which he defines in terms of exclusion and segregation. Along similar lines, Marx's commodity fetishism appears to Lacan as the gentrified version of surplus-*jouissance*, whose disturbingly empty core is hijacked, camouflaged and converted into the propelling force behind the consumer's pursuit of ersatz-enjoyment. However, the original surplus cannot be eliminated, for it survives in exclusion. It is in the inert human surplus of capitalist dynamics, Lacan claims, that one should look for an image of truth and salvation, ultimately embodied in the motif of "brotherhood":

The energy that we put into all being brothers very clearly proves that we are not brothers. Even with our brother by birth nothing proves that we are his brother – we can have a completely different batch of chromosomes. This pursuit of brotherhood, without counting the rest, liberty and equality, is something that's pretty extraordinary, and it is appropriate to realize what it covers. I know only one single origin of brotherhood – I mean human, always humus brotherhood – segregation. We are of course in a period where segregation, ugh! There is no longer any segregation anywhere, it's unheard of when you read the newspapers. It's just that in society – I don't want to call it "human" because I use the term sparingly, I am careful about what I say, I am not a man of the left, I observe – everything that exists, and brotherhood first and foremost, is founded on segregation. No other brotherhood is even conceivable or has the slightest foundation, as I have just said, the slightest scientific foundation, unless it's because people are isolated together, isolated from the rest. (Lacan 2007: 114)

I argue that what we have in this conflation of segregation and brotherhood is a profoundly dialectical figure that needs to become the catalyst of a new political discourse of universal emancipation. A political epistemology derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis provides us with a dialectical framework where knowledge – intended in its indissoluble tie with fantasy as the substance of our immersion in the socio-symbolic order – is defined by both its intrinsic materiality and entropic surplus. As I try to illustrate by bringing the focus on the half-forgotten figure of Alfred Sohn-Rethel, it is crucial to insist on the question of the materiality of knowledge-at-work, or the unity of head and hand, which in truth is also central to Lacan's stance. The historical novelty of the capitalist process that leads to the creation of surplus-value, he claims, is centred on the extraction of knowledge from the slave/worker. During this process the entropy originally consubstantial with knowledge is converted into value and marketed as enjoyment. The whole point, however, is that the gap between "obscure" knowledge-at-work and capitalist enjoyment does not disappear, but returns in the form of "human waste", namely the ghostly masses of slum-dweller produced by, and simultaneously excluded from, the dynamics of value-formation.

It is from the vantage point of a Lacanian epistemology based in the potential re-articulation of knowledge via its "unconscious materiality" that I consider some of Žižek's key terms, such as parallax and subtraction. I see these terms as profoundly dialectical, for they reassert the primacy of contradiction and negativity in the naturalized realm of capital. We should not lose sight of the fact that the so-called loss of values and angst-ridden fragmentation of experience that accompanies our pursuit of enjoyment is sustained by and conducive to the affirmation of an increasingly unquestioned socio-symbolic framework characterized not only by the free circulation of commodities, but also by systematic violence, human exploitation and exclusion. It is against this subtly disavowed and yet fully operative framework that I examine the dialectical impact of parallax and subtraction, exploring the extent of their continuity with Lacan's notion of surplus-*jouissance* as well as with Žižek's Hegelian motif of "tarrying with the negative".

Part 2 begins with an evaluation of the political potential inscribed in Žižek's appraisal of subjectivity. While exploring the Lacanian and Hegelian origins of Žižek's concept of the subject, I first unravel his groundbreaking analysis of how the subject connects with the ideological fantasy woven in external reality. The key point here is that since our being caught in ideology ultimately depends on our unconscious libidinal attachments (i.e. on a strictly speaking non-ideological feature which at the same time sustains also the ideological field), it follows that we are never fully aware of

the extent of our subjection. With regard to this point, it is worth noting that in his essay 'Free Time' Adorno tells us a slightly different story. Though he had clearly identified the coercive character of the injunction to enjoy typical of consumer capitalism, he thought that the subject's awareness of the ideological role played by enjoyment implied a certain wisdom and potential liberation from ideology. While analysing the public reactions in Germany to the 1966 wedding between Princess Beatrix of Holland and junior German diplomat Claus von Amsberg, Adorno admits that 'people enjoyed it as a concrete event in the here and now quite unlike anything else in their life'. However, many of them also

showed themselves to be thoroughly realistic, and proceeded to evaluate critically the political and social importance of the same event [. . .]. What the culture industry presents people with in their free time, if my conclusions are not too hasty, is indeed consumed and accepted, but with a kind of reservation, in the same way as even the most naive theatre or filmgoers do not simply take what they behold there for real. Perhaps one can go even further and say that it is not quite believed in. It is obvious that the integration of consciousness and free time has not yet completely succeeded. The real interests of individuals are still strong enough to resist, within certain limits, total inclusion. [. . .] I think that we can here glimpse a chance of maturity (*Mündigkeit*), which might just eventually help to turn free time into freedom proper. (Adorno 1991: 196–97)

If this consciousness, for Adorno, implies that freedom from ideology is still possible, for Žižek it signifies an even more effective form of ideological enslavement. Žižek's ideology critique relies on Lacan's motto "les non-dupes errant": those who think that they are not being fooled are in the wrong, for ideology is particularly effective over those who count on a degree of imaginary dis-identification from the ideological predicament – this being especially true of the cynical post-modern subject who believes precisely through disbelief. In this sense, psychoanalytic critique significantly updates the classical Marxian theory of alienation, according to which, once freed from capitalist ideology, human beings will be able to embrace the right (non-alienated) desires and satisfy all their needs. Against this utopian view, Žižek sides with Lacan in claiming that alienation is nothing less than *subjectivity's very condition of possibility*. We form our identity and are able to interact with others only through self-alienation, i.e. by depositing some knowledge about ourselves into that off-limits reservoir we call the unconscious. Thought itself is co-extensive with a practice of separation

from the surplus which traverses thought as well as external reality and its causal link – inasmuch as thought is always caught in the latter, and as such it can only emerge and expand in the big Other.

What would seem to bedevil Žižek's materialism is that it requires thought to be heteronomous instead of autonomous, that is to say dependent on conditions which in the last and crucial instance are external to (political) consciousness. Such materialism cannot emerge as *causa sui* but is triggered by “miraculous” occurrences that escape its radar, its conscious control. Similarly to Alain Badiou's notion of the event, the Žižekian act is unverifiable, subject to conditions that cannot be thought in advance. More precisely, Žižek's dialectics are predicated upon a coincidence or overlapping of lacks: the subject qua empty signifier,  $\$$ , and the non-existence of the big Other,  $S(A)$ . For Badiou, what matters are evental contingencies which thought has to recognize and show fidelity to; for Žižek, radical change emerges *ex nihilo*, from the contingent cracks of historicity in which the subject discovers its own core. This is why Žižek argues that a genuine materialist embraces the destabilizing surplus qua lack constitutive of *jouissance*, with no guarantee that some good might result from this act: ‘A true materialism joyously assumes the “disappearance of matter,” the fact that there is only void’ (Žižek 2004c: 25).

It would be misleading, however, to place all the emphasis on the moment of negativity, for Žižek's dialectics endorse the Lacanian ‘connection between death-drive and creative sublimation: in order for (symbolic) creation to take place, the death-drive (Hegelian self-relating absolute negativity) has to accomplish its work of, precisely, emptying the place, and thus making it ready for creation’ (Žižek 2008c: xxx). As is well known, Žižek has developed this dialectical sequence in close connection with theology, insofar as he sees in the Christian narrative of Fall and Redemption a perfect representation of what is needed today. With this regard he not only claims that ‘the subversive kernel of Christianity [. . .] is accessible *only* to a materialist approach’, but also that ‘to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience’ (Žižek 2003b: 6). Žižek's atheistic interpretation of Christianity as implicitly dialectical and materialistic is not the object of this study. However, it does provide a clear entry point to the understanding of the two terms of Žižek's dialectics that I consider alongside surplus, namely subtraction and sublimation.

The central Lacanian thesis apropos surplus-*jouissance* is that the surplus therein articulated corresponds to a void, a lack to be intended as a “passage through symbolic death”, which as such represents the substantial and implicitly traumatic ingredient of any authentic instance of subtraction. On

the one hand, I examine the political import of subtraction in relation to the considerable centripetal and cooptative resources of both capitalism and liberal democracy, as well as alongside the Lacanian topos of human exclusion. On the other hand, I contend that the second, necessary dialectical step of the concrete reconfiguration of surplus into a new order must be conceived of as disengaged from the theory vs. praxis framework in which it is generally placed. The diatribe on the practical implications of the Žižekian act is not examined in this book, due to the fact that I regard it, strictly speaking, as a false problem. Rather than claiming a direct connection with practical interventions, sublimation should first be located within the vertiginous dimension of thought, for it implies the creative task of thinking a new social constellation characterized by a radically changed calibration of the Symbolic vis-à-vis the Real surplus of *jouissance*. In Herbert Marcuse's exemplary words: 'The groundwork for building the bridge between the "ought" and the "is", between theory and practice, is laid within theory itself' (Marcuse 1972: 66). If a dialectical materialism informed by Lacanian epistemology can only be prompted and authenticated by the collapse of knowledge qua subtraction from our comfortable immersion in the shared horizon of meaning, it must at some point *coincide with* the effort of reclaiming the unthought of thought, that 'disembodied rational machine' (Žižek 2000: 62) unreachable and yet inseparable from thought's historically given terrain.<sup>1</sup> The surplus of knowledge is identical to both its erasure and the spark of an intuition that springs from the unconscious and opens up the space for a new constellation. If knowledge first needs to be evacuated, the glimmer of another dimension is already inscribed in its collapse. The two moments (negativity and the spark of the new) belong together, and together they oppose the "dead knowledge" of the university discourse. What I have in mind is the sudden, inexplicable, exalting awareness of children, poets, great philosophers and political thinkers who have not severed the link with the flash of "unknown knowledge" which constitutes the unconscious.

I want to conclude this Introduction by way of an example from my academic experience. In my undergraduate course on European Cinema, the first three films that students are required to watch are (what I regard as) three gems of contemporary cinema: *The Son's Room* (Nanni Moretti), *Three Colours: Blue* (Krzysztof Kieslowski) and *The Man without a Past* (Aki Kaurismaki). What strikes me about these works is, to put it succinctly, their almost coincidental reliance on a very precise narrative structure, which I do not hesitate to call dialectical. In all three films, everything hinges on a surplus of knowledge which proves to have both a traumatic and (at least potentially) liberating effect on the main characters. In *The Son's Room*, the

knowledge in question concerns the son, and emerges only after his tragic death: nobody in the family had realized the extent to which he was alive, i.e. pervaded by a destabilizing desire. In *Blue*, the surplus of knowledge concerns the husband. Again, only after his tragic death does his wife realize that he was leading a second life: he had a lover, with whom he was starting a new family. Finally, in *The Man without a Past*, the knowledge in question concerns the main character himself, who after being mugged loses his memory, reawakens in the slums of the big city (Helsinki), and refashions his life among the “human debris” of modern society. The magic of all three films lies in the way they show us that the traumatic “unplugging” from the socio-symbolic order (here family life as symptomatic of the insularity of social existence under capitalist conditions), opens up the possibility of reconfiguring the symbolic order itself, improving its content. It is an implicitly Christian dialectic of Subtraction and Sublimation, suggesting that the only way out of our current dilemma depends on connecting with what we should call with its proper name: the unconscious, insofar as the unconscious is “a knowledge that does not know itself”, and as such can only come about through the dispelling of the fantasy that sustains our subjectivity. What collapses in the three narratives is the fantasy of the family as microcosm, the real and metaphorical socio-symbolic narrative which gives meaning to our lives. Once the main characters reach “ground zero” of their subjectivity, they are forced to reconfigure their fictional framework, moving in a direction which suggests (especially in *The Man without a Past*) a different relationship with the big Other.

It would be easy to show how contemporary cinema has indeed grasped the necessity of this dialectical sequence, expressing it in a variety of metaphorical and metonymical ways. The lesson coincides with the tragic yet pressing awareness that the only chance we have to survive our predicament is, as Žižek claims quoting Lenin, to “begin from the beginning again” (Žižek 2009c: 86). This, however, will only be possible if we find a way to relate to entropic subjectivities which either exceed the logic of capital as their inert remainders, or have learnt to disengage from it. More to the point, the dialectical and political task ahead will need to be informed by an understanding of theory not only as interpretation, but also as a daring and constructive reorientation of the subject’s relation to a new social fantasy. Badiou states that ‘truths are eternal because they have been created and not because they have been there forever’ (Badiou 2009a: 512). If this view is, as I believe, to be taken seriously, it is not merely because it indicates that we should be faithful to already created truths, but because it implies that we should dare to fill them with new meanings, to create them again. Though this, as Žižek argues, may not be the philosopher’s task,<sup>2</sup> it will probably have to become so.

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## Part 1

# The Enjoyment of Capitalism

*What happens is surely wild and obscene, virile and tasty, quite immoral – and, precisely because of that, perfectly harmless.*

*(Herbert Marcuse)*



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## Chapter 1

# The will to enjoyment

Slavoj Žižek's dialectics can be said to begin with the insight that capitalism, like all social orders, is stained by a self-generated excess which makes it incomplete, inconsistent and therefore vulnerable. However, the epistemological novelty of the capitalist discourse is that, unlike previous formations, it does not hide or disavow its constitutive excess; rather, it elevates it into 'the very principle of social life, in the speculative movement of money begetting more money' (Žižek 2002a: 277). Particularly with global capitalism, we enter a "post-historical" era dominated by the ubiquitous injunction to consume in excess (from ordinary material products to – increasingly – lifestyles, fashions, cultural/spiritual/sexual experiences).<sup>1</sup> *What* we consume is irrelevant; it only matters that we continue to consume. The first thing to notice about this overwhelming and yet subtle command is that it leaves us as disorientated as the proverbial punch-drunk boxer: it disables us from understanding our predicament itself. This is why today's key existential feature is not that we cannot remember and make sense of our past, but that 'the present is experienced as a confused succession of fragments which rapidly evaporate from our memory' (Žižek 2002a: 277). The catch is that the more capitalism coincides with its self-generated excess, the more we are caught in its vortex. What could threaten the system's consistency is turned into its *raison d'être*, ultimately the very matrix of our social life.

### An itch named *jouissance*

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the excess we are dealing with corresponds to the category of *jouissance*, which I have chosen to leave in its French original to distinguish it from what I refer to as enjoyment, or pleasure. *Jouissance* can be defined as a senseless libidinal surplus, experienced as a lack, which is inerasable from the symbolic field, i.e. from any knowledge. As such, it retains a substantial status: it is the elusive, ultimately unconscious substance

secreted by the signifier (language) the moment it comes into play, and henceforth it both drives and disturbs all human activity. Put differently, *jouissance* bears witness to the fact that our existence is irredeemably tainted by a disturbing excess of libido which materializes the inconsistency of any knowledge we acquire and identify with. More to the point, its presence signals that in us there is an unconscious knowledge that we are unable to access.<sup>2</sup> This unconscious knowledge dupes our consciousness, inasmuch as a dupe, Lacan states, is someone *exploited* by someone else. Updating Marxism, then, psychoanalysis tells us that 'the exploiter is less easy to grasp' (since it overpowers us by catching us "in the gut", without our realizing it), and so is 'the style of revolution' (*Seminar XVI*, 5 March 1969).

Lacan's four discourses (master, hysteric, university and analyst), as presented in *Seminar XVII*, are as many attempts to locate the position and function of the unconscious, and thus of *jouissance*, within our social lives as speaking beings. For Lacan the basic problem for us humans, as opposed to animals,<sup>3</sup> is how to deal with *jouissance*, in other words *how to manage the constitutively unmanageable libidinal surplus produced the very moment we say 'I'* – the moment we enter the social link and become self-conscious beings. The problem, therefore, coincides with our very nature as human beings: against Darwin's theory of adaptation, Lacan claims that what makes us human is our basic, foundational *disconnection* from our environs, which is embodied by that "sabotaging surplus" called *jouissance* – or, in Freudian terms, death-drive. Furthermore, by uncoupling us from the immersion in our environs, this surplus represents *the only measure of our freedom*, i.e. our autonomy from the "flat surface of being" where consciousness does not yet exist. As visual examples of this discrepancy between subject and environs, Žižek mentions the blurred background in Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Alfred Hitchcock's early films or Orson Welles' extreme close-ups, claiming that 'this irreducible gap between the subject and its "background", the fact that a subject never fully fits its environs, is never fully embedded in it, *defines* subjectivity' (Žižek 2006b: 45). This fact – our coincidence with our surplus of sense – lends Lacan's theory both a tragic and ethical character: although *jouissance* will always find a way to pop up, making our lives hellishly inconsistent with the meanings we ascribe to them, it is our ethical duty to "enjoy our symptoms". We must assume this alien kernel as our own, in the paradoxical awareness that the surplus that inhabits us is the very core of what we are, the only place where we truly become subjects.

As Žižek often stipulates, what is at stake in the endorsement of *jouissance* over our immersion in the socio-symbolic order is the risky and onerous chance to begin anew, the massive task of resignifying our symbolic space,

filling it with a different content. This is indeed the leitmotif of Žižek's dialectics. Complex questions of political change are tied to a move which cannot be fully constrained in rational, strategic evaluations, as it is ultimately authorised only by itself. There is no promise of fulfilment, or of dialectical synthesis, in this choice, only the unverified possibility of a "better failure",<sup>4</sup> which will depend on our ability to reset and improve the social administration of our life. Here, at least two legitimate questions immediately emerge. How is it possible to debunk capitalism via surplus if capital itself explicitly endorses the latter as its key generative matrix? Furthermore, how are we supposed to conceive of the relationship between Žižek's theoretical wager and a corresponding political practice, especially within the context of global capitalist affirmation and the attendant political misery of the left?

The most fruitful way to address the first question (and, as we shall see, eventually also the second) is by exploring Lacan's overarching argument, exposed primarily in *Seminar XVI* and *XVII*, that the ruse of capitalism, in its infinite plasticity and resilience, lies in surreptitiously hijacking and converting *jouissance* into value – into something which, as Marx described so convincingly, is valorized and exchanged as commodity with the only aim of generating more value (and *not* of satisfying real needs). Through this conversion, Lacan argues, the system's intrinsic limit, its "itch", is transformed into its main strength, literally its productive engine. The itch of valorized enjoyment drives the capitalist machine forward, to the extent that – to continue with the metaphor – the more we scratch it, the more we help the system to reproduce itself. With capitalism this itch becomes endemic and irresistible, colonizing every aspect of our lives, and securing their overall meaning. Indeed, today's predicament is that we *know* we are alive only because we feel the urge to scratch the itch of valorized enjoyment. This operation does not merely entail going after commodities with ferocious determination, but, more extensively, taking part in a universe where each one of its meaningful experiences is characterized as representing a certain exchange value. It is therefore a totalizing gesture.

Given this premise, I argue for the importance of retaining the Lacanian focus on the historical shift in the function of *jouissance* caused by the advent of capitalism. As anticipated, the novelty of capitalism as an economic and socio-historical framework (interspersed with cyclical crises in turn linked to social turmoil and wars which have very rarely had a drastic impact on the framework itself) is that it is founded on an *explicitly* obscene and therefore shameless rhetoric. Capitalism does not hide its disturbing surplus but rather puts it on display in order to profit from it – which is why Lacan calls it the discourse of the perverted master. In focusing on the combination of

obscenity and shamelessness that characterizes the capitalist itch, Žižek's analysis in many respects revives the critical approach of the Frankfurt School developed, for instance, by Herbert Marcuse. Here is a passage from Marcuse's 1969 *Essay on Liberation* which is still relevant to our understanding of today's predicament:

This society is obscene in producing and indecently exposing a stifling abundance of wares while depriving its victims abroad of the necessities of life; obscene in stuffing itself and its garbage cans while poisoning and burning the scarce food-stuffs in the fields of its aggression; obscene in the words and smiles of its politicians; in its prayers, in its ignorance, and in the wisdom of its kept intellectuals. [. . .] The reaction to obscenity is shame, usually interpreted as the physiological manifestation of the sense of guilt accompanying the transgression of a taboo. The obscene exposures of the affluent society normally provoke neither shame nor a sense of guilt, although this society violates some of the most fundamental moral taboos of civilization. [. . .] Thus we are faced with the contradiction that the liberalization of sexuality provides an instinctual basis for the repressive and aggressive power of the affluent society. This contradiction can be resolved if we understand that the liberalization of the Establishment's own morality takes place within the framework of effective controls; kept within this framework, the liberalization strengthens the cohesion of the whole. (Marcuse 1972: 17–18)

Although Žižek often distances himself from the Freudo-Marxist propensity to turn political deadlocks into libidinal ones, it is undeniable that the foundations upon which his critique of capitalism is premised are rooted in a productive amalgamation of psychoanalysis and Marxism. The key ideological role played by commodified libido was first systematically identified by the Frankfurt School. While Žižek emphatically shares, and in fact updates this diagnosis, he also attempts to politicize it in ways which take us beyond Freudo-Marxism. In this respect, he has inaugurated an immensely fruitful field of study within which to elaborate an original theory of the *demise* of the capitalist social link. I argue that if this theory, embedded as it is in a negative ontology, awaits the historical chance to prove its effectiveness, it is also, perhaps more urgently, in need of being developed dialectically into its own generative counterpart. The underlying intention of my work is to explore the connection between a breathtakingly innovative critical theory structured around the Hegelo-Lacanian overlapping of universality and negativity, and its dialectical other. This other, I claim, consists of

the creative intervention delineating how the destructive force of the negative can be transubstantiated into a new order. In this respect, we must ask: is the explosive capacity of *jouissance* effective enough to help dissolve the old horizon of meaning and disclose the contour of a new one? Consequently, how are we to think the strategic rehabilitation of *jouissance* within an alternative (non-capitalist) social order? If it is not given to us to get rid of the itch, how can we change its function?

For they know what they do not do . . .

To start tackling these questions, let us briefly consider the pervasiveness of the ideological function of enjoyment in our world. My overarching point is that the injunction to enjoy has become such an irresistible and totalizing ideological category precisely because, by feigning a non-ideological function, it prevents the concrete constitution of collective political projects which may seriously challenge capitalism. It is because of the subtle but nonetheless hegemonic injunction to enjoy that today we are unable to even imagine the formation of social spaces and practices alternative to those imposed by capital. The problem here concerns not only the economy (the regulation of the market), but also the sad transformation of politics into a consumer good, or valorized enjoyment. In this respect, Žižek is fully entitled to criticize the call for more “political passion” within the leftist camp.<sup>5</sup> To claim that today’s left needs to engage more fervently in the democratic competition in order to match the engagement of the right is both theoretically simplistic and practically counterproductive. Injecting political passion into a weak project, a project that *in itself* is unable to mobilize the people, is vacuous and self-defeating. To put it succinctly: before being passionate about its politics, today’s left has to reinvent a politics to be passionate about. The main fault of the left is not the insufficient libidinal attachment to its politics, or the distance from the “real needs” of the people, but its by now chronic and obdurate inability to devise a project that might command an enthusiastic popular response. From this important perspective, currently the right enjoys a clear structural advantage: even where it claims to accept values of tolerance, moderation and respect for democracy, the message that reaches the people is redolent with obscene enjoyment (full of racist, sexist, egotistic undertones). Although today the official line of the major right-wing parties has to endorse the basic democratic rules, it surreptitiously interpellates voters at the level of their “dirty (anti-democratic) underbelly”. An explicit example of this strategy comes

in the form of a recent documentary showing Mario Borghezio, an Italian MEP for the populist Lega Nord (Northern League), as he speaks at a meeting of French neo-fascists on new tactics to gain power through political infiltration. Unaware of the hidden camera, Borghezio advises his French colleagues that to avoid being labelled “nostalgic fascists” they should *pretend* to engage in regional politics of all kinds while deep down fighting for fascist agendas.<sup>6</sup>

The lesson of contemporary politics is thus that partial, unofficial right-wing investment in obscene enjoyment effectively neutralizes the condition of possibility of any alternative discourse, while simultaneously maintaining sufficient conditions for global capitalism to thrive. In such a scenario, the left would seem to have two options: either continue condemning right-wing excesses while claiming moral superiority – a strategy which, given the current historical conjuncture, is palpably short-sighted (or can only yield momentary, inconsequential success), since the right has learnt to promote a liberal agenda *secretly* anchored in these excesses; or, in a much more daring and difficult move, it can attempt to reinvent itself through a project that effectively taps into unconscious forms of collective enjoyment. As Žižek argues, crucial to such a choice would be the break with liberal democracy, for until we persist in supplementing blind capitalist dynamics, susceptible to crises and annexed social turbulence, with calls for more democracy, the political advantage will always rest with a right that has learnt to play on two tables simultaneously (democracy and illicit enjoyment), while the left sticks to the anodyne, deeply contradictory defence of “capitalism with a human face”.

Currently, the liberal left has joined the right in the unbearably hypocritical call for the abandonment of “old-fashioned” ideological positions. However, while the hypocrisy of the right hides a series of strong (revolting) passionate attachments, the hypocrisy of the left is suspended upon its own structural emptiness. Undoubtedly, for the left this is the outcome of at least two decades of (to put it generously) political convalescence and regrouping following the epochal collapse of socialism. What has nevertheless become clear now is that any alliance between the left and global capital ends up favouring the populist right. In fact, one is tempted to claim that in its depoliticized obsession with technocratic competence and multiculturalism, contemporary leftist politics is itself a product of the triumph of the capitalist “will to enjoyment”. Its secret, unacknowledged aim is less to challenge the right than to share with the right the enjoyment of (the discourse of) capital. My contention is that it is from the questioning of this will to enjoyment that we should begin anew if we are to learn how to

dismantle the capitalist (dis)order and prevent the catastrophic consequences that for some decades now have been looming on the horizon.

### Helots of the regime

Lacan claimed that the proliferation of commodified enjoyment amounts to a caricature of *jouissance*, a potentially (self-)destructive injunction to embrace excessive enjoyment which is nevertheless constantly balanced out and domesticated by opposite discourses aimed at re-inscribing us into the comfort of the pleasure principle. With regard to the elusiveness of the capitalist injunction to enjoy, it seems to me that at the heart of Žižek's enquiry there lie the following key questions, whether explicitly or implicitly addressed by Žižek himself. First, the *reciprocity* of enjoyment as an ideological category: both the deceptively simple question of our enjoyment of capitalism and its products, and the inverted proposition concerning how capitalism enjoys us, or enjoys itself through us (which also means that in the phrase "the enjoyment of capitalism" the genitive should retain all its semantic ambiguity). Secondly, the wager that the category of enjoyment has to do, simultaneously, *with capitalism and anti-capitalism*, inasmuch as it is (1) what propels capital forward in its headless drive towards profit-making; (2) what keeps consumers libidinally attached to the capitalist machine; and (3) also what allows us to imagine the breaking up of the current order.

The main merit of Žižek's speculative method is to be found in the way it unambiguously asserts that capitalism *is* its own excess, pinpointing for us a series of significant consequences. As we have seen, Žižek claims that the strength and originality of capitalism as an ideological apparatus – what marks it out as a historically unique phenomenon – is that it explicitly endorses its intrinsic imbalance. Its key injunction and substance can be summed up in one word: Enjoy! This means not only that capitalist ideology compels us to enjoy commodities, but also that *we* want capital to keep enjoying itself (through us). Thus the two forms of enjoyment merge into one, making it difficult to distinguish between the two traditional categories of Hegelo-Marxist dialectics, namely "masters" and "servants". If capitalism has its servants, they belong to that category of people whose inclination Étienne de la Boétie touched upon in his masterpiece *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* (1548). In la Boétie's treaty (explicitly directed against single tyrants, but not accidentally written right at the dawn of the capitalist era) we discern the kind of masochism which psychoanalysis will



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