



WARWICK TIE

# IN THE PLACE OF UTOPIA

AFFECT AND TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS

PETER LANG

Considerable socio-political change has re-configured the discursive space once occupied by 'utopia'. Within the cultures of late capitalism and the organisational matrices of bio-political administration, that space is no longer animated by images of idealised states that are yet to come, or by a sense of simple failure in the production of those same states. Rather, it is overdetermined by a condition of *differentiation in the representation* of reality. The origins of that differentiation of representation appear to lie deep within the modernist project. *In the Place of Utopia* explores how that condition of representation might be animated anew by the *discursive circuits* through which modernity has come to operate, so as to enliven the ability of transformative ideas to lever change from within a range of organic crises current to the world system: the financialisation of global capitalism; the subsumption of worker subjectivities to the logic of capital; the broadening of the metabolic rift through industrial-capitalism. Central to this animation of transformative ideas is the relationship between *language* and *the body*.

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Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

*Bibliographic information published by die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek*  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <<http://dnb.d-nb.de>>.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data: A catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library, Great Britain

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tie, Warwick.

In the place of utopia : affect and transformative ideas / Warwick Tie.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-3-0343-1303-2

1. Civilization, Modern--Philosophy. 2. Postmodernism. 3. Utopia. I. Title.

CB430.T54 2014

321'.07--dc23

2014009802



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ISBN 978-3-0343-1303-2 br.

ISBN 978-3-0351-0714-2 eBook

**PETER LANG**



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Printed in Switzerland

*For my father, Laurie, whose unexpected passing helped clarify the reasons for which I was writing.*





## Preface

“There are two moments worthwhile in writing, the one where you start and the other when you throw it in the waste-paper basket”. So proposes Samuel Beckett. His insight begs the question, however, as to how anything would get written if we were to routinely throw away what had just been penned. Moreover, it raises a question as to how ideas might develop at all if, in their emergent states of confusion, their movement was not stabilised by their inscription upon a durable surface of some kind.

It was not from Beckett that I learned to consign my daily writing to the rubbish bin. Rather, the lesson had come to me from Picasso; or, at least, from the scraps of an urban myth which I heard about the way in which Picasso painted. According to the myth, Picasso would produce his master-pieces in a very short time; perhaps just a few hours. Behind that act of rapid production, however, lay several months of sketching various elements of the emergent piece. At some point in time, so the myth continued, that process of continual sketching would incite a sense that the compositional challenges of the painting could be grasped and that the time to paint was about to impress itself. Upon hearing the story, I began to wonder if Picasso’s practice might transfer to the world of written words; and to the discursive composition of ideas more particularly. And so began a new practice: early morning sun; favourite cafés; coffee; people I came to know; pencil upon paper; writing; the persona of a public writer.

Somewhere along the way I learned – accidentally no doubt – that various authorial possibilities would emerge from the act of physically discarding what the writing session had produced. With something akin to sacrilegious perversity, I began to adopt a practice of ritualistically tossing into the nearest rubbish bin the ripeness of thought just grasped.

The act of doing so threw me, quite unexpectedly, into a state of trust that any lines of thought which are significant would return. Freud, I think, had said something about that. Upon returning on the subsequent day, the new and blank page would find me having to recreate the object which the previous writing had produced. And now, only dimly, if at all,

could it be recalled. Invariably – and this became the moment of magic I came to anticipate – the object would again congeal, but always in a slightly altered form; squeezed and pummelled by the events of the preceding day.

As to what that object could thereby be said to comprise – given its quizzical lack of being yet full possession of form – need not concern us immediately. Such a matter would only become of concern, I learned, where I found myself anxious: afraid that the emergent ideas wouldn't form again in my mind and would be, instead, lost forever. More become the lesson, however, that a swarming of thought cannot be stilled when sharpened graphite begins to again scour clean paper.

The character of 'writing' became difficult to determine with this new practice. Gone was the obsession with hoarding drafts; of assembling an archive of pages which, optimistically, might house a secret *agalma*. It instead became apparent that my practice of discarding the writing is less like the comforting action of assembling a jigsaw-puzzle, than an uncanny inhabitation of the absent piece in the child's sliding toy. Paul Verhage has said something like that.

Counter to any concerns that such writing would slide into an endless string of shapeless forms, I learned to recognise the quiet impress of ideas in their formation. Moreover, I came to recognise those points where I needed to shift my location from the café to the computer and to swap the waste-bin for a memory stick. Several frantic hours of typing later, a discussion would lay written which, until that time, had neither the pretence nor capacity to bear such a name. And, through this practice, the book's argument emerged.

A modest drive propels this act of talking about how the book formed. Call it my 'methodological discussion', if you will: to understand the writing practice through which the text has emerged is to comprehend, in large part, the book itself.

Before I leave you to the text that follows, I wish to acknowledge the support of the Massey University Research Fund in enabling another to teach for me while I wrote the middle chapters. I also wish to thank the following for their abiding interests in the writing, and for the kind of support which enabled me in a completely different way: Wendy Bolitho; Grant Duncan; Bruce Edman; Anna Fielder; Chris McMillian; Tami Wyness; and my co-collaborators in *Political Organisation Aotearoa*. May each of you sense your imprint upon the words which follow.

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# 1 *Utopia: ‘What is to be done?’*<sup>1</sup>

For those seeking to rejuvenate something like a politics of equality – an audaciously singular pursuit in these post-utopian times – the emergent instabilities of the world-system present a troublingly pleasurable paradox. Productively, the idea of a ‘world-system’ enables a mapping to be undertaken of the various logics and practices through which the governance of people presently occurs: both of those logics’ geo-political distributions and their trajectories. To this end, the various forms which capitalism now takes,<sup>2</sup> and the bio-political administrations of populations<sup>3</sup> – including the co-ordinates of life itself<sup>4</sup> and of death<sup>5</sup> – can be charted. Moreover, that mapping can canvas the variable degrees of sedimentation which those logics have achieved within different geo-political territories,<sup>6</sup> in addition to the historical movement of those logics across geo-political spaces.<sup>7</sup> Productively, also, the identification of instabilities within those logics provides a dynamic means by which to envisage potential portals through which transformative reflexes might open within the world-system as a whole. And to this end, a range of crises that appear organic to the world-system provide considerable ma-

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- 1 V. I. Lenin, “What is to be done?”, in *V. I. Lenin Selected Works, Volume. 1*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1970: 119–261.
  - 2 See C. Lane and G. T. Woods (eds.), *Capitalist Diversity and Diversity Within Capitalism*, London and New York: Routledge 2012.
  - 3 Emblematic texts in this regard include M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage Books 1995; and M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volumes 1, 2, & 3*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1981.
  - 4 See N. Rose, “The politics of life itself”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18(6), 2001, 1–30.
  - 5 See G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998.
  - 6 See D. Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom*, New York: Columbia University Press 2009.
  - 7 See G. Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*, London and New York: Verso 1994. See also P. Bourdieu and L. Wacquant, “On the cunning of imperialist reason”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 16, 1999, 41–58.

terial upon which critical analyses can gain traction in the envisioning of alternative social and political trajectories. As Slavoj Žižek writes, the defining characteristic of such issues is that they are “problems for which no clear solutions are guaranteed by the logic of evolution”.<sup>8</sup> Emblematic of these crises are the instability of a now financialised, global economy,<sup>9</sup> the fragility induced within ecological processes as a consequence of industrial/consumption practices,<sup>10</sup> and the subsumption of identity by the logics of capital and of post-political administration.<sup>11</sup>

Within this constitution of the world-system by an emergent set of crises, the possibility arises that elements of the system which have not hitherto assumed transformative significance now begin to count. So suggests Immanuel Wallerstein.<sup>12</sup> Where instability comes to define the operation of the system as a whole, such that crises become organic to the structure rather than being merely episodic in character,<sup>13</sup> actions performed at the margins of that system have the potential to reconfigure the logics of capital and of social administration:

We are living in the transition from our existing world-system, the capitalist world economy, to another world-system or systems [...]. We know that the period of transition will be a very difficult one for all who live it [...]. Not paradoxically, it will also be a period in which the ‘free will’ factor will be at its maximum, meaning that individual and collective action can have a greater impact on the future structuring of the world than such action can have in more ‘normal’ times, that is, during the ongoing life of an historical system.<sup>14</sup>

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8 S. Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, London and New York: Verso 2012, 8.

9 See, for example, D. Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism*, London: Profile 2010.

10 See, for example, J. B. Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, New York: Monthly Review Press 2000.

11 See, for example, A. Negri, *Empire and Beyond*, Cambridge and Maldon: Polity Press 2008; and P. Virno, “General intellect”, *Historical Materialism*, 15, 2007, 3–8.

12 I. Wallerstein, *Utopistics: Or Historical Choices of the Twenty-First Century*, New York: The New Press 1998.

13 We can set aside here, as analytically wanting, the currently popular characterisation of such crises as being (simply) ‘wicked problems’.

14 *Ibid.*, 35.

During such periods of organic instability, human agency thereby begins to really matter. To this end, protests held against the various administrators of those logics begin to gain an address that reaches beyond the sites immortalised in their occurrence – of Seattle, Cancun, Tahrir Square, *Place des Droits de l'Homme*, *Puerta del Sol*, Wall Street, Tiananmen Square, and so on. To summarise the point, resistance and the construction of alternative modes of political organisation have come to carry an unprecedented weight of meaning in this period of accumulating organic crises: they herald futures that run oblique to the forms of organisation sown within modernity, to the various processes of capital expropriation and of bio-political administration which have come to shape intra-human, inter-species, and species-ecological relations.

Less straight-forward than the historical significance that human agency appears to presently be obtaining, however, is the matter of the ends to which such action might now be put. Here the allure of troubling pleasure bites. The issue is not that action to re-establish a politics of equality finds itself occurring within a normative vacuum. It is not that the institutions of modernity provide insufficient normative visions and ethical frameworks to give people traction on the matter, to ground their value-judgements. It is not that the conduct of affirmative relationships cannot thereby be guided. Rather, the issue is that such visions and frameworks proliferate. There exists a state of 'too much' rather than 'too little'. A plethora of normative modalities accosts the subject who seeks ethical-political guidance, such that people must negotiate a normative (mine-)field populated by various species of political and philosophical pragmatism, by pluralistic reflexes towards social difference and multicultural tolerance, by a range of proto-nationalist, linguistic, and religious sectarian injunctions, by resurgent Marxisms; not to speak of exotic synthetic accretions such as liberation theology, eco-feminism, queer-ecology, and so on.

The appearance of normativity as, now, a field in a state of rampant proliferation, suggests that the question of what ought to now be worked for is not, simply, in and of itself a normative one. It has, rather, the form of an ideological problem. The issue of normativity now concerns the constitution of transformative ideas and the movement of transformative thought. More particularly, the problem concerns the form which ideas might now take when they are made to convey normative impulses, when they are asked to carry the anticipation of better futures.

In the process of presenting some or other ethical vision, such ideas persistently show themselves to fail, in part at least. With recurring monotony, they demonstrate an inability to secure a correspondence between the utopianism of the concrete plans being put forward and the limiting effects of the actually-existing social conditions within which that expression is being enabled. The recent subsumption of the socialistic ('anti-austerity') vision of the incumbent President in France to the logic of 'the markets', in his act of proffering neo-classical economic solutions for the country's financial challenges (tax credits to the corporate sector; an increase in sales tax; cuts in State spending), suggests yet again the power of those actually-existing social conditions. Utopian ideas too readily appear idealistic and unrealistic in the grim face of 'reality'.

Fuelling that failure is the difficulty which transformative ideas appear to exhibit in building into, and of sustaining within themselves, the material impulses of the contexts in which they spawn. This had been Jacques Derrida's quarrel with that most momentous of normative visions, the American Constitution: the political performativity which had enabled the writing of the Constitution was, upon the scripting of the text, immediately subsumed by the 'legal' demand for the document itself.<sup>15</sup> The emergence of a constitutional state (the United States of America) thereafter eclipsed the radical character of that particular act of writing. No subsequent juridical interpretation, in Derrida's mind, could reconstitute the necessarily unlicensed intent performed in the scripting of the great text.

No stronger statement exists on the contemporary predicament of ideas, in relation to the matter of normative vision, than Louis Althusser's first thesis on the relation between ideology and ideological state apparatuses (the ISAs): "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence".<sup>16</sup> As with the field of normative vision, no limit exists to the production of ideologies: each individual is capable of generating a representation of the relation between their lives and the material conditions which sustain them. Moreover, the individual can only ever do so. They must undertake this work of

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15 J. Derrida, "Declaration of independence", *New Political Science*, 1986, 15, 7–15.

16 L. Althusser, "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses", in J. Rivkin and M. Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 693.



establishing their relation to the world if they are to continue in the task of reproducing their lives day by day. Chillingly in this vein, Althusser writes, “*individuals are [thereby] always-already subjects*”.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the one element which all individuals share in common – and by which they might gain some leverage on the social forces that they routinely encounter – remains obdurately inaccessible. That object emerges in the work of Althusser as being *ideology* itself. Drawing upon an explanation of infant socialisation found in the early work of Jacques Lacan, Althusser explains the esoteric character of this element in the following way. That object, of *ideology*, emerges in relation to the processes of learning by which the infant child becomes a social being. More particularly, Althusser associates this object with the state of elemental “misrecognition” (*méconnue*) by which the human subject is constituted in those processes of early socialisation.<sup>18</sup> The material facts of human socialisation indicate that the infant is born into a state of anticipated subjectivity, one which pre-exists their arrival. Stated baldly, it is routinely expected that the infant will be a person, will play social roles, will feel emotions, and so on. Additionally, each individual needs help becoming a subject, for this is no spontaneous act of autonomous agency. Thankfully, for the reproduction of social bonds, resources for the construction of personal ideologies swarm about us, as social practices and processes of thought by which the ideological apparatuses of State operate: of family life, of religious observance, of educational attainment, of legal argument, of scientific method, of political representation, of collective decision-making, and so on. Through the act of being ‘hailed’ by these various agencies and their practices of social cohesion, the individual comes to misrecognise themselves as being a coherent ‘I’. As a consequence of that misrecognition, the messages from those apparatuses enact a recurring effect: the subject is made knowable; to themselves, and to others.

What is not available within this profusion of practices, apparatuses, and emergent ideologies, however, is ideology ‘itself’. And without ‘ideology itself’ no possibility exists for ‘normativity itself’. For Althusser, there exists no way by which the human subject can step outside the production of the ideologies by which it imagines its relation to the reali-

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17 *Ibid.*, 700. Original emphasis.

18 *Ibid.*, 701.

ty of its own existence. What cannot be obtained in the construction of ideologies is, therefore, that quality of knowledge which would guarantee any given representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. All that exists, alternatively, is the operation of ideology.

Famously, within Althusser's argument – or infamously for those, as anticipated by Wallerstein, who would seek to dismantle the machinery of domination by dint of their own (collective) agency – not only does the subject never appear but it does not exist. It is not that the operation of ideology prevents the generation of subjectivity, as if the very possibility of human agency routinely finds itself extinguished by the overwhelming power of social structure. Rather, for Althusser, the problem runs deeper than this. There exists no condition within subjectivity that can guarantee the place from which ideas are spoken, no possibility of the morally autonomous self. Without that capacity, the subject remains forever reliant upon social practices and institutions to supply it with a place from which they can speak, with a symbolic mandate. And, to this end, Althusser is able to indicate with regard to the generation of the subject, that “(t)here are no subjects except by and for their *subjection*”.<sup>19</sup>

Notwithstanding the apparent non-existence of the subject, the processes of subjectivisation as mapped by Althusser unexpectedly generate a potentially productive condition within subjectivity. That condition is a state of overdetermination, of psychical surplus. The productivity of that condition lies with the manner in which it eludes integration at the levels of both the individual and the ISAs through which subjectivity is fuelled. The persistence of that element emerges in conjunction with a general sense which the subject gains, as an on-going legacy of its social formation through that state of ‘elemental misrecognition’: that the world indeed makes sense. This gives rise to a social effect whereby “the vast majority of (good) subjects work all right ‘all by themselves’”.<sup>20</sup> That experience is not illusory, insofar as no alternative modes of experience exist that are capable of condemning such feelings of coherence to the dustbin of false consciousness. That said, the various cliché-filled declarations of rightness which abound within popular culture – which suggest

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19 *Ibid.*, 701. Original emphasis.

20 *Ibid.*, 701.

to the individual that a reasonable fit indeed exists between the narratives they compose about themselves and the situations in which they live – do not suggest, either, that individuals are routinely attaining a generalised state of wellbeing. The issue does not thereby turn upon the simplistic question as to whether the individual is experiencing success or failure. Rather, the declarations indicate that a condition of surplus is being generated at the level of the individual: “This phrase which registers the effect to be obtained” – such as, in the French context in which Althusser was writing, “*so be it!*” – “proves that it [wellbeing] is not ‘naturally’ so”.<sup>21</sup>

By way of an indication that this element cannot be integrated into subjectivity itself, Althusser names this surplus “the Subject”.<sup>22</sup> The Subject forever outstrips the flesh and blood of subjects. Moreover, it is this supra-semblance of subjectivity, alone, which guarantees existence for the subject. Indicating, further still, the formative role which this inassimilable figure plays with regard to subjectivity, the semblance remains capable of enacting its congealing effects only as long as flesh and blood individuals “freely accept their subjection to the Subject’s ‘commandments’”.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the apparent promise being signalled here, that adherence to the Subject’s superego-like commandments will produce a sense within the individual subject of an intrinsic self, there exists no way by which the subject can integrate into its own functioning the overweening presence of the Subject. Blocking that ability, for Althusser, is the structuring effect upon subjectivity of “the reproduction of the relations of production and of the relations deriving from them”.<sup>24</sup> The logic of capital, as one of the most powerful mechanisms to emerge within modernity for the realisation of human potential, thereby stands as an unerringly persistent obstacle to that realisation.

The subject who thus emerges under the ISAs of liberal-capitalist societies – under modernity’s interpenetrating logics of capital and of administrative governance – is not thereby beset by a condition of lack and deficit. Rather, it is plagued by an unbearable condition of psychical

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21 *Ibid.*, 701. Original emphasis.

22 *Ibid.*, 701.

23 *Ibid.*, 701.

24 *Ibid.*, 701.

surplus, a surplus that Jacques Lacan playfully called ‘enjoyment’ (*jouissance*). This situation births, from within the work of Althusser, a predictive hypothesis: the formation of subjectivity under the logics of modernity creates a surplus within subjectivity which the subject cannot integrate back within itself. We need look no further for contemporary evidence of this state of inordinacy, Žižek suggests, than the emergence under the pressures of late capitalism/ bio-political administration of various collectivised attempts to rid the social of this tacitly shared dislocatory presence; most painfully, in the global resurgences of racism and raw violence as recurring forms of popular political expression in the face of the (ethnic) other. Driving the phenomenon, Žižek suggests, is a simple characteristic of subjectivity within late modernity: “*The hatred of the Other is the hatred of our own excess of enjoyment*”.<sup>25</sup> It is within this context – of subjectivity in a state of overdetermination, as arises with a thorough-going dislocation to the field of ideology – that negotiations within liberal-capitalist spaces over the meaning of normativity, and the hope of *utopia*, now occur.

The new social movements which sit on the margins of political organisation – from *Los Indignados*, to Occupy Wall Street, to elements of the Arab Spring – provide a potential site for such a negotiation to be attempted; of the surplus generated within subjectivity by the present non-availability of *ideology*. Moreover, the audaciously direct gesture which Lenin made towards questions of normativity – “what is to be done?” – provides a readily-accessible lure, as befits the no-nonsense pragmatism of our liberal-capitalist spaces, for the scripting of such a negotiation.<sup>26</sup>

While clear differences exist between the new social movements involved – in both their historical conditions of emergence, the classes and status-groups involved in each, and the organisational forms they have come to take – a shared dearth of directed reform agendas releases within

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25 S. Žižek, “Eastern Europe’s republics of Gilead”, *New Left Review*, 183, 1990, 57. Original emphasis.

26 The occasion for Lenin’s pamphlet on political strategy was a deadlock he perceived to exist in Russia, at the turn of twentieth century, between the stilted state of the union movement and the blind futility of anarchist activism. He became concerned with a subsequent preference which was emerging within Social-Democracy, with regard to that deadlock, towards programmes of political reform over the use of revolutionary insurgency.

them the normative energies found brawling within Lenin's provocation. While the absence of programmes for transformative change might be readily interpreted as a failure of movements such as Occupy – a sign of political inconsequence – a cleft which that absence introduces into the question of 'what is to be done' might productively lever the consideration of *utopia* into a potentially fertile discursive space. More particularly, the absence of fixed agendas may release the normative pulsion of Lenin's question from the various analytic imperatives – which can all so quickly demand political allegiance – as interpretations brew of the geopolitical contexts in relation to which such movements find they speak. In the context of the Occupy Movement in Aotearoa/ New Zealand, for example, where I live, the interpretations of the global economic crisis held by participants were able to productively remain in a state of fluidity without congealing into a singular clotted condition that could then have been so easily discounted by entrenched social interests (as being no more than anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, pro-environmentalist, and so on, rants). In this way, openings might be found emerging in and around the new social movements, between the substantive analytic content which Lenin's question implies and the performative urge staged by the very asking of such a question. It is within these openings that, as Žižek puts it, people might come to find "the questions to which they have (or, rather, are) the answer".<sup>27</sup>

For those of us living in neoliberal political communities, the slow but distinctive waning of Northern exceptionalism provides durability to this emergent kind of critical political engagement; of a diminution in the capacity of prevailing Northern nation-states to act as if separate from, and thereby emboldened to act upon, other communities and ecosystems. That waning surely now occurs as the gravity of global economic activity shifts from the Anglo-American economies to those of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.<sup>28</sup> Being highlighted in this shift is a reliance which the operations of the Northern economies have had upon the externalisation of costs. These costs have arisen in association with the

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27 Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, 89.

28 For an account of the dynamics of this shift, see G. Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*, London and New York: Verso 1994; see also G. Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London and New York: Verso 2008.

privatisation of economic surpluses, in conjunction with the production and consumption of commodities, and of a subsequent projection of those costs onto classes, populations, and ecological systems with insufficient resources to resist that projection in anything like a sustained manner.<sup>29</sup>

The progressive decline of the Northern economies highlights this reliance upon practices of externalisation. This is not the case, however, because the emerging centres of economic activity necessarily present preferable models of political economy (such as the so-called Asian model of capitalism).<sup>30</sup> Rather, the decline highlights the extent to which Northern exceptionalism had come to depend upon an horizon of development that had emerged out of its own functioning: out of a sense of given-ness which Anglo-American economic and demographic administration has come to embed within its own national cultures and to project on those made dependent upon Northern economic-military power.<sup>31</sup> The capacity to assume such an horizon has thereby enabled a hegemonic belief to emerge – relating to the normality of capitalist organisation and liberal-parliamentary management – within which that very same horizon has needed only to be assumed in order to function.

The ability of transformative ideas to inhabit the current moment of normative opening, as conveyed in the Leninist provocation, pivots upon a particular element of this same late modernist condition. It turns upon

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29 C. Nair, *Consumptionomics: Asia's Role in Reshaping Capitalism and Saving the Planet*, Oxford: Infinite Ideas 2011.

30 See Žižek on his criticisms of Chinese capitalism: S. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, London and New York: Verso 2010, 154–158. For a contrary and more optimistic view, see G. Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing*.

31 See, for example, N. G. Fernanda, “Promises of accession: reassessing the trade relationship between Turkey and the European Union”, *American University International Law Review*, 24, 4, 2009, 739–783. That said, the trade imbalances which exist between American and China alter the operation of such power, nestled as those imbalances are within a wider constellation of international trade relationships: see in this regard R. Dekle, J. Eaton, and S. Kortum, “Unbalanced trade”, *American Economic Review*, 97, 2, 2007, 351–355. Moreover, new realignments in trade relations look to alter the machinations of economic power further, particularly as between Russia and China. On this issue see S. Kotkin, “The unbalanced triangle: what Chinese–Russian relations mean for the United States: review essay”, *Foreign Affairs*, 88, 5, 2009, 130–138. See also L. H. Liew, “US trade deficits and Sino-US relations”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 40, 4, 2010, 656–673.

the cognitive muscle by which, variously, the capitalist appropriation of wealth, the externalisation of costs, and associated systems of political organisation, have operated; that element being the production of knowledge.

A stunted version of Lenin's question can be seen at work in the processes of knowledge development which augment the neoliberal regimes of economic governance. It is not a version which productively loosens empirical observation from set normative impulses, as the new social movements might do; nor does it strategize for an alternative image of shared social life, as Lenin's own work sought. Rather, the form of knowledge at work orients action, in a pragmatic manner, towards the horizons of possibility that are simultaneously gestured towards, and masked by, the common-sense of liberal-capitalist management. Illustrating the point is the fiscal strategy, during 2011–2013, of imposing austerity-based solutions upon those members of the Eurozone facing unsustainable levels of sovereign debt: the capacity of administrators to abstract the social effects of financialisation from the logic of financialisation itself (as had occurred to Eurozone societies during the period 1980–2008) has popularised criticism of those societies for the social costs they now bear (the Greeks being 'unproductive', 'lazy', 'too accommodating to immigration', and so on).<sup>32</sup> In a similar manner, that same logic enables the ecological effects of financialisation to be separated off from questions about economic form.<sup>33</sup> The experience of limitless growth in virtual wealth, that has become synonymous with securitisation practices in finance and the trading of financial derivatives, cuts across the scientific understanding that natural eco-systems have material limits. The very idea of 'limits' bears no resemblance to the absence of

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32 See, for example, M. Hudson, "From Marx to Goldman Sachs: the fictions of fictitious capital, and the financialisation of industry", *Critique*, 38, 3, 419–444; R. Wade, "Financial regime change?", *New Left Review*, 53, September/October, 2008, 5–21; N. Potts, "Surplus capital: the ultimate cause of the crisis?", *Critique*, 38, 1, 2010, 35–49.

33 See, for example, S. Bracking, "How do investors value environmental harm/care? Private equity funds, development finance institutions and the partial financialization of nature-based industries", *Development and Change*, 43, 1, 2012, 271–293; T. Theuillat, "Negotiated city: between financialisation and sustainability", *Geographie Economie Societe*, 13, 3, 2011, 225–254; A. Zalik, "Oil 'futures': Shell's scenarios and the social constitution of the global oil market", *Geoforum*, 41, 4, 2010, 553–564.

limitation being witnessed in the private accumulation of wealth. A further effect can follow: the scientific idea of ‘natural limits to growth’ becomes contestable on the (naïve-empiricist) grounds that lived experiences of the investor classes in the knowledge economies of the North suggest otherwise.

Moreover, it is not only the fields of economic organisation and political administration which operate through an asthmatic expression of the Leninist question. It is to be anticipated that popular concerns about ‘what is to be done’ might also mutate in this manner, in keeping with the vague angst now spawned by the tectonic shifts dislocating the globalised landscape of political economy. To this end, limited visions of change are to be expected as people attempt to map themselves relative to this historical transition in the constitution of capitalism, and in the absence of experiences in their personal orbits which could comprehensively explain to them the nature of those changes. The opening words of C. Wright Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination* tellingly bespoke our current time:

What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighbourhood; in other milieu, they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely, of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel.<sup>34</sup>

Under such conditions, the question of what is to be done comes under the sway of one or other regressive form of discourse. Fodder for the media industries, in this regard, is the plethora of conspiracy theories which find expression in popular fiction, journalism, and Hollywood film. As Fredric Jameson disparagingly notes of such theory:

Conspiracy is a poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system.<sup>35</sup>

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34 C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press 1959, 3.

35 F. Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping”, in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Basingstoke: Macmillan 1988a, 277.



Adding to the regressive profusion of popular conspiracy narrative are a variety of other phenomena: the proliferation of spontaneous and direction-less violence as an expression of protest;<sup>36</sup> the fundamentalist pursuit of identification through attachment to religious and/or nationalist icons;<sup>37</sup> popular complicity with programmes for social renewal that reduce those same people to objects of scientific administration;<sup>38</sup> and so on.

The politically limited (and limiting) character of such platforms is best approached not with strident criticism but, rather, with the same ear for utopian longing which Marx brought to his understanding of religion:

*Religious* distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation [...].<sup>39</sup>

Attempts, such as these, to resist forces which impinge upon the self, symptomatically reflect the impossibility of the situation. They suggest a condition in which individuals are finding themselves overdetermined by instabilities in the world-system for which daily experience provides insufficient analytic traction.

Both forms of knowledge – as are associated with the exploitative externalisation of costs by dominant economies; and with popular attempts to resist the economic and political domination which follows – share a common platform. They both operate through *practices of abstraction*.

In itself, this observation doesn't take us far. The development of knowledge always turns upon the insertion of some or other 'abstracting' mechanism between subject and object. In this sense, we can think of the experimental method, reflexive methodology, myth, theoretical narrative,

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36 For commentary on this point, see Žižek, *Living in the End Times*.

37 Žižek provides further insight on this matter: Žižek, "Eastern Europe's republics of Gilead"; and S. Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London and New York: Verso 2002, 112–134.

38 Emblematic in this regard has been the popular buy-in, within western liberal-capitalist societies, of 'happiness' as a governmental rationality. For a critique of this, see L. G. Duncan, "Should happiness-maximization be the goal of government", *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 11, 2, 163–178.

39 K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Religion*, New York: Schocken Books 1964, 42. Original emphasis.

common-sense, prayer, physical exercise, eroticism, and so on, as commonly encountered mechanisms. It is through the operation of some such mediating device that the subject and objects are brought into proximity with one another. The significant element of this operation is the manner by which the subject can thereby experience both an encounter with an object and of themselves as being autonomous from that thing.<sup>40</sup> This has the effect of establishing subjectivity over and above the network of objects through which it exists. As Michel Foucault thereby suggests, the relation is far from being a benevolent one:

Behind knowledge there is a will, no doubt obscure, not to bring the object near to oneself or identify with it but, on the contrary, to get away from it and destroy it—a radical malice of knowledge.<sup>41</sup>

Any misgivings we might have about the metaphysical connotations of Foucault's rhetorical flourishes (insofar as 'all is power'), his point highlights how the act of abstraction comprises an orientation towards the world of things that is simultaneously epistemological and existential: abstraction induces a process of rejecting the otherness of objects in favour of the anthropocentric value which is to be attributed to those things, and occurs through the course of knowledge-producing encounters.

Notwithstanding the role that abstraction plays as the cultural underbelly of knowledge production in general, and of socio-economic governance in particular, the practice of abstraction contains – as Marx understood with regard to religion – an unassuming kernel of utopian hope: the human condition might advance through the development of knowledge. Moreover, attention to the role that abstraction plays in this development of understanding suggests that alternative practices of knowledge production might be brought into being which can divert the movement of abstraction from those trajectories which cement existing

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40 For Marx, this has occurred most dramatically with the moulding of human labour into a commodity under capitalism. Alternatively, for Georg Lukács, it occurs with the restrictive imprint of instrumental reason upon the plasticity of transformative thought. See K. Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, London: Penguin 1976a, 151–152; and G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 1971.

41 M. Foucault, "Truth and juridical forms", in J. Faubion (ed.) *Power/Michel Foucault*, London: Penguin 2002, 11.

patterns of social domination. One particular alternative will take our attention here, for subjects in liberal-capitalist economies: a process of knowledge production that invokes *subjectivity in its state of cultural overdetermination*.

A production of knowledge of this kind lies latent within the utopianism of the general quest ‘to know’. The particularly utopian quality of this pursuit has already been signalled by Althusser: the ability to generate knowledge in such a (utopian) manner remains impossible – in the absence of a thoroughgoing transformation in the relations of production – and is only otherwise able to be imagined in its barest, most idealised, of forms. To this end, subjects of liberal-capitalist economies remain without this kind of knowledge, without ideology *per se*, and instead stay trapped within the production of imaginary representations of themselves to the organic crises that now constitute the world-system. As a consequence, the utopianism by which such a transformative kind of knowledge-production might emerge cannot be directly experienced.<sup>42</sup>

The latent utopianism of knowledge lies elsewhere, within the *discursive space* which the concept of *utopia* has historically occupied. This proposition will instruct us on where and how to look for alternative futures. The conventional exploration of this space has been animated thus far, not by the latent utopianism of knowledge, but by two spectres that haunt the use of ‘utopia’ as a *concept*:<sup>43</sup> one symbolic, one political. The act of framing *utopia* as a concept, to begin, incites the risk that our most compelling of utopian symptoms – the “longing that cannot be uttered”<sup>44</sup> – will sublimate into a figure which can indeed, in a rather banal manner, be uttered. Paradoxically, then, the desires which might drive people to invoke the image of *utopia* would, in the course of the word being used, stop those same desires from materialising: *utopia* would paradoxically be reduced to the flat fact of its enunciation, bereft of the affective charge which motivated its use. Barak Obama’s presidential

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42 Any attempt to formulate a position will find the subject, at best perhaps, picking amongst narratives from the past or trying to ‘fail better’ amidst the absence of an ideology that could help forge alternatives within the contemporary state of systemic crises.

43 Emblematic of this use of *utopia* as a concept is Ruth Levitas’ text *The Concept of Utopia*, London: Philip Allan 1990.

44 R. Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age*, New York: Colombia University Press 2005, 113–144.

platform of ‘Hope’ springs to mind here, as might the United Nations’ Millennium Goals for the eradication of poverty. Should any such instance of use actually succeed, and become a cornerstone of not only popular common-sense but of governmental practice also, *utopia* is at risk of morphing into a political rationality. The eradication of poverty would become a technical matter and the attitude of Hope a regime of political correctness.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the risk of symbolic reductionism that haunts *utopia*, two disabling political effects continually stalk the idea when it is framed as a concept: absorption and exclusion. In the terms by which the Norwegian criminologist Thomas Mathesian presents this issue, utopian visions find themselves forever at risk of “being ‘defined out’ as irrelevant and ‘defined in’ as undangerous”.<sup>46</sup> To this end, images of *utopia* all too easily encounter the accusation of being out of touch with the real world (as can occur, for example, with political plans for economic restructuring that cut across the received wisdom of neoliberal doctrine). Conversely, also, they can be criticised for being all too readily comprehensible and capable of being absorbed at the level of governmental policy, subsumed within the horizons of development associated with nationalism and/or market forces. Far harder it is to maintain a critical position that remains crucially engaged with – in full competition with – the prevailing ideologies, so as to remain in a paradoxical state of “*competing contradiction*”.<sup>47</sup> In this vein, Žižek notes of the Occupy Movement, that the

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45 Such have previously been the dire predictions of social commentators spanning Orwell and Huxley, in addition to personalities in the pantheon of science philosophy as broadly spaced as Popper and Feyerabend.

46 T. Mathesian, *The Politics of Abolition*, Oslo: Scandinavian University Books 1974, 23.

47 *Ibid.*, 14. Original emphasis. Ideally, as the socialist commentators Boaventura de Sousa Santos and César Rodríguez-Garavito note in this regard, such positions might evoke “forms of thought and practice [that] question the separation between reality and utopia and formulate alternatives that are utopian enough to challenge the status quo and real enough to avoid being easily discarded as unviable” (B. de Sousa Santos and C. Rodríguez-Garavito, “Introduction: expanding the economic canon and searching for alternatives to neo-liberal globalization”, in B. de Sousa Santos (ed.), *Another Production is Possible: Beyond the Capitalist Canon*, London and New York: Verso 2006, xxii). Much like the lure of paradox which bubbles up from within a notion like ‘competing contradiction’, the suggested resolution from

urge [to invent ‘new forms of discipline and organization’] [...] should simultaneously be kept at a distance. What should be resisted at this stage is any hasty translation of the energy of the protest into a set of concrete demands.<sup>48</sup>

Žižek continues by indicting that strong demands always risk being incorporated by established patterns of governance and economic organisation. What is required, instead, is the construction of a discursive space within which such demands are simultaneously articulated and refused their full expression:

In the aftermath of the Wall Street protests, we should indeed endeavour to mobilize people around such demands—however, it is no less important to remain simultaneously *subtracted* from the pragmatic field of negotiations and ‘concrete’ proposals.<sup>49</sup>

Žižek’s preferred strategy for doing so lies with the identification of some or other demand which

while thoroughly ‘realistic,’ disturbs the very core of the hegemonic ideology, that is, which, while in principle feasible and legitimate, is de facto impossible (universal healthcare for example).<sup>50</sup>

Least we think that such demands are primarily directed towards the Other (of government or business), Žižek continues, they need be directed simultaneously, if not more immediately, towards those who are themselves exercising the demands. Quite clearly, fascists could also support claims for the ending of corruption, the humanisation of capital, the valuing of people over products, and so on. Rather, demands, if they are to succeed, will prevail because they have been enacted upon the group by the group themselves. Žižek poses this as a question, leading to a difficult challenge to members of the Spanish expression of the occupation movement (*Indignados*):

While the entire political class, right and left, is dismissed as corrupt and driven by a lust for power, the manifesto [of the *Indignados*] nonetheless consists of a series

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Santos and Rodriguez-Garavito depends upon a rhetorical investment in the tautological promise of “non-reformist reforms” (*ibid.*, xxii).

48 Žižek, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, 82.

49 *Ibid.*, 84. Original emphasis.

50 *Ibid.*, 84.

of demands addressed to—whom? Not the people themselves: the *Indignados* do not (yet) claim that no one will do it for them, that (to paraphrase Gandhi) they themselves have to be the change they want to see.<sup>51</sup>

A key question which Žižek's approach thereby poses, in response to the political spectre which haunts the figure of *utopia*, turns upon the form which a demand might take which can variously cut in upon the operation of the institutions of neoliberal governance *and* the place of enunciation from which those demands are being uttered. If this present project were articulated in the form of a demand of this kind, it might read as follows: that a condition of positive knowing develop about the organic crisis of the world system that always but prefigures the real knowledge which is emerging.

A set of vectors enable the discursive space of utopia to set in motion a demand for knowledge of this kind. These vectors enable the question to be asked of 'what is to be done?' in the absence of any clear sense yet of the end to which the action is to be put. Various interpretations of these vectors already exist. The work of Fredric Jameson suggests they comprise three dynamics associated with the movement of ideas within and across the socio-political spaces of modernity: of contradiction, negation, and difference.<sup>52</sup> For Niklas Luhmann, alternatively, these vectors comprise the symbolic, hierarchical, and functional forms of representational differentiation that have come to characterise the societies of modernity.<sup>53</sup> Alternatively again, Jacques Lacan presents these vectors as patterns of discursive circulation that have cumulatively come to constitute the cultural architecture of modernity: the discourses of "the master", "the hysteric", "the university", and "the analyst".<sup>54</sup> And yet otherwise, for Žižek, the vectors operate by virtue of "the gap that separates the economy as the absent Cause from the economy in its 'oppositional determination,' as one of the elements of the social totality".<sup>55</sup>

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51 *Ibid.*, 79.

52 F. Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, London and New York: Verso 2009, 3–74.

53 N. Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society*, New York: Columbia University Press 1982.

54 J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XVII. The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company 2007.

55 Žižek, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, 27–28. Emphasis added.

The significance of these various mappings of the discursive space does not lie with what each suggests about the specific vectors of transformative thought. Rather, their significance lies with the collective attention they draw to the differentiation of cultural representation that has become constitutive of the cultural machinery of liberal-capitalist societies. No attempt is being made here to synthesise these slightly competing interpretations into some new superintending discourse. Rather, they are being used here, severally, to indicate the state of differentiation as being the source of psychical overdetermination by which the contemporary subject of liberal-capitalist spaces finds itself unable to sufficiently map their lives relative to current historical trajectories. To rephrase the point, they collectively indicate how it is that the subject can find itself ‘without ideology’ and bereft of any ability to “cognitively map”, as Jameson puts it, their place in the world.<sup>56</sup>

The significance of this set of propositions for the figure of *utopia* will play out here as a series of questions. First, what might it mean for ideas to have transformative intent within a cultural condition characterised by a state of differentiated representation? This question, from the start, challenges how discussion might proceed: how might such a question be addressed from within that same state of differentiation; that is, how might this present manuscript speak without falling into a presumption that it inhabits some cultural space that is autonomous of the socio-political logics which sustain that condition of differentiation (of late capitalism and the bio-political administration of life)? Quite apparently, this text can make no claim to do so. Nor do I wish it to do so. Rather, I, along with my writing, need be assumed to be inflected by that same cultural condition. As a consequence, no attempt is made, for example, to resolve the differences between the various languages used to describe that state of representational differentiation (between those, for example, of Jameson, Luhmann, Lacan, and Žižek). Preferences will be expressed for particular elements of those descriptions at various points, but these never amount to some new conceptual machine capable of rethematising that condition of differentiation. Rather, the animating question becomes one of what it might mean to traverse that state through itself.

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56 Jameson, “Cognitive mapping”.

A second and related line of questioning then emerges. What forms of subjectivity emerge within this cultural condition that might show themselves capable of sustaining that state of traversal? What elements of subjectivity might prove able to remain unimpressed by the intellectual comforts promised by various elements in this differentiated state of representation: of belief in a direct correspondence between lived experience and reality (naïve empiricism); of belief in the ability of some or other scientific methodology to unravel the complexity of reality (“methodolatry”);<sup>57</sup> or of belief in the epistemological leverage of difference, *aporia*, and fragmentation (the ‘postmodern condition’). What might enable people to sustain the movement of ideas within that state of abstractive differentiation, in the absence of any guarantee as to the prospects for either the ideas or those who deploy them?

And finally, a third line of questioning follows. What kind of object could be said to now motivate – to exert transformative material force upon – critical ideas, in the absence of any clear sense of the future(s) towards which such ideas are being applied? What might now occupy the place previously held by The Idea, by The Good, and by The Useful, and in ways that can avoid the clotting effects of the various apparatuses now at work for the governance of bio-social being?

At stake within this inquiry into *the place of utopia* are the prospects for the movement of transformative ideas within those socio-political spaces which are now animated by a cultural condition of differentiated representation.

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57 V. J. Janesick, “The dance of qualitative research design: metaphor, methodolatry, and meaning”, in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 1994, 209–219.



## 2 Mapping *utopia*

Implied in the shift from ‘*utopia-as-concept*’ to ‘*utopia-as-discursive space*’ is a condition of dynamic change, a state which cuts along two vectors. The first takes the form of a movement that is implicit within the signifier itself (*within* ‘*utopia*’), of movement within *utopia*’s constitution as an idea. Comprising a second scale of change is a form of movement which relates to the constitution of the discursive space itself, of the social space(s) within which the signifier of *utopia* moves. The two are recursively linked but the character of that link might become apparent only as understanding emerges about the second scale of change. To begin, however, an understanding is pursued here regarding the first scale of change and is advanced through an act of mapping the discursive space of ‘*utopia*’. The co-ordinates used by Karl Mannheim in his classic work *Ideology and Utopia* provide a useful means by which to begin this task.<sup>1</sup>

The analytic impetus which develops from Mannheim’s use of *utopia* and of *ideology* comes not simply from his insight into the way in which ideology consolidates political positions and the figure of *utopia* motivates social transformation. Rather, and resonating with Jameson’s subsequent interest in the dialectical relation between *utopia* and *ideology*,<sup>2</sup> the impetus comes, initially, from the slippage that Mannheim notes in the meanings of both, as the words are applied within and to different social contexts. A second drive from his work then emerges to guide us: each term is found to be the precondition for the other. This combination of slippage and mutual constitution enables the potential impress of this discursive space to be indicated, initially, as a dialectical interplay between *the ideological function of utopia* and *the utopian function of ideology*.

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1 K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, London and New York: Routledge 1991.

2 F. Jameson, “The politics of *utopia*”, *New Left Review*, 25 (January/February), 2005, 35–54.

## The ideological function of *utopia*

Reflecting a considerable degree of variability which has emerged within the meaning of ideology,<sup>3</sup> the ideological function which is played by the figure of *utopia* produces a series of both conservative and radical social effects. An understanding of the conservative effects of utopianism comes, rather clearly, from Marx and Engel's critique of socialist idealism.<sup>4</sup> Their critique highlights the politically conservative outcome which had developed within the relationship between *utopia* and ideology in eighteenth century European political critique. On the face of it, the utopianism of that time appeared progressive, expressing a profound optimism about the capacity of European technical and political endeavour to propel the human species towards an elevated state of material wellbeing and social equality. Zygmunt Bauman has subsequently characterised this period as that of a "gardening utopia", in which various plans for the perfect society were hatched, cultivated, and tended.<sup>5</sup> Such utopian planning was no more than wishful thinking, however, for Marx and Engels, being idealist castles into which the otherwise politically-analytic mind could escape from the concrete challenges of wresting alternative futures from the grasp of privileged class interests. Utopianism became, in this guise, a politically conservative pre-occupation in keeping with its other-worldly character.

A subsequent period of utopianism – which Bauman has called the "hunting utopia" – amplified the ideological function of *utopia* in its conservative guise. In terms of its content, the new form of utopianism – which Bauman associates with the transition from "solid modernity" to "liquid modernity"<sup>6</sup> – leaves fully behind any radical aspirations for a

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3 See, for example, F. Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, London and New York: Verso 2009, 315–366; or J. B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1990, 1–73.

4 See D. Leopold, "Socialism and (the rejection) of *utopia*", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 12, 3, 2007, 219–237.

5 Z. Bauman, quoted in M. H. Jacobson, "'The activating presence' – What prospects of *utopia* in times of uncertainty?" *Polish Sociological Review*, 3, 155, 2006, 337–355.

6 Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press; Malden, MA: Blackwell 2000.

balanced and collective pursuit of human well-being. The sense of history which had animated the gardening utopia now collapses into a rabid and flat presentism, and the utopian impulse takes up a fixation with private sensual experience as had characterised the pre-modernism of mythological/religious thought.<sup>7</sup> New, however, is an aggressive attachment to a fully privatised salvation:

Unlike the preceding types, hunters could not care less of the overall ‘balance of things,’ whether ‘natural’ or designed and contrived. The sole task they pursue is another ‘kill’, big enough to fill their game-bags to capacity.<sup>8</sup>

Capitalist market relations become a potent vehicle for the development of a hunter-type utopianism, particularly the shift towards a highly deregulated and competitive model of market exchange, as sustained, of late, by neoliberal doctrine.

This shift in the image of *utopia* plays out also at the level of relations between human subjects and material objects: relationships between people and things become fully provisional upon the course of the (economic) competition into which subjects are forced, such that the kinds of involvement with objects through which personal sensual advantage is pursued (including other people) are always highly strategic and short-lived. A pragmatic sensibility thereby comes to prevail within, and to animate, all relationships: relationships remain durable so long as they appear to advance the appropriation of sensual surpluses. The hunter utopia thereby comes to take on, as Ruth Levitas notes, an explicitly “anti-utopian utopianism”; emerging as “a self-hating or at least self-denying utopianism, in which the claim to pragmatism serves to repress its utopian character”.<sup>9</sup>

This shift in the form which *the utopian* takes – pivoting upon the relations between the subject and objects – builds upon a shift in the content of the new utopian moment: the practice of a politically pragmatic decision-making ascends into something akin to an art-form. It is not, as Ruth Levitas notes, that pragmatism now drives politics but that

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7 G. Claeys and L. T. Sargent, *The Utopian Reader*, New York and London: New York University Press 1999, 2.

8 Bauman, quoted in Jacobson, “The activating presence”, 345.

9 R. Levitas, “Looking for the blue: the necessity of *utopia*”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 12, 3, 2007, 298.

pragmatism now operates as the legitimating discourse for the restructuring of the social in the guise of a network of competitive exchanges.<sup>10</sup> The imposition of market relations is thereafter justified on the basis that ‘they work’ better than regimes of centrally-imposed cooperation. The denial of any connection between *utopia* and history, which characterises this privatised and pragmatic anti-utopianism, has the effect of conserving the political ideologies that are constitutive of late modernity. To this end, a highly competitive mode of social exchange begins to appear as a thoroughly realistic mechanism for mediating between the diverse interests and identities that populate the spaces of liberal-capitalism. Moreover, it finds itself able to suspend the paradox associated with the presentation of itself as *the only* realistic possibility, while evading the trap of appearing utopian. The political pragmatism of neoliberal economic policy thereby emerges as the quintessentially anti-utopian utopianism.

This normalisation of an anti-utopian kind of utopianism further alters the ideological role played by the concept of *utopia*: the boundary between critique and political conservatism virtually dissolves. To the diminished extent to which the machines of modernist utopian planning can still be found operating – in State welfare institutions, planning and regulatory authorities, and so on – and their functions protected from the antagonistic play of market forces, such organs of centralised planning appear to “have all abandoned their previous sense of urgency and responsibility”.<sup>11</sup> That abandonment appears to correlate with the recalibration of central planning in keeping with the *laissez-faire* principles of neoliberal economic policy.<sup>12</sup> Within this situation, the prospects for *utopia* have indeed been transformed “and transformed thoroughly indeed”.<sup>13</sup>

Amidst the conservative inflections absorbed by the utopian motif, a radical version of the ideological function of *utopia* nevertheless unexpectedly emerges. The figure of *utopia* finds itself primed not by images of the future but by a sense as to the impossibilities of the present, by the unsustainably exploitative character of relations between classes, be-

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10 *Ibid.*, 298.

11 Jacobson, “The activating presence”, 347.

12 For an extensive critique of this condition, see M. Gunder, “Passionate planning for the others’ desire: an agonistic response to the dark side of planning”, *Progress in Planning*, 2003, 60, 3, 243–244.

13 Jacobson, “The activating presence”, 347.

tween humans and other species, and between humans and ecological processes. Within this emergent and radical function of *utopia*, the subject finds themselves coming to live, as Michael Jacobson puts it, “*through*, not *towards*” utopia.<sup>14</sup> The discursive space of *utopia* thereby takes on a spirit of ‘critical utopianism’, hosting a set of analytic strategies by which diagnostic commentary is offered on the prevailing constellations of economic organisation and governmentality. Animating such critiques are no longer the vestiges of utopian planning, of an intention to (re)establish political freedoms and to reinstate social egalitarianism, or the hope to enhance the technological control of lived environments, and so on. The twentieth century has provided more than enough empirical evidence that humanitarian bio-political intent routinely encases, as much as releases, human potential; with the projects of both socialism and capitalism being cases in point. Rather, critique comes to be animated by the apparent *impossibility of utopian thought* within the socio-political formations that have arisen through those projects (of capitalist economy and statehood). To this end, Jameson notes, the figure of *utopia* persists within transformative thought not on account of any ability it might retain to concentrate the mind on the planning and realisation of new worlds. Rather, its purpose now lies in

demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future—our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity—so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined.<sup>15</sup>

The absence of liveable futures outside of a now globalised capitalist economy and bio-political administration of life thereby alters significantly the critical political function of *utopia*. Possibilities for the re-establishment of futurity – for an awareness of alternative possible futures – can only now emerge obliquely; through a staging, within transformative ideas, of the psycho-social closure wrought by the normalisation in political pragmatism of an anti-utopian utopianism.

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14 *Ibid.*, 350. Original emphasis.

15 Jameson, “The politics of *utopia*”, 46.

## The utopian function of ideology

Without eclipsing the ideological role which is played by the concept of *utopia*, there also operates in the relationship between utopia and ideology *the utopian function of ideology*. To this end, the cusp which exists between the domains of *utopia* and of *ideology* also enables the installation of utopian impulses within ideas themselves. Ideas can ‘express’ normative aspiration; they can convey, simply put, “the expression of the desire for a better way of living”.<sup>16</sup> Much turns here on the meaning being attributed to the notion of ideology.

Within the register at which all ideas can be thought of as ideological in kind, this expressive function of *utopia* operates most visibly in the role which literature has played in the subversion of dominant interpretations of the present. To this end, within the “utopias of sensual gratification” of the so-called pre-modern societies, literature conveyed a sense that utopian possibilities formed through divine intervention and without human effort: the book of *Genesis*, the works of Hesiod, Ovid, and Vergil, and so on are emblematic in this regard.<sup>17</sup> Such scripts shifted in form with the emergence of “utopias of contrivance”.<sup>18</sup> Rather than stories of divine plans, texts began to narrate human attempts to overcome the limitations of their physical constitution and environments. Narration of this kind enabled alternative futures to be scripted (of both positive utopias and dystopian futures) and satirical portrayals to be presented of prevailing social arrangements through a projection of those circumstances into other (utopian/dystopian) spaces. Emblematic of the latter are the quintessential texts of *Utopia* (More) and *Gulliver’s Travels* (Swift).

The role that ideas play in conveying *utopian* longing alters significantly where the notion of ideology goes beyond the (relatively) simple idea of ‘all thought being ideological in kind’, such that ideology begins to imply a stronger association between the ideas by which people are

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16 R. Levitas, “For utopia: the (limits of the) utopian function in late capitalist society”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 3, 2–3, 2000, 27.

17 See Claeys and Sargent, *The Utopian Reader*, 6–8.

18 *Ibid.*, 2–4.

given to think and enduring patterns of social inequality. In this idiom, the idea of ideology conveys a sense that the operation of ideas will always advantage particular groups and disadvantage others. The work of ideology-critique then involves the establishment of a finding about how that mix of outcomes is being struck in any given context. An additional sense therein emerges as to how *utopian* impulses might come to operate within ideas. As ironical as it might sound, ideologies of this politically-particularistic kind consistently express – no matter how politically or ethically questionable they might be – an urge towards futurity. That urge remains quite untainted by the particular content of any given ideology. Bloch’s guiding notion of the *not yet* within the operation of ideas conveys something of this dynamic.<sup>19</sup> Žižek’s interpretation of ideology also makes this point, but in a way which highlights the formative role of ideas independent of the referents they might imply. Drawing upon an insight from Lacan – regarding the abiding presence within all ideas of a “scrap of the Real” – Žižek points to the manner by which an otherwise questionable ideology such as Nazi National Socialism was nevertheless able to project from within itself a kernel whose presence and motivating effect was replicated across opposing ideologies. In the case of Nazism, that kernel took the form of a quest for national solidarity. The key point here, however, is not that an ideology like Nazism depends upon the presence of a “trans-ideological ‘authentic’ kernel” in order to operate, such that people have some clear “trans-human” object through which they can create a shared identity.<sup>20</sup> Instead, the aspirational power of ideology lies with the ability of that particular political current to lift itself above disquieting questions about how the specific substance of its belief has come about and now reproduces itself. That is, the capacity for an ideology to grip popular thought depends upon its ability to operate independently of the politics through which it is expressed. It does so by virtue of the mere existence of a kernel within itself which the politics cannot express. To this end, as Žižek suggests, “*it is only* [the performative act of making] *reference to such a trans-ideological kernel which makes ideology ‘workable’*.”<sup>21</sup>

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19 E. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1986.

20 S. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London and New York: Verso 1997, 21.

21 *Ibid.* 21. Original emphasis. A particular, and analytically useful, effect emerges from the unexpected inhabitation of partisan ideologies by utopian urges: it pro-

In addition to this ‘expressive’ effect to which *the utopian function of ideology* gives rise, there exists an “instrumental” function.<sup>22</sup> Ideologies provide the substantive content by which detail can be amassed for the development of concrete utopian alternatives. Within this strategic idiom, content depends in the first instance upon the inventiveness of human beings. Science and technology, religion, feminism, economics, and ecology have variously been recognised in different national contexts as sources of utopian inventiveness. Moreover, the instrumental moment looks both backwards and forwards: archeologically and architecturally.<sup>23</sup> Archeologically, the instrumental function seeks to recover from previous historical locations various fragments of social organisation, ethics, and systems of belief which could inform alternative visions of the good society. Architecturally, the moment involves the construction of those fragments into a coherent whole. Emblematic in this latter regard, for Levitas, has been the magisterial socio-political theory of Roberto Unger.<sup>24</sup> Although chiding of ‘the utopian’, Unger presents a sequenced movement for the reformulation of the core structural elements of late modern societies: the economic, the social, and the political. This plan works not by way of a spatial blueprint but by a sense of the imaginative and improvisational processes by which significant structural adjustments might occur that are, thereafter, able to always recollect the fact of their having been created by human labour (and by which they might remain open to reconstruction).

A third social effect of the *utopian function of ideology*, signalled again by Levitas, comprises the manner by which *utopia* suggests the

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vides a way of explaining the historical and trans-cultural persistence of utopian longing without recourse to a questionable essentialism which suggests that utopian longing is a bio-anthropological fact of the human condition (and which the work of Bloch might be criticised for suggesting). Extracted from ‘the human condition’, utopian longing emerges more as a function of the symbolic order and through the manner by which discourses circulate. We will have much more to say on this point. As a function of language, the condition of utopian longing thereby moves in from a location which is external to the individual subject, from an evolutionary ‘necessity’, and comes closer to the domain of subjectivity and to the social processes of subjectivisation.

22 Levitas, “For utopia”, 28.

23 Levitas, “Looking for the blue”, 300.

24 R. Levitas, “Pragmatism, utopia and anti-utopia”, *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory*, 9, 1, 2008, 42–59.



possibility of social transformation.<sup>25</sup> The sense of what ‘transformative’ means in relation to the figure of *utopia* never remains static, however, repeatedly altering in keeping with the kind of normative vision which the concept of *utopia* is called upon to express. Indeed, it is in relation to this matter of social transformation that the *ideological function of utopia* and the *utopian function of ideology* come into closest proximity. It is also the issue which induces a limit-point to that relationship and, thereby, the existence of a limit-point to the very notion of *utopia* as an internally bounded discursive space. All this requires some explanation.

### On the limits of *utopia* and *ideology*

For significant periods in western modernity, and up to the 1960s at least, ideas about utopian possibilities took a substantivist form, developing largely through the literary narration of alternative futures.<sup>26</sup> A sufficient sense remained that spatial possibilities and subjective experiences were possible beyond the horizons of those being progressively mapped and reconfigured by consumerism and bio-political surveillance. To this end, the hope remained alive that story-telling could suggest alternative social arrangements and relationships. Even those narratives which drew the darkest of lessons from the enclosures being erected around subjectivity and political communities, by global capitalism and administrative governance, indicated the possibility that unfettered spaces might exist by virtue of their very ability to tell a story about that increasing enclosure. These were capillary activities, to invoke Foucault, operating at some distance from the main arteries of social administration. To this end, a perception of spaces not yet colonised by imperial powers and capitalist interests enabled the act of literary narration to succeed, and to operate as a mechanism for the imagining of social transformation. The future could yet be projected into those spaces. That said, such spaces were becoming less and less plausible. P.D James’ *Children of Men*, for example, presented such spaces as existing somewhere within the fog of

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25 Levitas, “For utopia”, 28–29.

26 See Claeys and Sargent, *The Utopian Reader*, 312–420.

the North Sea; and, more contemporaneously, the utopian space projected in James Cameron's *Avatar* is not only accessible through space-travel alone but is also wholly dependent upon the persistence of imperialist intentions.

An additional expression of the transformative impulse has come to emerge around *processual* (as compared to substantive) approaches to the formulation of utopian futures. As Levitas notes, the emergence of processual approaches marks a significant shift in the constitution of transformative ideas. Such ideas move from a utopianism which is animated by a concern with a given future ("telic") to "heuristic" forms which examine the social determinations by which alternative futures are being imagined (science, philosophy, religion, gender, technology, politics, and so on).<sup>27</sup>

Animating this gulf between processual and substantivist approaches is the role which Levitas identifies as being played by reflexivity in the formulation of utopian thought.<sup>28</sup> While the substantivist forms of critical utopianism have been able to set aside difficult questions about how their future visions might be brought into being – and which comes to be reflected in the fanciful character of the images which result – the processual forms of critical utopianism have found themselves confronted with the potentially discomfiting task of disclosing and accounting for the social and political interests embedded in their own analyses.

Two forms of reflexivity have proven popular within utopian studies for the task of unravelling those biases: one which is tendentially subjectivist (and 'personally reflexive'); the other objectivist (and which tends more towards what the UK sociologist, Gregor McLennan, would call "full and proper *reflection*").<sup>29</sup> Fusing the differences which otherwise exist between the two approaches is an analytical action in which both participate: a splitting of the subject (the subject who knows) from the object (that which is known about) in the construction of transformative ideas. Such a split is never, however, balanced; indeed, it is only upon the basis of either subjectivity or objectivity gaining analytical

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27 Levitas, "For utopia", 38.

28 *Ibid.*, 38.

29 G. McLennan, "Quandaries in meta-theory: against pluralism", *Economy and Society*, 31, 3, 2002, 495. Original emphasis.

ascendency that this processual approach to thinking in utopian terms can be made to function at all.

The first of these forms within the study of *utopia* (which, for heuristic reasons we will here call the ‘reflexive’ approach) emphasises the role which subjectivity might play in the construction of transformative knowledge. Emblematic in this regard is Levitas’ own work on the existential dimension of *utopia*.<sup>30</sup> Initially, Levitas presents the production of transformative ideas in terms of an analytic practice which is oriented towards the construction of objective insights into the figure of *utopia*. This involves various analytical projects: the production of definition(s) of *utopia*; identification of the various functions that utopian thought plays (of ‘expressiveness’, ‘instrumentality’, ‘transformation’); and specification of different modalities of interpretation within utopian studies and of their implications for analysis (‘telic’/‘heuristic’).<sup>31</sup> Coupled with the description of these various co-ordinates is a normative element which comes to be framed in the subjective terms of personal “responsibility”.<sup>32</sup> Validating the inclusion of responsibility in the production of transformative knowledge is a seemingly reasonable argument: those who engage in the study of *utopia* do so for reasons that are, in themselves, utopian; and, given the “potential functions of utopian thinking”, the “engaged intellectuals” of *utopia* should acknowledge and take responsibility for the political leanings of their analyses.<sup>33</sup> In this register, reflexivity thereby emerges as a practice of analytical interpretation that operates between the objectivity of scientific method and the subjectivity of personal responsibility. It appears to balance out the two dimensions.

Undermining any prospect of balance between these subjective and objective elements, however, is a vulnerability which this form of reflexivity experiences. The use of various co-ordinates to map the use of *utopia* for analytical purposes (of definitions, functions, modalities, and so on) inevitably evokes points of undecidability about which co-ordinates are to be included in any given project, about which events and circumstances in the ‘real world’ pertain to those various co-ordinates, about

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30 Levitas, “Looking for the blue”.

31 The reader might have noticed that some of these projects have, indeed, assisted with this present task of mapping the discursive space of *utopia*.

32 Levitas, “For utopia”. 40.

33 *Ibid.*, 27.

whether or not more co-ordinates are needing to be invented, about whether or not the set of co-ordinates being used will create their own disciplinary effects, and so on. Such points of decision can never be settled on purely rational lines and the positions reached will inevitably contain elements that are as aspirational as they are descriptive. Where responsibility for such decisions is demanded in the unequivocal manner suggested by Levitas' work, a problem of socio-political effect emerges: a state of full authorial responsibility can never be reached because the full implications of decisions being made can never be completely known in the present. A salient question thereby emerges around the use of reflexivity to orient thought towards the utopian: can we ever be reflexive enough when it comes to guaranteeing the validity of our analytic strategies? The privileging of responsibility as a means by which to secure analytic reflexivity finds itself at risk of falling headlong into that impossible question, and of striking a quasi-religious stance that indeed there exists an ultimate and unitary Other in respect of whose demands the subject can stabilise the provisionality which stalks their analyses.

A potentially more productive challenge exists in relation to the matter of responsibility, one which avoids the trap of attempting to accede to the ethical call of the (non-existent) Other. This challenge concerns how the subject might strike a position towards the production of transformative knowledge such that understanding of future possibilities would resonate with the state in which history finds itself. It is something of this latter challenge that can be found within the theoretically 'reflective' orientation of 'utopian pragmatics'.

In contradistinction to the subjectivism associated with reflexivity, the field of utopian pragmatics emphasises the materiality of lived experience. It is through the objective quality of social life that transformative knowledge will gain gravitas. This alternative strains the subjectivist connotations of reflexivity, pushing utopian studies towards what McLennan calls the working out of "the consistency of our positions, their vulnerability to criticism, their ideological motivation, their resources and weaknesses when subjected to scepticism".<sup>34</sup> The significance of this shift in weighting lies with the manner in which the analytic strategy by which it operates – "strenuous intellectual examination"<sup>35</sup> –

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34 McLennan, "Quandaries in meta-theory", 495.

35 *Ibid.*, 495.

has the effect of truncating what can be known about the operation of subjectivity *per se* within the production of transformative knowledge. While that subjective element reveals itself as always being present, it comes to be relegated to a marginal space relative to the machinations of the objects posited as being central to the analysis. Emblematic of this reflective orientation with regard to utopian studies is the “utopistics” of Immanuel Wallerstein (1998).<sup>36</sup> To be clear, Wallerstein begins, history has cast the concept of *utopia* adrift:

utopias are breeders of illusions and therefore, inevitably, of disillusion. And utopias can be used, have been used, as justifications for terrible wrongs. The last thing we really need is still more utopian visions.<sup>37</sup>

What is required, instead, is a practice of “serious [reflective] assessment of historical alternatives”<sup>38</sup> as guided by the yardsticks of science, morality, and an (albeit ambiguous) “substantive [values-oriented] rationality”.<sup>39</sup> Never mind the distinction erected by the positivists between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, Wallerstein’s clarion calls: utopistics gleans from the fields of science, morality, and politics the various messages they implicitly project about “what our goals *should* be”.<sup>40</sup>

The key for understanding the relation between science and values – and thus the character of normative longing within the practice of utopistics – lies with the generation of knowledge about social systems. Setting the context of that knowledge has been, since the sixteenth century, the incremental emergence of capitalism as a fully global system. Paradoxically, however, as Wallerstein notes, knowledge of that system is also knowledge which has been generated *by* that system. Setting that conundrum aside for one moment, the scientific understanding of systems suggests that they exhibit a high degree of plasticity: boundaries shift and rules change. Neither kind of change alters in the least, however, the persistence of boundaries/rules as objects in their own right. And on the basis of this understanding a key fact about systems can be derived: the

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36 I. Wallerstein, *Utopistics: Or Historical Choices of the Twenty-First Century*, New York: The New Press 1998.

37 *Ibid.*, 1.

38 *Ibid.*, 1.

39 *Ibid.*, 3.

40 *Ibid.*, 2. Emphasis added.

systemicity which the persistence of boundaries invokes, resists change through the absorption of change. In this vein, Wallerstein concludes, large social transformations – including the French and Russian revolutions – have thus far been no more than context-sensitive variations of the changes also experienced by other political communities during the time-periods involved.

Only when extreme levels of disequilibrium interrupt the functioning of a system does the possibility emerge that a successor system might materialize. Such is the condition being experienced within our latest capitalism, Wallerstein avers. In this regard he points to a profound source of dislocation within a core source of capitalism's socio-political durability: the emergence of the self-actualising nation-state, particularly in the course of the State coming under the impress of globalisation.<sup>41</sup> Under conditions of extreme disequilibrium, the determining effect of the system's sheer existence – its persistence as an object – diminishes in relation to the more contingent elements of that system. At such points the actions of individuals can begin to count. Subjectivity starts to really matter.

The prospects for transformative thought turn, at this point, upon the (highly ambiguous) practice of 'substantive rationality' with which the argument began: upon a strenuous intellectual assessment of possible alternative systems that have the potential to produce morally apposite outcomes. Much can be said from within utopistics about the character of entrenched social interests and their forceful capacities to forestall social transformation. Little can be gleaned from the approach, however, about how subjectivity might work in shaping ethical forms of transformation, beyond the occasional statement such as "the concept of a rainbow coalition is probably the only viable" form of alternative political organisation.<sup>42</sup> And even then, utopistics appears less than optimistic about the possibilities of collective agency: in practice, Wallerstein suggests, the idea of such a coalition would appear to be "tremendously difficult to implement".<sup>43</sup> End of story, apparently.

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41 To this Wallerstein also adds (though indirectly) the waning of capitalism's ecological durability (as a consequence of environmentally destructive processes associated with industrial production and capitalist consumption).

42 *Ibid.*, 88.

43 *Ibid.*, 88.

The relative silence which characterises the ruminations of utopistics on the subjectivity being released at this historical junction signals something about it as a mode of analysis. Animating that mode is that same splitting of object from subject, as occurs with the reflexive utopianism of Levitas. The analytic emphasis placed on the systemacity of global capitalism has the effect of subsuming the field of subjectivity beneath a power of an undisclosed kind, and for which utopistics appears to be operating as a vehicle at the same time as a source of criticism. With regard to the manner in which that power materialises, it emerges in the murky merger of description and prescription, which Wallerstein seeks to both deploy and contain through the appeal to ‘substantive rationality’. An upshot of this power is that the subjectivity which is now emerging, “unplugged from the system”, mutates into a normative requirement for that subjectivity to be transformative. The category of ‘is’ problematically morphs, here, into that of an ‘ought’: subjects ought to take seriously the fact of their appearance in history during this period of system instability (with the assumption plausibly following that sanctions for not doing so could reasonably apply). When subjectivity appears amidst the analytic shadows of utopistics, it thereby has all the appearance of a bio-political effect of the analysis.

## Toying with limits

The deadlock between the reflexive and reflective moments in utopian studies pivots upon a gap which appears to persist between the domains of subjectivity and of objects in the world. The manner in which that gap is conceptualised impresses significantly upon the form which acts of utopian transformation will take. As a source of ideas for how this deadlock might be traversed, an exchange between Žižek and Stavrakakis proves to be highly fertile, and in two ways. An interpretation which they share of Lacan’s work on the constitution of subjectivity will illuminate how that relationship between subject and object might be rethought. Second, an acrimonious temper which has come to characterise the exchange between Žižek and Stavrakakis, on the socio-political implications of that alternative understanding, provides an unexpected moment

of insight. That insight illuminates the significance, for transformative thought, of how ideas circulate amidst the differentiation of representation that now constitutes the cultures of late modernist socio-political spaces. This focus on the matter of how an idea circulates, in turn, points to the limits of *utopia* as a concept.

In the Lacanian register, ideas grip the subject on account of a condition within subjectivity which exists separate to, and yet only in conjunction with, the building blocks of those ideas (*signifiers*). That enigmatic condition Lacan called *jouissance*. Like the swimmer who experiences their mass only in relation to the impress of water upon their bodies as they move, *jouissance* imparts weight to ideas as those ideas circulate through social spaces. *Jouissance*, as already noted, is commonly translated in English as ‘enjoyment’, suggesting the corporeal character of the condition. Experiences of *jouissance* are physical occurrences, being, as Jacques-Alain Miller indicates, “a property of the living body [...]. To locate the place of *jouissance* without idealism, means to find it [...] in the body itself”.<sup>44</sup> As to the form which that experience takes, *jouissance* involves not only enjoyment of the pleasurable kind but also of the unbearable kind, of troubling pleasure.

The significance Lacan accords to *jouissance* in the production of transformative thought, comes from an assumption which both Žižek and Stavrakakis share: human reality is always a symbolically mediated reality. To this end, for Lacan

it is the world of words that creates the world of things – things originally confused in the *hic et nunc* [the here and now] of the all [of material totality] in the process of coming-into-being.<sup>45</sup>

In a Kantian vein, no reality exists for human experience which has not passed through some or other discursive framework or discursively-structured practice of apperception. To this end, knowledge of how the symbolic order operates becomes central for understanding how it is that particular ideas, at specific times and in precise places, come to gain produce tractive force while others do not.

The capacity of the symbolic order to inject mass into ideas turns, for Lacan, upon the persistence of two forms of *lack*. These two for-

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44 J. -A. Miller, “Paradigms of *jouissance*”, *Lacanian Ink*, 16, 2000, 41–43.

45 J. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, London: Tavistock 1977, 65.



mations appear within each and every attempt to describe or explain the world. The first of these is perhaps the more recognisable of the two. In their representation of objects, the words being used at some point inevitably show themselves to be insufficient for the task. Such has repeatedly been my experience in the course of writing this manuscript. At such points, attempts can be made to overcome the condition of lack with new sets of words for the object ('better' analytic strategies, 'better' mixes of description and explanation, 'better' themes). In a psychical register, this form of lack induces *desire*, a hope of filling the hole – and of expunging the lack – being exhibited by the signifier: “what does this book seem to be about?” Moreover, movements in thought that appear to offer a productive wrestling with that condition of lack produce pleasure. Anticipation that the new signifiers being tried will ‘complete’ the analysis generates *jouissance* of a pleasurable kind. In the domain of philosophy this fantasy of a full and final state of completeness is frequently imputed to Hegel’s notion of the Spirit fulfilling itself; within positivist science, alternatively, it takes the form of a unified scientific field progressively attaining for its knowledge-claims a verifiable and generalised condition of truth.

For Lacan, the capacity to imagine in this manner depends upon the operation of an additional form of lack, functioning at the level of the symbolic order (as compared to the individual signifier). In this second register, the symbolic order is without any limitation: it exhibits an unequivocal “lack of lack”.<sup>46</sup> In shorthand, and exhibiting Lacan’s contrary humour, this condition of being without limitation is that of ‘the Real’. This form of lack is not immediately accessible to experience. As Stavrakakis notes, it eludes understanding on account of the *jouissance* associated with the Real, by which the body would otherwise understand that state, having been “castrated [separated off from the subject] through socialisation”.<sup>47</sup> In this vein, the process of the infant child becoming a speaking animal erects a barrier to the absence which has no lack, to the Real. Lacan makes the point thus:

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46 J. Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI. The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*, London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis 1997, ix.

47 Y. Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*, Albany: State University of New York Press 2007, 74.

The lack inscribed in the signifying chain through which the Other, as the only possible site of truth, reveals that it holds no guarantee, is in terms of the dialectic of desire a lacking in *jouissance* of the Other.<sup>48</sup>

To reframe the point, there exists nothing within the symbolic order in respect of which it is limited (that is, there exists no lack). This absence of lack is a necessary pre-condition for the signifier to affect its cut into material reality without any prior restriction being placed upon it. As a consequence of this absence of restrictions, the symbolic order thereby becomes *Other* in its purest state, a condition of illimitable reach.

To the mind of those with a wish ‘to know’, such a condition might appear as Nirvana insofar as it suggests the possibility of full knowledge. Occupation of the symbolic order in this register would, however, for Lacan, unravel the elemental social bond which makes the subject into a social being. The absence of limitation is a condition “impossible to bear”,<sup>49</sup> immersing the subject without relief within the unbearable lightness of an absence which is without lack. We’re talking here about psychosis. Functioning on the side of the subject, at this point – stabilising subjectivity – is the operation of fantasy. Fantasy gives the subject access to enjoyment in the absence of any necessarily recurring bases for such. Such access comes through the incitement by fantasy of a special kind of object which Lacan detected within the symbolic order – *objet a* – the ‘scrap of the Real’ which continually turns up within speech. *Objet a* functions as a source of desire which is simultaneously its own cause. As a consequence of this paradoxical constitution, this strange little object can auger an engagement with the (impossible) *jouissance* of the Other within any and all acts of representation. As Žižek explains, “[o]bj<sub>e</sub>t a is a kind of ‘positivisation’, filling out, of the void”.<sup>50</sup> It embodies

simultaneously the pure lack [the absence of lack in the symbolic order], the void around with desire turns and which, as such, causes [both] the desire *and* the imagi-

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48 Lacan, quoted in Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*, 74.

49 A. Quinet, “The gaze as object”, in R. Feldstein, B. Fink, and J. Jaanus (eds.), *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1995, 140.

50 S. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*, Durham: Duke University Press 1993, 122.

nary element which conceals this void [*objet a*], renders it [the lack of lack] invisible by filling it out.<sup>51</sup>

The Lacanian image of the symbolic order, to which both Žižek and Stavrakakis adhere, is thereby one in which the orderliness of language is constituted by an internal *a priori* state of differentiation, by a state of pure difference (that being *objet a*). That condition of indeterminate differentiation takes the following form: the condition of lack (which enables the imagination to contemplate a condition of wholeness amongst the chains of signifiers that fill out an individual's thought) depends upon, but is structurally disconnected from, the absence of lack that also comprises the order. To this end, Lacan pronounces, the Other does not exist directly for subjective experience. What does come to get installed in the frame of subjective experience – without volition, much like the inability we humans have to wilfully stop breathing – is that operation of fantasy, an operation by which possible objects of identification (*objet a*) become animated without any necessary social prompting aside from their own performativity. It is by virtue of this installation within subjectivity of the operation of fantasy that the state of pure difference comes inaccessible in itself and comes to be experienced, rather – and as if by projection – as a condition of difference that pertains to sets of (symbolic) distinctions between objects.

If this image of the symbolic order and its operation appear implausible, it is this same picture which informs the present hunt within quantum physics for the Higgs Boson. In a peculiar reversal of the hierarchy of fundamental science and social science/humanities, it is the latter (Lacan's psychoanalytic theory) which provides the template for understanding this phenomenon. During the period in which this manuscript has been written, news was emerging from those working with the Hadrian Collider of evidence that the enigmatic object exists. The quest for the Higgs Boson has been animated by the same genre of question noted above, as to how it is that words come to gain a level of force, a weight within subjectivity, which exceeds their condition as mere signifiers. The Higgs Boson had been proposed in the 1960s by Peter Higgs as the object responsible for installing mass into sub-atomic particles. Without an

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51 S. Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, Verso: New York and London 1994, 178–179.

installation of mass of this kind, all particles would be in a state of moving about randomly at the speed of light (including those, of course, that make up the human body. Its existence thereby seems significant). Furthermore, the emergence of this state of force creates a “Higgs Field” which is surmised to be responsible for the continuation of a condition of mass-ification, by which matter can exist in a state of having continual mass when the Higgs Boson itself has disappeared.

A particular methodological challenge has surrounded the hunt for the Higgs Boson and the presence of the Higgs Field. As with the absence of lack within the symbolic order, the Boson and the Field are surmised to exist only in conjunction with the movement of known matter such that, with the cessation of movement, both the Boson and Field would cease to exist (at least, in the empirical meaning of the word). In Lacanian terms, the Higgs Boson and Field are seen to exist in a state of *extimité* (“extimacy”) with empirical matter: they simultaneously transcend, and yet remain fully immanent to, matter.<sup>52</sup> To this end, evidence of the Higgs Boson and Field has been sought in terms of a production of matter within experiments – typically of light and/or heat – that would exceed the amount of material that enters the tests. That excess would be produced in the violent collision of those known quantities of matter. The emergence of matter in quantities that exceed the amounts that entered the experiments would suggest the existence of the Boson and its Field. And it is this appearance of an excess which has been the big scientific news of late.

Lacan presented a highly specific idea, which both Žižek and Stavarakakis hold to, with regard to the identity of the excess which comes to be generated in and amongst the interaction of signifiers as a consequence of the absence of lack in the Other. That excess – the part which, strictly speaking, and in terms of the quantum of energy which is in-putted, has no reason to exist – is *the subject*. We might recall here Althusser’s rather clumsy attempt to express the existence of the subject as this state of surplus: subject/Subject.

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52 By this term, Lacan points to the absence of a determinate boundary between that which pertains to ‘the inside’ and that which ‘is outside’, between subject and object. See J. Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1950–60*, London: Routledge 1992, 139.

The relationship which exists between the subject and the symbolic order, in Lacan, appears by way of his apparently quizzical definition of the signifier: *the signifier is that which presents the subject for another signifier*.<sup>53</sup> The subject is that which appears momentarily in the movement between signifiers. Foucault's definition of knowledge gestures, also, to this state: to the "spark which flies between swords".<sup>54</sup> The figure of 'the subject' thereby differs substantially from the popular idea of 'the ego', the ego being but an imaginary figure which suggests the existence of a continuous and recursive capacity for agency. Rather, the condition of excess which we thereby know by the name of 'the subject' forms in our minds as 'ego' only as a consequence of, Lacan suggests, "a series of alienating identifications" which is spawned by the movement of signification.<sup>55</sup> The figure of the subject cannot thereby be objectified, or reduced to, the terms through which the figure of the ego forms: "What do we call a subject? Quite precisely, what in the development of objectivation, is outside of the object".<sup>56</sup>

The idea that the subject comprises a state of excess gives rise to an additional dimension in the constitution of subjectivity. Lacan signals this with the notion that "the subject is a subject only by virtue of his subjection to the field of the Other".<sup>57</sup> That field of the Other, to which the subject is subjected, is the Other in its state of being without lack, of the Other as the unbearable *jouissance* of an absence that has no deficiency. This insight sparks understanding about the composition of the conditionality (commonly called 'subjectivity') by which the subject exists in the moments of its emergence between signifiers. To this end, as Bruce Fink indicates, the subject exists in a state "between language and *jouissance*".<sup>58</sup>

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53 Lacan, *Écrits*, 835.

54 M. Foucault, "Truth and juridical forms", in J. D. Faubion (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Power*, Penguin Books: London 1994, 8.

55 Lacan, *Écrits*, 128.

56 J. Lacan, *The Seminar. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique. 1953–55* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, 194.

57 Lacan, quoted in D. Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London and New York: Routledge 1996, 196.

58 B. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995.

The existence of subjectivity as a state that lies between, on the one hand, the movement of signifiers in their condition of lack and, on the other, the Other in a condition which is fully without lack, indicates the presence of a field with enormous plasticity pertaining to the existence of the subject. The correlate of this in the Standard Model of quantum physics is the sought-after Higgs Field. In psycho-social theory it emerges, however, as the field of subjectivisation, within which a range of modalities of subject-formation emerge over time and across places. Perhaps the most extensive inventory of such modalities has been Foucault's genealogy of western "technologies of the self", of mechanisms operating as socio-political practices by which the self – weaving between Greek Antiquity, the Christian Middle-Ages, and modernist governmentality – has enabled the emergence of a western subject of "self-knowledge".<sup>59</sup>

The existence of a field between language and *jouissance* – comprising various modes of subjectivisation – holds a particular significance for the figure of *utopia* as a site of transformative processes. It indicates the existence of various ways by which the subject forms in relationship to the circuits by which ideas move. It suggests, moreover, that some modalities of discursive circulation might productively suspend (without effacing) the gap between subjectivity and objectivity – thereby moving the idea of utopian transformation beyond the fragility of 'pure personal responsibility' and 'full historical determination' – and to enable a simultaneous movement of the subject (as the excess of the symbolic order) and its shifting conditions of material existence.

On such ideas Žižek and Stavrakakis would appear to easily agree. Where disagreement enters between the two is with the matter of how such ideas might be put to work politically in the transformation of social relations. That is, they disagree as to how those ideas about the circulation of discourse and its effects upon the formation of subjectivity could operate with utopian effect. An important point to grasp in relation to the exchange between Žižek and Stavrakakis is that the dialogue itself becomes a mode of subjectivisation, its specific discursive circuit impacting upon the manner in which these Lacanian ideas might inform a transformative politics.

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59 L. H. Martin, H. Gutman and P. H. Hutton, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press 1998.

Two nodal points appear to animate the contributions by Žižek and Stavrakakis to this question, respectively, of how the Lacanian subject and its investment in/by the symbolic order might produce politically transformative effects: ‘the philosophical’ and ‘the political’. Where Žižek and Stavrakakis appear to differ is on the analytic weight that should be given to each. The philosophical dimension of their respective contributions conveys the understanding which they share about the Lacanian subject and its relation to the symbolic order. Alternatively, the political element conveys their respective programmatic visions.

For Žižek, the political dimension involves a set of struggles for the re-appropriation of various commons from the capitalist processes of commodification and of bio-political administration: of culture; external nature; internal nature (biogenetics); and the excluded.<sup>60</sup> His preferred designation for that struggle is “communism”. Success in that struggle will require the emergence of readily identifiable emblems which people can become “passionate about”,<sup>61</sup> and in relation to which a genre of choice can be exercised which is presently (and paradoxically) acknowledged within and disavowed by the pragmatism of contemporary administrative politics. This is a condition of choice that has no fixed points to influence its direction. In conjunction with the investment which the French philosopher Alain Badiou has been making in the notion of political transformation as a series of epochal moments – as “radical events”<sup>62</sup> – Žižek suggests an exercising of choice. Such an act occurs in a manner that does not accord with the prevailing determinates of that choice, becoming an action capable of producing no less than an irrevocable and radical tearing of the symbolic fabric of institutionalised (bio)politics by which the possibility of that particular choice has emerged. Acts of political intervention that lie fully outside the choices presented by representational democracy, for example – outside the couplet of Democrats/Republicans, in the American context – might exemplify what Žižek means. Challenges associated with the reconstruction of social order in the aftermath of successful interventions do not, in Žižek’s

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60 S. Žižek, “How to begin from the beginning”, *New Left Review*, 57, May/June 2009, 43–55.

61 S. Žižek “The liberal *utopia*: Against the politics of jouissance”, 2008a, 3. <<http://www.lacan.com/zizliberal.htm>> accessed 7 February 2008.

62 See A. Badiou, *Being and Event*, New York: Continuum 2005.

mind, risk the elemental social bond. They merely undermine the particular ways in which that bond as it has come to be shaped by the logics of capital and post-political administration. Any risks which might exist are readily offset by the potential of a new kind of choice, of one that has the capacity to punctuate the institutionalised domain of ‘politics’, to open up for inhabitation by flesh and blood people the meta-theoretical field of “the political”.<sup>63</sup>

For Stavrakakis, alternatively, it is the figure of ‘radical democracy’ rather than communism that most powerfully enables ‘the political’ to come into being for the Lacanian subject. Rather than a singular tearing of established social boundaries, as Žižek posits, a perpetual displacement and redrawing of boundaries is required in order for social struggle to become possible both now and in the future (of what has previously been called a state of “agonistic antagonism”).<sup>64</sup> The mechanism by which this condition of continual displacement and redrawing might become available would be, for Stavrakakis, the institutionalisation of the condition of lack which animates the symbolic order.<sup>65</sup> Such an institutionalisation would have the effect of injecting a continual state of dislocation within political discourses, such that political prescriptions would find themselves perpetually confronting that part of them which does not ‘fit’; their own otherness. To this end, for example, the act of allowing social groups which are presently disbarred from participating in electoral matters could have this effect. In the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand, for example, the presumption of participation appears to be made on the basis that such participation is a wholly rational action, and that particular groups lack the requisite rationality (children, the mentally ill, come categories of criminal offender, and so on). The act of allowing members of such groups to participate in electoral processes could have the effect of transforming the practical meaning of democracy for New Zealanders. This state might then engender within established political positions an impetus towards the recognition of socio-cultural aspirations which do not resonate with the terms by which those

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63 On this point see G. Daly “Politics of the political: psychoanalytic theory and the left(s)”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 2009, 14, 3, 279–300.

64 See C. Mouffe, “Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism?”, *Social Research*, 66, 3, 1999, 745–758; C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London and New York: Verso 2000.

65 Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*, 10.



positions protect themselves. Within the context of Aotearoa/ New Zealand again, the recent election of the first profoundly deaf politician stands to thereby enable the social agenda of the deaf community to directly punctuate institutionalised politics.

Transformative movement within established positions would not thereby come about by way of epochal ‘events’, as Žižek and Badiou suggest. Indeed, in Stavrakakis’ mind, to seek the dissolution of prevailing co-ordinates of shared understandings seems irresponsible. The minimal attention which Žižek pays, in Stavrakakis’ estimation, to questions about the form which post-event political organisation might take can be attributed to a misguided fixation with theoretical purity.<sup>66</sup> That is, the philosophical commitment which Žižek exercises toward a particular reading of Lacan, in which the enigma of ‘the Real’ is elevated above all else, creates a politically dangerous proclivity towards cataclysmic kinds of social transformation. What is required, instead, is an institutionalisation not of the Real but of the gap which persists between the Real and the symbolic order, such that a perpetual state of “event-ness” comes to characterise politics.<sup>67</sup> Event-ness thereby becomes the elemental ontic condition of social transformation. To this end, then, Stavrakakis provides extensive discussions of a number of means by which this association between agonistic antagonism and lack can be given political effect: forms of democratic exchange that speak to the post-democratic condition;<sup>68</sup> a state of mourning as the means by which *the sublime* – as the emblem of social otherness – might now be encountered;<sup>69</sup> a form of planning which operates through a spatiality that is beyond space;<sup>70</sup> interactive artistic practices as a mechanism of popular political expression,<sup>71</sup> and so on.

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66 Y. Stavrakakis, “On acts pure and impure”, *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 4, 2, 2010a, 1–35.

67 *Ibid.*, 15. We need to note, however, that Žižek maintains that it is indeed this very gap with which he also works, this being the space in which fantasy operates.

68 Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*.

69 Y. Stavrakakis, “Discourse, effect, jouissance: psychoanalysis, political theory and artistic practices”, *Art & Desire Seminars*, Istanbul, unpublished paper, June 2010b.

70 Y. Stavrakakis, “The radical act: towards a spatial critique”, *Planning Theory*, 10, 4, 2011, 301–324.

71 Stavrakakis, “On acts pure and impure”.

The detail given will suffice, I trust, to indicate the board contours of this strained engagement between Žižek and Stavrakakis. The significance of the altercation between them lies, for us, with the manner in which it opens up the possibility of an orientation towards the utopian that skirts the problematic reduction of questions about utopian social transformation to the poles of subjectivist or objectivist orientation (as characterises the positions represented by the works of Levitas and Wallerstein). What sustains the possibility of openness within processes of transformation, for both Žižek and Stavrakakis, is the persistence of an excess within the symbolic order; of that surplus which materialises as *the subject*. The continual production and movement of, following Jacques Ranciere, this “part of no part” constitutes the domain of the political.<sup>72</sup> In the same manner by which the subject-as-excess proves unruly at the level of social life – giving rise across history to all manner of cultural, religious, political, ethical, psychological, and social mechanisms for its containment – this condition of excess ironically proves problematic at the level of conversation between Žižek and Stavrakakis. Its unruliness manifests as a new version of the question as to how the condition of excess might be deployed so as to interrupt the ahistorical pragmatism of contemporary bio-political political decision-making. The containment of that unruliness plays itself out, in this exchange, through a struggle over the weight that ought to be accorded the two determinations of philosophy and of the political.

At the level of the exchange between Žižek and Stavrakakis – though this matter does not necessarily always pertain to the wider *oeuvres* of both writers – the two determinations play unequal roles for each contributor. In his staking of a position against the criticisms that Stavrakakis makes of his work (and that are centred upon the recurring complaint that Žižek ‘disavows’ the negativity of the Real, leading to a reification of the radical act), Žižek invokes a primarily philosophical reading of the issue (and within which the political register is made to play a subordinate role). To this end, and in response to the “breathhtakingly simplistic”, “simplified”, “thoroughly unconvincing” interpretations and use by Stavrakakis of key Lacanian notions (including *jouissance*, “traversal of the fantasy”, *objet a*, and so on), Žižek offers extended discus-

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72 Ranciere, cited in S. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso 1999, 185.

sions of, and corrections to, those usages so as to achieve something akin to a return to the ‘real Lacan’ and to the subversive centrality of the Lacanian subject.<sup>73</sup> Only on this basis, for Žižek – through a philosophical interpretation of the problem – can truly political thought become available. Only then “can the Left practice its own ‘politics of *jouissance*’”.<sup>74</sup> On the matter of how such a politics might then come to be taken up and used by flesh and blood individuals, Žižek’s suggestions are much more oblique in kind.<sup>75</sup>

In the work of Stavrakakis, this polarity in the exchange reverses. The philosophical rendition of the problematic loss of ‘the political’ becomes secondary to an apparently immediate political task at hand, which is to work out how the condition of lack might become a durable feature of political exchange, such that the condition of lack might come to gain an institutional durability. At this point Stavrakakis becomes vulnerable to the criticism that the examples he uses are not illustrative enough, a criticism from which Žižek (in addition to other, more sympathetic commentators) does not hold back.

The exchange is thereby structured around this difference in the relative weights that have been given to the philosophical and the political for the (utopian) transformation of the prevailing logics of late modernity.

Emerging out of this structure is a particular kind of circulation by which ideas move in the exchange between Žižek and Stavrakakis. This circuit involves a sequential disclosure (and criticism) by each one of some shortfall in the argument of the other, coupled with an apparent strengthening of intellectual agency (an increasing bullishness) from which those criticisms are sequentially being made. In orthodox academic terms, this exchange appears to be little more than business as usual.

For Lacan, alternatively, this kind of circulation would be of a very particular kind, one which he termed *hysterical* discourse. In terms of

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73 Žižek, “The liberal *utopia*”, 2008a. For an extended attack on Stavrakakis’ position, also see S. Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London and New York: Verso 2008b, 304–316.

74 Žižek, “The liberal *utopia*”, 3.

75 See, for example, the following: his reflections on the art object as *objet a*; his discussions of collective experience through ‘overidentification’ as emerges within the rock concerts of German metal band *Ramstein*; of shared rituals; and so on, in S. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*. London and New York: Verso 2010, 353–402.

concrete academic practice, this hyper-critical mode of discursive circulation turns upon the act of disclosing the inconsistency in the other; typically in the argument, position, method, and so on of the other who presents themselves as the one who knows (and is parading as the Master). This pattern of discursive circulation proves to be enormously productive in academic exchanges, such as between Stavrakakis and Žižek. The writing just keeps on coming. Moreover, as a form of discursive circulation, the so-called hysterical mode of discourse has a very particular set of prospects: it gives rise to a precise form of subjectivity within the place of criticism, assuming the existence of a subject whose intellectual agency appears to be solid and coherent. Frequently imagined to be at the core of liberal political community, this subject displays, however, a state of misrecognition. They are never a coherent 'I'. That fantasy plays a pivotal role in the reproduction of liberal community, coagulating the discontinuous plays of lack that constitute the symbolic order in its relation to material reality, and of the subject as the unruly remainder that falls out as the excess of that discontinuity. To this end, and relative to the Lacanian assumptions that Stavrakakis and Žižek share with regard to the salience for transformative thought of the subject as an unruly state of surplus, the hysterical mode of discursive circulation, through which debate operates between the two, inadvertently reproduces the problematic lodestones of liberal political philosophy and practice.

Productively, however, the exchange between Žižek and Stavrakakis on the character of utopian thought indicates something of the challenge associated with enticing ideas to circulate in a transformative manner: the act of constructing transformative ideas appears to be insufficient in itself for transformative thought to come about. Rather, the Žižek/Stavrakakis exchange suggests that the modality by which ideas come to circulate has a determining effect which outweighs any transformative quality in the content of the ideas themselves. Indeed, the co-ordinates being used here to map the discursive space of *utopia – the utopian functions of ideology* and *the ideological functions of utopia* – are themselves at risk of limiting knowledge about how transformative ideas might now operate, especially were those co-ordinates to get caught up in debates as to their 'correctness' or otherwise. At stake in understanding the prospects of the discursive space of *utopia*, alternatively, is the matter of how a form of discursive circulation might be established within that space, whose effects can exceed the repertoire of

possibilities set by the co-ordinates through which that space has initially been established. We have seen here how, for example, the ‘transformative’ element of processual utopian thought can find itself circumscribed by a state of contest between contrary views regarding its practical implementation. Quite apparently, from the discussion here, the source of transformative modes of discursive circulation does not lie simply *within* the discursive space of *utopia*.



### 3 Beyond the discursive space of *utopia*

The prospects for the discursive space of *utopia* turn upon the socio-historical context(s) in which that space exists. Only in the process of undertaking an exploration of *context* might the historical significance of movements within the signifier of *utopia* become evident. Reflecting the continuing ascendancy within contemporary social thought of *spatiality* as an organising metaphor for this idea of context, Stavrakakis has framed this particular issue as being a question about the “space beyond spatiality”;<sup>1</sup> about, here, the space beyond the spatiality implied by the figure of *utopia*. What is, his question asks, the socio-political space – ‘the political’ – in respect of which the discursive space of *utopia* now operates? The question produces a task of identifying the particular coordinates of socio-historical context which have the potential to propel the normative impulse of *utopia* beyond, but without nullifying, the important categorising role of the specific interpretations being put forward of that same context. How might the closed-cycle of a snake biting its own tail transform into that of an open-ended spiral? To this end, returning to Lenin, how might the normative impulse of the question ‘what is to be done?’ grow beyond, without necessarily denying, Lenin’s own diagnosis of the Russian political situation in which he lived (that the gulf between a stunted union movement and the individualistic impotence of anarchist activism validated a dictatorship of the proletariat)?

A particular challenge immediately arises in respect of developing insights into the matter of socio-historical context. In one register, the idea of context implies the existence of objective attributes in relation to which the dynamics of the discursive space of *utopia* can be explained. Littering contemporary social theory is any number of contenders begging to be considered: ‘late modernity’, ‘postmodernity’, ‘risk society’, ‘Empire’, ‘multiculturalism’, ‘late capitalism’, ‘informational capitalism’, ‘Gaia’, ‘finance capitalism’, and many more besides. The act of analysing the discursive space of *utopia* in terms of one or other of these

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1 Y. Stavrakakis, “The radical act: towards a spatial critique”, *Planning Theory*, 10, 4, 2011, 301–324.

structures risks, however, the installation of, within the analyses which follow, the same undisclosed act of power by which that specific designation was chosen over the others. It matters quite a bit as to whether the context – in relation to which the discursive space of *utopia* will be seen to morph – is identified as being ‘late modernity’, ‘risk society’, ‘multi-national capitalism’, ‘multiculturalism’, or ‘Gaia’. There exists no way, however, to categorically defend in the moment of writing the choice of name and, as such, analysis will remain haunted by an act of power whose presence eviscerates at the same rate at which the given designation sticks.<sup>2</sup> This very text has not entirely exorcised that same haunting.

Stavrakakis notes that time has recently, again, been given primacy within radical political discourse as the dimension through which to consider transformative action. Time thereby emerges again as the preferred transformational dynamic by which to think about this relationship between social context and the utopian. Unfortunately, in Stavrakakis’ mind, the particular way in which time is currently being deployed smacks of a banal utopianism. Transformation becomes synonymous – for the likes of Žižek and Badiou – with those moments of undetermined and indeterminate action (‘events’) which can interrupt the prevailing vectors of social interaction, and to create new discursive co-ordinates in which alternative kinds of social relationships might form. In the light of what Stavrakakis interprets as being the nihilistic naivety of this position, and of an inability which thereby follows to speak adequately to the matter of post-revolutionary political organisation, the stick gets bent back in his writing towards the figure of spatiality as the more appropriate metaphor for framing the meanings of socio-political transformation and of transitional political organisation. In practice, however, what Stavrakakis seeks is not so much the foregrounding of the spatial as the nodal point for socio-political analysis but, rather, “a more sophisticated registering of the unavoidable space–time dialectic”.<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with Stavrakakis’ particular attempt to derive a more sophisticated figuration of that dialectic – and more generally to avoid the

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2 It could be counter-argued, however, that future historical circumstances will vindicate the choice of analytic strategy by demonstrating the choice to have been correct, as having been a matter of ‘fact’. That said, in the absence of that future knowledge, the choice of designation retains in the present moment an element of *belief*.

3 *Ibid.*, 301.



threat of a banal positivity which his quest to identify ‘the space that traverses spatiality’ might inadvertently reinstate – an alternative means is pursued here to envisage the socio-political context in respect of which the discursive space of *utopia* functions. Rather than identify an object by which this relationship might be interpreted – ‘the space beyond spatiality’, or ‘the event’, or by one of the various designations of the contemporary socio-political conjuncture (‘late modernism’, ‘late capitalism’, ‘risk society’, ‘world system’, and so on) – this alternative strategy draws upon the trajectory opened up in the critique of representation inaugurated by Heidegger, and which has led to hermeneutics and post-structuralism. This trajectory presents the act of symbolic representation as a field of meaning-making practices into which the human is thrown, the differentiation of which is now a regular feature of social spaces operating under the impress of late capitalism and the bio-political management of populations.

The work of German sociologist Nikolas Luhmann exemplifies well the analytic gains to be had from an historical analysis of symbolic representation. Within his *oeuvre*, the interpretive practice of historicism moves beyond the simple act of locating the institutions and structures of social management in their respective times and places (of law, the family, medicine, the State, the economy, and so on). It involves equally the construction of an historical account of the various modes of abstraction which the cultural formations of modernity exhibit and through which the administrative organs of that modernity will both operate and find themselves analysed. It is this latter field – the formation of ideas and their social conditions of existence – which comprises the immediate context in relation to which the discursive space of *utopia* forms and reforms. The value of Luhmann’s particular practice for understanding the historicity of such matters, as an exemplar of the kind of contextual knowledge which transformational thought might well exhibit, lays not so much with what his work achieves. Rather, the value will lie with insight which can be generated from the reasons for which Luhmann’s particular kind of historicism shows itself barely able to contain what it unleashes.

## The strange object of differentiation

European modernism, as the overarching context which Luhmann adopts for thinking about the relation between socio-political formations and cultural practices of abstraction, is characterised by the analytic practice of categorising social relationships into various classes of object (of social institutions, their functions, social practices, agents, and so on). Luhmann calls the effect of this dissection “differentiation”.<sup>4</sup> As Luhmann will go on to imply, the cultural sources of differentiation lie much earlier than the onset of modernism. Indeed, their origins lie so deeply embedded within the courses of history that differentiation exists as something akin to an anthro-biological constant within the human condition. So deeply ingrained does it sit that differentiation reflects the very operation of meaning-making itself: differentiation separates objects one from the other in language. The very possibility of language, meaning, and of social life moreover, thereby depends upon the dynamism of differentiation to motivate the movement of speech. Furthermore still, differentiation separates objects one from the other without itself, as if by some magical ruse, ever taking the form of an object. As a cultural artefact, however, differentiation reaches a state of development in modernity such that it can be used to reflect upon its own existence. It knows itself not as a static object but, rather, recursively; as an effect of its own functionality.

In Luhmann’s narrative, the logic of differentiation has taken three forms within modernity in its role of patterning of social order within European and colonial spaces: “segmented”, “hierarchical”, and “functional”.<sup>5</sup> The capacity of these three to contain the socio-cultural complexity inaugurated by industrialism, capitalism, and political enfranchisement varies, with functional differentiation demonstrating the greatest ability to mimic – and thus corral – that complexity at the level of socio-political organisation. To this end, it is functional differentiation alone which shows itself able to facilitate a network of interdependent activities, within a single space, by a diverse array of social actors and

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4 N. Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society*, New York: Columbia University Press 1982.

5 *Ibid.*, 242–245.

institutions.<sup>6</sup> This kind of insight can regularly be seen propelling inquiry into the role that the institution of law might play in congealing socio-culturally polyglot political formations: such formations spawn a variety of experiments for the construction of legal structures that might simultaneously contain and facilitate the divergent expectations of diverse cultural communities.<sup>7</sup>

This pattern of differentiation at the level of institutional governance extends also, for Luhmann, to the modes of symbolic abstraction by which a kind of knowledge might develop which can sustain the functionality of a complex society.<sup>8</sup> Key here, for Luhmann, is the “self-referential” character of such knowledge:<sup>9</sup> sustainable knowledge is knowledge which has been able to reflect upon the conditions by which it has been produced. This pegging of systems theory to the quality of self-referentiality will enable Luhmann to suggest that systems continue to survive to the extent to which they create knowledge that sustains relations “with themselves and to differentiate those relations from relations with their environment”.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, for Luhmann, the capacity to forge this distinction between system and environment comprises a necessary dimension of knowledge production if systems are to successfully adapt to shifting conditions. In extreme situations, such as those mapped by Wallerstein of an entire world-system beset by organic crises, the

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6 The (historically) prior patterns of differentiation, based upon the aggregation of social units according to either some measure of equality (‘segmented differentiation’) or hierarchical structure (‘hierarchical differentiation’), persist, however, into late modernity.

7 In this regard see O. A. Payrow Shabani (ed.), *Multiculturalism and Law: A Critical Debate*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press 2007.

8 Luhmann’s functionalism will enable him to indicate the relative impotence of knowledge forms which are locked within modalities of differentiation that are now marginal to late modernity (of segmented and hierarchical differentiation, specifically). He refers here to schools of thought that presuppose either the persistence of a settled field of formally equal units, as might be associated with the sociologies of a Durkheim or Parsons, or of an obdurate hierarchy of social sectors, as might be associated with Marxist analysis. The rationales by which those forms of criticism operate simply lack the analytic strategies necessary for gaining traction with the logic of functional connectedness that now characterises the modern social system, according to Luhmann.

9 N. Luhmann, *Social Systems*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1984, 13.

10 *Ibid.*, 13.

system has to be able to transform itself into some other form that is in keeping with the shifting context (environment) in which it has been existing. No other kind of dialectical distinction will achieve this outcome, only that of system/environment.<sup>11</sup> The proper logic of all social analysis will thereby become one that presupposes “a consistent *system-internal unity of self-reference and external reference*”.<sup>12</sup>

The significance of this particular dialectic will gain momentum as Luhmann begins to articulate the particular conception of totality to which the systemacity implied by his systems theory indexes itself. In ontic terms, the figure of totality takes the form of “a single system of world society that relies on functional differentiation and on mass communication”.<sup>13</sup> Luhmann is not immediately interested, however, with either the identity of the world system (as we find with Wallerstein) or impacts which the communications media might have upon the circulation of ideas within that system (being the field of critical media studies). Rather, his interest falls upon a pattern of re-iteration that occurs of the principle of differentiation, both within<sup>14</sup> and between systems.<sup>15</sup> To this end, the differentiation of systems from one another (“system differentia-

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11 *Ibid.*, 15.

12 N. Luhmann, *Observations on Modernity*, Stanford, Stanford University Press 1998: 17. Original emphasis. To this end, Luhmann displays his antipathy to the notion of postmodernism and its substitution of dialectical thought with the logic of antinomy (*ibid.*, 1–5). For Luhmann, the logic of antinomy threatens to normalise some or other ‘vitalist’ dimension of human life (power, desire, undecidability, and so on) that would institute a collapse of the patterns of functional difference which have developed within and between social systems. This would spark a regressive condition of ‘de-differentiation’ which could undermine modern social life (as the West, at least, knows it).

13 Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society*, 247–248. The significance of a massified and media-ated world society lies, for Luhmann, with the impact which mass communications has upon the social experience of time. Systems which have a capacity to project messages into that single world space have the potential to restrict the operation of other systems, shifting the locus of “imputed knowledge” within that space towards an enhancing of their own particular functionality (*ibid.*, 248). In this shift of concern – from the space of systems to the temporality within which systems operate – Luhmann enlarges our sense of what constitutes totality.

14 Systems favoured for analysis by Luhmann have included law, the market, and the psyche.

15 Examples here would include the patterns which might emerge between law and the market, between the market and religion, between religion and family, and so on.

tion”) becomes “nothing more than the repetition within systems of the difference between system and environment”.<sup>16</sup> This endless reproduction of the logic of differentiation throughout the social whole nicely corrals analysis in the absence of any Archimedean vantage-point from which external critique can be mounted of either the global whole or of any particular historical ordering of that whole. All critique thereby becomes immanent critique – or, in Luhmann’s preferred term, self-referential. And the production of transformative ideas will turn upon the successful institutionalisation of the particular kind of abstraction associated with the most complex of social forms; that is, functional differentiation.

Yet within this self-contained account of systemacity there persists the potentially unruly element which Luhmann calls “environment”. On the one hand, the notion of environment appears to exceed that of the system. Moreover, the environment of any given system comprises the aggregated multiplicity of all other systems which are external to the one that is under consideration. To this end, for example, the external environment to the system of law would comprise a constellation of systems ‘outside of law’, including the market, family, religion, the psyche, and so on. That said, the environment has no substantive content upon which descriptions of it could be based. Environment forever remains inscrutable in its own terms. But neither is it a residual category in respect of system, as it needs to exist in its own right in order for the systemacity of societies to exist as a theoretical possibility. And neither, in a realist vein, does environment simply supply energy or information for systems in their respective modes of operation.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the environment is a formally empty element in contra-distinction to which the very possibility of an internally coherent system becomes possible.

The condition of difference which thereby operates from within the system, such that the categories of ‘system’ and ‘environment’ are distinguished one from the other, casts the two as being functionally equivalent.<sup>18</sup> This relation makes sense when viewed from a high level of abstraction but not so at the level of practical knowledge. The two are not substantively equivalent: knowledge-claims can be generated about any

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16 Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 7.

17 *Ibid.*, 176–177.

18 *Ibid.*, 176.

given system whereas the environment cannot, in itself, be known. Any knowledge of it is, at the moment of inception, immediately provisional. The mode of dialectic thought at work here is thus not of the kind in which one pole could be supplanted by the other (of system by environment, or *vice versa*). Rather, a higher order state sustains the patterning of difference, of the dialectical kind akin to a ‘unity of opposites’. Luhmann will in time give name to that state, and thus to give name to totality as such: “the world”.<sup>19</sup> Totality will become “the *unity of the difference between system and environment*”.<sup>20</sup> This interpretation of totality does not, however, imply any “sum of facts” that could be conceived as being “free from difference”.<sup>21</sup> And to this end Luhmann signals a rupture with any banal Hegelian synthesis of opposites. Rather, the totality implied “is given as an ungraspable unity”, effective only from within systems which generate meaning about themselves (“meaningful systems”), and only on the basis that a distinction can still be made between the systemicity of those individual systems and an environment that is external to them.<sup>22</sup> And to this end, the idea of environment continues to remain unsymbolisable from the position of any given system or field of systems.

Given the inaccessibility of ‘totality’, the self-referential systems theory of Luhmann generates its cognitive traction elsewhere. It comes from what Luhmann calls “the pivot of difference”, from an unsymbolisable point around which the practice of representational differentiation turns. The ability of a person to self-consciously integrate the performativity of that pivoting action into their analysis of a concrete social formation (like that of the law or the marketplace), as Luhmann will later make clear, becomes the centre-piece of constructivism’s claim (with which he identifies) to surpass the quasi-religious transcendentalism that haunts both realist and empiricist modes of knowledge production. Least we think that there might be solid ground beneath this claim, that the pivot of difference can be institutionalised (which resonates with Stavrakakis’ project), Luhmann indicates that the pivot nevertheless always remains inaccessible to thought processes, being a perpetual “blind spot”

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19 *Ibid.*, 206–209.

20 *Ibid.*, 208. Original emphasis.

21 *Ibid.*, 208.

22 *Ibid.*, 208.

for cognition: “Reality is what one does not perceive when one perceives it”.<sup>23</sup> The enigmatic quality of this condition has potentially disastrous consequences for social analysis, however, according to Luhmann, insofar as each and every pivot point threatens to become in and of itself “the centre of the world”, with each individual being able to claim the ability to occupy it.<sup>24</sup> As a consequence of a privatisation of criticism and a relativisation of knowledge which can all so easily follow, the meta-theoretical concept of ‘the world’ re-emerges in Luhmann’s system theory as a necessary element for the development of transformative knowledge.

A state of torsion which is thereby set up in Luhmann’s systems theory – between the totality of the ‘world’ and the performativity of the ‘pivot of difference’ – arises not because of the irreconcilable qualities of the elements in question. Rather it arises because of an inability on the part of the architecture that supports Luhmann’s historicisation – of the differentiation of the human act of abstraction – to contain that antagonism. Specifically, that architecture comes to depend upon a presentation of differentiation as a static object, as a proto-anthrobiological fact. On the one hand, that grounding enables each of the various planes of differentiation – the distinction between segmented, hierarchical, and functional differentiation; of the separation of ‘system’ from ‘environment’; and of the undisclosed differentiation of ‘world’ from ‘pivot of difference’ – to appear as though they are symbolically equivalent, as disembodied signifiers sliding across a smooth surface of anthro-biological necessity. On the other, the position of author emerges here as being equally problematic, for authorship also can be no more than a signifier sliding across that same smooth surface. And yet, clearly, the texts imply otherwise. In order to function, the authorial performativity being demonstrated in Luhmann’s production needs be integrated into, without leaving a ripple upon, the very act of analysis itself.

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23 N. Luhmann, *Theories of Distinction: Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002, 145.

24 Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 208. This is the same kind of criticism which Žižek mounts to Stavrakakis’ suggestion that radical democracy can institutionalise the productive unruliness of *objet a*. For Žižek, radical democracy invites reformist programmes that are relativist in kind, each of which, in Luhmann’s terms, would operate as if it were ‘the centre of the world’.

## The limitations of normal integration

Two political implications flow from this mode of historicisation. Each bears upon the issue of how the place of writing, of the intellectual work performed by the one who seeks to understand, might be integrated back into the analysis. First, the logic of differentiation used by Luhmann proves unable to question the basis upon which it has become a privileged mode of abstraction within modernity: it effaces history from its own constitution. Rather than appear in a manner that would see itself morph and enlarge through the process of its own application, the figure of differentiation – upon which Luhmann’s work pivots – operates through a constant and non-dialectical reproduction of itself. All external obstacles that might affect the trajectory of differential naming come to be subsumed to the logic of differentiation itself. Even the most potent of those obstacles that Luhmann can imagine, that of ‘environment’, comes to be subsumed within the logic through the simple act of adding it to the list of other objects in the totality.

Second, and in keeping with this symbolic imperialism – as Fredric Jameson notes – the differentiation of Luhmann mimics the expansionist logic of capitalist commodification.<sup>25</sup> Each and every element that is encountered in the process of functionalist inquiry is reduced, through that encounter, to the standardized form of the commodity. We have seen this with regard to the objects which make up Luhmann’s particular historical method (of ‘segmented’, ‘hierarchical’, and ‘functional’ differentiation). It can also be seen in the manner by which the institutional objects which get caught up in Luhmann’s analyses of social systems – of law, marketplace, religion, and so on – are rendered structurally equivalent to one another through the singular currency of functional differentiation.

Helping to consolidate this form of symbolic exchange are social structures that are particular to the societies of European modernism, and which encourage differentiation as a preferred logic of abstraction. The archetype is the marketplace. Such structures need to be supported, in

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25 F. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London and New York: Verso 2002, 89.



Luhmann's mind, because they are at risk of being undermined by the institutions of centralised planning. The danger is that:

we may replace the relatively large openness and variability of the classical, internal differentiation of the economic system by decision-making processes having too little selectivity [read, the welfare state] and habitual and rigid premises [read, state bureaucracy]. We would then let the economy sacrifice the manoeuvrability that became available after the external differentiation of the economy from the rest of society [read, the evolutionary ascendancy of the free market].<sup>26</sup>

At risk is the on-set of a state of de-differentiation. In such passages, Jameson observes, Luhmann's "ostensibly sociological theory of modernity can be seen to unmask itself as conventional free market rhetoric and the ideology of deregulation".<sup>27</sup> Various implications follow for the production of transformative ideas. First, the logic of differentiation thereafter proves unable to contemplate the existence of its own "antagonistic contradiction".<sup>28</sup> That is, the logic cannot imagine the existence of systems other than capitalism for calculating the meaning of social change. Research undertaken by McLennan, into the state of knowledge within the informational capitalism of the United Kingdom, exemplifies the kind of inquiry which the logic of differentiation could not entertain (in which an argument is made for a principle of "disengagement" by the contemporary university from the economic and governmental "stakeholder communities" to whom is being passed the authority to determine the value of academic thought).<sup>29</sup> Equally, for Jameson, an ahistorical principle of differentiation, such as Luhmann's, could not easily contemplate the existence of its 'non-antagonistic contradiction'. Equally impossible to imagine, here, is a capitalism that finds itself riven from within by multiple modalities of transformation. Francois Lyotard's inquiry

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26 Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society*, 305–306.

27 Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 92.

28 The notions of an 'antagonistic' and a 'non-antagonistic' contradiction derive from Jameson's adaptation of A. J. Greimas' 'semiotic triangle'. See F. Jameson, "The vanishing mediator: or, Max Weber as storyteller", in F. Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971–1986, Volume 2: The Syntax of History*, London: Routledge 1988b, 12–13.

29 G. McLennan, "Disinterested, disengaged, useless: conservative or progressive idea of the university?", *Globalization, Societies and Education*, 6, 2, 2008, 195–200.

into the education sector of Canada's informational economy in the 1980s, for example, stands as an archetype of such analysis.<sup>30</sup>

By indicating the inability of Luhmann's approach to contemplate either mode of contradiction, Jameson demonstrates the thoroughly non-dialectical character of the logic. His concept of differentiation falls from the realm of theory into philosophical dogma. Composed thus, the ahistorical conception of differentiation which Luhmann deploys has the effect of dissembling its ideological character, cementing an outer horizon in place that mimics the limit-points of its own self-reflectivity. That limit-point is no less than a clotting of history around the institution of free-market capitalism.

It is this outcome, however, which resolves the problem of the potentially unruliness within the writing by which Luhmann's analysis comes into being. The origins of that writing lie, for Luhmann, with the anthro-biological fact of the speaking animal and of its advanced capacity to differentiate, through language, between objects in its environment. Analysis of how that practice of differentiation shifts over time comes, for Luhmann, through a return to the space-time of that originating 'fact'. In this context, moreover, the naturalisation of the market-place in Luhmann's work is not unexpected, as the logic of capitalist relations has an elective affinity with the kind of differentiation expressed by Luhmann's 'state of nature' convictions. The portrayal within capitalism of social relations being between morally autonomous and innovative individuals valorises the idea of people being born with an irrevocable capacity to differentiate: the latter (the natural disposition of individuals towards symbolic differentiation) thereafter has the potential to justify any excesses exhibited by the former (an economic system operating by a principle of differentiation). The unruly performativity which Luhmann's analysis otherwise unleashes is thereby contained through a questionable naturalisation of the socio-historical system in which the subjects of liberal-capitalist social spaces increasingly have their being.

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30 J. -F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984.

## Behind the time of differentiation

The limitations in Luhmann's historicisation are not intrinsic to his approach but, rather, are historically contingent in kind. They reflect the socio-economic horizon to which his sociological practice is being indexed. Luhmann's insight into the variability of abstraction – regarding the ability for symbolic figuration to differentiate as much as the socio-political administration of modernity (through the mechanisms of law, science, the market, and so on) – provides a key for enlarging his historicism beyond the ideological commitments which congeal his work. That limitation in his work stands to be exceeded through a productive suspension of a (wanting) assumption which is key to self-referential systems theory: that the human condition is synonymous with the cognitive process of abstracting objects one from the other. The suspension of this assumption does not undermine the significance which practices of abstraction play for the functioning of the human organism: subjectivity depends upon a capacity to distinguish objects from each other and of those objects from its own being.<sup>31</sup> To this end, the suspension of the assumption is not the same as its dissolution, as might be associated with the celebration of schizophrenia during the 1970s by Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>32</sup> Rather, the task of enlarging the historicism found in Luhmann's sociology turns upon an expansion of the singular and positivist manner by which the appearance of differentiation is scripted. To reframe the point, the task will present symbolic differentiation, whose salience to subjectivity and the production of knowledge Luhmann's work rightly attests, to the very logic of historicisation to which Luhmann has always remained committed.

The challenge involved in this historicisation of the field of symbolic differentiation turns upon the way in which the figure of totality – the 'beyond' of *utopia* – haunts the very practice of historicisation. Totality stands as a kind of trans-historical condition in respect of which exist the very same instances and events of human interaction which historicism,

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31 Indeed, if individuals couldn't routinely achieve that outcome, many might well find themselves inadvertently killed by objects of various kinds.

32 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1983.

by definition, takes as its interpretive ground. The issue gathers in complexity, however: the act of interpreting events through the use of analytic strategies that imply the existence of a social totality of some kind – of ‘alienation’, ‘patriarchy’, ‘colonialism’, ‘reification’, and so on – provides no valid basis upon which we might, as Jameson puts it, “analyze something [here, totality] whose existence we have not yet even demonstrated”.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, totality can never be demonstrated in any empirical sense. Rather, as Jameson suggests, the figure of totality materialises not as a meta-narrative about the broad sweeps of history. Instead, it appears most routinely in the sounding of various “parts of speech” by which are grounded the interpretive practices used for describing interactions and events.<sup>34</sup> Verb structures, for example, have the effect of staging relations between objects. Variants of the verb ‘to be’, for example, suggest a condition of strong correspondence. That correspondence works at two levels. A simple statement such as “the sun is hot” indicates a direct relation between ‘the sun’ and ‘heat’. It also indicates a direct relation between the condition of ‘the sun is hot’ and the place of enunciation: the speaker appears as one with irrefragable knowledge (about the condition of the sun). Alternative verb structures introduce mediations which diffuse relationships, both between the objects concerned and those objects and the condition of knowing: “the heat of the sun enlivens the soul of the one who experiences it ...”. Such parts of speech successfully ground interpretive practices to the extent to which they can convey metaphysical assumptions which etch out of the figure of totality indentations within which those same assumptions then, in apparent truth of themselves, can echo. Luhmann’s work again proves instructive in this regard: its use of a narrative of human origins – such that human powers have emerged from the linguistic capacity to differentiate between material objects – hollows out of Luhmann’s concept of totality a cavern whose shape (market-relations freedom) fits the echo of self-determination as it resounds from that imagined state of original being.

Totality, as the ‘beyond’ to the discursive space of *utopia*, is thereby “not something one ends with”, but, rather, something with which one

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33 F. Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*. London and New York: Verso 2009, 4.

34 *Ibid.*, 4. For an extended analysis of the manner by which parts of speech convey social structures, see also F. Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic*. London and New York: Verso 2007.

tacitly “begins”.<sup>35</sup> To this end, it proves insufficient to claim that a specific system which has emerged on the globe – of capitalism, multiculturalism, modernity, risk society, Gaia, and so on – is synonymous with totality (no matter how totalising any of these descriptors might become). Equally, it proves insufficient to present *utopia* as being tantamount to totality.

Jameson’s particular mapping of the representational differentiation that makes up the cultural condition of modernity provides a provisional means for charting possible pathways for the production of transformative thought in relation to totality. The specific vectors he uses relate to the figurative idioms of realism, modernism, postmodernism.<sup>36</sup> The significance of this set of co-ordinates doesn’t lie simply with the insights it enables, either singularly, or cumulatively, into prospective directions for the production of transformative ideas. Rather, for Jameson, their significance lies with the manner in which they collectively stage the non-availability of any singular platform upon which progressive thought might now develop. To this end, their ‘result’ makes no sound. No new ‘big ideas’ ring. And therein lies, now, the challenge for radical politics.

In the first of these co-ordinates – that of realism – totality takes the form of an object that emerges in relation to its opposite of ‘the particular’ (of a pliable condition which is always an effect of thoroughly contingent, localised events and processes). In this respect, totality and particularity assume, as it were, opposite sides of the coin such that neither can exist on the same plane, and of each being the negation of the other. To think one in its fullness denies the possibility of doing the same with the other, but the act of doing so projects into that one an objective quality. The deployment of this dialectic has the effect of imbuing possible objects of transformative thought with an essentialist tenor, capable of giving traction to political action. The ready manner by which various social identities – such as worker, woman, indigenous peoples, community, the individual, and so on – are frequently imbued with a measure of coherence befitting of a transformational identity, perhaps attests to the point.

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35 Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 15.

36 For a comment from Jameson on the centrality of these for his work, see F. Jameson, “Culture and finance capital”, *Critical Inquiry*, 24, 1, 1997, 246–265.

The second of these representational idioms juxtaposes totality with historical specificity, with the effect not of privileging one over the other, nor of producing something like the vulgar Hegelian synthesis of opposites. The approach materialises as method, in a glorification of conceptual templates for the naming and analysis of contradictions and/or differences. The aggregative multiplicity which ensues from that act of naming becomes isomorphic with the figure of totality. Most famous, in this regard, as Jameson points out, is “the binary” popularised in the structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss.<sup>37</sup> This is a formalist device, apparently devoid of all substantive content, on the basis of which sets of relations can be mapped without any apparent commitment to the normative hopes being conveyed in any expression of that content. ‘Superstructure’ and ‘base’ thereby exist in relation to one another, as do metaphor and metonymy, similarity and difference, and so on. Quite apparently, the reframing of questions about the composition of totality in a purely methodological manner, such as with ‘the binary’, licences the anti-utopian utopianism of political pragmatism: there exists no necessary basis within the method upon which a normative impulse can be inserted. Productively, however, as Jameson notes, the abstract character of this particular dialectic also enables the valences of the objects being considered to be reversed, such that the rhetorical power being staged in their presentation can be made to produce alternative effects. To this end, base can be seen to exist in relation to the movements of superstructure (rather than superstructure necessarily being interpreted as an epiphenomenon of base). That simple reversal of terms has enabled, within western Marxism, historical materialism to be substituted for the dialectical materialism of Soviet communism, engendering hope that critical interventions in the ‘relatively autonomous’ fields of super-structural institutions such as law, culture, and science, might alter the trajectory of economic relations.<sup>38</sup>

A third dialectical approach for engaging the figure of totality with transformative intent emerges from a proposition within Hegel’s work: the truth of an element lies neither in its essence nor its material conditions of existence, but within the semblances by which it appears in

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37 On this point, see Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 16–17.

38 For a critical evaluation of this movement, see S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*. London and New York: Verso 2006a, 5–6.

thought. Jameson's reading of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* introduces the contours of this approach.<sup>39</sup> It takes some explaining given the marginal cultural status of this idiom relative to the first two forms of representation.

A form of the dialectic which exists in the work of Hegel – the 'truth of appearances' – associates the transformative movement of ideas with the condition of 'particularity' itself. That particularity refers to the condition of 'singularity' which each and every image of an object possesses. Jameson finds this also in Adorno's association of the figure of 'the concept' with the condition of 'the particular'. A concept is never anything more than a semblance of its referent (being thereby always highly 'singular'), and yet, within that concept lies the truth of its referent. The move turns upon Adorno's deconstruction of both poles of the dialectical relation of particularity/totality, such that neither totality nor particularity exists as a system in their own right (of metaphysical or material kinds, respectively). Each is constituted instead by the fact that their semblances are never fully contiguous with their empirical selves. They are thus constituted through a condition of 'non-identity'.

The origins of the force which puts the process of representation in motion, that constitutes objects in this state of non-identity with themselves, is always, for Jameson, present in the semblances by which those objects are known. Clues as to the identity of an object come by way of the *form* which the given semblance takes, and by which the substantive meaning of that concept is corralled and sustained. This is not a state of 'pure form'. Rather, it is form which always already has historically-given structure. The significance of this dimension, of form, lies with the manner in which it produces a kind of traction within consciousness which operates autonomously of the substantive meaning implied by any given concept's content:

what in my opinion Adorno's dialectic proposes [...] is a kind of stereoscopic thinking in which the concept continues to be thought philosophically and cashed at face value, while in some other part of the mind a very different kind of intellectual climate reigns [...] in which the form of that concept is noted and registered in

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39 Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 53–57.

shorthand and in which the existence of the financial and banking system thereby presupposed is somehow reckoned in.<sup>40</sup>

The value of Adorno's work, then, for Jameson, lies in its realisation that transformative movements in ideas do not require access to either a transcendental exteriority or an empirically-knowable materiality in order to secure their validity. Instead, a principle of disturbance always already now exists within concepts ('non-identity') that is given by the prevailing socio-historical structures (now, the 'financial and banking system'), and which continually threatens the coherence of those same structures.

In those moments in which a concept is put forward as a trigger for transformative developments – say, for example, *financial austerity* as the vehicle for economic reconstruction – the form which that concept embodies (a reflex of the socio-political forces of finance capitalism which frame that concept as a common-sense idea) has a latent capacity to disturb the coherence of the concept itself (of financial austerity). In this manner, the prescriptive dimension of the concept (that economic reconstruction must now occur through processes of financial austerity) asserts its own correctness by tautologically presenting itself as the only option. This does not result in financial austerity becoming the final word. Paradoxically, the concept is able to parade itself thus while also remaining a source of alternative options. The driver of those alternatives is the appearance in the concept of its own non-identity: the 'naturalness' which is being attributed to 'austerity' implies that the full variability of economic relations out of which that concept has been extracted is not yet available for subjective experience. "What the concept cannot say must somehow", Jameson notes, "by its imperfection, be registered within it":<sup>41</sup> the logic of capital always already at work within the operation of a concept like 'financial austerity' perpetually undermines the coherence of that concept's contents and of its programmatic expression. Only the act of artificially imposing a state of coherence, ultimately through the coercive apparatuses of the State, can sustain the viability of such a concept.

Notwithstanding the clear sense in Adorno of how this historically-specific version of the dialectic might now be progressively marshalled

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40 Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 28.

41 *Ibid.*, 30.



as a form of critique, Jameson expresses caution. It harbours the problematic spectre of a totalitarian Absolute, perhaps the return of a dictatorship of the proletariat. At the very least, it establishes a ‘truth of appearances’ in a position of policing the other modes of representation at work within that cultural space, fruitlessly attempting to disavow the cultural condition of abstractive differentiation by which it now exists. The ease with which Adorno attributes this shift in the dynamics of language to capitalism, as an object in its own right, exemplifies this problem: the solution to the problem of capitalism lies with a dogmatic use of ‘the truth of appearances’ as a new interpretive weapon against that logic.

In Žižek’s appropriation of Lacanian psychoanalysis, alternatively, Jameson finds an expression of this orientation towards totality that can sustain the dialectic of appearances in a manner that might prevent such an outcome, which could thwart the return of an Absolute.<sup>42</sup> The key to this urge lays with a proposition which Žižek further associates with Hegel’s insights regarding “the possibility of ontological convictions without any accompanying linguistic or philosophical expression”.<sup>43</sup> Žižek will in time formulate a crisp Kantian for this, of an analytic practice that involves

putting two incompatible phenomena on the same level [...] [being] strictly analogous to what Kant called ‘transcendental illusion,’ the illusion of being able to use the same language for phenomena which are mutually untranslatable and can be grasped only in a kind of parallax view, constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. Thus there is no rapport between the two levels, no shared space—although they are closely connected, even identical in a way, that are, as it were, on the opposed sides of a Moebius strip.<sup>44</sup>

The transcendental illusion is, as Žižek’s former student Alenka Zupančič states, “the name for something that appears where there should be nothing”,<sup>45</sup> being “the material force of nonsense itself”.<sup>46</sup> The illusion operates, therefore, not as an element that finds itself – upon its

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42 See Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 57–60.

43 *Ibid.*, 62.

44 Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 4.

45 A. Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press 2003, 172.

46 *Ibid.*, 173.

emergence within consciousness – tagged in relation to other proper names; rather it emerges as an object of the bodies themselves which are in the act of comprehending the gap which has opened up thus, often as the rude forces of laughter and/or of abjection.<sup>47</sup> This is the condition of *jouissance*, of which Lacan spoke.

These three approaches towards the figure of totality produce, to return to the language of Freud, a condition of overdetermination within those who seek, through ‘totality’, an alternative common-sense to that given by the logics of capital and post-political administration. Totality does not thereby emerge as a metaphysical state in respect of which we might find ourselves wanting, the desire for which could be satiated if only we managed to adequately picture that utopian condition. Althusser is instructive at this point. Totality emerges instead as a state which now confronts the subject in a highly mediated condition, taking form as a plethora of historically specific ‘effects’ in the fields of economics, law, politics, science, philosophy and so on. Totality thereby becomes “the effects of the whole on the parts [...] where the complex totality of the structure of dominance is a structure of effects with *present-absent causes*”.<sup>48</sup> Totality as absent cause, Althusser continues,

is not an essence *outside* the economic phenomenon which comes and alters their aspect, forms and relations and which is effective on them as an absent cause, *absent because it is outside them. The absence of the cause in the structure’s ‘metonymic causality’ on its effects is not the fault of the exteriority of the structure with respect to the economic phenomena; on the contrary, it is the very form of the interiority of the structure, as a structure, in its effects.* This implies therefore that the effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to *imprint its mark*: on the contrary, it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects [...] that *the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects*, in short, that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects.<sup>49</sup>

Where an empiricist might, upon viewing a theatrical stage, Althusser further elucidates, perceive a play they are watching to somehow be a

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47 D. Schwarz, *Listening Subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press 1997, 160–163.

48 L. Althusser and E. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, London and New York: Verso 1979, 310. Original emphasis.

49 *Ibid.*, 188–189. Original emphasis.

reflection of themselves, and the Hegelian might sense “the hand of God or the Spirit” at work in the unfolding of a universal message, the Marxist interpreting the event in terms of totality of this kind sees a theatre “which reflects neither simple reality nor any transcendental truth, a theory without an author; the object of his science is the mechanism which produces the stage effects”.<sup>50</sup> Poetically, as Lacan avers, this object – of a cause which remains absent to the thoughts attributed to it – arises empirically by way of bodily sensations in which

(o)ne has a succession of alternation where the signifier comes back to strike, as I might say, the flowing stream with the flails of its mill, its wheel raising up each time something streaming, in order to fall back again, to enrich itself, to complicate itself, without us ever being able at any moment to grasp what dominates in terms of the concrete starting point or of equivocation.<sup>51</sup>

As a platform for social analysis, the notion of a cause which is simultaneously present-absent suggests a condition which is always exceeding the specific knowledge claims which emerge through any act of analysis. Proximity to that condition threatens the act of analysis, however, with silence. We have seen this with Luhmann’s interpretation of abstraction’s differentiation, wherein the force unleashed by that differentiation is only, and barely, held at bay through an act of repositioning analysis firmly within the horizons set by late capitalism. Jameson equates this condition with the force of Necessity, of life itself, with a force within whose utter indifference to human wellbeing social communities seek to etch out a zone of subjective freedom.<sup>52</sup> Those attempts comprise, for each such community, their modes of production; modes which also inevitably segment and stratify its members. At stake, now, for those

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50 *Ibid.*, 310.

51 Lacan, quoted in P. Dravers “In the wake of interpretation: ‘The Letter! The Litter!’”, in L. Thurston (ed.), *Re-Inventing the Symptom: Essays on the Final Lacan*. New York: Other Press 2002, 160.

52 F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, New York.: Cornell University Press 1981. To this end, Jameson notes, the whole of history “is [...] the experience of Necessity” (*ibid.*, 102). In further elaboration he adds: “That history – Althusser’s ‘absent cause,’ Lacan’s ‘Real’ – is *not* a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational; what can be added, however, is the proviso that history is inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, that it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization” (*ibid.*, 82).

who seek to reinvigorate the discursive space of *utopia*, is the matter of how transformational ideas might arise within a mode of production which operates not only upon Necessity in a manner which sediments historical patterns of social inequality but by which, also, that operation is naturalised through the figurative effects of a differentiated field of representation.

## 4 Back toward totality

The social spaces organised by the logics of capital and administration appear now to be characterised by a state of differentiation in how cultural meaning is produced. So establish analyses as broadly spaced as Luhmann's and Jameson's (albeit in different ways and to different effect). Productively, for the animation of the discursive space of *utopia*, this differentiation promises to detach the normative impulse within Lenin's provocation – of 'what is to be done?' – from, and in a manner so as to exceed, the invariably circumscribed prescriptions that accompany any given diagnosis of the state of our contemporary organic crises. To reframe the point, it is under the impress of this differentiation that the utopian urge might now find itself able to surpass the contents of those socio-historically specific discourses within which utopianism is routinely expressed: from those of radical democracy; of communism; of the millennial faiths; of anarcho-syndicalism; eco-feminism; and so on. In the terms of Althusser and Jameson, this shift in the constitution of abstraction constitutes an historically specific effect of an always-absent casuistry, of totality as the blind force of material necessity.

An understanding of how transformative ideas might now work in relation to the organic crises of the world-system will not, however, be advanced simply by the differentiation that has been occurring to interpretive practice; that is by virtue of the culture of late capitalist modernity. That condition possesses no meaningfulness in itself, given that the differentiation itself threatens a hiatus in the production of truth, of ideology; and neither is such a condition of differentiation accessible, in itself, to experience *per se*.

One device for engaging with this situation – and a culturally privileged one in the social spaces of capitalist organisation and political administration – is that of scientific explanation. Explanation has emerged as a powerful mechanism to interpret those social systems which now normalise the pluralisation and fracturing of meaning. Emblematic in this regard has been the historical materialism of western Marxism, with the attention it has placed upon the role of ideas in the construction of politi-

cal blocks and in the pursuit of counter-hegemonic transformation. Its privileged status as an interpretive tradition lies, in part, with its capacity to present the socio-political operation of ideas – the so-called superstructure of capitalist political economy – as an object which can itself be offered up for scientific inquiry, as a zone for rational and deliberate counter-hegemonic intervention.

Any such field of explanation cannot help, however, but exhibit the very effect for which it seeks to give an account. In the case of the splaying which now characterises the production of meaning, analysis will thereby convey within itself that same condition of differentiation which it seeks to explain. In this manner, sections of western Marxism that have drawn upon the interpretative tradition of discourse analysis for the study of superstructural dynamics – or, more accurately, perhaps, the rearticulation of the base/superstructural distinction in terms of the discursive properties of capitalism – have drawn upon the postmodern condition of industrial-capitalist culture in the process of offering an interpretation of that same phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> To presume that it might be possible to ignore completely the labile character of the cultural terrain within which analysis is being offered is, for post-Marxists such as these, to step away from the hope of creating interpretations of political events attuned to local complexities. Moreover, avoidance of this discursive unruliness might fix analysis within an idealist mould, wherein human action and consciousness are exorcised of all their cultural vitality. To this end, within the post-Marxist moment, the act of interpretation seeks to map the vectors of social instability in relation to the unruly cultural dynamics of late modernity, such as the discursive constitution of political identity (as compared to the putative coherence of political class).

At the same time as they exhibit the social conditions upon which the act of diagnosis seeks to provide an explanation, analyses of the post-Marxist kind are at risk of reifying those same conditions; particularly the pluralisation of interpretation. And it is this concern which animates a central criticism of post-Marxism: the attention which post-Marxist analysis places upon the fluidity and provisionality of social patterns of identification – over and above the systemacity and stability of the ex-

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1 Emblematic in this regard are texts such as E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London and New York: Verso 1985.

exploitative processes within those patterns – tacitly reproduces the logics of capital. Gesturing towards this, Terry Eagleton notes

(a)s the grand narrative of capitalist globalization [...] unfurls across the planet, it catches these intellectuals at a time when many of them have almost ceased to think in political [class] terms at all.<sup>2</sup>

Within this risk being taken, however, there lies a possibility which has not been so evidently possible where analysis has focussed primarily upon the social institutions which manage ideas (of law, science, religion, the mass media, and so on). This possibility lies with capacities within subjectivity which have been emerging with that differentiation of representation, through which the logic of capital now reproduces itself. Before we move on to look at those subjective capacities, it is worthwhile noting that no consensus exists on how that reproduction occurs. The accounts of Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and Fredric Jameson, for example, offer quite different interpretations of the processes. They advance in common, however, the proposition that the unravelling of ideology has occurred in conjunction with shifts in the commodity form.

In the process of drawing attention to this association, between the operation of ideas and the commodity form, each of those three accounts, moreover, foregrounds an interpretive strategy of its own. Each of those strategies is particular to the account but, also, each emerges as an expression of the general condition of differentiation to which the accounts collectively speak. The first, that of Debord's, uses a form of abstraction which draws upon a condition of 'singularity' to describe an emergent 'society of the spectacle'; Baudrillard's account of the connections between changes in the commodity form and cultural processes of representation uses an abstractive form akin to 'an aggregated multiplicity' to indicate the emergence of a 'hyper-reality'; and Fredric Jameson's account of late capitalist culture draws out the prevalence of 'spatial movement' in the constitution of representation. Together, this set of accounts collectively stages something of the differentiation of abstraction which each of the contributions individually diagnose.

The reason for presenting these various analyses does not lie with any putative truth which each might claim about the state of the commodity form and its relations to a transformative politics. Rather, the

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2 T. Eagleton, *After Theory*, New York: Basic Books 2003, 72.

purpose is to illustrate how the process of constructing an explanatory account of abstraction's current state of differentiation cannot fully distance itself from that particular trope which primes the possibility of truth: that of *totality*. In the case of these three interpretations, that totality is 'the economic'. Infusing each account is a particular interpretation of what it might mean for 'the economy' to operate as a social determinate. Taken together, however, these three interpretations point to 'the economic' not as being a specific mechanism belonging to a particular set of spaces but, following Deleuze, the absent cause of contemporary social bonds. As a primal mechanism for differentiating between objects, the economy can thereby be seen continually at work but without ever being traced to "its own place" (as Žižek puts it).<sup>3</sup> In this vein, Žižek invokes Deleuze's insight: "that is why 'the economic' is never given properly speaking, but rather designates a differential virtuality to be interpreted, always covered over by its forms of actualization".<sup>4</sup>

What emerges through the consideration of this set of commentaries on the relation between representation and the commodity form is neither a *collection* of (contrary) truths about that truth (about the relation between the differentiation of abstraction and changes in the commodity form), nor *the* truth about this field of truths (of totality as being 'the economic'). Rather, the sense of totality which emerges in this set of interpretations is that of the absent cause itself at work; of an act of differentiation which enables the field to work as a field. This operation occurs not as a consequence of something like 'the logic of the economic' impressing itself upon each one of the interpretations but, rather, as (what Jameson calls) a "force field" through which inconsistencies and contradictions between accounts are bent to enable interpretation of this kind to continue.<sup>5</sup> Within this force field, a kind of subjectivity is produced which is (impossibly) supposed to understand and command the contemporary differentiation of abstraction by which it is formed in the economic/administrative matrix – *le sujet supposé savoir* (as Lacan calls that subjectivity: the subject-supposed-to-know). It is upon a re-

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3 S. Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, New York and London: Verso 2012, 25.

4 Deleuze, cited at *ibid.*, 25.

5 F. Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism", *New Left Review*, 146 (July/August), 1984, 57.



calibration of this site of production that the prospects for transformative ideas will be found pending.

## On truth, totality, and singularity

For Guy Debord, the defining character of contemporary social life has been the evolution of the commodity form into the character of “the spectacle”.<sup>6</sup> It is within this mutation of the commodity that the seeds lie for a theory of abstraction’s differentiation. The spectacle, Debord explains, is nothing short of “capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image”.<sup>7</sup> As image, the spectacle refers not to the emergence of a particular image (such as that of ‘capital’), or even to the transformation of society into a field of images, but to the development of a collective condition wherein relationships become unthinkable outside of the mediating presence of some or other imagery: the spectacle thereby becomes “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images”.<sup>8</sup> This focus on the binding role played within relationships by a manufactured presence reflects Marx’s analysis of the commodity form having itself become the constitutive force within relations under capitalist conditions. Within this development, the problematic matter of the competing use values which different groups might assign to given objects (or to their own identities, or bodies) comes to be overridden by the dominance of the exchange value of those goods, as determined by the marketplace. In keeping with Marx’s materialism, also, Debord remains faithful to a belief that productivity remains the constitutive force beneath the operation of the commodity form, the spectacle remaining functionally connected to the economic base notwithstanding its increasing autonomy from the logic of capital. As Baudrillard has similarly remarked, the spectacle thus remains “an immense connotation of the commodity”.<sup>9</sup>

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6 G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books 1994.

7 *Ibid.*, 24.

8 *Ibid.*, 12.

9 J. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, St. Louis: Telos Press 1975, 120.

In the advanced form that the commodity now takes – of the commodity as spectacle – the hierarchical relations upon which the logic of capitalism depends reproduce themselves without human intent: the spectacle “makes no secret of what it *is*, namely, hierarchical power evolving on its own”.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, the commodity as spectacle gains an autonomy that the logic of the commodity never had when it was tied to a relationship between use-value and exchange-value. The spectacle thereby comes to operate fully in the mode of an exchange value without the requirement that it reference itself in any way to the materiality of physical utility. To this end, the capacity of the spectacle to unify objects which are otherwise discrete, amplifies, and does so in proportion to the abstractness dispensed by the pure imagery of the specular. The multiplicity of the field, which is unified under the gaze of the spectacle, thereby continues to disaggregate: “The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only *in its separateness*”.<sup>11</sup> So far-reaching is this capacity that the “cumulative power of this autonomous realm of artifice necessarily entails a *falsification of life*” in full; that is, a loss of directly lived experience.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence of this autonomy which the specular accrues to itself, semblance is normalised as a social phenomenon such that legitimacy attaches to those actions which can successfully transform vague possibilities – concerning the powers of human freedom, aspiration, and so on – into images coherent enough to support wilful action.<sup>13</sup>

Much of Debord’s account details the shifts which occur in the constitution of social life as a consequence of the commodity taking the form of the spectacle: the spectacle’s impact upon the notion of the historical class (such that the working class itself becomes a “representation”); the impact of specular life on the experience of time (as the non-reversible, linear time that governs commodified labour grows in social prominence); upon space (through the discipline of environmental plan-

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10 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 20. Original emphasis.

11 *Ibid.*, 22. Original emphasis.

12 *Ibid.*, 45. Original emphasis.

13 For Debord, the normalisation of the specular, as an autonomous force, is assisted by a number of contemporary social processes including the following: the development of massified communication; increasing productivity within the manufacturing and service sectors; an increasing division of labour; technology; and the increasing salience of consumption within a continually expanding marketplace.

ning); of culture as the social vehicle for the spread of specularity; and of the negation by culture of history as it might be “directly lived”,<sup>14</sup> such that history becomes but “frozen time”.<sup>15</sup>

Of significance in Debord’s account is the manner by which it seeks to reflexively expose the analytic strategy which the critique uses – the deployment of ‘the spectacle’ – to the critique which it mounts of ‘the commodity-spectacle’ as a material object. It is this step in which Luhmann proved unable, if not unwilling, to fully participate: to historicize the act of critique itself, to locate itself within the differentiation of representation which is being mapped.<sup>16</sup> If the “simple boosting of the system” is to be avoided, as Debord notes is achieved by social theorists like Luhmann, then the Scylla of this Charybdis that is to be equally eluded is the “fake despair” of “non-thought” that follows the employment of non-dialectical and ahistorical analysis.<sup>17</sup> Only a trajectory of analytic thought which puts at centre stage the question of the spectacle’s emergent powers to constitute social life, set within the incessant productivity of capital, can elude this “authorised amnesia” of historical practices as supported by the (non-dialectical/ahistorical) academic traditions that currently prevail within university settings.<sup>18</sup>

Debord’s account thereby demonstrates an acute awareness that the concept of the spectacle has the capacity to become “just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric designed to explain and denounce everything in the abstract”.<sup>19</sup> That is, it has the capacity to become as unyielding to immanent critique as Luhmann’s treatment of the concept of differentiation. To act otherwise in the process of critique – to speak as if the act of explaining the rise of specular capitalism will suffice to pre-suppose the transformation of that capitalism – suggests that more than just a little idealist delusion is at work.

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14 *Ibid.*, 135.

15 *Ibid.*, 141.

16 Luhmann’s work typifies the infestation of social science by this problem, as Debord would see it, insofar as the critique which Luhmann has attempted of contemporary socio-political formations has been nothing more than what Debord castigates as being “a specular critique of the spectacle, studying separation with the sole aid of separation’s own conceptual and material tools” (*ibid.*, 138).

17 *Ibid.*, 139.

18 *Ibid.*, 139.

19 *Ibid.*, 143.

For Debord, alternatively, an analytic form exists that indeed can wrest the task of interpretation from the content attributed to the concept of the spectacle. That analytic form is the act of joining theory with social practice: “we may say with certainty that the obscure and difficult path of critical theory must also be the path of the practical movement that occurs at the level of society as a whole”.<sup>20</sup> Only this domain of a concrete “rigorous practice”,<sup>21</sup> of a practice that takes as its ground the materiality of productive forces, has the potential to capitalize on the indeterminacies which lie latent within the concept of the spectacle itself.<sup>22</sup> Only the domain of practice can use in an innovative fashion the vague objects which lie between the elements that correspond to the structure of the spectacle (that is, the field of social relations as is mediated by the domain of images) and its function (to contain accumulated capital). Practice, thereby grounded, has the potential to arrest the concept of the spectacle from itself becoming mere spectacle; and the concept of the spectacle, for its part, gives traction to the meaning of transformative social practice.

These theoretical postulations aside, Debord’s account will give little indication as to the possible substance of social practice, nor of its meaning for the negotiation of a field of abstraction as fragmented by the commodity form as spectacle. To do so may be to risk the imposition of formulaic political responses to the logic of capital and to thereby chance the collapse of the theory/practice cusp into a new kind of specular hole. A repeated exception to this caution occurs in the account’s advocacy of those practices which might successfully wrestle the field of dialogue from forms of speech that would otherwise equate the specular with the figure of truth: the specular holds no truth in and of itself but is, rather, an historically specific condition through which the productivity of the working class can be re-established in terms that are of its own time. But aside from those rare gestures towards the purposes to which rigorous practice might be put, the account remains quietist outside of its generalised polemical temper regarding practice’s necessary partnership with the work of theoretical explanation.

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20 *Ibid.*, 143.

21 *Ibid.*, 143.

22 *Ibid.*, 143.

Supplementing these generalised gestures, regarding the character of social practice, are a series of latent observations concerning the figure of totality in respect of which the condition of differentiation moves. It is at this point in the account that an explanatory understanding begins to emerge of the contemporary differentiation of abstraction. That explanation draws not upon the origins of differentiation – mutation in the commodity form – for that origin provides no leverage for the production of transformative ideas. Rather, an impulse comes from the spectre of *utopia*, from a singular sense of totality in relation to which social transformation might move. Totality, in Debord's account, comprises a variety of figures: "the unity of life";<sup>23</sup> a "total historical movement";<sup>24</sup> "*unified social practice*";<sup>25</sup> a cultural condition that promises the possibility of productive life "directly lived";<sup>26</sup> of experience which functions without the need for mediating elements such as the commodity form or the spectacle. It stands for human life creating conditions for itself outside the limiting ('negating') effects upon lived experience of what has become the primary domain of images, that is, of capitalist culture.

Paradoxically, for Debord, it is specular capitalism that now provides the historical conditions within which a singular unity of life and historical movement can be imagined, a unity that will not fall prey to the demands that accompany any given image of itself (of communism, or of radical democracy, for example). More specifically, the autonomy obtained by the spectacle releases the image of a unified whole from any necessary connection with a material use value: there now exists no concrete value to which the coagulating effects of a new sense of unity need now refer. To this end, the unity of life and history can be thought without invoking the need for a referent of the future – of *utopia* for example – for which the signifier needs stand. In this same vein, it is possible to jettison the hope of "directly lived" experience – of the present – allowing it to instead be "lost forever" to memory, in the knowledge that the condition has never in fact been experienced directly outside of culturally mediated discourses.<sup>27</sup>

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23 *Ibid.*, 12.

24 *Ibid.*, 130.

25 *Ibid.*, 147. Original emphasis.

26 *Ibid.*, 135.

27 *Ibid.*, 12.

Within this apparent evisceration of Debord's materialist commitments, the traces of productivism and workerism that remain of his Marxism morph into an increasingly oblique form. Moreover, references to those traces appear in the guise themselves as spectacles, without the supplementary notes that might suggest that concrete objects such as the workers' movement will once again be the continuing ground of contemporary history. As a consequence of this suspension, the concept of totality unexpectedly emerges as the assumed platform for analysis. This is not a form of totality that can be known in an objective sense, whose coordinates can be constructed from materials scattered about the socio-political landscape. Rather, the singular sense of totality within Debord's work simply exhorts the subject. And with that exhortation a sense of surety re-emerges whereby the figure of totality comes to again fuel transformative thought – promising a resurgent dictatorship of the proletariat, no less – re-establishing dialectical thought in the present as the means by which history might restart in the era of the spectacle.

## On truth, totality, and multiplicity

In contrast to the image of a social domain whose underlying logic remains associated with human production, Jean Baudrillard's account of change points to a transformation of such scale within the capitalist economy that the pursuit of productivity no longer remains its rationale. Instead, the logic of consumption has come to characterise social relationships. Moreover, its central mechanism – of desire – protrudes with such functional necessity that desire becomes constitutive of all social life. Figurative practices cannot themselves avoid being infused by what Baudrillard will come to call *seduction*. It is this overdetermination of social life by the profusion of seduction which animates, in Baudrillard's account, the contemporary differentiation of abstraction.

The transformation by which this differentiation comes about reflects the “genealogy of the system of exchange value” which Baudrillard perceives Marx to have noted.<sup>28</sup> At stake here is an increas-

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28 J. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, St. Louis: Telos Press 1975, 119.

ing enlargement of market relations from the trading of simple surpluses to that of all which is produced. With that enlargement comes the birth of capital and with that birth a thorough-going imprinting of social relations by the economic. In a further extension of the logic, the economic comes to incorporate elements of social life that might be otherwise considered “unalienable” – of human attributes such as “virtue, love, knowledge, consciousness”.<sup>29</sup> It is for this newly commodified set of elements that Baudrillard, much like Debord, deploys the term *spectacle*; the term not only indicating the textual quality of the commodified product but also registering the distinctiveness which commodification comes to possess under monopoly capital (as compared to the former condition of market capitalism in which concrete objects seemingly mattered).

For Marx, the extension had signalled no more than the embedding of economic relations within societies at the level of social superstructure, neutralising the attributes of virtue, love, etc., as subjectivity was increasingly subsumed by the logic of productive relations. For Baudrillard, alternatively, the latter extension radically recomposes not just the commodity form but the manner in which the logic of capital is thereafter to be experienced. If the commodity is to be comprehended in all its “radicality as a generalized process of social abstraction”, as Baudrillard believes Marx had done,<sup>30</sup> the expansion of the commodity form so as to envelop the human attributes demonstrates a new trait. This is a trait within the commodity form that cannot be reduced to the role which the commodity plays in the general development of productive forces: rather, the commodity first and foremost *signifies*, and it does so in a performative manner that outstrips thoroughly the productive forces of the economic ‘base’.

Signalling the enormity of this transformation in the constitution of the commodity, for the manner by which human relations will now ensue, Baudrillard registers this shift not as being simply an evolution within the commodity. It comprises, instead, a wholesale mutation of its form. Capitalism, and the commodity form through which it functions, have leapt *genus*.

Providing the preconditions for this mutation, the account continues, is a particular element within the shift from competitive to monopoly

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29 *Ibid.*, 119.

30 *Ibid.*, 120.

capitalism. That element is a movement from production-for-profit to a condition where-in production becomes for its own sake. Governing the realm of productivity within the preceding era of competitive capitalism had been a calculus that weighed the costs of inputs to the system and the value of its outputs in a manner that produced the greatest competitive gain for the companies involved. The most notable of these costs and outputs was the use value of labour and the exchange value of the commodities produced. With the move to a monopolistic era of capitalism, the matter of competitive edge lessens and there emerges – in a manner that progressively eclipses the calculus of cost/gain – a calculation regarding the circulation of commodities across social spaces. Governing the circulation is a relatively simple classificatory calculus, one that functions not according to the materiality of the commodity (that is, of its concrete use value; which, for Baudrillard, never existed but which was always the retroactive construction of exchange value) but the imagery which the commodity incessantly projects beyond itself. The imagery which is thereby launched interpolates the consumer *via* the would-be user's desire for the particular semblance involved. Motor cars, for example, resonate with a desire to be mobile; and SUV's of mobility tinged with a desire for adventure.

Coexisting with the transformation from competitive to monopolistic capitalism, as Baudrillard's account will contend, is a shift in the logic by which the circulation of the commodity form occurs. That shift takes the form of a substitution within the logic of differentiation itself, one which sees the dialectic of objects replaced – of materiality/ideas, production/consumption, of worker/non-worker, and so on – by a play of difference. That play comes to animate the domains of identity politics, sexual politics, multiculturalism, and so on. Marxism no longer stands as the form of theory most able to interpret the newly emergent specular character of the commodity form within monopoly capitalism. Instead, semiotics will emerge, for Baudrillard, as the theoretical schema conceptually equipped to analyse the relations which the specular commodity invokes as being, now, constitutive of the social. Semiotics proves capable of mapping the field of commodities as an aggregate of discrete images, organised in terms of a classification schema and superintended by a semiotic code. The locus of capitalism no longer lies with the organisational capacity to control the means of production, through the exercise



of force and the manipulation of ideology, but through management of “the code.”<sup>31</sup>

It is within this shift towards the emergence of production for production’s sake that there occurs a significant mutation, not only in the commodity form, but in the economy of affect through which subjectivity forms within capitalist culture. That shift occurs within the arena of psychical desire, such that there comes to the fore of social life the seductive dimension of the linguistic order. By ‘seductive’ Baudrillard is pointing towards an emergence, within the content of speech, of the un-symbolisable predicate of that content; a predicate in respect of which all acts of speech constitute attempts at its simultaneous enunciation and closure (or, of closure through enunciation). We saw Luhmann attempt to name that predicate ‘the environment’. And we have seen Žižek draw attention to its socially transformative potential, as the ‘part of no part’ that conveys the social structure within which speech acts occur. Pushing this idea further, the domain of ‘depth’, which interpretative theories such as psychoanalysis and Marxism had interpreted as the unconscious or the materiality of production, dissolves, for Baudrillard, into a field of appearances; into the movement of signification itself, into the realm of appearances. The effect marks human perception within the era of monopolistic capitalism with a generalised, psychotic-like condition of flatness. Far from being regressive, that condition brings directly into social experience the elemental seductiveness of language itself, by which each and every utterance (and form of political arrangement, beyond) is made possible.<sup>32</sup> As a consequence of this shift, the fabric of desire mutates, from having being organised within competitive capitalism around the obtaining of tangible objects, to being a state animated by “the void” at the centre of the semiotic code: “The attraction of the void lies at the basis of seduction: not the accumulation of signs, nor the messages of desire, but an esoteric complicity with the absorption of signs”.<sup>33</sup> Death, rather than acquisition, will become the motif, for Baudrillard, through which to understand the possibility of productive engagement with the overdetermining impress of that void. Rather than being an urge to “un-

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31 See J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, London; Thousand Oaks, California: Sage 1998.

32 J. Baudrillard, *On Seduction*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Education 1990, 158–159.

33 *Ibid.*, 77–78.

cover” the non-existent truth of things, the emblem of death stands for the relinquishing of demands for coherence and for closure in understanding: “The world is naked, the king is naked, things are clear. [...] ‘perhaps we only wish to uncover truth because it is so difficult to imagine it naked’”.<sup>34</sup>

In keeping with the causal powers which Baudrillard attributes to monopoly capitalism, the image of totality which stalks this account comes under the fragmenting effects of that same capitalism. Thus, in *Simulation and Simulacra*, we see the totalising logic of ‘the code’ subsumed by a state of multiplicity which is accounted for in terms of the play of simulations and social differences as supported by monopoly capitalism; such that there emerges, in somewhat ironic fashion (given the aversion to dialectical synthesis which Baudrillard displays, and which he credits to the age in which he writes), a term that reaches beyond the code/difference couplet: ‘hyperreality’. In one sense, hyperreality comprises a fourth, and last, stage in the evolution of the image (from the image reflecting material reality, to its perversion of reality, to the marking of the absence of reality, to a condition which “bears no relation to any reality whatever”) – hyperreality being “its own pure simulacrum”,<sup>35</sup> a proliferation of signs “dedicated exclusively to their recurrence as signs”.<sup>36</sup> In another modality, the term will mark a new manner in which the space previously signified by ‘totality’ will be signalled: hyperreality becomes the ungraspable condition in respect of which signs in their proliferated state assemble. Representation thereafter tumbles as if thrown into a non-gravitational space, with each act of signification counting for no more than any other, irrespective of pedigree:

myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production. This is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us: a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal.<sup>37</sup>

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34 *Ibid.*, 181.

35 J. Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1994, 170.

36 *Ibid.*, 179.

37 *Ibid.*, 171.

The logic of simulation alters in this condition, from a desire for specificity to a desire for desire's sake – for seduction. And the proliferating images which convey the seductive power of signification whirl in the place we might otherwise expect to encounter totality in its ungraspable singularity, that being the logic of totality under the condition of hyper-reality.

## On truth, totality, and spatial movement

Preconditioning the shifts that have occurred within the logic of capital, for Jameson, is the movement of history. This is a movement of historical occurrences whose inevitability cannot simply be taken as given just because of the various shifts which have occurred thus far within economic organisation, governmental organisation, or any other logic.<sup>38</sup> Debord's interpretive error, from the perspective which Jameson presents, is to presume the possibility that the present condition of stasis into which history has fallen can be circumvented through a return to dynamics that characterised earlier periods of capital; that is, to the motifs of productivism and the centrality of worker-centred politics. While the present conjuncture will not outlaw this return as a strategic possibility, the move itself will prove insufficient in overcoming the present impasse which the social democracy/ multinational capitalism couplet now marks.<sup>39</sup> The proposition presumes a consistency within the logic of history that has ceased to exist as capitalism has passed, as both Debord and Baudrillard have noted, from a productive to reproductive form. That said, for Jameson, neither is the view of history that informs Baudrillard's interpretation of that transformation progressive. Unlike Debord's interpretation, Baudrillard views the present condition of his-

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38 In his periodisation of capital, Jameson draws on Ernst Mandel's topology of 'competitive', 'monopoly', and 'late capitalism'. For Jameson's defence of periodisation as an analytic strategy, refer to F. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, London and New York: Verso 2002, 28–30.

39 Indeed, for discussion of current projects of this kind, and of the limit-point to their operation under neoliberal conditions, refer to B. Santos (ed.), *Another Production is Possible: Beyond the Capitalist Canon*, London and New York: Verso 2006.

torical stasis as being terminal, insofar as it brings about the end of the dialectical movement of History. Instead, it inaugurates a condition of histories (plural) that exist not in dialectical relations with one another but rather in a state of radical difference (and by virtue of which History now becomes just one instantiation of the various histories in circulation). The perspective which Jameson will be developing suggests that history has indeed stalled (in the manner described by Debord), but that the manner in which it has stalled (*à la* Baudrillard) informs the manner in which alternative futures need come into being.

Despite the contentiousness of the term, *postmodernism* provides, for Jameson, an instructive language for speaking about how late capitalism now operates: that is, through a substitution of temporality by the spatiality which emerged within the architectural idiom of postmodernism.<sup>40</sup> Late capitalism substitutes the meaningful progression of images about itself, with a static field of imagery incapable of establishing the historical meaning of the system. A number of technical elements of late capitalist economic organisation contribute: value develops in relation to business stock that displays a “decidedly semi-autonomous status” in relation to companies’ material assets; a form of profitability emerges which relates less to the value of artefacts produced than “the downsizing of employees at the demand of banks and investment institutions and the draining of the company’s assets (sometimes fatally) in order to inflate dividends”; and, “money is sublimated into sheer number”.<sup>41</sup> To similar effect, at the level of subjective experience these same (postmodern) reconfigurations of money, value, and profitability eviscerate the temporality by which narratives of personal biography might otherwise corral the minds of the users. The longer cycles of time by which capitalism has previously functioned, and which have accorded more or less with the passages of experience which the individual can grasp – of the movements within business between “accumulation of inventory, liquidation, and so forth”, as well as the slightly longer fifty- or sixty- year accumulation cycles – collapse with the global financialisation of capi-

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40 A long standing theme in Jameson’s work, the concept of spatiality is most clearly articulated in F. Jameson, “The end of temporality”, *Critical Inquiry*, 29, 4, 2003, 695–718.

41 *Ibid.*, 703.

talism.<sup>42</sup> The cycles of time now take on a constricted form associated with “the consumption of investment”; with “the anxious daily consultation with the listings, deliberations with or without your broker, selling off, taking a gamble on something as yet untested”, and so on.<sup>43</sup> Such is the degree of compression within the field of time that, “predictably”, a thorough-going “end of temporality” results.<sup>44</sup> Subjectivity forms, thereafter, in a wholly presentist state as indicated by the proliferation of politically regressive forms of individualism and by the reification of the body. Moreover, this occurs in a way that recasts the role which physical presence plays as the existential condition to which the very possibility of meaning is indexed within contemporary western culture.<sup>45</sup> With the same stroke by which culture provides the subject with an array of (potentially novel) experiences, the presentism now at work removes any hope of a stable platform upon which successions of experience might be inflected with any meaning capable of exceeding their mere sequential occurrence. Such experiences can no longer be narrated except through the most provisional of possible story-lines. There emerges, instead, either a “pornographic” kind of figuration – whereby the various scenes of a public event are held together by the flimsiest of story-lines<sup>46</sup> – or a succession of conspiratorial narratives arise whose threatening objects point to zones upon which can be mapped a restricted set of areas within which resistance can occur.<sup>47</sup>

The spatial character of late capitalist culture offers up a particular quality of itself that promises an alternative prognosis for the differentiation of abstraction (to that found in the works of Debord and Baudrillard): an unmappable element of the spatial context, in respect of which each and every site-specific rendition of space exists. This comprises the quality of spatiality that can never itself appear as rendered space, being a space that “makes it impossible for us to use the language

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42 *Ibid.*, 703.

43 *Ibid.*, 704.

44 *Ibid.*, 706.

45 *Ibid.*, 712–713.

46 *Ibid.*, 712.

47 F. Jameson, “Cognitive mapping”, in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1988, 356.

of volume or volumes any longer, since these last are impossible to seize”.<sup>48</sup>

In so indicating this possibility, within the spatiality of the postmodern social condition, Jameson makes a novel move which proves significant in relation to the state of abstraction. He sets aside the lure of giving name to this unmappable element as a possible vehicle for progressive politics. To this end, he sidesteps the temptation offered by Lacan with his dislocatory concept of *the Real*, or of Derrida’s *aporia*, or of Deleuze’s *virtuality*, and of the possibilities these might afford a new genre of political engagement. Rather, that unsymbolisable kernel of postmodern spatiality becomes fully immanent to the analytic strategy that Jameson’s account will use to advance the cause of a socialist traversal of the current historical stasis. Central to that strategy is the figure of totality: “without a conception of the social totality (and the possibility of transforming a whole social system), no properly socialist politics is possible”.<sup>49</sup>

In the act of conveying that unsymbolisable kernel, the figure of totality poses an affective challenge for the subject, however. In the absence, now, of a comprehensive image of totality, the subject is liable to find themselves alienated from the domain of meaningful action; unable to find themselves, or to see themselves reflected, within the larger order of things. On the one hand, advances in Marxist science would appear to be of some assistance here – and in this regard Jameson takes the work of Ernst Mandel as being of singular value for contextualising international finance relations as an historical phenomenon. The strength of that work lies, however, not in its ability to represent in accurate form that matrix of finance capital – for it exists in a continual state of change – but to enable the totality in respect of which multinational finance capitalism functions to be engaged, notwithstanding its membership to the field of unmappable absent cause.<sup>50</sup>

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48 Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism”, 82.

49 Jameson, “Cognitive mapping”, 355.

50 “What a historicist view [...] would want to add is that such coordination, the production of functioning and living ideologies, is distinct in different historical situations, but above all, that there may be historical situations in which it is not possible at all—and this would seem to be our situation in the current crisis” (Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism”, 91).

At the level of the subject, then, there remains the task of achieving a personal sense of location within the global situation. The challenge involves the task, for Jameson, of ‘cognitively mapping’ that space. Involved here is not simply the creation of a picture of that space. Instead, it requires an orientation to be adopted which can forestall the alienation which will otherwise occur as a consequence of the discombobulating effects that accompany the unrepresentable quality of that totality. It is the lack of instruments by which to perform this task that Jameson identifies as the contemporary crises of Marxism: that is, the crisis of Marxism is a crisis of ideology.<sup>51</sup> That crisis plays out primarily at the level of the subject: Marxism’s inability to produce an adequate map unhinges phenomenological experience in those situations where people find themselves faced by a gulf between their personal experience and the functioning of the economic system. Nothing might activate this divide more directly in the current period than mass redundancies, of the mass foreclosure of mortgages, of the foreclosure of businesses for lack of credit flows (rather than for want of trade), and so on.

No better description of ideology exists for this period, in Jameson’s account, than Althusser’s Lacanian formulation with which we opened, of “the representation of the subject’s Imaginary relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence”.<sup>52</sup> The analytic value of this view of ideology lies, for Jameson, not just with the manner in which it points to the dependence which individual perception has upon the operation of fantasmatic structures – in Jameson’s language, of combined “conscious and unconscious representations”.<sup>53</sup> Althusser’s insight points, also, to the trauma which is induced by a totality “that transcends all individual thinking or experience”.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, it registers the total reliance which experience has upon processes of abstraction for the bridging of the gap. It registers a gap whose recurrence within the production of knowledge reinforces the now long-stranding crisis of representation itself.

The implications of the Althusserian formulation, for Jameson, also extend beyond the value which the concept of ideology might have for

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51 See F. Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, London and New York: Verso 2009, 315–366.

52 L. Althusser, “Ideology and ideological state apparatuses”, in J. Riven and M. Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2004, 693.

53 Jameson, “Cognitive mapping”, 353.

54 *Ibid.*, 353.

people negotiating their relation with the contexts in which they live. The implications extend to the notion of totality. The extension occurs by way of the inclusion of subjective imagination within the figure of totality itself; included within this are not only the subject's ruminations about their relationships with the unrepresentable totality by which their existence has been made possible but, also, with the intersubjective acts of imagination given to them in culture concerning the relationship between daily personal experience and actually-existing socio-political structure. The figure of totality thereby enlarges within Jameson's account so as to encompass the swarming vortex which is both of these dynamics in relation one with the other.<sup>55</sup> In conjunction with this re-entry into ideology of the figure of totality, at this time in history, when an affective need remains to join the dots between those dynamics (yet) in the absence of any tools for decisively doing so, the actuality for which 'totality' stands enlarges. It enlarges such that it becomes less an object than a condition of flux between the indeterminate drive of subjective perception (the Imaginary) and the absent cause of an unrepresentable economic system (the Real). Totality, in this historical moment of late capitalism, as with the differentiation of abstraction more particularly, thereby becomes a state of pure movement within the Symbolic.

## The seductions of knowing

In the act of suspending our hope that a preferred option will surface amongst these three interpretations – through which abstraction might be

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55 Jameson's caustic observations about the emergent prevalence of conspiracy theorising, as the 'poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age', bear this out also. In many respects, for Jameson, conspiracy indeed conveys a number of qualities associated with a progressive definition of totality – of totality as an un-symbolisable realm for which there exists only speculatively narrative accounts. The element which conspiracy theorising does not entertain, however, and which the Althusserian formulation makes clear, is the inseparability of the empty position of enunciation from the object being enunciated. Instead, conspiracy theory positivises totality by removing from consideration the constituting role of that impossible position of knowledge, the subject-supposed-to-know.



stabilised or through which a dialectical leap might be accomplished that takes us beyond the interpretations as a set – a significant challenge emerges for the production of transformative ideas. The challenge takes the form of how to incorporate into analysis the condition of impossibility with which the three interpretations in their co-existence leave the subject who wishes to understand the times in which they live. Within the logic of historicism, a key analytic task thereby becomes neither the simple one of outlining the various interpretations that have been offered by Debord, Baudrillard, and Jameson regarding shifts in the commodity form, of determining the relative truth of each according to ‘historical evidence’; nor to identify the condition of absence through which those three interpretations appear to coexist as a field of explanation. Instead, a central task of an historically attuned historicism becomes that of determining how development of meaning might proceed in the midst, simultaneously, of the shared sense of purpose between the interpretations, of diversity in their respective trajectories, and of the absence of any ability to “construct some coherent machine out of their very differences”.<sup>56</sup>

A politically regressive option immediately opens up at this point, regressive in terms of its implications for historicisation as a vehicle for producing transformative ideas. That option would seek to annul completely the disturbance that otherwise occurs within the field of interpretations, as would happen if that condition of impossibility took on the form of an identifiable object within the analysis. This attempt has most famously been made in non-Hegelian terms – that of mathematical set theory – by Bertrand Russell.<sup>57</sup> The so-called ‘Russell’s paradox’ that emerges around set theory, attempts to sustain the idea that there exists an identifiable condition of ‘unsymbolisability’ in respect of which the play of images operates. Our interest lies not so much with Russell’s paradox as a philosophical work, as with a regressive methodologism that comes to be deployed by others as they attempt to reconfigure the problematic with which that paradox wrestles. That move functions by appearing to excise that unsymbolisable element from the production of

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56 F. Jameson, “Lacan and the dialectic”, in S. Žižek (ed.), *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, London and New York: Verso 2006, 373.

57 B. Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1903; B. Russell, “Mathematical logic as based on the theory of types”, *American Journal of Mathematics*, 30, 3, 1908, 222–262.

knowledge. That effect is obtained through, ironically, the act of naming that element, of ‘the unmappable element’, in Jameson’s terms.

Russell’s intellectual quest had been to discover logical axioms upon which the sciences could be established. The identification of those principles would eradicate, for Russell, disturbances within the coherence of leading ideas. Such ideas might otherwise be repeatedly threatened by contradiction – as a consequence of contradicting intellectual frameworks being brought to bear upon the ideas – and by scepticism (the latter being a kind of non-contradictory difference). In 1901 his confidence waned when confronted with an apparent paradox around an axiom that appears to be central to mathematics. This axiom concerns the operation of sets. The paradox takes the following form: “if the combination of any number of terms is a new term, the combination of *all* terms is a term distinct from any term”.<sup>58</sup> That is, the logic of any given set cannot be contained by the set – it must be a term that exists separate from the set. Thus, the set of all people in a room cannot be the actual people; it must be something else – a concept such as ‘all people in the room’ would be a possible contender. The problem compounds when the example enlarges to the entity which is ‘the set of all sets’. Under that latter scenario, the logic which holds the set of all sets cannot be comprehended at all in the terms given by mathematical set theory. At such a point, set theory itself becomes incomprehensible even at the same time as it continues in its work of producing the problematic.

Russell’s ultimately insufficient solution to the paradox – the so-called *theory of types* – saw a departure from the strategy of inventing axioms. The solution called for an intellectual policing in the use of typologies so as to avoid the thorough-going regression at the heart of the paradox. The trigger to that regression is that just cited: the category of ‘all terms’. We simply need to prevent the use of contexts in the interpretation of events that evoke the imagery of totality, and of the hope that perfect solutions can be found to social problems. Analysis needs instead to become more sensitive to the specificity of local context and more pragmatic in its expectations. The range of objects with which inquiry thereafter deals, needs to include only those which are immediately ac-

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58 N. Griffin and D. B. Martens, “Russell, Bertrand (Arthur William)”, in R. Audi, (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995: 700. Original emphasis.

cessible. In this way the use of axioms could be set aside in favour of the establishment of consistency at the level of empirical findings around given objects, as have been obtained through the scientific testing of typologically defined elements. If those findings are found to be consistent, such tests could then be presented as retroactive proof that such axioms indeed exist. Problematically for the solution, however, an increasingly complex array of classification strategies had to be deployed to protect set theory as a mathematical axiom, as various versions of the paradox emerged that threatened to again trigger regression.<sup>59</sup>

Progressive responses to the insufficiency of Russell's solution have vied away from trying to resolve the paradox which motivated his work. Two dominant responses are considered here: an attempt to contain the unruly condition which Russell's paradox reveals (through an extension of the general purpose towards which the *theory of types* gestures, in conjunction with an effort to avoid the kinds of science which would trigger the regression in the paradox),<sup>60</sup> and an attempted engagement with (rather than containment of) that same unruly condition within thought. Both will be seen to produce a similar effect: the installation of a methodological fetish which constructs not only scientific objects of inquiry but also the subject who seeks to know.

From the vantage point of the first response, the science to be most avoided – when it comes to the production of transformative ideas – is positivism and its research strategies of induction and verification. Positivism, induction, and verification all assume – problematically – that knowledge will ultimately be corroborated by the material world itself, with such knowledge as is thereby constructed retrospectively becoming axiomatic in character. The problem with the verificationist impulse of positivism, the Popperian philosopher Alan Musgrave notes in this regard, is a simple one: “the more you say, the less can you be [sure] that what you say is true”.<sup>61</sup> The traces of Russell's paradox in this comment are clear: increases in the quantum of knowledge occur not just through the enhanced specificity of knowledge but *via* an enlarging interconnect-edness of understanding, and this introduces the problem of set theory.

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59 *Ibid.*, 700.

60 A. Musgrave, *Secular Sermons: Essays on Science and Philosophy*, Dunedin: Otago University Press 2009.

61 *Ibid.*, 177.

To the extent that positivism and its logics hold out the possibility for a limitless and cumulative generation of knowledge, the paradox of a set that contains the set of all sets stalks the enterprise.

As an alternative to the optimism of verification, a condition of “certainty scepticism” should be endorsed<sup>62</sup> – the idea that all beliefs should remain in a state of uncertainty – the kind of movement against which Russell raged. Such scepticism need not be without foundation but, rather, can be informed by the theory of types which Russell proposed as the solution to the paradox of set theory. Grounded thus, scepticism can be legitimately held towards all claims regarding the nature of things but can reasonably be set aside in the construction of empirical typologies, in amongst which the consistency of findings can be tested. To this end, the researcher can answer the sceptics’ question of “how can you be sure about the possibility of regularities in the empirical domain?” “No”, the researcher can reply, “of course I am not certain – because what I am saying is interesting”.<sup>63</sup>

In terms of sustaining the scientific research programme in the face of both metaphysical scepticism and the current intellectual hegemony of reflexive theoretical pluralism, the philosopher’s defence of the scientific method has much to commend it. It does court, however, a retreat into the methodologism noted by Gregor McLennan; into a

level of abstraction at once notably less hubristic than ‘philosophy of social science’, yet aiming nonetheless to affect our sense of the relation of particular investigative endeavours to some presumed possible consensus about the situation and promise of social knowledge.<sup>64</sup>

While meta-theory cannot in and of itself avoid displaying something of this element, McLennan’s point in deploying the term is that there appear to be more or less progressive ways in which this particular dimension of knowledge work might operate. One of the more regressive ways, and to which the philosopher’s response to Russell’s paradox corresponds, is the avoidance of the dialectical impulse which the paradox divulges and

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62 *Ibid.*, 149.

63 *Ibid.*, 177.

64 G. McLennan, “Quandaries in meta-theory: against pluralism”, *Economy and Society*, 31, 3, 2002, 486.

of the configuration of scientific inquiry into increasingly prescriptive methodological practices (for the likes of Musgrave, of falsification).

A significant effect follows from philosophical interventions such as Musgrave's for the production of transformative ideas. The removal of the dialectical impulse – involving the recoding of critical inquiry as a typological ordering of objects upon which scientific investigation then proceeds, validated then on the incalculable basis that it is 'interesting' – risks a particular distortion of science that is normally associated with the operations of imperialism and patriarchy. Science takes on the appearance of being an ahistorical entity, beyond the conflicts within and between social classes, genders, and ethnic groups. Science would not, however, thereby become ahistorical in the banal sense that a history of science cannot be written. Indeed, Musgrave's philosophy uses historical narrative extensively as a means by which to demonstrate the superior qualities of falsification. Rather, it is ahistorical in the sense that such articulations of science cannot present themselves in the analytical terms that can simultaneously account for and enable the movement of science itself. Rather, the position from which the narration is written – in Musgrave's case, Popperian falsification – is given as the preferred end state within science, being tautologically established as such by the act of its narration. Those who wish to participate in this line of critical engagement must enter a state of belief of no less measure than that exercised by the philosopher.

In contrast to Musgrave's attempt to occlude the dislocatory nub within set theory, Alain Badiou seeks to deploy that same dislocating presence as the very basis upon which to reconstruct the field of abstraction. Such, in Badiou's mind, would seem to be in keeping with the Marxian imaginary of epochal social transformation. The key to the possibility of such transformation lies with the collapsing of a range of dualisms that have comprised western thought – of mind and body, thought and experience, structure and agency, and so on – under the impress of that unsymbolisable condition at the heart of the paradox of set theory: of the 'unnameable point', 'the evanescent', 'the indiscernible', 'eternity' or any of the other signifiers by which Badiou gestures towards that state.

Of all the products which philosophy delivers for advancing the Marxian concern for social transformation, Badiou suggests, insights into time stand as the most significant. Forget, however, about time as history, as duration, as instantiated consciousness, and so on. Think instead of

the temporality of time itself, of that which remains beyond each and every attempt to render time intelligible. And in terms of politics, think of ‘the time of our time’, of the capacities which our prevailing socio-political conditions possess which might enable that temporal excess to alter those conditions from within themselves. When it emerges in real time, that condition of excess becomes the course of genuinely transformative social change, bringing about the condition, noted earlier, that Badiou has come to popularise as “the event”.<sup>65</sup>

Transformative events are not so much singular points in time than movements characterised by their capacities to reconfigure the coordinates of the socio-political fields in which they occur. October 1917 stands, for Badiou, as one such event; as does the Paris Commune, the Cultural Revolution, and “May 1968”.<sup>66</sup> Rare in their occurrence, such events rupture historical meaning as it will have been operating within the contexts that have spawned them. Rather than produce smooth dialectical shifts out of and beyond those contexts, the truly transformative event is one that “constitutes its own time”,<sup>67</sup> a kind of time that cannot be determined to have occurred through the conventions of judgement associated with the situation from which it emerged; the temporality of the event having being indiscernible “as such”.<sup>68</sup>

The entry point into this kind of philosophy is, for Badiou – as with Russell – mathematics; and – as with Russell again – set theory. Radically, Badiou asserts an equivalence between material reality and mathematics: ‘ontology=mathematics’. That is, mathematics is not a means for representing ontology; in the guise of set theory mathematics literally stages ontology. Mathematics stages ontology not in the simple sense that it can logically display the possible array of relations between elements in the world. Set theory, as Badiou argues in *Logics of Worlds*, *performs* that exercise, doing so at the level of axioms; axiom by axiom.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, it also stages ontology in the sense that set theory

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65 See A. Badiou, *Being and Event*, New York: Continuum 2005, 173–261.

66 For Badiou’s extended discussion of these particular events, see A. Badiou *The Communist Hypothesis*, London and New York, Verso 2010.

67 A. Badiou, “Being by Numbers: Lauren Sedofsky talks with Alain Badiou”, *Artforum International*, 33, 2, 1994, 118.

68 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 211.

69 A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2. London and New York: Continuum 2009.

performs the means by which consciousness perceives the existence of relations between things in the material world. Freud and Lacan were insufficiently correct in the sense that consciousness is the effect of language, *per se*. Consciousness, along with all other dimensions of being, is moreover a feature of mathematics. More particularly still, consciousness is the mathematical state of multiplicity into which the problem of set theory throws the mind. Philosophy thereby contains a new and now singular axiom: all is multiplicity. Gone is Heidegger's fixation with questions of being. The form by which subjectivity is constituted is, instead, multiplicity.

Mathematics installs this axiom not by way of proposing a foundational logic for the establishment of multiplicity as an *a priori* principle. Instead, it installs the axiom insofar as mathematics has the capacity to stage a special kind of condition relating to multiplicity – “the point of excess”.<sup>70</sup>

This is the same point which set theory demonstrates as existing with respect to each and every imaginable typology of empirical reality (for example: the set of all possible nation-states is something other than a State; the set of all possible families is something other than the family form; and so on). The special character of that condition is that it, itself, is excluded from representation within typologies, at the same time as it constitutes the ordering process by which the action of typological mapping clots the unruly multiplicity of material reality into graspable ideas. This condition, quite apparently, is the same element that operates as the trigger for infinite regression within Russell's paradox. Badiou discovers this condition not through Russell, for whom it was a wholly negative entity, but through the mathematician Paul J. Cohen,<sup>71</sup> for whom the condition is analytically productive rather than nihilistic. Badiou draws a powerful conclusion from this condition in relation to the human capacity to know: the capacity to find order in the world is wholly contingent upon the formative power of a particularity that is fully without content of its own, upon the “singularity of the unnameable term”.<sup>72</sup> In Lacan's terms, Badiou is talking of *objet a*.

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70 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 81–92.

71 *Ibid.*, 355–371.

72 Badiou, “Being by Numbers”, 124.

The formal properties of that ‘unnameable term’ become accessible only, in Badiou’s account, through a finite set of “truth procedures”: “The fact is that today—and on this point things haven’t budged since Plato—we only know four types of truths: science (mathematics and physics), love, politics and the arts”.<sup>73</sup> Truth as a singular state exists but it cannot be accessed as a metaphysical system because of its distribution across these four procedures. Even as abstraction itself is enabled to escape any limitation in its movement by a part within itself that has no objective existence, there exists a bounded set of social processes by which the cultural process of abstraction finds itself congealing. That set of processes – the truth procedures – constitutes, in our preferred terms here, Badiou’s account of representational differentiation.

The difficulty with this argument, at the level of Badiou’s project as a whole, is not that there exist procedures. Indeed, I personally find much value in science, art, love, and politics. The difficulty is that the approach cannot easily submit the prescriptive presentation of these procedures to the logic of differentiated abstraction being presented. At the level of these procedures themselves, it is difficult to identify the movement of the ‘singularity of the unnameable term’. They are four in number; they have been since Plato (implying they might always be so). The procedures thereby appear to be cordoned off from the unruliness of that one (unnameable term). Moreover, transformative ideas become possible only through unyielding “fidelity” to events which exhibit the qualities of these truth procedures: to this end, Badiou thereby unequivocally asserts “I have underlined this undecidability according to which the event is only possible if special procedures [science, art, love, and politics] conserve the evental nature of its consequences.”<sup>74</sup>

A significant effect follows for the subject. Notwithstanding the agency which is attributed to the individual – in its (albeit rarely performed) capacities to decide “an undecidable from the standpoint of an indiscernible,”<sup>75</sup> or to measure “the possible disqualification of a presented multiple”,<sup>76</sup> or to save “the singular” truth of the event<sup>77</sup> – the act

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73 Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 71.

74 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 211.

75 *Ibid.*, 407.

76 *Ibid.*, 408.

77 *Ibid.*, 409.



of taking up this philosophical project requires that the subject submit to the undisclosed power being exercised through the text, to its naturalisation of the doctrine of Platonic truth procedures; and for the subject to be produced thus.

## What, then, of the subject?

Any attempt to produce subjectivity in a manner which can elude the corraling effects of methodologism, as characterises the work of Musgrave or Badiou, is beset by an issue associated with the cultural condition of late capitalism. The domain of ideas from which a progressive (re)construction of subjectivity might be attempted – ideology – no longer proves sufficient to “enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the [...] structure as a whole”.<sup>78</sup>

One potential means by which to elude this stalemate, around the present non-availability of ideology, lies with a particularly historicist insight: the mediations which are now available to the subject for mapping their existence relative to the context in which they live are quite apparently always creatures of that same context. To this end, as Jameson avers, the emergent global financialised capitalism system now provides a possible means by which subjects might cognitively map their lives. Between the cultures of postmodernity and the infrastructure of late capitalist globalization, he suggests, “the phenomenon of finance capital [...] is [...] one of the most effective mediations to be constructed”.<sup>79</sup> The source of its significance for the task lies with the manner in which such mediation is always, in Althusserian terms, an ‘effect’ of the (absent) cause of history. To this end, the specular character of financialised capitalism emerges as a socio-historical mediation within which the (non-available) condition of an original state of material cause finds itself fully materialised. The neoliberal truth of ‘the appearance’ by which capitalism materialises in contemporary socio-political discourse – that

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78 Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism”, 90.

79 F. Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory*, London and New York: Verso 2008, 642.

capitalism is the high point of human economic evolution – returns, from amidst the many and various contemporary criticisms of that neoliberalism, in the guise of an element of that very same appearance: the hyper-real character of financialised capitalism *is* capitalism shorn of its historical specificity. For the first time, it would seem, the field of socio-historical mediations now stages, through late capitalism, directly and without intercession, the very condition of absence in whose place that field of mediations stands.

This condition of effectiveness does not allude to any ability on the part of finance capitalism to empower the subject in its task of locating themselves relative to the global economic system – the long-standing task of ideology. Rather, the condition of effectiveness to which Jameson gestures, lies elsewhere. It lies with the spatiality which that capitalism projects as an organising force upon the imaginary. On the one hand, that spatiality can be found in the global character of multi-national finance capitalism:

Globalization has above all meant the association of space and spatial distance in production itself, whether in terms of outsourcing, of the uneven development of production and consuming nations, or the migration of labour, as well as the black holes of unemployment, famine, and unspeakable violence into which whole surfaces of the current globe suddenly fall. The dominance of finance capital today is also a spatial phenomenon, in the sense in which its originalities derive from the suppression of more traditional temporalities of transmission and suggest all kinds of new spatial simultaneities.<sup>80</sup>

In itself, this particular spatial quality of capitalism offers little traction for the subject in the task of mapping itself. Indeed, the absence of stable markers has the potential to lead the subject to simplistic renditions of capital, towards the seductions of conspiracy theories and the like (the ‘greed’ of bankers and of ‘back room deals’). In another register, the spatiality inflects back upon the material substance of the subject, upon ‘the body’ as the spatial rendition of late capitalist subjectivity; and in this an alternative possibility lies.

Jameson’s notion of the body, here, isn’t of the essentialist kind which valorises physical experience, whereby the experience of personal “embodiment” comes all too easily to be misrecognised and proffered as

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80 Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 66.

“the only authentic form of materialism”.<sup>81</sup> Rather, his more elaborated accounts of the body present it as being constituted through a relationship it has with language; that relationship being a force-field through which ideas must pass in order to gain mass such that propositions can exert traction upon the subject.<sup>82</sup> On the matter as to the composition of that relationship, however, Jameson is more sanguine. He doesn’t claim to know. Nor, he will aver, can the character of that relation be known under these socio-political conditions. More modestly, the phenomenon of financialised global capital provides new metaphors for grasping the challenge which that particular mediation presents (of the body/language relation) for the generation of transformative ideas about alternatives to the late capitalist condition:

The newer architecture [a field of corporate sky-scrapers coated in mirror-glass, as now populates the central business districts of the world’s major industrial cities] [...] stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions.<sup>83</sup>

The architectural spectacle of recursively-replicating images implies that some form of discursive circulation is at work, one which implicates the operation of the body. Whatever that operation of the body might ultimately prove to be, finds itself activated in amongst that reflective play of imagery between the mirrored surfaces of liberal-capitalism’s corporate cathedrals. Our existing organs of knowing prove unable to engage and process that circulation of imagery, however, such that it might propel us towards alternative relations with ourselves and with otherness.

In one register, this evocation of a relation between language and the body appears to turn upon the simple notion that the relationship presently lacks the capacity to spawn new and transformative ideas from amidst the cultural condition in which the liberal-capitalist subject finds itself. In that same vein, it appears to suggest that such a deficiency might be surmounted through an act of something like growing new organic func-

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81 Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory*, 651.

82 Here I am setting aside a less convincing approach that Jameson takes to the notion of the body as a spatial phenomenon, in which he speaks of a “quasi-spatial enlargement” of the condition of “consciousness” (into one of “self-consciousness”). See Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 69–70.

83 Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism”, 80.

tionality. That functionality would be one which could expand the reach of subjectivity not only towards the generation of new knowledge – for example, about the conditions of the subject’s existence within informational capitalism, and about the form which a politics of equality might now take – but also to the play of the language/body relation in the negotiation of such knowledge.

Any such registration of a condition of lack is offset, however, by a state of overdetermination. Any plan to evolve the epistemological functionality of people – whether it be through the pursuit of new forms of identity, the adoption of new conceptual strategies, of a return to the ways of the forebears, and so on – is but an inevitably insufficient attempt at containment, through symbolic means, of the condition of impossibility which haunts the naming of things in themselves within the culture of late capitalism. Under the condition of representational differentiation, between the semblances put in play by the various representational idioms, there remains something in the object being presented which cannot be reduced to the naming of it. The set of all possible sets remains inscrutable. Remaining with the architectural idiom of late capitalism, the overdetermination manifests in “the distorting and fragmenting reflexions of one enormous glass surface to the other”,<sup>84</sup> that play of images being rendered interminable by the absence of an initial point whose structure could set in motion a bounded narrative that might relieve the subject of that constant state of specular movement. Amidst the architectural emblems of corporate dominance, the subject is confronted with a state of incessant reflectivity which no act of symbolic mastery can command.

The overdetermining impress of incessant movement upon subjectivity sends our present quest to mediate the relationship between language and body not in the direction of some condition lost to experience, whose recovery will enable critical analysis to again speak with oracular authority. Rather it looks to the condition of overdetermination itself.

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84 *Ibid.*, 79.

## 5 The psychic life of ideas

The emergence within modernity of a differentiated state of abstraction, as normalised by the practices of late capitalist exchange and embodied within the cultural expression of that capitalism, is the dynamic which now animates the discursive space of *utopia*. Moreover, the manner by which that animation of *utopia* occurs has the potential to incubate ideas appropriate to the transformation of a world-system in its states of organic crisis. Ideas which have transformative value, like that of *utopia*, do not now work – as Gregor McLennan *etal.* note – in the denotative manner associated with previous cultural conditions. Rather, they inhabit a condition of “symbolic uncertainty”.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, such ideas now appear to gain transformative force by virtue of the state of movement in which they are constituted; by virtue, in our terms here, of taking the form not of a concept but of *a discursive space put in motion by a condition of differentiated abstraction*. The prospect for social transformation, for McLennan, now turns not upon the ability of progressive ideas to simply detail new and innovative projects but, rather, for “moving things on” in the absence of any clear indication of what comprises the future(s) into which the present is being moved.<sup>2</sup> Static ideas, no matter how progressive their content, are at risk of being absorbed by the pragmatic net of bio-political administration, signalling something akin to symbolic death for any seeking guidance from them. Surprisingly, for McLennan, concepts such as Third Wayism, the knowledge economy, and so on – as intellectually flaccid as they might initially appear to be – signal a capacity to run askew to this fate, exemplifying a mobile condition of “vehicularity” that now appears to be constitutive of transformative ideas. Characterising the vehicular idiom are qualities including “ineliminable

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1 G. McLennan, T. Osborne, and J. Vaux, “Universities in ‘the condition of publicity’: how LSE engages with the wider world”, *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 3, 3, 2005, 278.

2 G. McLennan, “Travelling with vehicular ideas: the case of the Third Way”, *Economy and Society*, 33, 4, 2004, 485.

vagueness and ‘mobility’”.<sup>3</sup> Not only do the contexts alter within which transformative ideas come to be articulated, but the domain of informational capitalism means “they can be ‘owned’, and in the owning, shifted in *meaning*, by different parts of the user network”.<sup>4</sup> Given the considerable plasticity which enters into the constitution of vehicular ideas, such ideas always now have but “a limited shelf life”.<sup>5</sup>

This kind of plasticity had already been noted by Jameson in his discussion of the “vanishing mediator”.<sup>6</sup> The term describes ideas that ease the emergence of new social formations. Emblematic in that regard, for Jameson, are Weber’s insights into the mediatorial status of the religious prophet: the prophet displaced the role of the magician in a manner which both enabled the emergence of, and its replacement by, “the bureaucratic organization of the priesthood” (which would subsequently lead to the bureaucratisation of public life more generally).<sup>7</sup> In a paradoxical manner, the success of such ideas in facilitating thoroughgoing shifts in social structure comes to marginalise the network of associations through which their meaning had previously been held stable. With the evisceration of those networks, insufficient support remains for the continuation of a state of truth in respect of those ideas; and, as a consequence, they ‘vanish’.

What was once historically exceptional in the realm of ideas, according to Jameson has, for McLennan, become constitutive of all transformational thought under the post-representational logics of informational capitalism. The proliferating character of the shift comes not from the number of ideas produced, nor of their alteration of the benchmarks by which the transformative potentials of ideas will be understood. Rather, the shift in the constitution of ideas occurs at the level of a change in what can be taken as the process of benchmarking itself, of normalisation. The vitality of the vehicular thereby lies not so much in its capacity to stabilise ideas, such that particular ideas can steady a shifting field of thought. Rather, it lies with how the condition of vehicularity illuminates the manner by which the very movement of ideas, as characterises the

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3 *Ibid.*, 485.

4 *Ibid.*, 485. Original emphasis.

5 *Ibid.*, 485.

6 F. Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory Essays 1971–1986 Volume 2: The Syntax of History*, Routledge: London 1988b, 3–34.

7 *Ibid.*, 16.

differentiation of abstraction, comes to be contained such that meaning-in-a-state-of-movement obtains a state of being socially productive. Vehicularity thereby enables the act of social critique to present itself as being in motion, but without the vista of progressive transformation collapsing into the anarchy of a movement without purpose or towards the nihilism of blind action.

At this point, however, a paradoxical condition enters this shift in the composition of progressive ideas. The apparent ubiquity of transformational possibilities, as is associated with the condition of vehicularity, accentuates a gap which lingers between the trans-contextual character of ideas (that they can operate across broad swathes of times and places) and their context-specific conditions of possibility (that their meanings depend upon how and where they are used). Vehicularity, McLennan notes, would appear to be all about matters of contextual specificity, with generality suffering as a consequence. A number of intellectual movements associated with vehicularity bring this about: “the emergence of broadly ‘postmodern’ themes; the influence of specific paradigms like chaos and complexity theory; and the missionary uptake amongst business gurus of notions of networking, innovation and creativity.”<sup>8</sup> To the extent that ideas come to express this horizon of boundless possibility, however, it becomes evident that the state of vehicularity belongs to a specific time and place: it remains a creature of the singular horizon of informational capitalism. Moreover, the non-appearance of that horizon within the chains of equivalence by which vehicular ideas like Third Wayism and the knowledge economy have come to be articulated, indicates that something like ideological disavowal is at work around the historical particularity of that same horizon. Emblematically, the knowledge economy and Third Wayism, to whose dynamism vehicular ideas contribute, remains, as Žižek loves to point out “a *political* economy, stupid!”<sup>9</sup> And it is for this kind of reason that McLennan associates the emergence of vehicularity with informational capitalism. The less which that horizon of possibility is spoken of within public spaces, how-

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8 G. McLennan and T. Osborne, “Contemporary ‘vehicularity’ and ‘romanticism’: debating the status of ideas and intellectuals”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 6, 4, 2003, 51–52.

9 See S. Homer, “It’s the political economy, stupid! On Žižek’s Marxism”. *Radical Philosophy*, 108 (July/August). Emphasis added.

ever, the more it is staged as the social bond through which social relations need form.

Least it be thought that time-honoured ideas, such as ‘ideology’, can be recuperated in an unmodified form for the purposes of denouncing the vehicular (as being an expression of capitalist logic), such ideas are now only available as romanticised renditions of themselves.<sup>10</sup> To reframe the point, ideas that might succeed in demystifying vehicularity – and we might here imagine ideas such as ‘commodification’ or ‘reification’ being deployed for this task – can only be conceived as doing so to the extent to which they are shown to exist autonomous of the knowledge production associated with the capitalist knowledge economy. The insights of Debord, Baudrillard, and Jameson on alterations to the commodity form – first with the emergence of monopoly-, and then finance-capitalism – give reason for thinking this kind of autonomy might not now be available.

Such becomes the task, however, of the critical intellectual; to understand how transformative ideas might now operate under these conditions. And with that requirement comes the task of establishing mobile platforms upon which something akin to ideology-critique might still be achieved. Such is the task that Gregor McLennan and Tom Osborne set themselves.

The position arrived at in this attempt to establish an historically-attuned platform for social critique proves to be illuminating with regard to the work that remains. The particular approach which McLennan and Osborne advocate for this task – a “modified romanticism” – provides the act of analysis with sufficient elasticity to operate in two productive registers: “for some purposes and in some contexts, we need to be rigorous observers of the power and density of contexts, but for other purposes we need to be romantic critics and idealists”.<sup>11</sup> Both the intrinsic meaningfulness of signifiers and the sway upon meaning of the socio-political contexts in which signifiers appear, are available to be analysed: modified romanticism allows us “to have it both ways”.<sup>12</sup> That said, no indication can be given of the conditions under which one approach

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10 See McLennan and Osborne, “Contemporary ‘vehicularity’ and ‘romanticism’”, 57–58.

11 *Ibid.*, 63.

12 *Ibid.*, 63.



ought to be deployed in preference to the other. Rather, and productively, “this tension-laden in-between-ness [...] is perhaps nothing more or less than the ethical role and burden of all serious intellectuals”.<sup>13</sup> To this end, this condition of “proper tension” enables a given vehicular idea like Third Wayism to be critiqued both in terms of its context – as being “ideological cover for neo-liberalism and paternalistic authoritarianism”<sup>14</sup> – and construed from a position within the idea itself. In what follows, however, it becomes apparent that reference to the ‘intrinsic’ meaning of ideas cannot now mean something like irrefragable association with a referent. Rather, reference to the interiority to ideas refers to the existence of a state of interplay between an idea and its context, an interplay which cannot help but invoke within the life of an idea an irreducible state of internal non-correspondence of the idea to itself. Here we might think of Adorno’s notion of the ‘non-identity’ of a concept. On this basis, critical engagement with an idea like Third Wayism cannot help but productively induce in that idea “‘radical’ variants within it[self]”.<sup>15</sup> And what this indicates is the persistence within thought of the “familiar ‘dialectical’ pattern”.<sup>16</sup>

This arrival at the figure of the dialectic, and in the apparently singular state as appears here, indicates the work that is yet to be achieved in the ‘modified romantic’ attempt to approach ideas *via* the dynamics of their circulation. The notion of the dialectic emerges in the guise here as, what Žižek would call, “the constitutive exception” of modified romanticism:<sup>17</sup> ‘the dialectic of modified romanticism’ escapes the state of analytic tension which is the proper foundation of critical thought, by stabilising the argument in which it appears: the capacity of the dialectic to sustain the approach depends on its capacity to remain aloof from the key tenet of the very approach itself, which is the historicisation of thought. As productive as the invocation of the dialectic is here, the dia-

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13 *Ibid.*, 65.

14 McLennan, “Travelling with vehicular ideas”, 497.

15 *Ibid.*, 497.

16 *Ibid.*, 497.

17 S. Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, The MIT Press: Cambridge Massachusetts 2003, 68.

lectual figure thereby comes to be placed in a “black box” that remains secure from interrogation.<sup>18</sup>

The challenge which this observation raises for the prospects of historicised critique – for the discursive space of *utopia* under the conditions of differentiated abstraction – concerns the matter of how attention to the dynamics of ideas might enlarge so as to encompass the particular discursive form which appears to be motivating analysis (in this case, of the dialectic). To reframe the point, the challenge to which McLennan and Osborne’s analysis of transformative ideas usefully points concerns the difficult status of ‘metalanguage’ within critical analysis.

## The lures of metalanguage

Path-breaking in its consideration of this question of metalanguage in relation to the movement of ideas has been Foucault’s analysis of discursive formations. Central to Foucault’s historicism in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* had been his strategy of reducing questions of society to questions about relations that are simultaneously social and discursive in kind.<sup>19</sup> Such an approach appears to enable any object of interest to be located in terms of the dynamics of the time/place in which it exists. An analytic challenge arises at this point, however, insofar as the act of mapping needs to account for not only the relations through which a given object comes into being (as an object of analysis), but the effects which follow from the relations which the very acts of observation and reportage inaugurate. The latter kind of relation implies the existence of some kind of force which cannot easily be integrated into the description of the object as a relational thing, a force which would discursively occupy the space of a metalanguage.

In part, Foucault appears to deal with this issue through a progressive substitution of analytic strategies that favour synchronic analysis –

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18 On the issue of ‘black-boxing’ see B. Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1999.

19 M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London and New York: Routledge 1994.

structuralism in particular – by those with a diachronic bent: particularly the Nietzschean metaphor of war and struggle that emerges from *Discipline and Punish* onwards. This latter notion of indeterminate struggle presupposes that the act of critical commentary carries within it a performative element which cannot be fully integrated within, or subsumed by, the content of commentary.

*The Archaeology of Knowledge* provides the template for this enlargement that occurs in Foucault's thought. It presents the practice of analysis as initially involving an engagement with two kinds of relationality, a couplet in the cusp of which objects come to gain objective substance: a "system of *real* or *primary relations* [relations 'between institutions techniques, social forms etc.'], [and] a system of *reflexive* or *secondary relations* ['relations that are formulated in discourse itself']".<sup>20</sup>

Complicating the apparently settled groove which these two forms of relation comprise is, however, a third kind of relation: "a system of relations that might properly be called *discursive*".<sup>21</sup> Notwithstanding the synthesising effect which this third form of relation appears to play in facilitating the dual roles of institutional presence and of discourse in the constitution of the object, this additional element proves difficult to locate in the terms offered by these primary and secondary fields of relationality: these third relations "are not [...] internal to discourse [...]. Yet they are not relations external to discourse [...]. They are [...] at the limit of discourse".<sup>22</sup> The proto-spatial location which Foucault ascribes to this domain of discursive relations – being somewhere other than internal to and/or external to the discourse through which they exist – suggests that it exists as a kind of function, a state of dialectical differentiation that, while quite apparently existing in an ontological sense, always remains without determinate content of its own.

What then might be made of this conundrum, of a set of relations which exists fully without content but only through content? Quite apparently, for Foucault, the shucking off of structuralism represented a much needed refusal of a certain commitment towards transcendence, through which it had become legitimate to presuppose an ability to stand apart from phenomena and, in that state of elevated separation, embark

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20 *Ibid.*, 45. Original emphasis.

21 *Ibid.*, 45. Original emphasis.

22 *Ibid.*, 46.

on the task of mapping the particular in terms of the ahistorically abstract. In the course of refusing the possibility of transcendence of any kind, however, an intellectual risk emerges insofar as social space might thereafter be naively reduced to a static network of relations which, tautologically, could be seen as constituting that space. As the Lacanian social theorist Joan Copjec indicates, Foucault's substitution of the naïve hope of transcendence with an interpretive strategy which would invoke the possibility of immanent and material engagement with objects – achieved most fully through the deployment of the war/struggle metaphor – is at risk of inflecting analysis not with an anticipated direct immediacy (with objects in their state of formation) but with a rejuvenated idealism.<sup>23</sup> The strategy does not, as anticipated, produce an embodiment of the materiality of its own being: it instead casts analysis further into the domain of speculative articulation.

Emblematic of this tact idealism is a concluding move in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In terms of its analytic strategy, the text proves interesting insofar as it both stages Foucault's critical engagement with structuralist principles of analysis and anticipates the Nietzschean focus on power and struggle. For its part, the structuralist idiom maps socio-discursive relations and gestures towards the possibility of specifying the underlying rules of those relations. The latter, Nietzschean, thread shapes the discursive form which the final chapter takes: a spirited struggle between Foucault and an imagined interlocutor over key points of the text's argument.

Notwithstanding the displacement of structuralism, the text finds itself unable to fully invest itself in the Nietzschean dimension and to adopt the fully performative idiom that might otherwise be expected. The act of divestiture occurs by way of an assumption which enters the argument: the substantive character of 'discursive relations proper' can indeed be made known in speech (such that language comprises a productive outer limit-point of discursive practice), and those 'relations proper' can therefore always in the end be put into words. The content of that limit-point, for Foucault, is thereby always already capable of being articulated.

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23 J. Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 1994, 7.

Conveying this assumption is a point of difference to which Foucault draws the reader's attention regarding archaeological and scientific inquiry: archaeological inquiry is able to go beyond simple calculations of competence with regard to given discourses and to, instead, seize "out of the mass of things said [...] the statement defined as a function of realization of the verbal *performance*".<sup>24</sup> Being indicated here is a sense that the bio-anthropological dimension of speech which underpins the meaning-effects of language can always be located within the speech act. Moreover, the task of locating that act enables it to be articulated: that is, the content which is particular to the facticity of the act can be known in the same manner as the manifest meaning of the discourse that has just been produced. Through this process of identifying the enigmatic meaning of this performativity, archaeology is enabled to exceed the authority welded by science in any given instance, to thereby authoritatively "define the acceptability of statements [...] rules of formation [...] the conditions of their realization".<sup>25</sup>

As Copjec notes of this outcome in Foucault's historicism, the approach appears to subvert the dynamic of historical openness which his analysis of discursive relations otherwise projects. The closure

seems to overlook [...] that form of negation which, while written in language, is nonetheless without content [for Foucault, the 'discursive relations proper']. This type of negation cannot, by definition, be absorbed by the system it contests.<sup>26</sup>

In practice, archaeology allows no elements within a given field to exist independently of the rules of description through which the movement of objects within that field are manifest: no materiality can exist outside of that which is scripted. All elements, including the illocutionary dimension of speech, are reduced to an already-always given state of discursiveness. And if this be the case, a social field exists as a single flattened surface of discursive relations that has no dynamism apart from the patterns of dispersal internal to, and thus fixed by, those particular relations. It becomes difficult to see that, under such conditions, modernity could ever become other than the pattern of abstractive differentiation by which it has come now to be constituted.

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24 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 207. Original emphasis.

25 *Ibid.*, 207.

26 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 10.

In contrast to this incorporation (and consequential containment) of the illocutionary domain of ‘discursive relations proper’, Lacan’s psychoanalysis stages directly within itself the modernity within which psychoanalysis has formed. It admits no distance between itself and that modernity, refusing any discursive vehicle that would articulate, and thereby reduce, the dynamic of that historical emergence to some other object. Enabling this direct performance of its own socio-historical conditions of existence is the refusal of metalanguage, the refusal of any assumption regarding the existence of an immanent cause for which the organising effect of language would emerge as its direct representation. This act of refusal enables Lacan’s psychoanalysis to stage the limitations of that modernity as its own and, in the process, to project from within its own co-ordinates (albeit without intent) modernity’s possible futures.

### *The Uncanny* and the refusal of any tricks to make it go away

Key to the refusal of metalanguage in Lacanian psychoanalysis has been the salience attributed to the trajectory of *the uncanny* (of the *unheimlich*).<sup>27</sup> In phenomenological terms, the uncanny refers to a “special shade of anxiety” that surrounds particular classes of experience,<sup>28</sup> a response which is simultaneously “disturbing and pleasurable”,<sup>29</sup> involving the return in new form of that which was forgotten; “the canny [...] [being] that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar”.<sup>30</sup> In social terms, the uncanny expresses a proximity to strangeness which, through its exclusion at the level of cul-

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27 See M. Dolar, “‘I shall be with you on your wedding-night’: Lacan and the uncanny”, *October*, 58, Autumn, 1991, 5–23.

28 A. Masschelein, “The concept as ghost: conceptualization of the uncanny in late-twentieth-century theory”, *Mosaic*, 35, 1, 2002, 54.

29 M. Jay, *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1998, 158.

30 S. Freud, “The uncanny”, in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume 17*, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis 1957, 200.

ture, comprises the constituting element of each and every expression of shared community.<sup>31</sup> Interest has been expressed in the uncanny not only as a static object but as to what has occurred to it as the experience entered modernity. Within pre-modern societies, as Malden Dolar notes, the uncanny was simultaneously expressed and “veiled” through the institutionalisation of the sacred within religion.<sup>32</sup> Come the secularisation of the Enlightenment, however, the uncanny literally became without a home, itself being rendered *unheimlich*. To this end, the uncanny reached its zenith in the rationalising impulse of modernity, its meaning now becoming synonymous with its materialisation as modernism. Sensitive to monumental historical shifts, popular culture registered this movement within the uncanny, and apparently prior to politics or the economic.<sup>33</sup> The secular scientism of Enlightenment thought, coupled with the innovative foregrounding of self-generating subjectivity as produced in the works of Descartes and Kant, provided the nest in which cultural expressions such as the Gothic novel would birth. In the self-same scientific register of the Enlightenment, moreover, it was psychoanalysis which illuminated the psychical preconditions of the historical shift, being the first discipline “to point out systematically the uncanny dimension pertaining to the very project of modernity”.<sup>34</sup> Significantly for the prospects of modernity, the goal within Freudian psychoanalysis of drawing attention to the uncanny was not to dissolve its presence but, instead, “to maintain it, to hold it open”.<sup>35</sup> Significant in this regard has been Lacan’s reformulation of ‘the object’, through the resources found in the cultural traces provided by the uncanny as it entered modernity. The reformulation pointed to the existence of an object which haunts modern subjectivity in the guise of a performative dimension of language’s meaning-

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31 Dolar, “I shall be with you”.

32 *Ibid.*, 7.

33 Indeed, it would appear that the economic sphere has had to await the emergence of a globalised financial capitalism for the uncanny to gain economic form. Luhmann’s work gestures towards this possibility in the sense that the remarkable social significance now given to ‘fictitious’ capital might in part be sustained by the manner in which such capital stages a return of surpassed infantile beliefs as to the existence of transcendent magical powers to make things happen without sufficient cause (that is, to differentiate without limitation).

34 *Ibid.*, 23.

35 *Ibid.*, 23.

effect. It is this object towards which Foucault appeared to gesture with his concept of the ‘discursive-relations proper’. This is an object, for Lacan, which cannot, however, itself be located within the domain of meaning. It takes the form, rather, of an object which can only be presented in a thoroughly formalist (algebraic) manner. Lacan designated the task to the first letter of the Anglophone alphabet: the letter *a*; the *objet a*.

The intellectual capacity which thereby emerged through science, in the work of Lacan, to talk of the uncanny – through the object *a* – does not imply, as Dolar notes, “a going beyond modernity”.<sup>36</sup> Rather, the capacity denotes a reflective staging of modernity’s “internal limit”, of a splitting “which was there from the outset” of modernity.<sup>37</sup> Lacan’s marking of that constitutive split within the modernist production of knowledge – through the inventive *objet a* – thereby emerges as modernity’s “simplest and most radical expression”.<sup>38</sup>

The act of reformulating the discursive space in which a metalanguage might otherwise be deployed, then invokes, for Lacan, a deliberate strategy of formalisation: the invocation of “a *discourse without speech*”.<sup>39</sup>

Through the instrument of language a number of stable relations are established, inside which *something that is much larger and goes much further* than actual utterances [*énonciations*] can, of course, be inscribed.<sup>40</sup>

Required for the task, for Lacan, is a mode of discourse which does not simply represent those relations but which, instead, transmits them directly through the operation of its own interdiction. By way of a contrast to the approach taken up by Lacan, the kinds of strategy deployed by linguists to develop understanding around the motivating dimensions of language will always founder upon their replication of the structure of language itself. Such has also been the fate of Foucault’s analysis of discursive formations, outlined above. Each incites the presence of such

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36 *Ibid.*, 23.

37 *Ibid.*, 23.

38 *Ibid.*, 23.

39 J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XVII. The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company 2007, 12. Original emphasis.

40 *Ibid.*, 13. Emphasis added.



a limit-point only to find that the point cannot be represented using the words deployed for describing the structure of language. Moreover, the process of formalisation that Lacan envisages will convey within itself the metamorphosis of the uncanny, as the uncanny came to be stripped of the symbolic supports it possessed in religion by the secularisation which progressively characterised the Enlightenment's scientific turn.

For Lacan, the possibility of a discourse that operates without speech implies a relation between knowledge, truth, and enjoyment. Knowledge, as the emblem with which truth always enjoys a relation, goes beyond the set of truth-claims that comprise the stock of understanding held within a given political community (and through which stable relations can be created amongst its members). Rather, knowledge comprises the stock of all possible statements about reality, of statements that would be both true and false, drawing upon a 'treasury of signifiers' which exists independently of the truth status of any of its elements. Lacan's position on the relation between knowledge and truth derives from his subversion of Saussure's notion that the status of a signifier is autonomous of the meaning-effects which emerge around it (those meaning-effects being 'the signified'). Alternatively, for Lacan, the signifier can never escape a relation with the domain of "meaning effect":<sup>41</sup> against Saussure, the relation is non-arbitrary. This recoupling of the signifier and the signified enables Lacan to return the matter of truth to the issue of knowledge. The manner in which truth operates does not depend, as might be anticipated given the wording of that statement, upon its relation to a domain of material referents. Rather, it depends upon its relation, in the first instance, to knowledge.

## On truth, knowledge, and science

Enabling a relation between truth and knowledge to be rejuvenated out of the detritus of structuralism, for Lacan, is a re-imagining of science.

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41 J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX. Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–73*, New York and London. W. W. Norton 1998, 19.

This involves a shift from the notion of science as derived from Aristotle to one which can be found in the work of Descartes.<sup>42</sup> Aristotelian science approaches material reality as if it were a set of potentialities whose connections can be understood through the mapping of various forms of cause between objects (causes which Aristotle listed as ‘material’, ‘efficient’, ‘formal’, and ‘final’). Successful explanation, which is to be pursued through the deployment of various combinations of cause as befits the specific subject material being observed, will produce knowledge about the essence of the phenomenon, understood ultimately in terms of the strength of those causal connections and of their teleological trajectory. In relation to the assumption presented by Aristotelian science – that reality is a closed system constituted by various states of causality – Cartesian metaphysics instead pushes the horizon of science beyond the casuistry and metalanguage which animates the Aristotelian tradition. In more contemporary terms, it gestures toward a state of knowledge production which operates beyond the congealing effects of the various philosophies that make up the contemporary research field (of positivism, falsification, post-positivism, realism, constructivism, etc.) and beyond, also, the different methodologies which those philosophies support (the experimental method, discourse analysis, ethnography, and so on). Cartesian science does so by enabling the contemplation of a field of knowledge-claims whose members have yet to be authorised by one of those calculative philo-methodological logics. The world forever outstrips what can be said about it. To this end, the Cartesian approach to science presents for our consideration a field of knowledge-claims whose causal relations always remain in part unresolved, if not irresolvable. Descartes’ venture here was to imagine a God who has had the capacity to create an open-ended reality whose co-ordinates cannot be imagined from within the scientific schemas beloved of the Aristotelian; such that, for example, a mode of cosmic existence could be imagined where  $2 + 2$  equals 5.

Cartesian science thereby substitutes what the Aristotelian would call reality with what Lacan called – with his tongue firmly in cheek – the Real; materiality of a kind whose existence is censored from thought

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42 See A. Cutrofello, “The ontological status of Lacan’s mathematical paradigms”, in S. Bernard and B. Fink (eds.), *Reading Seminar XX*, Albany: State University of New York Press 2002, 141–170.

by the discursive realities constructed as a consequence of scientific inquiry. Material reality of this kind is, as Jameson quips, the “object forbidden”.<sup>43</sup> Politically, this becomes important for Lacan. Only a materiality that outstrips what can be said of it, which “is not initially there to be known”, can alone “hold idealism back”.<sup>44</sup>

In terms of subjective experience, this state is accessed, for Lacan, through the field of knowledge (which he would designate with the algebraic figure of  $S_2$ ). Knowledge pertains not what is known but, rather, to the stock of all possible truth-statements. As this innumerable stock, knowledge gains the form for the subject of an enigmatic Other, of that in respect of which normal (neurotic) desire operates. Under its impress, the subject is enabled to respond to a (superego) demand that s/he successfully form into a kind of being who is able to know about the conditions in which it lives (the subjective state which Lacan called *le sujet supposé savoir*). To desire that knowledge, however, is to desire more than what that Other ‘is’. Desire for knowledge takes that form because the Other remains without intelligible form, incapable of being represented. Rather, and for reasons to which we shall return, the subject’s desire for knowledge also thereby involves an act of *desiring the Other’s enjoyment*. Moreover, it is this element of Lacan’s work which enables insight to develop into the role which the body plays in the movement of transformative ideas.<sup>45</sup>

With respect to the various elements that make up the patterns of discursive circulation which constitute the socio-political spaces of modernity, and through which scientific knowledge-claims form, Lacan suggests that there are four: the master signifier; knowledge; the subject; and enjoyment. In algebraic idiom these become, respectively,  $S_1$ ,  $S_2$ ,  $S$ , and the little object *a* (*objet a*).

The choice of these four had arisen as a consequence of advances Lacan made on the relationship between the fields of signification and affect (*jouissance*), of language and the body. As Zupančič has observed, Lacan’s sense about the dynamics of that relationship was shifting dra-

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43 F. Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory*, London and New York: Verso 2008, 18.

44 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 186. Readers might note points of similarity here with the critical scientific realism of Roy Bhaskar. See R. Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, London: Verso 1975.

45 And it is this element which thereby differentiates the work of Lacan from the more cognitively-oriented realism of Bhaskar.

matically over his career.<sup>46</sup> Initially, knowledge and enjoyment were presented as being absolutely separate in kind. This resonates with an underlying tenet of scientific positivism; that the production of knowledge and the processes of the human body have little, if anything, to do with one another. This notion of absolute separation shifted in Lacan's work, however, to an idea that language and the body co-existed through a mechanism of "structural homology".<sup>47</sup> With Lacan's move to mathematical formalisation, to the use of a discourse that ostensibly subverts language, the domains of signification and affect began to fuse so as to become increasingly contiguous with one other. As will become evident here, the shifting form which this relationship takes within Lacan's work stands as something of a rare litmus test of the capacity of modernity to stage its limit-points to itself.

If the conceptual strategy that Lacan employs for mapping ideas in their state of social circulation is mathematic formalism, the analytic practice he exercises in the course of doing so is the fusing of thought and affect, of the signifier with enjoyment, of language and the body. The issue which motivates this direction in Lacan's work emerges from the understanding which he had been developing about the signifier, namely its apparent insufficiency for the task of generating representations that can sustain meaning. In Lacan's earlier work, there had appeared the figure of the Name-of-the-Father which seemed to be responsible for the motivation of meaningful speech. The Name was a kind of master signifier which, without content of its own, emerged within the subject in conjunction with that subject's initial inauguration into the symbolic order as an infant. The intervention of that Name cut the child from its immersion in a state of unmediated physical sensation. Failure at the level of installation would threaten to cast the infant into psychotropic states such as autism or psychosis.

While this schema helped explain the entry of the subject into the symbolic order and of the individual's installation as a social being, the metaphor failed to communicate why any given speech act might or might not thereafter succeed in the task of establishing meaning. What

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46 A. Zupančič, "When surplus enjoyment meets surplus value", in J. Clemens and R. Griggs (eds.) *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Duke University Press: Durham and London 2006: 155–178.

47 *Ibid.*, 155.

was needed was an understanding about the relationship between the subject and the signifier that would continue beyond the inaugural installation of the subject within language. Running against the grain of Lacan's primary concern with the plight of the psychically-distressed individual, then, this theoretical concern about the relationship between the subject and the signifier would enlarge the reach of his psychoanalysis beyond the clinic and into the cultural constitution of social spaces, and beyond that, to politics. Indeed, it would offer to unlock the operation of hegemony.<sup>48</sup>

The association between the subject and language, for Lacan, turns upon a relation that operates at the level of discourse (*form*) rather than language itself (*content*). This relation is captured in the following statement by Lacan on the dynamic of subjectivisation: the signifier is *that which presents the subject for another signifier*.<sup>49</sup> We might find this immediate reference to the signifier strange. Through this phrase Lacan, however, would repeatedly draw the attention of his audiences to what, for him, is a basic semiotic fact about the speaking animal. The subject only exists insofar as it is being conveyed between signifiers. Subjectivity thereby only appears intermittently, mirroring the variability of the relations which signifiers form with it. As Lacan observed in this respect, "the I does not need to be continuous for it to multiply its acts".<sup>50</sup> Illustrating this is the manner in which the driver of a car can, for periods of time, drive without conscious attention being played to the road, dissociating from the task of keeping the vehicle on the highway. Quite remarkably then, given the complexity of the task, the driver can continue on without crashing. At some level they are being conveyed between the signifiers through which the process of driving a vehicle occurs, but

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48 See J. Butler, E. Laclau, and S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London and New York: Verso 2000.

49 J. Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*, London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis 1977, 207. Emphasis added.

50 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 65. Any alternative image of subjectivity, through which the subject might be seen to possess a state of continuous presence unto itself, stages a kind of misrecognition in the same way in which someone watching a film joins the flickering of the singular frames of the celluloid into a seamless image.

without that act of being conveyed necessarily sparking the subjectivity associated with the subject-position of ‘driver’.

On the side of the signifier, moreover, the signifier exists only to the extent that it is conveyed by the intermittent flashes which the subject is experiencing as subjectivity. All this is another way of introducing Lacan’s particularistic take on the problematic with which we opened here from Gregor McLennan: as to what comprises the dynamic of transformative ideas.

## The signifier, subjectivity, and transformative ideas

For Lacan, an understanding of how ideas might transform subjectivity such that, in Jameson’s terms ideology might once again become available, emerges from the dynamic by which a signifier presents the subject for another (signifier). Articulated thus, however, such an understanding would appear to convey us no further than the prospects for change provided by the limited emblem of the Name of the Father. The proposition reduces agency to a feature of signification. In order for the relationship between thought and subjectivity to be extended, then, that relation needs to be animated by an abstract condition of discourse which exceeds spoken language.

By way of a precautionary note, an immediate objection to this move needs to be set aside that comes from a Derridian direction, one to which Andrew Cutrofello draws attention.<sup>51</sup> The suggestion made by Lacan, that the act of analysing the relation between the subject and the signifier cannot be advanced through speech and that analysis must return to something akin to writing, would appear, for Derridian sensibilities, to be a regressive move. It appears to return thought to the domain of philosophy and to the vista of a knowing subject able to achieve self-clarity through the act of writing. Conversely, the deployment of a mode of discourse that is formalist in kind, as Lacan urges, has the effect of setting aside any possibility of philosophic clarity. This obscuring of meaning occurs on account of the algebraic form which the characters

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51 Cutrofello, “The ontological status of Lacan’s mathematical paradigms”, 143.

take: each of the characters acts as a placeholder for a given point of meaning but for which a potentially infinite set of ideas could fit, whose appearances will be entirely dependent upon the social purposes for which the analysis is being undertaken. The algebraic figure of  $S_1$ , for example, comes to potentially stand for any conceptual idiom capable of corraling other signifiers; that is, a signifier proves to be of the genus of  $S_1$  where it shows itself capable of congealing thought. In a similar vein, as we have seen,  $S_2$  includes the full repertoire of all possible truth-claims, whether true or false. In contrast, then, to the proposition that algebraic emblems convey truth-meaning, the significance of these emblems will lie with the relations which exist between them; a point to which we shall be returning. So the turn to writing which Lacan's notion of a discourse-that-is-not speech suggests, does not comprise, as the Derridian might object, a return to philosophy.

Conveyed in algebraic terms, the relation between signifier and subject – such that the signifier ( $S_1$ ) is the element which presents the subject ( $\$$ ) for another signifier ( $S_2$ ) – takes the following diagrammatic form:

$$\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{\$}$$

Moreover, it is from this discursive figuration of the relationship between signifier and subject that the figure of enjoyment comes into play, such that a relationship between language and the body begins to impress itself as being central to the movement of ideas. This enlargement of understanding about language and subjectivity comes about by virtue of the subject being conveyed by a signifier not simply to another solitary signifier  $S_1$  but, rather, always to another signifier as it lies within the field of signification ( $S_2$ ). Success in the transfer comes by way of the subject achieving an ability to relate to itself (that ability developing as a consequence of the subject's movement within the field of representation). To reframe the point,  $S_1$  successfully 'cuts' into the interminable polyvocality of  $S_2$ , thereby transporting the subject into a state of understanding which it would not otherwise have achieved. As Philip Dravers expresses this point:

It is this movement which allows the subject to escape petrification beneath a signifier, but at the same time commits him to the field of representation, precipitating him, under the sign of his erasure, into the delirium of interpretation.<sup>52</sup>

It is in this process of being conveyed that the subject undergoes an irredeemable fracture, which accounts for the diagonal line with which Lacan dissects his algebraic figure for the subject ( $\$$ ). In the course of conveying the subject into the domain of all possible statements, into  $S_2$ , the master signifier ( $S_1$ ) prevents the subject from succumbing to the psychotic-like absence of depth that would accompany emersion into the entire field of possibility ( $S_2$ ).<sup>53</sup> As Lacan phrases it, the subject is barred from the enjoyment which is particular to the Other. Knowledge has the status of being that which the Other enjoys, the Other's *jouissance*; and the subject no longer has unmediated access. The subject instead becomes fully and irredeemably 'of the signifier', able to access the enjoyment of full knowledge only through the specificities of given knowledge-claims. In the Freudian imagery which Lacan was using, the life-force of the subject is thereby cut off from reality: it is castrated. Signalling the relation, then, between castration – the loss of access to the *jouissance* of the Other – and the subjects' existence now only in relation to the signifier, Lacan notes "(c)astration means that *jouissance* must be refused so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder of the Law of desire".<sup>54</sup>

The act of speech, within which the subject thereby becomes implicated, creates, moreover, a paradoxical condition within subjectivity. Within the act of speech, the status of being 'the one who speaks' (as the linguist J. L. Austin would say, the "illocutionary" condition of linguistic agency, and the performativity which Foucault apparently tried to ex-

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52 P. Dravers, "In the wake of interpretation: 'The letter! The litter!'", in L. Thurston (ed.), *Re-Inventing the Symptom: Essays on the Final Lacan*, New York: Other Press 2002: 160.

53 These are forms of consciousness that are associated, by Freud, with the death drive; with a desire to be fully at one with 'what is'. In a cheeky mode Lacan cites at one point the example of the parsnip: the parsnip, in all probability has a level of communication with its environment which is fully unmediated, its knowledge corresponding fully with the materiality of its situation. Such a condition is liable to be unbearable, however, insofar as nothing blocks the condition of being a parsnip from the enjoyment of the Other. For that reason we should feel for the parsnip.

54 J. Lacan, *Écrits. A Selection*, London: Tavistock Publications 1977, 324.



press through his notion of ‘discursive relations proper’) dissipates at the same rate as the act comes to gain meaningfulness (that is, comes to gain a “locutionary” aspect).<sup>55</sup> The speech act is laced at the outset with an anticipatory trajectory, whose possibilities are cashed in at its conclusion through a retroactive movement which sutures back through the temporality of the speech act in a meaning-forming move. This corresponds with the simple act of speaking a sentence: its meaning cannot become apparent until the utterance is completed, at which point a retroactive movement occurs back through the sentence and a suturing of meaning is performed.

The successful accomplishment of that move eviscerates any consciousness of the performativity of the speech act having been achieved. The raw fact of the speech thereby gets overlaid by its meaning-effect.<sup>56</sup> This is not to say, however, that the agency involved in the speech act is terminated by the moment of enunciation. Rather, it emerges as an uncanny agentive spectre, of an un-scriptable presence ‘behind the subject’s back’ which is produced by the speech act, but that has no place within the meaning-effect generated by the act’s success. In graphic style, this spectre is, for Lacan, like the shit that just keeps on sticking to one’s shoe no matter how determined the effort to shake it off: “It’s irresolvable. Nobody knows what to do with this [...]”<sup>57</sup>

This state of a continual production of something that has no place reverberates with the enjoyment of the Other, and from which the subject is barred. Paradoxically, this state, which saves the subject from the potentially annihilating effects which such enjoyment would bring about, produces an additional species of enjoyment: it produces a condition within subjectivity which persistently exceeds the anatomical state that characterises the speaking animal. Speech relentlessly produces a condition of *surplus jouissance*, from which there can be no respite.

The absence of respite from this ‘part of no part’ gives rise to repetitive actions on the part of the subject. An instance whereby a particular action is being repeated thereby indicates the location of an enjoyment that cannot be integrated into the normal symbolic functioning of that

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55 J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1975.

56 Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality*, 19.

57 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 175.

subject. The unruliness being produced thereby indicates a potential point of transformation.

The notion that there exist points of enjoyment that cannot be integrated comes to Lacan from Freud's essay *Group Psychology*. That essay points to the existence of an elemental point of identification through which the subject's attachment to language initially forms: the 'unary trait'. We are talking here, instructs Lacan, about the origin of the signifier: "The point of departure to take is the *effect* of what is involved in the simplest order, from which the language effect comes into play at the level of the emergence of the unary trait".<sup>58</sup> This is an origin, however, that marks the signifier  $S_1$  by a split which never resolves; and to this end is never quite a unitary point of beginning.<sup>59</sup> The One is, thereby, always already in a state of division, of *a priori* differentiation. We have seen this already in Lacan's definition of the signifier: the motive power of the signifier  $S_1$  emerges from the state of interminable splitting within the signifier, between the presence of the subject and the field of signification to which the subject is being conveyed.

As to the role of the unary trait in the constitution of this split, and of the subject's attachment to  $S_1$  in its condition of being internally riven, the unary trait materialises at points of subjective loss that cannot be integrated back into the subject's world ( $S_2$ ). Such points of loss display themselves in physical symptoms that perform the work of clotting the subject at those sites of deficit. To reframe the point, the unary trait operates as a signifier of a primal kind. The two elements here, of loss and symptom, occur – topographically speaking – at the same point. One of Freud's examples of the unary trait proves particularly illuminating, from a boarding school for girls. One of the girls is having an elicited relationship with a young man, the knowledge of which is shared amongst the other girls. The reception of a particular letter from the young man throws the girl into a state of jealousy which plays out as an uncontrollable emotional outburst. Upon learning this, several other young women who identify with her fall into the same heightened affective state.

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58 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 155.

59 To this end, Lacan continues: "Our first rule is never to seek the origins of language, if only because they are demonstrated well enough through their effects" (*ibid.*, 155).

Zupančič draws attention to two elements of this case study.<sup>60</sup> The case suggests that the point of identification, though arbitrary in any absolute sense, is not arbitrary at all for those who participate in it. It marks the precise point of conjunction between the signifier (the unary trait; that is, the symptom) and enjoyment. Second, as that loss of the object is experienced, investment in the desired object is transferred to the unary trait such that the trait comes to occupy the structural location of that now-lost object. Continual identification with the loss, through the repetition of the symptom/trait (the emotional outbursts), becomes a substitute (‘supplementary’) enjoyment.

Lacan’s account of how ideas thereby move will go on to suggest that the relation between signification and enjoyment, language and the body, does not take one single form. The relation instead appears in a variety of modes. Moreover, Žižek reads these variations (Lacan suggests that they number four)<sup>61</sup> as constituting the possible range of social bonds through which relations between people can develop under conditions of modernity; “the historicity inscribed in [...] the four discourses” mirrors “the historicity of modern European development” itself.<sup>62</sup> In addition, these four modes of discursive circulation share the tendency with each other, as signalled by the unary trait, to invoke within subjectivity an overdetermining rotation of the subject around a point of loss/impossibility.

## Ideas in movement: the *Four Discourses*

The first of the discourses – which Lacan labels the discourse of the master – is, strictly speaking, pre-modern. Lacan attributed its discovery to Hegel’s identification of a tautology – an “ambiguity” – within the mas-

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60 A. Zupančič, “When surplus enjoyment meets surplus value”, 166–167.

61 Lacan also hinted as to the possibility of a fifth discourse but this idea was never developed in full – a ‘discourse of capitalism’.

62 S. Žižek, “*Objet a* in social links”, in J. Clements and R. Grigg (eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2006b, 109.

ter/slave dialectic, “when it was found to have been posited at the outset that the subject asserts himself as knowing himself”.<sup>63</sup> The key to this ambiguity in the discourse of the master lies with the manner in which it mimics Lacan’s algebraic representation of the relation between signifier and subject. The discourse, along with the ambiguity, stands as the elemental structure of signification; “the Master’s gesture [being] the founding gesture of every social link”:<sup>64</sup>

$$\frac{S_1}{S} \quad \frac{S_2}{a}$$

What the discourse adds to the definition of the signifier/subject are structural roles, which each of the positions plays in relation to the circulation of ideas:

<u>Agent</u>	<u>Work</u>
Truth	Product

Within the discourse of the master, a single signifier (the ‘agent’) motivates the circulation of ideas. Its significance lies with the manner by which that signifier operates in relation to the ‘work’ undertaken by knowledge. In terms of historical political formations, Lacan associates this form of discursive circulation with Antiquity, with the ownership and deployment of slaves for the purpose of generating material wealth. The slave is thereby not so much an identity than “a [social] function”, the notion of slave being “characterized as the one who is the support of knowledge”.<sup>65</sup> By this statement Lacan is indicating that the ability of the master’s power to reproduce itself turns upon something other than his own desire for knowledge. Indeed, the master “doesn’t desire to know anything at all—he desires that things work”.<sup>66</sup> The master’s capacity to function in the place of power depends, instead, upon his ability to deploy the practical know-how of the slave. It is through this appropriation of the slave’s *savoir-faire* that the material production and reproduction

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63 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 89.

64 S. Žižek, “The structure of domination today: a Lacanian view”, *Studies in East European Thought*, 56, 4, 2004, 393.

65 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 21.

66 *Ibid.*, 24.

of life can be made to function ( $S_2$ ). Moreover, through this act of appropriation the slave learns what the master requires of them.

Of particular importance in that practical know-how, then, for Lacan, are not the scraps of ('theoretical') knowledge which come to be distilled from the material practices of the slave (from their *savoir-faire*), and which the master will subsequently come to know.<sup>67</sup> Those scraps do not constitute the kernel of the process. Rather, that kernel lies within the performative dimension by which know-how gets activated at the level of the slave: "this know-how that is so akin to animal knowledge", this knowledge of how to do things and of how to know what it is that the master requires.<sup>68</sup> Lacan signals this performativity with the figure *a*, denoting here a psychical state which emerges surplus to the social requirements of knowing. This surplus (of 'enjoyment') emerges as the primary social effect (the 'product') of ideas as they circulate in this modality of 'the master':

$$\frac{S_1}{\S} \quad \frac{S_2}{a}$$

The figure of *a*, the performativity which underpins the material practices of ordinary social life, can never be incorporated into the knowledge which the master appropriates. This means, unfortunately for the master, that he is never able to fully exercise command. Therein lies the point of impossibility which this mode of social bond produces in the arena of subjectivity: the subject who 'knows' (that is, the slave and not the master) is left with an unruly surplus of immaterial labour which has no value in the terms established by the stock of knowledge which its own operation produces. That surplus of raw labour power is, here, the part of no part.

Enabling some degree of accomplishment on the part of the flesh and blood individuals caught up in this circuit, and an apparent escape from the state of repetition which would otherwise set in, is the appearance of the subject in the position of 'truth' under the master. The presence of the master promises for the subject the possibility of a state of

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67 *Ibid.*, 23.

68 *Ibid.*, 22.

full and complete identification. They only need to believe (in the Master):

$$\frac{S_1}{S}$$

We need only think here of how the iconography of unitary religions – such as Christianity – promises full and coherent identity for those who will but identify with the One. In the same manner, however, that the master proves unable to fully incorporate the performative dimension of the practical know-how of productive work, so too is the subject never able to fully integrate into their relation with the master that same inscrutable condition of performativity through which they act. That state of performativity haunts their subsumption to the presence of the master, as an uncanny and unsettling double to the otherwise apparently congealing effects of their participation in the concrete practices which give them identity as the master’s slave. “Nobody knows”, to repeat Lacan’s quip, “what to do with this surplus *jouissance*”.<sup>69</sup> To the extent to which the subject gets ensnared by the troubling pleasure of this performativity-with-no-place, they become alienated from the transformative potential of their labour power.

Quite apparently, the role of the master signifier in getting things moving – being the ‘agent’ that motivates the circulation of ideas – is vulnerable to critique. That One never quite succeeds in ‘knowing’, even though they sit in the place of mastery. It is this act of critique which the second of the four discourses stages, this modality being obtained through the rotation of the algebraic elements a quarter (clockwise) turn.

$$\frac{S}{a} \quad \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

Within this mode of discursive circulation, it is the subject which now occupies the place of agent. The significance of the subject, as agent, lies with its ability to raise for critical consideration the fact that the discourse of the master cannot help but generate a condition of surplus, a surplus which can never be fully integrated into the master signifier’s

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69 *Ibid.*, 175.

own operation as agent. As Zupančič puts this, the subject as agent draws attention to the fact that “the apparatus  $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$  does not exhaust the integrity of the discourse, that, in the end, it does not come out without a remainder or surplus, and that it is blind to its own truth”.<sup>70</sup>

Unremarkably, in light of that ability to critique, this particular mode of discourse – which Lacan calls ‘the discourse of the hysteric’ – is responsible for much of the knowledge that comes to be officially recognised as such. The discourse critiques in an unremitting manner the various power formations that have come to dominate modernity: colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, bureaucracy, and so on. To this end, the field within the schema that Lacan associates with ‘product’ is, within this pattern of discursive circulation, occupied by  $S_2$ ; by an apparently endless production of new insights and knowledge-claims.

The particular orientation between language and the body associated with this second pattern of discursive circulation turns upon the relationship between the subject and the master signifier. In that relationship will form a point of impossibility upon which the discourse will repeatedly founder, and which will become for the subject a source of troublingly pleasurable paradox. More particularly, the relationship signals a desire by the subject ( $\$$ ) that the Other finds fulfilment in their existence. Moreover, the discursive circuit fosters a belief within flesh and blood subjects that they, themselves, have become the force which motivates the immaterial labour involved in the production of knowledge. To this end, this mode of discourse promises a state of full and self-reflexive identity for the subject.

The criticisms which the subject routinely mounts about the insufficiency of the master (signifier) are, as Zupančič identifies, at once very specific and also very general.<sup>71</sup> Complaints frequently take the form of accusations of injustice, generating demands for the rightful recognition of those who find themselves politically marginalised as a consequence of the operation of the master signifier (marginalised by patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, etc.). The normative character of such claims means that they can be couched in the language of true/false (or in the legal idiom of prohibited/missible). More generally, the forms of personal identification generated by the discourse of the hysteric prove unable to

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70 Zupančič, “When surplus enjoyment meets surplus value”, 163.

71 *Ibid.*, 163–168.

bridge the gap between what the subject believes itself to be and the symbolic roles it finds itself given to play. To this end, even where particular accusations of injustice might be shown to have missed their mark, or even proven false, the claims always remain true at a structural level, pointing as they do “toward an essential feature of symbolic discursivity as such”, that things are not always as they appear in language.<sup>72</sup>

In addition to other complaints which characterise the discourse of the hysteric – of the kind that ‘the emperor (master signifier) has no clothes’ and, in a proto-transcendental vein, that the truth always exceeds what can be expressed in language – a fourth and final complaint points again to the deadlock which constitutes the discourse. This complaint concerns the matter of satisfaction, and of the continual insufficiency of satisfaction for the subject who perceives themselves to be the empirical cause of its own being. That complaint comes to be frequently voiced around solutions which lie latent (at least) within the subject’s diagnosis of the injustices, and to which the subject announces (in response to the inevitable insufficiency of their recommendations) “but that’s not what I mean!”. In this way, the subject whose ideas circulate in accordance with the discourse of the hysteric becomes “guardian of the negative, of the incommensurable and the impossible”.<sup>73</sup> What the subject in this position fails to notice, however, is that the practice of negativity thereby becomes, in itself, a source of satisfaction, of one further instantiation of surplus enjoyment. The subject becomes marked by their love of the ever-critical conjunction “But ...”. As Lacan further observes with regard to this state, the subject finds themselves circulating within an impossible space over the issue of how social order might now look. To this end, the subject:

wants the other to be a master, and to know lots of things, but all the same she doesn’t want him to know so much that he does not believe she is the supreme price of all his knowledge. In other words, she wants a master she can reign over. She reigns, and he does not govern.<sup>74</sup>

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72 *Ibid.*, 165.

73 *Ibid.*, 167.

74 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 129.



It is no surprise then, that the algebraic formulation of the discourse finds the ambiguity of *a* occupying the place of Truth:

$$\frac{\mathcal{S}}{a} \quad \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

The aspirational dimension of the hysteric’s criticism of the master always thereby proves bereft of full and final form, despite all the matters of fact which might be presented as conclusive proof as to the master’s limitations. Where the subject finds themselves caught up by the troubling pleasure of this situation – by its *jouissance* – they stand to become separated from the transformative potential of the critical knowledge they have produced.

In Seminar XVII, Lacan suggests that the true oppositional discursive modality to the discourse of the master is not that of the hysteric, as it may appear here, but that of ‘the analyst’. To this end, the ‘discourse of the analyst’ expresses a strong countervailing voice to the dominating effect of the master signifier. This is what Lacan gets at when he says of the analyst’s discourse, that “it is the structural introduction, under artificial conditions, of the hysterics’ discourse”.<sup>75</sup> It is the discourse of the hysteric put to intentional analytical work.

In terms of its algebraic form, the discourse of the analyst is motivated by the ‘ultimate inconsistency and failure of the big Other’. *Objet a* is agent: agency is the condition of surplus enjoyment itself.<sup>76</sup>

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \quad \frac{\mathcal{S}}{S_1}$$

This discursive circuit signals a kind of interrogation that is motivated by absolute disinterest. Indicating that such a mode of interrogation is possible, the object which gets produced is a new master signifier through which the subject might be re-mobilised ( $S_1$ ). The truth of this new signifier, however, does not come by way of some principle of guarantee (scientific method, religious revelation, and so on) but by the ‘treasure trove’ of signifiers which sits in the position of truth (knowledge,  $S_2$ ).

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75 *Ibid.*, 33.

76 Žižek, “*Objet a* in social links”, 116.

Tellingly, for the fortunes of this particular mode of discursive circulation, Lacan indicates that the active element of the discourse – between the agent (*a*) and its object (*Œ*) – has the quality of “impossibility”.<sup>77</sup> Where the subject gets enmeshed in the troubling pleasure of this state, they stand to be disenfranchised from the analytical movement which the discourse otherwise promises. At best, the clinical analyst can only manage intermittent performances of the role, as the discourse itself provides no enduring structural location for the position of the practicing analyst. Instead, the analyst ultimately gets reduced to the status of waste (*a*): “in the end [he is] destined to become a loss, to be eliminated from the process”.<sup>78</sup> All attempts to thereby inhabit the discourse within the clinical setting, let alone sustain it, will be at best precarious. Julia Kristeva writes, in this regard, that

the analyst, since he interprets, is probably among the rare contemporary witnesses to our dancing on a volcano. If he draws perverse jouissance from it, fine; provided that, in his or her capacity as a man or woman without qualities, he allow the most deeply buried logic of our anguish and hatred to burst out. Would he then be capable of X-raying horror without making capital out of its power? Of displaying the abject without confusing himself for it?

Probably not.<sup>79</sup>

Jacques-Alain Miller notes, moreover, that an additional, socio-cultural reason has now emerged as to why the discourse of the analyst becomes less available in the guise imagined by Lacan.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, as a consequence of this reason, for Millar, the discourse of the analyst has ceased to occupy the location which Lacan had envisaged for it as the analytic ‘obverse’ of the discourse of the master. Resonating with a range of critical commentaries about the emergence of happiness as a defining political

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77 Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality*, 16.

78 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 38.

79 J. Kristeva, *Powers of Freedom: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press 1982, 210. Kristeva then goes on to argue that it is the recognition of this impossibility which enables the subject position of the analyst to become a source of insight. For a discussion of the political limitations of this injunction to ‘fail better’, see Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*.

80 Millar, quoted in Žižek, “*Objet a* in social links”, 116.

rationality of late capitalism,<sup>81</sup> Miller presents the discourse of the analyst as now being – and ironically so given its anti-utopian sensibilities – the contemporary formulation of ‘civilisation’ itself. The subject of liberal-capitalist society finds itself confronted with a socio-political injunction to ‘Enjoy!’. This injunction is experienced not as a mode of pleasure but as a superego command under whose impress the split subject is put to work to heal itself. Enabling the process is the ‘scientific-expert knowledge’ of social administration –  $S_2$  – as it here operates in the place of truth. Such knowledge instructs the subject in the generation of ‘self-mastery’ ( $S_1$ ) over the stresses which accompany the requirement to ‘Enjoy!’. We can think here of the huge pop-psychology industry. To reframe Millar’s point, the discourse of the analyst is now all too available, incessantly coming at us in commodified form from every self-help section of our local bookstores and from every television chat-show. Late capitalism thereby resolves the problem which Lacan noted around the impossibility of the analyst’s position, and of the troubling pleasure that entices the subject who would play that role. All that the position needed was to be reformulated as something that could sell.

Completing the set of possible rotations is ‘the discourse of the university’, the modality of discursive circulation which Lacan had considered to be no less than the primary social glue of late modernity:

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \quad \frac{a}{S}$$

For Lacan, the discourse of the university has displaced the discourse of the master as the key mechanism of social domination within modernity. The source of that domination now lies with the projection of apparently disinterested knowledge ( $S_2$ ), operating as the ‘agent’. At work, thereby, is the operation of knowledge. The common-place ideas of ‘the Knowledge Society’ and ‘Knowledge Economy’ express something of the central impetus given to the movement of knowledge itself. Moreover, the movement of knowledge is underpinned by power, as  $S_1$  now comes to occupy the place of truth. This facilitation of knowledge

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81 For a critical assessment of this trend, see L. G. Duncan, “Should happiness-maximization be the goal of government”, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 11, 2, 2010, 163–178.

by power, points to a limit-point in the discourse of the university. “The constitutive lie of this discourse”, Zupančič indicates, “is that it disavows its performative dimension: it always presents, for example, that which leads to a political decision, founded on power, as a simple insight into the factual state of things”.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, every attempt made by reflexive social analysts to get beyond the acts of power which motivate their critical reflection, results in the generation of a new act of the same ilk.<sup>83</sup> And any attempt to disavow the operation of such a power in the establishment of a given line of critique displays itself as being, again, an act of power. Encapsulating this deadlock has been Foucault’s observation as to an inexorable connection between knowledge and power (the so-called ‘power/knowledge couplet’). In Lacan’s *mathème*, this appears as the continual and simultaneous appearance, within the discourse of the university, of knowledge with that of the master signifier (of power):

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1}$$

In keeping with his presentation of this discourse as the contemporary face of social domination, Lacan had noted an operational affinity between the discourse of the university and the emergence of capitalism. That affinity turns upon the rotation of *a* – of practical know-how in its performative idiom, as it appears in the discourse of the master – into the structural location of ‘work’. The state of surplus which the figure of *a* thereby denotes – the performative and immaterial dimension of labour – is an unruly presence within social life, however. To this end, various technologies emerge within the bio-administration of late capitalism for its containment (psychometric tests to which prospective employees are subjected, auditing regimes for the tracking of worker productivity, and so on). In historical terms, for Lacan, containment had occurred through the reformulation of the value that had been attributed to labour power. With the movement of a feudal to capitalist economy, labour power morphed from a condition of indefinite use to that of calculable ex-

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82 Zupančič, “When surplus enjoyment meets surplus value”, 168.

83 See, for example the discussion on the critical socio-legal theory of Peter Goodrich in W. Tie, “Getting from ‘critic and conscience’ to conscientious criticism”, *Griffith Law Review*, 20, 2, 2011, 362–384.

change (the commodification of labour noted by Marx). This enabled a sharpening of its extraction through the use of increasingly scientific methodologies of organisational calculation (popularly associated with Taylorisation):

Something changed in the master's discourse at a certain point in history. We are not going to break our backs finding out if it was because of Luther, or Calvin, or some unknown traffic of ships around Genoa [...] for the important point is that on a certain day surplus *jouissance* became calculable, could be counted, totalized. This is where the what is called the accumulation of capital begins (sic).<sup>84</sup>

The commodification of labour, which characterises the logic of capital, thereby becomes an elemental social precondition for the emergence of the discourse of the university. Moreover, the appearance of that commodification, as *a*, indicates something particular about the manner by which it comes to be experienced as an emergent “place of more or less tolerable exploitation”.<sup>85</sup> The status attributed to the performative know-how of the worker becomes complex with the emergence of capitalism, for in terms of accomplishing its tasks, practical know-how increasingly becomes of less significance within industrialised work processes. As Lacan further observes: “Capitalist exploitation effectively frustrates him (the wage-labourer) of his knowledge by rendering it useless”.<sup>86</sup> That said, “in a type of subversion” the performativity “gets returned to him [as] something different—master's knowledge”.<sup>87</sup> What gets returned is the master's instrumentalist concern with making things work (management), coupled with the essence of that master, “namely, that he does not know what he wants”.<sup>88</sup>

The circulation of ideas under the impress of this discourse depends upon the successful inscription of the split subject in a set of terms that sequentially enable the extraction, the harnessing, and the containment of the performativity which underpins practical know-how. That surplus with which the subject is left needs be integrated back into the circulation of discourse in order for a continual regeneration of the discourse of the university to occur. The mechanism by which that integration occurs

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84 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 177.

85 *Ibid.*, 178.

86 *Ibid.*, 32.

87 *Ibid.*, 32.

88 *Ibid.*, 32.

is the set of political rationalities that now present the subject to itself in calculable form, of organisational methodologies which can deploy that calculated mass. To the extent to which the worker finds themselves enthralled by those methodologies – caught in the troubling please of fulfilling the symbolic mandate of ‘subject-supposed-to-know’ in respect of that which will remain beyond understanding – they are alienated from the transformative potential of their own knowing.

### The limits of the *Four Discourses*

As a platform for mapping the differentiation of representation that appears to be constitutive of the liberal-capitalist spaces of late modernity, Lacan’s Four Discourses commend themselves in various ways. The schema variously achieves the following: it provides a comprehensive record of possible relations within which the subject is inscribed and by which such subjects locate themselves; it invokes a sense of self-generation which functions independently of any transcendental principle, with movement being wholly immanent to the field of differentiation itself; and in being able to recognise ideas in terms of their present social dynamic, the Four Discourses sets aside the analytical need to explain its own historical origin.

These wholly structuralist characteristics of the Four Discourses sit in an uneasy tension, however, with another assumptive dimension of the Discourses; that the structures are not static, that social change occurs as a consequence of the unruly contexts within which ideas operate. As Oliver Feltham postulates in this regard: if more than one discourse is held to exist; if they have not existed from the beginning of time; if it appears that one structure leads to another; then “history as change occurs: that is, there has been structural change”.<sup>89</sup> To this end, the emergence within the Four Discourse of matters pertaining to historicity provokes a line of questioning that isn’t easily contained by either the terms

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89 O. Feltham, “Enjoy your stay: structural change in Seminar XVII”, in J. Clemens and R. Grigg (eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2006: 181.

offered by their structuralist architecture or by the presumption that historical transformation indeed happens. Instead the Discourses pose to themselves a theoretical problem that encapsulates much of the analytic angst given expression as post-structuralism: “How is it possible to think such structural change without any recourse to a notion of history as sequence?”<sup>90</sup>

Lacan’s exposition of the Four Discourses, across Seminars XVII and XX, offer three possible responses to this question. Their value, as Feltham indicates, lies beyond the fact that Lacan’s analysis also quickly identifies the shortcomings of each, saving upon the considerable energies which the likes of Foucault, Badiou, and Deleuze & Guattari have appeared to expend (in attempting to arrive at a scriptable resolution to the conundrum of social change in the absence of sequential history).

The first of Lacan’s responses presents each of the schemas, in a Hegelian manner, as having an internal mechanism whose activation brings about the evolution of a successor form of discursive circulation from amongst the existing set. As Feltham outlines, Lacan toys with three versions of this hypothesis: to begin, that a rotational principle sits inherent to the discourse (the notion of ‘a quarter turn’), being activated by the agent-work relation; moreover, that the inversely located positions of agent and production generates an alternative dynamic; and finally, that the discourses house a principle of perpetual movement.<sup>91</sup> Productively, the proposition that there exists some or other principle of change embedded within the discourses enables shifts in their structure to be understood. Seductive, in this sense, might be that principle of ‘love’. Problematically, however, such an assumption proves unable to contain and account for any novel differentiation of the structures which might follow (this being the dilemma which Luhmann’s sense of representational differentiation produces), and of dynamics which would be internal to the newly emergent structures (this being Baudrillard’s conundrum). In order for this approach to convince, a sole structural principle of change – and here, again, we might think of ‘love’ – would need to dominate (and thereby ultimately eclipse) the heterogeneity which would follow such change.

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90 *Ibid.*, 181.

91 In Seminar XX, Lacan announces this as being ‘love’: “love is the sign that one is changing discourses” (Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality*, 16).

The second of the hypothesis suggests that each of the four discourses has emerged in terms of purely contingent encounters between historical events. The chance encounter between the master's discourse (the religious/monarchical rule of European feudalism) and that of the hysteric (in the form of Enlightenment philosophy), for example, spawns the discourse of the university. Here, a novel version emerges of the conundrum that arises in respect of the first hypothesis: the act of thinking about the multiplicity of social life undermines the ability to envisage change; social change becomes synonymous with context-dependant struggles. Only when multiplicity is made into an *a priori* condition of social relations *tout court* would the notion of social transformation be returned to the domain of the thinkable. Badiou attempts this move. The trade-off, however, would be to establish the condition of differentiation as an illimitable primal structure, with fragmentation of meaning and of social organisation being the only possible future. The amusing Hegelian speculativism of the first hypothesis here turns, as we have seen with Luhmann's use of an argumentative strategy akin to this, into black comedy: market relations appear the only natural kind of social relations.

The third hypothesis appearing in the seminars produces no simple synthesis of the first two. Rather, structural change is not deemed to be possible; change can not conform to some or other existing principle of socio-political organisation. If change is to occur, it need operate as an indeterminate 'cut', not as a process of transformation. A structural homology exists here with Badiou's notion of 'event'. As Feltham suggests with respect to this third hypothesis, each of the individual schemas has emerged for historically contingent reasons into distinct institutional entities and, as such, there exists no principle of consolidation or transformation which is internal to them as a set. The fact that the discourses can be expressed using the same semiotic terms merely stems from the manner in which each, in synchrony, implicates the position of the speaking subject. If there is to be change it will not be of a kind that is internal to the schema but will be of the system as a whole – to the Four Discourses in full – and to the modernity which that schema expresses.

The notion of the cut, that animates this third hypothesis, emerges as a consequence of a network of assumptions that run deeper within Lacan's theoretical framework than the hypothesis itself: a cut refers to that movement of the signifier by which reality is intersected by language and by which an anthropocentric cataloguing of the world occurs. To



reframe the point, the action of the cut is the very gesture which sustains reality for the speaking animal.

With regard to its deployment as an hypothesis regarding socio-political change in relation to the Four Discourses, Lacan associates the possibility of a cut with a brief moment in the performance of the analyst's discourse. Signalling the transformative potential of this, Lacan muses "perhaps it's from the analyst's discourse that there can emerge another style of master signifier".<sup>92</sup> Alluded to here is the role of *objet a* in the place of the agent, freed from the presence of any fantasy which might script its movement, and wherein "contingency reigns briefly at the level of what can be done".<sup>93</sup> It is this momentary opening within the operation of ideas which the 'discursive relations proper' of Foucault appears to express, of a moment when a given idea proves able to convey – in addition to the content by which its socio-historical contexts have fashioned it – the inscrutable performative impetus of its own existence. The possibility that such an effect could occur depends, however, upon an assumption that the structure through which the idea has thus enlarged – in this case, the analyst's discourse – is self-generating, that it is *auto-poietic* as Luhmann would say.

As Feltham continues to insightfully indicate, however, such an assumption produces yet another expression of the Hegelian fantasy of History; this time as each of the four discourses become, each in their own right, a "mini" absolute with the power to project meaning as if in an *a priori* manner.<sup>94</sup> In the case of this third hypothesis, that ability is ascribed to the discourse of the analyst.

To reframe the problem to which Feltham alludes, and in terms of Lacan's approach to the differentiation of abstraction within modernity, the notion of a cut is at risk of being enlarged to a principle of transformation (of a truth). A particular implication would follow for the production of transformative ideas. The very possibility of transformation would become dependent upon belief in the existence of a fixed totality – at the core of which sits the cut – that would script the interpretation of any social change that occurs. We have already witnessed something

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92 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 176.

93 Feltham, "Enjoy your stay", 191.

94 *Ibid.*, 192.

akin to this in Luhmann's tacit assumption as to the existence of differentiation as an anthro-biological fact.

For Lacan, however, the notion of a cut has always implied more than a discursive relation between things. It implies the movement of enjoyment (*jouissance*) within language. Any transformation to the set of discursive circuits described in the Four Discourses will presuppose an enlargement in the constitution of enjoyment. That possibility lies with the manner by which the act of inserting a state of truth into knowledge produces loss at the level of the subject: upon arrival at a place of 'truth', the subject cannot now know what constitutes the truth of the Other. At that same point of loss there also forms for the subject a state of surplus enjoyment (*jouissance*): the subject's awareness of its own labour within the production of truth cannot find full expression in that newly found certainty, yet its operation will remain vital for the emergence of new findings, of new truth-claims. Around that condition of surplus enjoyment various repetitive actions form, as each and every attempt to integrate that surplus back into the operation of the subject's knowledge repeatedly falls short.<sup>95</sup> In the course of this, the subject is alienated from the transformative potential of its 'knowing'.

The inability of the Four Discourses to provide a mechanism from within itself to indicate how that integration might occur nevertheless suggests a fertile line of questioning. That questioning gestures towards a transformation of the Four Discourses in total, and a traversal of the dif-

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95 It is in this regard that a local phenomenon amongst fellow academics begins to make sense to me, with regard to those academics' desires to know what the New Zealand tertiary sector's research auditing regime thinks of them (the 'Performance Based Research Fund' ['the PBRF']). The regime appears to be widely understood by academics, within the social sciences at least, as a means by which the performativity of their academic labour can be re-scripted into something that can be easily governed. Even though that understanding exists, it appears insufficient to create a revolt against the system. Academics have the right to ask that their personal scores never be disclosed to them. Few do, however. Instead, a widely shared desire appears to be at work amongst academics, to know how the auditing regime rates them. This desire appears to suggest that an operation is at work within academic subjectivity, to integrate back into the operation of knowledge the surplus generated by the production of knowledge under 'university' conditions. The audit scores promise to ascribe value to the performativity of academics' immaterial labour. It provides a means by which those academics can assess the degree to which they have attained the status of the subject-supposed-to-know.

ferentiation that abstraction has come to take within the modernity of late capitalism and post-political administration. Moreover, this would signal a departure from the symbolic constitution of the now-conventionalised patterns of domination and of hysterical/analytical reactions that characterise the development of knowledge under modern conditions. To this end we can ask: What alternative relationships with enjoyment might be possible from within the Four Discourses, such that the vectors of knowledge/truth/enjoyment might alter and ideas grip the subject with full transformative effect? At stake here are the conditions of contemporary knowledge production within which alternative relationships between knowledge and enjoyment might emerge and find themselves maintained.



## 6 The seeds of times future<sup>1</sup>

The ability of the discursive space of *utopia* to circulate ideas in a manner that can sustain transformative intent lies with relations between language and the body, between the symbolic order and enjoyment. It is this capacity which Jameson had presaged with his comment that we, as subjects of late capitalism, now need to ‘to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions’. Notwithstanding Lacan’s relative indifference towards the implications his work on subjectivity might have for the trajectory of historical change, a particular line of inquiry upon which he embarks relatively late in his work – on the status of *Oedipus* – opens the way for understanding the character of a transformative shift in the relationship between language and the body, of the kind to which Jameson gestures. The significance for us of Lacan’s reconsideration of *Oedipus* lies with the analytic strategy by which he stages a major shift in the constitution of psychoanalytic practice. Greater emphasis comes to be laid within this, for the transformation of subject positions, upon *the absence of lack* in the constitution of the symbolic order (and of the field of knowledge), as compared to the condition *of lack* which characterises the movement of the signifier (and the particular ideas by which we live).

Lacan was well attuned to the trajectories of potentially historical movements, with his diagnosis of the student position during May ‘68 drawing significant attention. In response to the protesting declaration posted on a Paris street that “structures do not walk the streets” – a statement which was directed not against the government but against the French Academy and the prevailing structuralist leanings of the humanities/ social sciences – Lacan retorted that the manner by which the protests were being formulated indicated that structures were indeed trampling the cobblestones. Moreover, those structures would configure the

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1 F. Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, New York: Columbia University Press 1994.

repertoire of future possibilities. “What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master”, he admonished the students: “You will get one”.<sup>2</sup>

Going beyond such occasional observations, Lacan quite consciously drew together the historically specific fields of jurisprudence and psychoanalysis. The effect was a new analytic armature that pivoted around the shared concentration of law and the clinic upon the ordering of social life.<sup>3</sup> The shared project of these two institutions created an interest, for Lacan, which exceeded the content of culturally-specific social and legal injunctions (and about which he only ever displayed passing curiosity). That interest expanded, instead, towards the discursive form by which these fields functioned and of their implications as cultural mechanisms of subjectivisation.<sup>4</sup>

The salience of this quality within Lacan’s work doesn’t simply lie with the form which the transformation took in the theory of his clinical practice. Rather, it lies with a template which the enlargement of his work set for a psychoanalytic understanding of historical transformation. The sense of transformation which then emerges, bringing as it does a sense of the limit-points of modernity, in turn raises questions about the limits of psychoanalysis. The latter will not concern us, however, as much as a question about the possibility of staging the limits of modernity through the lodestone of ‘scientific understanding’, such that the discursive reproduction of political domination and economic exploitation which has come to characterise the societies of modernity might be traversed.

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2 J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XVII. The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company 2007, 207.

3 References to law became commonplace within Lacan’s seminars, especially when their location shifted from the medical school to the Paris School of Law. That said, the connection between psychoanalysis and law ought not to be simply reduced to this alteration of venue.

4 This proved to be a fertile lead for European socio-legal theory during the 1990s. See, for example, D. Caudill, *Lacan and the Subject of Law: Towards a Psychoanalytic Critical Legal Theory*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International 1997; D. Milovanovic, *Postmodern Law and Disorder: Psychoanalytic Semiotics, Chaos and Juridic Exegeses*, Liverpool: Deborah Charles 1992; P. Goodrich, *Languages of Law: From Logics of Memory to Nomadic Masks*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1990; and P. Legendre, “Parenthesis: the text without subject”, in P. Goodrich (ed.), *Law and the Unconscious: A Legendre Reader*, pp. 67–71, London: Macmillan 1997.

The kind of understanding which comes from pushing to its limits Lacan's thoughts on the psychic life of ideas – which he associates with the patterned circulation of discourse – turns upon the matter of representation. In this Lacanian idiom, the kinds of transformation most likely to radically alter stratified social relationships involve the use of interpretive processes which bring into view a set of material conditions whose expression is otherwise prohibited by the realities discursively created through those same relations. Typically, it is through the suppression of any reference to those unexpressed conditions that patterns of exploitation and domination are naturalised. This insight lies at the core of Marx's view, also, that the commodity form so thoroughly absorbs the labour power by which it has been constituted that human activity no longer appears within the commodity. For his part, Lacan appears to have been gesturing towards a form of "post-interpretative" representation to motivate critique of that censorship, a figurative move which cannot hold back from "calling into question the very function of representation itself".<sup>5</sup> In the terms adopted by Žižek from Ranciere, the censored pre-conditions for a given line of thought are 'the part of no part' of the prevailing social relations.<sup>6</sup> Any understanding which might be developed about those conditions constitutes a kind of waste which will most probably be excreted from the prevailing common-sense as being of no 'real' value.

Moreover, in the Lacanian field, success in staging that part of no part depends upon the banned elements manifesting in a manner that runs oblique to the domain of ideas. It is not enough – indeed, it will be politically regressive – if they simply appear as another idea by which we might attempt to intervene progressively with some or other problematic situation: 'woman', 'the working class', 'indigenous peoples', 'the environment', and so on.<sup>7</sup> The reason for this resonates with the conundrum which has haunted the idea of *utopia*: the abstract representation of such elements inevitably requires, for its success, the reduction of

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5 P. Dravers, "In the wake of interpretation: 'The letter! The litter!'", in L. Thurston (ed.), *Re-Inventing the Symptom: Essays on the Final Lacan*, New York: Other Press 2002: 150.

6 S. Žižek, "A leftist plea for 'Eurocentrism'", *Critical Inquiry*, 24, 4, 1998a, 988.

7 This would reconfigure the part of no part as something far more imaginable like 'the part with no part'; as an element which, if integrated, would promise a state of wholeness within. and for. the political community.

the potentially catalytic qualities of these occluded elements to the terms by which prevailing networks of association reproduce their hegemonic positions. Within this kind of scenario, the absorption of transformative energies into the prevailing patterns of domination becomes a foregone conclusion. Instead, the possibility of transformative action, and of the political organisation which will follow, depends upon attention being paid to the relationship between the content which is being staged and its place of enunciation. That is, the possibility of transformative effect depends upon attention being given to the manner by which cultural practices of representation are operating within the social field in which action is being attempted. It is to this matter that the present discussion attends.

Illustrating the points being raised for consideration by this Lacanian interpretation of political strategy, is a social movement that developed amongst illegal immigrants working in America in 2000. Their motto was “We are America”.<sup>8</sup> Their point was simple: the US economy depends upon the low-wage labour supplied by illegal immigration yet such workers are persistently marginalised, both socially and politically. They are the part of no part. The recognition that US global economic domination depends upon a class of low-wage workers whose social role cannot be acknowledged, as with the illegal migrant work-force, has the potential to provoke a thorough-going reformation in the understanding of American political economy. The social movement would retain that potential, however, only so long as it could occupy the structural position of the excluded object. That capacity depends upon its continual status as the constitutive exception to the US economy. It only took, however, a few days into the campaign before well-meaning legal activists re-articulated the issue in terms which integrated the movement firmly within the prevailing logics of liberal-capitalist rule: if the problem is that such workers cannot be recognised by US constitutional law, then the solution lies with mobilising a form of law by which such workers can indeed be recognised. The field of human rights was identified as the mode of law capable of doing so, and was advanced as the appropriate

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8 Many thanks to Chris McMillian for bringing this movement to my attention an exemplar of the ‘part of no part’. See C. McMillian, *Žižek and Communist Strategy: On the Disavowed Foundations of Global Capitalism*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2012.



solution. The response thereby became one of formulating a special kind of legal provision which would bestow upon illegal immigrants sets of social and political rights not otherwise accessible to them on account of their non-constitutional status. The part of no part now belonged and the potentially radical transformation which their presence invoked was successfully foreclosed upon.

### *Oedipus* on social order

The shift in Lacan's thoughts on the matter of social ordering, towards the role that the relation between language and the body plays in the circulation of ideas, occurs in his orientation towards the Oedipus complex. It is during this period of his work, in and around Seminar XVII, that Lacan thereby introduces in first systematised form his theory of the Four Discourses. Throughout the formative stages of Lacan's teaching, the story of Oedipus informs all crucial elements of clinical understanding: the structure of neurosis, psychosis, of perversion, and the formation of sexual identity. The operation of the psychoanalytic clinic simply could not be thought without the guiding trope of the Oedipal myth. Come Seminar XVII, however, "something unexpected happens".<sup>9</sup> Lacan begins to undermine the status held by *Oedipus* within psychoanalysis. At best it has been misdirecting psychoanalytic thought; at worst, it has been leading to clinical error.

Driving this move is a reconsideration of the terms upon which the status and the role of the Oedipal story within psychoanalysis are to be understood. Lacan had initially accorded the story with the status given to myths within the anthropology of his friend Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss' structuralist methodology had attributed the field of mythology with trans-cultural meaning. As a narrative form akin to other cultural structures, psychoanalysis was thereby understood to have been founded upon a field of trans-cultural meaning, as supplied by Freud's deploy-

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9 R. Grigg, "Beyond the Oedipus complex", in J. Clemens and R. Grigg (eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2006, 51.

ment of the Oedipal story. Lacan had never been happy with the manner in which the Oedipus complex had thereby informed clinical practice. Freud's problematic treatment of hysteria – pivoting upon the case of Dora – provided the flash point and Lacan progressively moved towards the conviction that the problem for analysis lay not with the existence of the Oedipal myth in Freudian psychoanalysis but with the founding capacity accorded to myth *per se*. Lacan instead intervened in Seminar XVII to declare Freud's act of deploying the Oedipal myth – in conjunction also with the myth of the primal horde and the murder of the father (in *Totem and Taboo*), along with that of Moses in *Moses and Monotheism* – as “Freud's dream”.<sup>10</sup> The operation of mythology within psychoanalysis is thereafter not to be understood in an anthropological manner but to, itself, be interpreted psychoanalytically.

At stake within this shift in how myth will be treated is a recalibration of a central concept which had come to be associated with the Oedipal myth: that of castration. By virtue of the shift, the notion of castration comes to gain a materiality not available to it when myth is understood as a cultural form. The association between castration and Freud's reference to Oedipus was, granted, already highly tenuous. Indeed, in neither Freud's account of Oedipus, nor in Sophocles' original, does castration figure. Lacan draws out this distinction between the complex and castration in Seminar XVII. In Lacan's reading, castration refers not to fantasy about the raging energies of a castrating father but to a “real operation” of language upon the speaking animal.<sup>11</sup> It refers to an effect upon the subject when the signifier exerts a cut upon the materiality of existence, resulting in the institution of an unassailable obstacle in the subject's access to actuality – to the enjoyment of the Other in all its *jouissance*.

With this alteration in the composition of castration, moreover, such that castration becomes a bio-anthropological fact rather than a cultural fantasy, a shift begins in the conception of ordering by which psychoanalytic intervention is to be understood. At this point, psychoanalysis and law meet, and it thereby unsurprising that Lacan begins to discuss the clinic in terms of a shift in ordering principle that occurs as myth passes from a cultural foundation of meaning to an empirical object whose appearance has to be interpreted. This shift resonates with the enlargement

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10 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 117.

11 Grigg, “Beyond the Oedipus complex”, 58.

in law which Foucault has subsequently described, as a move from the inscription of existing laws upon the body (through acts of sovereign power) to an emergence of law from within the body politic. As a consequence of this movement, the condition of being a subject comes to involve a process of self-interpellation, through which the principle of social ordering becomes installed within the human body.

For Lacan, the shift in the operation of social ordering, within the clinic, pivots upon an alteration in the status of the father – both within the Oedipal story, and as had operated in Freud’s myth of the primal horde together with the murder of the father in *Totem and Taboo*. Within the Oedipal complex, the father occupies the place of, and transmits, an existing state of legality which must be enacted even in situations where those who transgress have been thoroughly innocent with regard to their actions. The place of law alters within *Totem and Taboo*. Here, the father stands not for an existing state of law but of unabridged enjoyment. With full patriarchal power he commands all the women of the tribe, the father alone having sexual access. Pleasure thereby remains, for him, independent of social conventions or laws of any kind. His death at the hands of the sons brings about for those sons not the ability to access that enjoyment, as had been anticipated. Rather, it brings about an urge to establish a code that itemizes the prohibitions which the existence of their father had been staging in their midst. To this end, law emerges such that, in its state of emergence, it takes the form of having always already been inscribed within them. And as a creature of their own actions, this retroactively installed legality exercises a subjectivising effect not available to the mode of legality at work within the Oedipal myth: the subject, as Althusser has chillingly later observed in this respect, gains a capacity to regenerate their subjectivisation “all by themselves”.<sup>12</sup>

Lacan’s intervention with this matter of social ordering, of law, goes beyond the Foucaultian position of describing the shifting forms of legality – as we find, for example, in *Discipline and Punish*, from a sovereign legality to a bio-political form. His act of recasting the entire field from that of an anthropologically accessible domain of culture to that of a psychoanalytically analysable domain of signification and enjoyment has the effect of staging a shift in the fabric of social ordering. It is in this

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12 L. Althusser, “Ideology and ideological state apparatuses”, in J. Rivkin and M. Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 701.

context that concern with the place of the father in the Oedipal-complex and the primal-horde comes to be replaced with an interest in the role which discursive circuits play in the production of meaning.

### The *Four Discourses* talk

Lacan did not present the Four Discourses as an explanatory theory and significant implications follow for the understanding of social order. As a “*discourse without speech*” the set of discursive circuits named in the Four Discourses possesses no motive power, no force on account of whose existence it can be said to have formed.<sup>13</sup> “I am only saying this to specify”, Lacan explained, “an arrangement that has absolutely not been imposed in any way—as they say, from a certain point of view, nothing has been abstracted from reality”.<sup>14</sup> Echoing the contingent character of what is thereby being presented, “the form of letters in which we inscribe this symbolic chain [ $S_1$ ,  $S_2$ ,  $S$ , and  $a$ ] is of no great importance, provided they are distinct—this is enough for some constant relations to become clear”.<sup>15</sup> No constructivist epistemological conviction underpins this separation, on the part of Lacan, of the Four Discourses from the material reality of lived history. He had already made clear his logical objections to that kind of linguistic relativism, as was being proffered by Wittgenstein in particular.<sup>16</sup> Rather, it resonates with the inaccessibility of the figure of the sublime within modernity, as the figure of the uncanny (the *unheimlich*) had come to find itself without the material supports provided by religious thought. For the modernist subject there exists no means by which to directly access that which might transcend the individual’s existence, as religious cultural forms have long promised and towards which post-secular scientific thought now gestures. As such, no basis exists, either, upon which can be pegged the foundations of a replacement formulation for the legal principles of social ordering, in their

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13 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 12. Original emphasis.

14 *Ibid.*, 14.

15 *Ibid.*, 15.

16 See Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 59–63.

enlargement from the regimes of sovereignty to the rationalities of biopolitics.

But, for Lacan, this is the point. No basis exists for the move he performs in the presentation of the Four Discourses. This is not to say that justifications need not be given. Any foundation that comes to be proffered for the action will, however, demonstrate itself to be insufficient for the task. Caught in a deadlock between being insufficient yet normatively required, any such justification can be anticipated to inaugurate a state of repetition in their own performances. Such a state of repetition would thereby itself indicate the work of *jouissance* in the life of the ideas involved. Far from being an unproductive condition for a reformulation of understanding about social ordering, for Lacan, “the term *jouissance* enables us to show the apparatus’s point of insertion”.<sup>17</sup> The presence of repetition indicates that an act of power is operating, and the notion of *jouissance* provides a diagnostic tool for identifying the point at which a system is intervening to place social relations in (its) order.

The figure of *jouissance* poses a difficulty with regard to the meaning of knowledge, however, insofar as “we are no doubt leaving behind what knowledge authentically is, what is recognizable as knowledge”.<sup>18</sup> Instead, an alternative horizon develops around which the content of knowledge will form: “limits, to the field of those limits as such, the field that Freud’s words dared to confront”.<sup>19</sup> As an object of thought, ‘the limit’ needs to exceed the knowledge which can be constructed about it and must, if it is to remain *of* itself (a limit point), push the substance of what is said about it beyond the maxims of that content. The question of limits thus becomes a question “of leaving the system”.<sup>20</sup> This, again, was a move which Luhmann was unwilling to make in his consideration of the differentiation of representation (with his notion of ‘the environment’), but a move which Jameson understands as being germane to the prospects of, yet presently impossible within, the field of transformative ideas.

This observation does not, however, resolve the point, for the matter of the uncanny immediately reasserts itself: “Leaving it by virtue of

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17 *Ibid.*, 15.

18 *Ibid.*, 15.

19 *Ibid.*, 15.

20 *Ibid.*, 15.

what?”, Lacan asks.<sup>21</sup> Resonating again with an understanding as to the inaccessibility of the uncanny, Lacan observes that the act of departure can only be fuelled by virtue of something which the task of ordering has no need, given the instrumentality of systems. Lacan identifies that thing as ‘meaning’. Even then, however, the answer remains insufficient, given that the figure of meaning, as the part of no part, remains inaccessible in and of itself. The condition of the uncanny, by which the prospect of meaning might lure the subject with a promise of full identification, can only be apprehended amidst the failures of given meaning-effects:

It’s perhaps not the right one [meaning]. But, then, it is certain that we will find that there are many of these ‘It’s perhaps not the right one’ —the insistence of which is for us a good indication of the dimension of truth.<sup>22</sup>

What emerges, therefore – as the warrant upon whose authority the Four Discourses can be mounted – is not the specific truth-value which a given figure like ‘meaning’ might promise. Rather, what emerges is the fact of a truth in respect of which the collective state of partiality on the part of ‘meaning’ stands as testament. To this end, the Four Discourses appears in Seminar XVII as a staging of that for which it stands; that is, for the absence of a basis upon which such an act of social ordering can be authenticated.

The absence of a metaphysical basis upon which the Four Discourses might be presented, coupled with the absence of any dynamic internal to those discourses, comprise the Lacanian problematic as it relates to the matter of history. As Miller notes, Lacan’s relation to this problematic was politically liberal in kind.<sup>23</sup> The quest on the part of individuals for ontological platforms on which to stand – such as social groups or movements – never lifts, for Lacan, above being a banal act of misrecognition. Various possible emblems of identification populate the political field – moral conservatism, liberal socialism, anarchism, and so on. Each, for Lacan, merely marks, however, a kind of stabilisation of uncertainty that is itself symptomatic of an impasse of its own (symbolic) form. Such identifications promise a state of future wholeness whose

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21 *Ibid.*, 15.

22 *Ibid.*, 15.

23 Miller, quoted in S. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, London and New York. Verso 2010, 354–355.

symbolic shape never itself exceeds its constitution as an idealised image. He is not at all optimistic about the prospects for social identity of formulaic solutions such as these.

Without taking away from Lacan's sense about the misplaced character of attempts to ground identity in the social whole, Žižek finds within the Lacanian Discourses a productive condition which has the potential to produce a scale of social transformation capable of altering the coordinates of modernity: "What if, however, the collective is not merely the level of imaginary and symbolic identifications? What if, in it, we encounter the Real of antagonisms?"<sup>24</sup> – of positions where "*their difference is posited 'as such'*", presented without recourse to the mediating effect of an imagined marker of uncanny presence.<sup>25</sup>

Žižek observes in the Four Discourses a way of engendering 'the Real of antagonisms' that does not rely entirely upon the invoking of some or other collectivist imagery. In so doing, the approach has the potential to bypasses the step of identification with a named cause or political demand, so frequently assumed to be elemental to Leftist politics (around the rights of workers, women, indigenous peoples, the environment, and so on); and which has the potential to slide into populism, if not fascism and totalitarianism. His approach works upon the "historicity" of the discourses.<sup>26</sup>

## Modernity as the *Four Discourses*

Central to Žižek's historicisation of the discourses is the identification of an "inner tension" within the discourse of the university.<sup>27</sup> The externalisation of that tension produces the two primary sources of domination that occur in modernity:

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24 *Ibid.*, 355.

25 S. Žižek, "Objet a in social links", in J. Clements and R. Grigg (eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2006b, 111. Original emphasis.

26 *Ibid.*, 108–118.

27 *Ibid.*, 108.

capitalism, and its integration of an illimitable consumerist desire; and the bureaucratic ‘totalitarianism’ conceptualised in different guises as the rule of technology, of instrumental reason, of bio-politics, and as the ‘administered world’.<sup>28</sup>

These two elements appear in the discourse of the university as, respectively, the upper and lower levels of the formula:

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \quad \frac{a}{S}$$

At the upper level,  $S_2 \rightarrow a$  displays the operation of capitalism: a process of continual self-generation as the performative excess left over from work comes to be integrated back into “the ‘normal’ functioning of the social link” (through the commodification of labour).<sup>29</sup> The rise of the knowledge economy (of informational capitalism), exemplifies this well, insofar as the regulation of immaterial labour and its associated creativity becomes integral to the operation of the production of wealth. Such regulation provides an easily accessible means by which the raw performativity with which the subject is otherwise left, in their production of knowledge, is integrated back into (and contained by) the system. To this end, Žižek notes, “the true ‘permanent revolution’ is already capitalism itself”.<sup>30</sup>

At the lower level of the discourse,  $S_1 \leftarrow S$  denotes the operation of post-political administration.  $S_1$  functions here as a disavowed power that never fully discloses itself in the administrative effects it produces within people, thereby remaining forever of a kind in which the subject continually fails to recognise themselves, and yet by which s/he feels propelled.

Between the two levels, and the forms of social control they respectively express (the logic of capital; bio-political administration), there can be no reconciliation: “there is no metalanguage enabling us to translate the logic of domination back into the capitalist reproduction-through-excess, or vice versa”.<sup>31</sup> How, then, is the relationship between them to be understood, such that a traversal of the complex framework

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28 *Ibid.*, 108–109.

29 *Ibid.*, 110.

30 *Ibid.*, 110.

31 *Ibid.*, 109.



might be enacted and for the disciplinary discursive circuits of modernity to be exceeded?

Drawing attention to the operation of *objet a* within the Four Discourses – that emblem of performative excess which can never be fully integrated within social practices – Žižek notes the ambiguous form it takes within the Lacanian field. And it will be on the basis of that ambiguity that Žižek will script a form of political engagement that draws simultaneously upon both the operation in university discourse of  $S_2$  (of self-regenerating knowledge), and upon  $S_1$  (on the principle of an organising, though inscrutable, master principle). Moreover, he will pay special attention to the movements of signification which each implies, which are the movements of sublimation (in the case of a banal semblance being elevated to the status of the sublime) and desublimation (in the case of a privileged semblance being diminished to the status of the banal). Žižek will come to gesture towards this simultaneous impress of sublimation and desublimation upon objects as a signifying movement of “radical desublimation”.<sup>32</sup> In another guise, this dynamic will appear as “the parallax gap”, noted earlier.<sup>33</sup> The value of radical desublimation’s linguistic character (over the visual connotation of the parallax gap) lies with the attention it draws to the discursive movement of ideas, and to the potentially transformative effects of ideas which stage the simultaneous movements of sublimation and desublimation.

Illustrative of this pincer movement of sublimation and desublimation, for Žižek, and hence of radical desublimation, has been Franz Kafka’s parting offering to literature as he died; his essay “Josephine the Mouse, of the Mouse Folk”.<sup>34</sup> In the same manner by which the Gothic aesthetic heralded the plight of the uncanny within Enlightenment Europe, so too does the literary object of Kafka’s essay gesture toward the utopianism of radical desublimation.

‘Josephine’ presents a utopian image of community, of life shared without coercion, manipulation, or mysticism. The unifying principle of

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32 S. Žižek, *On Belief*, London and New York: Routledge 2001a, 89.

33 See S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press 2006a.

34 First published as *Ein Hungerkünstler*, Berlin: Verlag Die Schmiede 1924. For Žižek’s analysis of “Josephine”, see Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 366–371. See also F. Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, New York: Columbia University Press 1994, 123–128.

this utopianism does not emerge, in Kafka's story, as a simple object, person, principle, or thing. It does not appear in a manner such that it could be narrated, identified, and analysed. That said, the figure of a unifying One does partially appear in this way, to the extent that, in the story, the person of Josephine exists. Also, however, a utopian figure manifests as a haunting of the story by a trace left from Josephine's subsequent departure from the narrative, with her central role in the story paradoxically having no defining impact upon the overall trajectory of the story-line. As much, therefore, as the figure of Josephine plays a central organising function in the narrative, that role also has the status of having no essential part in the storyline. The One, the principle of utopian coherence, thereby shows itself to be that part of no part: *objet a*.

Josephine sings. That is her part in the community. Her singing has a profound effect on her kin, comforting them amidst the continual threats and toils which they endure:

Our life is very uneasy [explains the narrator], every day brings surprises, apprehensions, hopes, and terrors, so that it would be impossible for a single individual to bear it all did he not always have by day and night the support of his fellows: but even so it often becomes very difficult: frequently as many as a thousand shoulders are trembling under a burden that was really meant only for one pair. Then Josephine holds that her time has come.

And the masses crowd about her. Josephine, however, cannot sing. Her voice sounds with the timidity of a hollow pipe in the wind.

So there she stands, the delicate creature, shaken by vibrations especially below the breastbone, so that one feels anxious for her [...]. So it seems to us, but this impression, although inevitable, is yet fleeting and transient. We too are soon sunk in the feeling of the mass, which, warmly pressed body to body, listens with indrawn breath; [listening to] the solemn stillness enclosing her frail little voice.

Despite the fact that the community widely recognises the fragility of Josephine and the musical insignificance of her voice, Josephine believes her singing to be the force which holds the people together. In her mind it is Josephine alone who defends the very possibility of community. She takes the responsibility seriously, such that she demands recognition by being exempted from all other work. Always a strategist, moreover, she cajoles and mobilises others to speak on her behalf. All these demands find themselves met, however, by simple understanding and quiet re-

fusal, by a state of indifference which is proper to the egalitarian sensibility of the community.

In an ultimate act of manipulation, Josephine disappears at a time when she was supposed to sing. “That happened a day or two ago”, the narrator continues. Poignant, at this potentially traumatic point, is the response of the mouse-folk. What becomes apparent in this response is that Josephine had no ultimate significance to the community, at the same time as her role had been central to the life of the people. The narrator describes the paradox:

Despite the significant role that Josephine has played, she is a small episode in the eternal history of our people, and the people will get over the loss of her. Not that it will be easy for us; how can our gatherings take place in utter silence. Still, were they not silent even when Josephine was present? So perhaps we shall not miss her so very much after all, while Josephine [...] will happily lose herself in the numberless throng of heroes of our people, and soon [...] will rise to the heights of redemption and be forgotten like all her brothers.

For Kafka, then, Josephine comprises for the mouse-folk the part of no part: the nodal point through which a sense of community recreates itself and yet which, simultaneously – and much to Josephine’s miscalculation – has no foundational role in the life of the community. The figure of Josephine thereby operates as the emblem of utopian coherence, as a consequence of being in a state of simultaneous sublimation and desublimation: her obvious role in bringing the mouse-people together in times of danger slides down into a recognition as to her obvious lack of musical talent, at the same time as her all too apparent ‘humanity’ lifts her to a state of redemption in the process of joining the numberless throng of forgotten heroes.

On the basis of this initial observation about the ambiguities of *objet a* and of their play within radical desublimation, Žižek’s work suggests a definition of institutionalised politics. Moreover, it is against this definition which progress in the development of a transformative kind of knowledge production will be measured: institutional politics represents a collective effort to eradicate the unruliness of *objet a* from social relations and, in the discursive space opened up by that suppression of radical ambiguity, emblems are formulated by which subjects can achieve states of full identification and psychological cohesion (the Nation, the Market, God, Gaia, Apple, the Green Movement, and so very many more).

Moreover, it is with regard to the status of *objet a* within radical thought that the prospects of political movements can also be evaluated. By this means, Žižek identifies two trends within the critique of late capitalism that have the effect of, regressively, seeking an eradication of *a*. The first of these, associated with the work of Hardt and Negri, creates a chain of equivalence between the figures of democracy, the multitude, and the immaterial labour of late (informational) capitalism:

The wager of Hardt and Negri is that [...] directly socialised, immaterial production not only renders owners progressively superfluous [...] the producers also master the regulation of social space, since social relations (politics) is the stuff of their work [...]. The way is thus open for ‘absolute democracy’, for the producers directly regulating their social relations without even the detour of democratic representation.<sup>35</sup>

Rather than enable democratic politics to move forward, the analysis heralds – for Žižek – what appears to be the opposite of democracy: a “most radical sort of depolititization”, of a condition of “postpolitics” where there exists no principle in terms of which, or in opposition to which, subjectivity functions.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the proposal appears to mimic, for Žižek, a mistake of Marx, insofar as the notion of a fully self-regulating, creative populous comprises “the ultimate capitalist fantasy”, of a condition of self-generation which finds itself unleashed with the removal of its primary obstacle, of *a* (the surplus-value of capital materialised as private ownership).<sup>37</sup> “No”, says Žižek: under such conditions (of ‘direct democracy’) there will always emerge an underbelly of informal regulation by which ‘the people’ will find itself confounded.

In contrast to the dynamic which passes from sublimation to desublimation, as found in the work of Hardt and Negri around the figure of democracy, the opposite dynamic can be observed, for Žižek, in the work of Laclau and Mouffe. Echoing a motto of Edward Bernstein – “goal is nothing, movement is all” – successful inhabitation of the political would appear to require that the space of antagonism and the struggle for hegemony be sustained completely, such that no singular principle might

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35 Žižek, “*Objet a* in social links”, 119–120.

36 *Ibid.*, 120.

37 *Ibid.*, 121.

emerge for the organisation of that field (such as “absolute democracy”).<sup>38</sup>

On the face of it, the act of sustaining an open space would appear to involve a desire for the unfettered operation of *a*, rather than its dissolution; standing as *a* does for the excess upon which a perpetual space of social antagonism depends. Laclau and Mouffe understand, however, the significance of universalism for the maintenance of such a space, such that social struggles remain simultaneously containable and self-generating. While universality cannot be realised in itself, each and every struggle for hegemony presumes the existence of a universal horizon; with the category of the universal acting as an empty container which is itself hegemonised by some or other localised set of political claims. Each moment in which the universal comes to be contained by a particularistic political position, however, sees *a* dissolve. To draw out the salient point here, for Žižek; Laclau and Mouffe’s position depends upon a periodically necessary loss of *objet a* (in contrast to its removal, as with Hardt and Negri’s position). At such points, the spectre of strong regulatory powers – which Laclau and Mouffe chide – might nevertheless emerge as a necessary condition for the movement of radical democracy. Žižek hopes for something else.

A specific challenge emerges with regard to Žižek’s own strategy. That challenge turns upon the question of how the figure of *objet a* might be engaged. Any attempt to present *objet a* as being central to political life risks the two very same problems which Žižek associates with the works of Laclau & Mouffe and Hardt & Negri: the full incorporation of *objet a*, which will paradoxically result in its periodic loss; or its exclusion fully from analysis which will result in a depletion of subjectivity (respectively). Contrary to these positions on the status of *objet a*, Žižek resists the temptation to reduce the field of knowledge ( $S_2$ ) to the operation of a master signifier ( $S_1$ ) – as he interprets Hardt & Negri – or of the universality of  $S_1$  to a particularistic point of identification (coming from the field of  $S_2$ ), as per the work of Laclau & Mouffe. The ambiguity in *objet a* which Žižek seeks to deploy, instead, resides – and in a topographical sense – within the gap which opens between the two levels of the discourse of the university, between  $S_2 \rightarrow a$  and  $S_1 \leftarrow \mathcal{S}$ . Accentuating the gap to which he is thereby pointing, Žižek notes that “the difference

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38 It is this same ‘error’ which Žižek would accuse Stavrakakis of committing.

between  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  is [...] not the difference of two opposed poles within the same field".<sup>39</sup> That difference is not of a kind which results in a new big idea, crafted from a synthetic knitting of the opposition between the two poles.

At stake here is the character of  $S_1$ , the master signifier, the agent responsible for the inaugural cut in material reality that sets in motion the plays of knowledge: of classification, categorisation, coding, and the associated narrative strategies of explanation, description, reportage, and so on. To this end, the appearance of the two emblems of symbolisation within the same field (of  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ ) does not take the form of a simple dualism or dichotomy. Rather, to cite the full quotation begun above, the

difference between  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  is thus not the difference of two opposed poles within the same field, but, rather, the cut within this field – the cut at the level at which the process occurs – inherent to one term.

The cut itself, inaugurated by the operation of the master signifier upon the treasure trove of signifiers, is itself the point of difference between  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ . This is the point of difference that is internal to the figure of Josephine, which sees the two semblances of her slide simultaneously towards the banal (she brings the community together in her singing yet she cannot sing) and the sublime (she rises in her 'humanity' to a state of redemption by joining the numberless throng of forgotten heroes).

Central to the use of the ambiguity in *objet a* for enhancing the transformative effect of ideas, for Žižek, is how the master signifier operates within late modern social formations. That operation is now marked by the production of a surplus that can never be fully integrated by the consumptive and cultural performances of those formations. In Žižek's analysis, two contemporary processes of late modernity have been responsible for this reshaping of how the master signifier operates: the emergence of a cultural capitalism, and of risk society.<sup>40</sup> Cultural capitalism refers to a form of economic exchange in which consumers experience a redemptive moment in their acts of consumption, which has the effect of offsetting any ethical concerns which might otherwise arise about the association of over-developed and consumption-based western

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39 S. Žižek "The structure of domination today: a Lacanian view", *Studies in East European Thought*, 56, 4, 2004, 393.

40 Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 360.

life styles with increasing rates of global poverty, climate change, and so on. To this end, the guiding maxim of cultural capitalism becomes quite simple: “the very act of participating in consumerist activity is simultaneously presented as a participation in the struggle against the evils ultimately caused by capitalist consumption”.<sup>41</sup> The effect upon subjectivity reaches beyond the fact of the subject being caught in this contradiction. Rather, it lies with the manner in which this most elemental, but inescapable, fact of life about existence in market-based societies produces a “surplus-charge of meaning with which our lives are burdened”: it becomes impossible to “drink a cup of coffee or buy a pair of shoes without being reminded that your act is overdetermined by ecology, poverty, and so on”.<sup>42</sup>

In an associated register, the state of personal choice has also come to be overdetermined by forces outside the realm of subjective experience and for which no authorities or discourses exist of sufficient address to guide the individual in their states of concern. Ulrich Beck’s insights are informative here, for Žižek. They indicate how subjects are now routinely drawn into the space of having to make assessments about problematic outcomes of scientific activity, for which scientific methodology itself can offer no insights:

we are forced to choose without having at our disposal the kind of knowledge that would enable us to make a proper choice – more precisely, what renders us unable to act is not the fact that we ‘don’t yet know enough’ [about whether, say, a fossil-fuel economy is really responsible for global warming] but, on the contrary, the fact that we know too much *while not knowing what to do* with this mass of inconsistent knowledge.<sup>43</sup>

Such developments, operating as much now in the domain of bio-politics as in capital, unleash “a power that is not that of mastery”, a power that is not “proper to the exercise of knowledge as such”.<sup>44</sup>

Under the impress of that power, of a power which echoes a superego injunction of ‘more, yet more’, the signifier slices into reality in a manner that multiplies surfaces without stabilising meaning. The cut inaugurated by the movement of the signifier does not take the form of a

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41 *Ibid.*, 356.

42 *Ibid.*, 357.

43 *Ibid.*, 360. Original emphasis.

44 *Ibid.*, 360.

cut which occurs “within this, or within that” – “neither the penis, nor the mother, nor anything else for that matter”.<sup>45</sup> As Dany Nobus continues, for Lacan the cutting effect of the signifier

does not cut off, away, or through: it simply *cuts*, as one would say about a sharp knife, or, indeed, a thought-provoking text, a mind-blowing performance, or an innovative creating (one at the ‘cutting edge’).<sup>46</sup>

The significance of the cut thereby goes beyond the kind of vital subjective capacities which the quotation from Lacan might imply. In the state of cutting anew, the signifier creates new surfaces within the field of material reality in respect of which that signifier operates as a unifying force, and through which subjectivity might stabilise. Moreover, as will be reiterated by Althusser, below, such a movement in the operation of the signifier has historical conditions of existence which exceed the capacities of concrete individuals. At best, the individual subject is able to go along for the ride.

While the operation of the signifier in this manner has long characterised human relations – as with the operation of comedy<sup>47</sup> – its re-emergence with the new administrative forms of late modernity (such as cultural capitalism, finance capitalism, and the risk society) produces a new set of material conditions for the practice of radical desublimation. These new material conditions give rise to a range of effects related to the operation of the signifier, primary amongst these being a diminished ability on the part of the subject, as Jameson puts it, to map their place in relation to the now global totality of social life.<sup>48</sup> Nowhere is this sense of ceaseless overdetermination of the self any more evident, Žižek adds, than the domain which goes by the name of globalisation. At the very point at which ‘globalisation’ comes to mean something, it also bursts in an explosion of images of the phenomenon, at the very same time as its effects reconfigure the meaning of the social spaces from which the global is being interpreted. It is in the context of a totality such as this,

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45 D. Nobus, “Illiterature”, in L. Thurston (ed.), *Re-Inventing the Symptom: Essays on the Late Lacan*, New York: Other Press 2002: 30.

46 *Ibid.*, 30.

47 See A. Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press 2003.

48 F. Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism”, *New Left Review*, 146 (July/August), 89.



which appears to spiral away in meaning from the lived experiences of localised individuals in the very act of its being enunciated, that raw violence erupts – of immigrant-bashing, self-mutilation, and so on. The enacting of such violence operates, for Žižek, as a means by which to contain at the level of subjectivity an immeasurable reality which has now come too close to lived experience. Motivating the raw violence currently being exhibited across advanced industrial cultures, then, is not a desire to get closer to reality, as if reality has been progressively rendered inaccessible by the floss and gloss of contemporary consumerist culture. Rather, violence in such a primal state appears because reality – as that which exceeds all knowledge-claims being made about it, true or otherwise – has come too close. Violence, here, becomes a fantasmatic means by which the drive associated with that reality can be kept at bay.

## Not less fantasy but more

As the central mechanism by which the subject manages the overdetermination produced within late capitalism, fantasy incubates an alternative form of transformative politics. Central to an envisioning of such a politics is the task of understanding how fantasy might produce for the subject, through the ambiguity of *objet a*, a new relationship with enjoyment (another *jouissance*). Our interest here lies with how another production of knowledge might thereby operate. Key, in this regard, is the form which fantasy might take under radical desublimation, and of where and how it might manifest.

Žižek's Lacanian influences derive their interest in fantasy from Freud, Freud having asserted that early childhood sexualised memories (of 'seduction') can be the effect of fantasy – of unconscious desire – rather than the traces of actually-existing sexual abuse. To this end, in Freud's account, fantasy is radically opposed to reality. When Lacan engages with this element of Freud, this opposition between reality/fiction dissolves and fantasy comes to be ascribed a defensive function: fantasy defends the subject from the condition of impossibility which haunts the subject's attempts to map the boundaries between its talk and material reality. It thereby defends subjectivity from what would

otherwise be an unmediated, and therefore traumatic, confrontation with *objet a*. To this end, fantasy functions as a mechanism “by which the subject sustains himself at the level of his vanishing desire”.<sup>49</sup> The kernel of this defensive role lies with the *mathème* which Lacan derives for fantasy from the ‘graph of desire’:  $\$ \diamond a$ .<sup>50</sup> That *mathème* draws attention to the manner by which subjectivity persists because of a relation that exists with *objet a*. Moreover, it signals that there exists a relation of some kind – of ‘ $\diamond$ ’ – which protects subjectivity from having to directly address the impossible question of, amongst other existential imponderables, what is required of him/her. That there exist a number of different clinical structures in addition to neurosis, had suggested – for Lacan – that the structure of fantasy will alter in relation to each structure. To this end, for example, the clinical structure of ‘perversity’ (as compared to neurosis) sees an inversion in the *mathème*:  $a \diamond \$$ .

Moving from the psychological domain of clinical structure (and of the formation of psyches), to the social arena of discursive circuits and their formation of social bonds, the Four Discourses also invoke the *mathème* of desire. This can be seen immediately in the lower level of the master’s discourse:

$$\frac{S_1 \rightarrow S_2}{\$ (\diamond) a}$$

Moreover, the divergences which exist in the structures of the four circuits of the Discourses indicate a degree of variability in the form which fantasy can take. It is this variability which can inform how alternatively transformative processes of knowledge production might operate, including that of radical desublimation.

Like Lacan before him, Žižek emphasises the defensive role that fantasy plays in sustaining subjectivity. Fantasy creates a buffer between the ideological frameworks which enable the construction of various projects – and through which social relationships come to take reasonably durable forms – and the (unsymbolisable) end in respect of which that urge to order is oriented. Fantasy manifests as various sets of unwrit-

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49 J. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, London: Tavistock 1977, 272.

50 The ‘graph of desire’ is a pictorial representation of the psyche through which Lacan had initially mapped the clinical structure of (normal human) neurosis.

ten rules which, from one angle, appear to undermine the logic of those projects. These supplementary rules constitute the reality, however, of the ideological formations, being “the truth” about those formations which always “is out there”.<sup>51</sup> Such rules have the function of giving material force to the domain of ideology, which would otherwise remain in a purely symbolic state and without any tractive influence upon subjectivity. Moreover, those rules protect the projects from potentially ‘realising themselves’ and thereby protect the subject from any confrontation with the unbearable lightness of the unsymbolisable absence which constitutes their existential end. From the vantage point of the projects and their respective discursive forms, those unwritten rules are always ‘obscene’, evoking the body in its erotically charged states.<sup>52</sup> In that pornographic manner noted by Jameson, they replace the narrative of progressive development – as is projected by various socio-economic programmes – with one of a movement of events which has a gossamer thin semblance of meaning. In light of their obscene nature, moreover, behaviour which accords with those unwritten rules is always officially punished when it comes to light, at the same time as being tacitly approved.<sup>53</sup>

One final point follows about fantasy: the torsion between public ideologies and their obscene supplements prevents meaning from clotting around those objects which the ideologies have presented as their rallying points for collective action (of ‘community’, ‘the State’, ‘mar-

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51 S. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London and New York: Verso 1997, 5.

52 See, for example: S. Žižek, “Why does the law need an obscene supplement?”, in P. Goodrich and D. G. Carlson (eds.), *Law and the Postmodern Mind: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Jurisprudence*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1998b, 75–98.

53 At the time of writing, my own country of New Zealand is again wracked by news of illegal activities of our secret service agencies. The operation of such agencies provide endless material for the analysis of obscene supplementary rules as a socio-political phenomenon (see W. Tie, “Radical politics, utopia, and political policing”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 14, 3, 2009, 253–279). Repeatedly, the publication of such activities ends in a ritualistic sanctioning of the agents/agencies involved in the name of ‘accountability’ (court cases, Commissions of Inquiry, etc.). The ritualism of such sanctions is, in Žižek’s terms, the element which secures the obscenity. While everything appears to be put up for questioning about the operation of the system, the logic of that system – and the performative idiom of secret policing through which ‘order’ itself is repeatedly again put in motion – remains the same.

kets', 'God', 'science', and so on). Rather than take empirical form, such objects shift in their constitution such that they "cannot be pinned down to a specific positive symbolic feature" of themselves.<sup>54</sup> As a consequence, each and every object being sought for its abilities to bring people together (community, State, market, etc.) reveals itself to be potentially that dislocatory part which is no part, that element which is capable of figuration only through an abstracted algebraic form – the little *a*.

In a twist to this operation of fantasy, any given object which is held to be the motivating force in the organisation of an ideological edifice – of nationalism, workerism, community identity and so on – only ever emerges at the point at which the ideology suggests that object has been lost (for example, of religious or cultural traditions that have been marginalised by the secular liberalism of modernity), or stolen (by a – typically ethnic – other). Fantasy thereby indicates that such an edifice – *objet a* – had never been available for possession in the first place. The paradox within this situation is

that when a certain historical moment is (mis)perceived as the moment of loss of some quality, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the lost quality emerged only at this very moment of its alleged loss [...]. The immediate object lost in reflection 'only *comes to be* through being *left behind*'.<sup>55</sup>

To this end, by way of anecdotal experience, the ideological edifice presented by a large fundamentalist church in my home city is characterised by the recurring injunction given by the head pastor to apply its set of literalist biblical lessons in ways that "keep it a little bit naughty".<sup>56</sup> In addition to inserting a buffer between subjectivity and the inability of individuals to personally experience the full meaning of the Biblical message (which always ultimately lies beyond the grave), fantasy motivates the subject by invoking a patina of choice. That choice initially manifests at the level of the biblical teaching: humans are morally autonomous beings who demonstrate that autonomy by practicing the act of choice. The ultimate act of choice is, however, singular, a "forced

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54 Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 23.

55 Ibid., 12–13. Original emphasis.

56 As an exemplar of this, see <<http://lifenz.org/church/groups/>> accessed 10 September 2012.

choice”, as Lacan put it – “*le père ou pire*” (“the Father or worse”):<sup>57</sup> there is only one option of any value and it involves an unyielding obedience to the will of the divine being. The injunction to ‘keep it a little bit naughty’ reinvests that domain of choice, however, by shifting its location to somewhere within the field of personal action. It does so in a manner, moreover, which appears to re-instate the subject with a practical ability to choose. Within a fundamentalist environment, however, such a field of choice is of course a non-choice as any outworking of that permission, through sexually licentious acts or the adoption of a cocaine habit, for example, is sure to draw institutional rebuke. To this end, the defensive role being played by fantasy has the effect of sustaining existing patterns of social interaction and power, in that it “simultaneously closes the actual span of choices [...] and maintains the false opening”.<sup>58</sup>

Where a field of abstraction is operating under the movement of radical desublimation – as with Kafka’s image of *utopia* in ‘Josephine’ – the constitution of fantasy alters yet again. In graphical terms, fantasy comes to be splayed within the circulation of discourse across the locations of ‘the object’ (top right-hand quadrant) and ‘the product’ of discourse (bottom right-hand quadrant). Most significantly, for the form which fantasy will then take within radical desublimation, *objet a* comes to occupy the place of ‘the object’ as motivated by the manifold field of knowledge ( $S_2$ ) that sits in the place of the agent:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} S_2 & \rightarrow & a \\ \hline & & \diamond \\ S_1 & \leftarrow & \mathcal{S} \end{array}$$

Sited thus, under the impress of late capitalism, the condition of ambiguity that characterises *objet a* gains a kind of institutional durability. Under these conditions – of symbolic differentiation, as Luhmann calls it – *a* is enabled to “modulate”, as Jameson expresses the point, “into identical yet distinct spaces”.<sup>59</sup> Žižek suggests also, in this regard, that it is

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57 By this term, Lacan was referring to the manner in which the subject’s ability to speak comes at the cost of being bound by the strictures imposed by the symbolic order. See S. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom, Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, London and New York: Routledge 2001b, 74–77.

58 Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 29. Original emphasis.

59 F. Jameson, “Lacan and the Dialectic”, in S. Žižek (ed.), *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, London and New York: Verso 2006, 388.

only within the discourse of the university – and under the twin logics of late capitalism and post-political administration, thereby – that this ambiguity in the constitution of *objet a* enables transformative possibilities to emerge in the production of ideas.<sup>60</sup>

A misperception has emerged, however, to Žižek’s mind, as to the character of that ambiguity. It is one which needs to be addressed in order for the transformative potential of radical desublimation to be sustained. That misperception presents *objet a* as the paradox noted above, wherein *a* is seen to overlap with its own loss, to emerge only when loss of a material object is registered. Motivating this movement is the continually relapsing urgency of desire: “in the case of *objet a* as the object cause of *desire*, we have an object which coincides with its own loss, which emerges as lost”.<sup>61</sup> Rather, for Žižek, the “true” ambiguity of *objet a* emerges when, as within the discourse of the university, *objet a* “is directly the loss itself” and a transit occurs from “the lost object to loss itself as an object”.<sup>62</sup> Freed from any necessary connection with material objects, *objet a* thereby behaves under the impress of its own contingency. While this notion might appear strange at first sight, the same idea underlies quantum physics (the principle of ‘quantum superposition’): electrons are routinely presupposed to exist simultaneously in all possible states (spinning in opposite directions at the same time, existing simultaneously in two locations) and only the human act of measurement establishes any given electron as existing in a single state.

As a consequence of this shift in the constitution of *objet a* within the discourse of the university, whereby the ambiguity of *objet a* obtains a durable form within the differentiation of representation that now characterises the culture of late capitalism, a new movement becomes possible in the operation of fantasy. Its protective function, whereby fantasy shields the subject from confrontation with the absence that constitutes the meaning of the particular class of objects for which the subject longs, morphs as *objet a* begins to stir simultaneously in movements of sublimation and desublimation. Fantasy thereby finds its durability established not only in the state of lack, and in the subject’s need of defend itself through the physical operation of desire, but also within the condi-

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60 Žižek, “*Objet a* in social links”, 116–117.

61 *Ibid.*, 117.

62 *Ibid.*, 116–117. Original emphasis.

tion of overdetermination produced by the movement of radical desublimation. As indicated by Kafka, the movement constitutes a shift in the class of object around which political community might congeal. That object can still be given a proper name, which is not to say, however, that it can be represented. And to this end, Josephine's function in corralling the mouse-people in the face of danger (her proper name) slips down into a shared realisation that she has absolutely no musical talent; at the same time as her all too apparent humanity elevates her to a state of salvation, beyond representation, in the process of her being absorbed into the numberless throng of forgotten heroes.





## 7 For the love of water

The issue of freshwater might appear a long way removed from fantasy, *jouissance*, and their shared potential to re-sculpt the production of transformative ideas in practices of radical desublimation. Freshwater and its management cannot be divorced, however, from any concrete scenario within which the discursive space of *utopia* might be reformulated. Put bluntly, the sustaining of all organic life, even of a utopian kind, requires access to fresh water. As hermeneutic as the goal of this particular project might thereby appear to be – to rethink the place of *utopia* – it has as one of its material preconditions regular trips to the drinking-tap. To this end, as apparently remote as the textual consideration of *utopia* might be to the issue of water, the matter flows consistently through and around its construction. For this brace of reasons, the issue of freshwater management makes an excellent staging post at which to rest the movement of argument and to consider what that argument might thus far mean in physical terms.

Within the domestic context of Aotearoa/ New Zealand, the matter of water – of its accessibility and its quality – has come to be routinely framed in terms of ‘freshwater management’. This language appears to have become *de rigueur* for the analysis of water supply, also, within the broader global context of territorial governance; as issues of water scarcity and pollution come to recur with systematic regularity. In the immediate context of Aotearoa/ New Zealand, however, the idea that freshwater is an object which requires professional management emerges as quizzical, given the international projection of the country as “Clean and Green”.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to this image, however, scientific evidence accumulates of river water quality being “at great risk of impairment [...] because of pervasive land-use changes” wherein, at a national scale, levels

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1 For a report by the New Zealand Ministry for the Environment on the ‘Clean and Green’ image, and of its economic significance for the country, see New Zealand Ministry for the Environment, August 2001, *Our Clean Green Image: What’s it Worth?* <<http://www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/sus-dev/clean-green-image-value-aug01/index.htm>> accessed 17 April 2012.

of faecal matter and run-off from organic fertilizers exceed “the guidelines recommended for the protection of aquatic ecosystems and human health”.<sup>2</sup>

The heavily compromised condition of ground water in New Zealand, coupled with the signifier of ‘freshwater’ by which the local state of groundwater is made governable, points to the presence of an abiding paradox that constitutes the field of governance now called New Zealand’s ‘freshwater management’: the need for management of an element whose signifier denotes it as being already in a pristine state (that is, ‘fresh’), indicates that the said state no longer exists. At some point, and we need not be too fussy about pinning that moment down, a condition has emerged within ground water that indicates the presence of social and industrial processes which have compromised the quality attributed to fresh water.

In the context of Aotearoa/ New Zealand, the various governmental responses that have been made to the comprised quality of ground water each have the effect of reproducing the paradox. Moreover, they do so with no possibility of altering the circularity involved: the management of freshwater assumes a state of compromised quality. At work within – and providing the conditions for – this circularity is the modality of discursive circulation associated with ‘the university’. To traverse the circularity involved requires something like the traversal of the discourse of the university, and the hermeneutic work of radical desublimation.

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2 S. T. Larned, M. R. Scarsbrook, N. J. Snelder, and B. J. F. Biggs, “Water quality in low-elevation streams and rivers of New Zealand: recent state and trends in contrasting land-cover classes”, *New Zealand Journal of Marine and Freshwater Research*, 38, 2004, 347. This issue also received coverage in the *New York Times* in relation to New Zealand’s tourism industry. See *New York Times*, 16 November 2012, “New Zealand’s green tourism push clashes with realities”, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/17/business/global/new-zealands-green-tourism-push-clashes-with-realities.html?pagewanted=all>> accessed 10 December 2012.

## A local history of freshwater

Governance of water reserves has, in the local context, followed closely the British tradition of “town and country planning”.<sup>3</sup> That tradition sought, through instruments of deliberate government intervention, a kind of mediation between bio-social needs and the land-use requirements of capitalist development. As a consequence of that negotiation, it was envisaged, the uneven distributions that had developed across regions of infrastructural development in the course of the colonisation of Aotearoa/ New Zealand would be eased.<sup>4</sup> From the 1940s onwards, this produced in a diverse set of 59 legislative acts, regulations and government orders overseeing the environmental impacts of capitalist development.

Two countervailing sets of interests emerged during the 1980s in critique of the bureaucratically complex regulatory milieu which had thereby developed: the neo-classical economic movement (the so-called ‘New Right’) and environmentalism. For the capitalist business sector, the prevailing arrangements had become overly cumbersome and inflexible for the kinds of development required for the continuation of individualised profit accumulation. More particularly, those arrangements contained various loopholes by which environmental lobbyists could effectively delay private developments. From the perspective of environmentalists, alternatively, the legislative architecture produced an insufficiently coherent approach to planning – a “piecemeal top-down”<sup>5</sup> – which produced two unsettling effects: fragmentation between the policies and practices of the governmental agencies that were charged with responsibility for environmental protection; and recurring public conflict over development projects that would impact adversely upon the man-

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3 P. A. Memon and B. J. Glesson, “Towards a new planning paradigm? Reflections on New Zealand’s Resource Management Act”, *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 22, 1995, 110.

4 Kirk, quoted in Memon and Glesson, “Towards a new planning paradigm?”, 111.

5 P. R. Berke, J. Crawford, J. Dixon and N., Erickson “Do cooperative environmental planning mandates produce good plans? Empirical results from the New Zealand experience”, *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 26, 1999, 643.

agement of natural resources.<sup>6</sup> The key demand from the environmental lobby was that the principle of sustainability should be enshrined in legislation.<sup>7</sup> In keeping with a long history of pragmatic accommodation of antagonistic socio-political interests by successive governments, and that had come to characterise the colonial capitalism of Aotearoa/ New Zealand, the critiques mounted by these contrary movements together prompted a cross-sectorial impetus for legislative reform.

After three years of public debate, the large archive of statutory provisions was replaced by a single piece of legislation: the Resource Management Act 1991. The new Act – commonly called ‘the RMA’ – reflected the prevailing neoliberal mood of the time. It fashioned environmental decision-making instruments in ways which emulated the logic of market forces. Emblematic of that move was the devolution of decision-making about local environmental goods from government to the localities in which decisions had to be made. A common device for that devolution was the production of co-operative mandates (systems of “co-governance”) which would operate across various levels of territorial governance.<sup>8</sup> To this end the RMA contains, as one of its elements, generous provisions for public participation in the production of plans for the management of regional and local environments. Also guiding the development of the Act has been a principle for the governance of resource allocation (and use) that would surpass the prevailing highly-politicised atmosphere of conflict mediation which had prevailed: a notion of sustainable management was thereby advanced in which all stakeholders would theoretically find their interests reflected.<sup>9</sup>

The defining neoliberal characteristic of the new Act was not simply this devolution, however, but a sedimentation within the management of

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6 O. Furusest and C. Cocklin, “Regional perspectives on resource policy: implementing sustainable management in New Zealand”, *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 38, 2, 1995, 182.

7 B. J. Gleeson, “The commodification of resource consent in New Zealand”, *New Zealand Geographer*, 51, 1, 1995, 43.

8 A. Jonas and G. Bridge, “Governing nature: the re-regulation of resources, land-use planning, and nature conservation”, *Social Science Quarterly*, 84, 4, 2003. See also Berke *etal.*, “Do cooperative environmental planning mandates produce good plans?”

9 As promoted by the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development: (the *Brundtland Report*).

environmental issues of hegemonic beliefs in the natural state of private property and in the efficiency of market-mediated relations in managing the distribution of ownership. Fuelling this perception has been the Act's resonance with economic libertarianism, in the sense that RMA aims "to promote flexible and streamlined free-market solutions to environmental problems".<sup>10</sup> To this end, the Act came to insist "that planning be reconstituted in a manner that would facilitate rather than hinder development".<sup>11</sup> Central to this notion of facilitation is a shift which the RMA inaugurates, from the regulation of development practices, *per se*, to a regulation of the *effects* of development.

Laudably, on the one hand, this shift requires that development projects take into consideration the possible effects which alterations to the environment will visit upon future generations. As to how that kind of calculation might be made, given the inability of the future to be categorically represented in the present, is unclear. Of more immediate critical significance, however, is the manner by which the sense of sustainability, as projected by the Act, marginalises any consideration of issues around economic equity and social inequality within the planning process. No account is given to the different levels of economic and social resource that parties bring to the planning process.<sup>12</sup> To this end, the notion of sustainability as crafted within the RMA comes out looking like a "carefully circumscribed" one,<sup>13</sup> reflecting the long history of political accommodations within New Zealand by which the private accumulation of capital has been favoured over the collective protection of environmental commons.

In conjunction with the legislative reform, key institutional measures were enacted in the lead up to the Act's introduction, which saw the separation of previously entwined government responsibilities. Most nota-

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10 Berke *et al.*, "Do cooperative environmental planning mandates produce good plans?", 643–644.

11 Gleeson, "The commodification of resource consent in New Zealand", 42.

12 This issue has emerged as being significant with regard to the international field of environmental policy-making more generally, given the dependence of the global sustainability programme upon the distribution of wealth to disadvantaged political communities. See United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*, <<http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/42/ares42-187.htm>> accessed 9 April 2012.

13 Gleeson, "The commodification of resource consent in New Zealand", 43.

bly, responsibilities for environmental protection and management were separated from responsibilities for resource development (around energy and forestry resources, in particular, and in conjunction with the management of government-owned land).<sup>14</sup> Accountability for the related tasks of protection and management was thereafter installed across three new government bodies: the Ministry for the Environment; the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment; and the Department of Conservation.

In conjunction with this recalibration of the agencies exercising national oversight, the RMA inaugurated a set of interlocking responsibilities between national, regional, and local governmental authorities. Statements of national policy, concerning the management of coastal, freshwater, land, and air resources, are required from those agencies of central government charged with protecting and managing the environment. These policies take the form of National Policy Statements (NPS). Regional authorities are then mandated to craft regional plans which canvas resource-management matters germane to their jurisdiction, and to do so with reference to those National Policy Statements. These matters tend to relate to natural hazards in the region, the management of water and soil, and so on. And, finally, district and city councils are primed to generate plans governing local use of land, the regulation of noise, etc.

Of interest for our present discussion is the fact that the regional authorities created through the RMA correspond to zones of freshwater catchment, underscoring the centrality of freshwater management to the discursive architecture of the Act as a whole. Of additional significance for this discussion will be the onus placed upon central government, by the legislation, to produce National Policy Statements on various elements of the environment, including freshwater.

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14 See Furuseth and Cocklin, "Regional perspectives on resource policy", 182.

## Contemporary commentary on the RMA

Four styles of interpretation have come to circulate in the wake of the Act's inauguration, resonating with the modes of social bond articulated by Lacan. The discursive power of each, of their abilities to sustain the manner of environmental regulation in their own terms, lies not simply with the content which they canvas about the RMA (as germane to the matter of freshwater management as that content indeed proves to be). Rather, that power lays with the particular kind of relationship which each establishes between language and the body, with the states of troubling pleasure whose resolution each promises with the next articulation of the issue at hand.

The most prevalent style of commentary is one which mimics the bio-political character of the Act itself, that functions through the modality of discursive circulation which Lacan called university discourse. These commentaries suggest improvements to a range of operational matters whose present state of underdevelopment risks the effectiveness of the legislation. Several issues get canvassed: a low capacity on the part of regional planning processes to effectively convey to government the insufficient administrative abilities of regional authorities to sustainably manage natural resources;<sup>15</sup> the limited abilities of regional and district processes to engender public participation in the task of assessing the environmental impacts of developments;<sup>16</sup> the proclivity of government to reactively amend the RMA in the face of one-off issues rather than ensure that the full planning capacities of the Act are utilised;<sup>17</sup> the need to ensure that regional authorities have the research and administrative capacities to fulfil their particular responsibilities with regard to the monitoring of freshwater reserves;<sup>18</sup> and the underdeveloped capacities of regional and district authorities to construct planning reports of suffi-

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15 *Ibid.*, 182.

16 R. Morgan, "Progress with implementing the environmental assessment requirements of the Resource Management Act in New Zealand", *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 38, 3, 1994, 333–348.

17 C. Kilner, "The RMA under review: a case study of Project Aqua", *Political Science*, 58, 2, 2006, 29–41.

18 R. Beanland and L. J. Brown, "Water purity due to good luck, not management", *Planning Quarterly*, 114, June, 1994, 9–11.

cient quality to ensure the effective management of environmental resources.<sup>19</sup>

Characteristic of university discourse is the operation of a power which, as Zupančič observes,

disavows its performative dimension [in that] it always presents [...] that which leads to a political decision, founded on power [‘public polls, objective reports, and so on’], as a simple insight into the factual state of things.<sup>20</sup>

That power manifests, in Lacan’s schema, as the figure of the Master Signifier ( $S_1$ ) sitting beneath and commanding the field of knowledge ( $S_2$ ), without any reference available as to its identity:

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \quad \frac{a}{S}$$

Emblematic in this regard is the report by a consortium of academic planners (Berke *et al.*) on the effectiveness of the RMA’s cooperative planning mandate.<sup>21</sup> Their focus is the production, through a ‘cooperative’ process, of ‘good plans’ (as compared to the kinds of plans which emerge through ‘coercive’, ‘consensus-building’, and ‘conjoint’ planning processes). The clarity with which the purpose of the paper is stated belies the opaque character of the move by which the notion of ‘a good plan’ becomes the privileged object. The operation of power by which that object gets installed, as the preferred indicator of successful cooperative planning, occurs by way of the following innocuous statement:

Assertions have been made about the advantages of cooperative mandates, but evidence to substantiate how they influence the quality of local plans is not available [...]. Our study is aimed to fill this gap.<sup>22</sup>

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19 Berke *et al.*, “Do cooperative environmental planning mandates produce good plans?”.

20 A. Zupančič, “When surplus enjoyment meets surplus value”, in J. Clements and R. Griggs (eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2006, 168.

21 Berke *et al.*, “Do cooperative environmental planning mandates produce good plans?”.

22 *Ibid.*, 644.



The figure of ‘quality of local plans’ materialises in this context *as if* their production *is* the defining element of co-operative decision making. As such, the production of plans emerges in the very same discursive space within which a material referent of that planning process might be expected to appear (of some empirical measure of ecological health). Instead, that which is taken to be an effect of the process of cooperative planning – the good plan – comes to be tautologically inserted as the primary cause of that same process.

Resonating with this performative exercise of power – which reduces questions about the relationship between humans and the environment to technical matters about decision-making and their bureaucratic outputs – the report pursues an ever-finer calibration of the organisational means by which environmental protection plans come into being. Towards this end, the report prescriptively lists a set of tasks to enhance the production of ‘good quality plans’: adequate education of regional and local authorities in RMA; the simplification of the language used in the Act; greater assistance from central government agencies for regional and district authorities in the drafting of plans; and so on. Each of these recommendations make good sense, insofar as they stand to enhance the clarity of what gets said in the regulation of human activity in relation to ecological processes. The knowledge which sustains the productivity of the ideas being produced operates only obliquely, however, to the materiality of the environment for which the plans are required. Indeed, questions about the relationship between humans and the environment are thereby further reduced to technical matters around the production of planning processes for the regulation of that relationship.

As with the discourse of the university in general, the productivity of this kind of discourse doesn’t lie simply with the image of objectivity which it projects. Indeed, such work *begs* questions about where the ‘object’ of the RMA – the environment – has gone (relative to the attention being placed upon decision-making processes). Rather, the productivity of the discourse – its capacity to sustain the matter of freshwater management within its own technocratic terms – lies with the manner by which those reading the report (let alone writing it) find themselves interpolated. A particular kind of lure operates here: authorship of such work promises to produce a capacity to step outside the technical means by which the knowledge is being produced. As indicated, however, the research is characterised by tautology (that which is taken to be the effect

has been inserted as the cause). The process of producing knowledge about ‘the good plan’ promises to place the writer in a commanding position outside that tautology at the same time as it sustains their inhabitation within it. It is the troubling pleasure (*jouissance*) associated with the lure of getting beyond, while remaining fully within the tautology, which drives the work: it promises to produce, for the author and those who believe the report, the status of being the subject-supposed-to-know in respect of environmental relations. The *jouissance* being produced thereby locks the subject in the circuitry of the university discourse and anticipates the production of yet more knowledge which promises yet further (technical) mastery. Whatever value that might lie with the act of planning is at risk of being waylaid by the troubling pleasures which the mode of discursive circulation inaugurates.

A second, though smaller, genre of academic commentary focusses on the space of the master signifier which animates the RMA (in Lacan’s terminology, the figure of  $S_1$ ). Two signifiers which have appeared in that space have attracted particular attention of critical commentators: economic libertarianism,<sup>23</sup> and the continuing colonial form of New Zealand’s law-making.<sup>24</sup> This form of commentary – which in Lacanian terms represents an hysterical circulation of discourse – proves to be extraordinarily effective in expanding the field of knowledge about the operation of the RMA. To this end, for example, Brendon Gleeson brings to light a recondite dimension of the Act, concerning the implications for “social justice” of the “liberalised planning” procedures of the new regulatory mechanism.<sup>25</sup> Indicative of the issues which he raises for consideration is the commodification of resource consents that the RMA now enables, and of the naturalisation of market-relations as the basis for maximising the movement between user-groups of such consents.

A similar outcome pertains to Jacinta Ruru’s analysis of legal mechanisms. For Ruru, the RMA lacks the political gravitas necessary to provide the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa/ New Zealand (Māori) with vehicles to enact the proto-constitutional rights granted to them for the

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23 Gleeson, “The commodification of resource consent in New Zealand”, 42–48.

24 J. Ruru, “Undefined and unresolved: exploring indigenous rights in Aotearoa New Zealand’s freshwater legal regime”, *The Journal of Water Law*, 20, 5–6 2009, 236–242.

25 Gleeson, “The commodification of resource consent in New Zealand”, 42.

exercise of governance over freshwater resources by the *Treaty of Waitangi*.<sup>26</sup> The analysis usefully identifies a deadlock between the subject-position made available to Māori through that treaty with the Crown, and the constitutionally diminished subject position made available through the legislative provisions: between Māori as “Treaty partners” and as economic “stakeholders”.<sup>27</sup>

As Lacan’s Four Discourses suggest, the truth of knowledge which is developed in conjunction with this particular pattern of discursive circulation resides with the marker of discursive indeterminacy in the symbolic order, with the little object *a*:

$$\frac{\mathcal{S}}{a} \quad \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

As a consequence of *a*’s presence in that place of ‘truth’, no particular outcome can be envisaged from this kind of analyses, nor is one particularly anticipated. The act of commentary thereby finds itself easily absolved of responsibility for its analytic process in respect of the deadlock Māori find themselves, thrown between ‘Treaty partner’ and ‘stakeholder’ and without any institutional lever capable of producing change. Indicative of this condition are the concluding statements in the argument by Ruru:

It is encouraging that the current New Zealand Government recognises that there exist both a challenge and an opportunity better to define and resolve Māori rights and interests in water. But in reforming water management and allocation models, the law needs to do something more than simply acknowledging that water is important to Māori. Māori need to be recognised as Treaty partners, not merely stakeholders, and thus have rights to influence the decision-making concerning all aspects of water take and use. *The issue is now critical for resolution*.<sup>28</sup>

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26 The Treaty of Waitangi comprises the agreement signed in 1840 between various Māori tribal authorities and the British Crown, enabling settlement of Aotearoa/ New Zealand by British subjects. This issue has gained considerable significance, as this text goes to print, in relation to the incumbent government seeking to partially privatise State owned hydro-electric power companies before the matter of indigenous rights to water have been legally defined.

27 Ruru, “Undefined and unresolved”, 242.

28 *Ibid.*, 242. Emphasis added.

On the one hand the statement appears to make clear what needs to happen: Māori need to be elevated from the status of one amongst many stakeholders to that of full constitutional (Treaty) partner in the management of water. Cutting across this claim, however, and providing a state of minimal distance from the injunction being presented, is the last statement. The abstract form of expression used, that the issue ‘is now critical for resolution’, displaces the matter of Māori’s status relative to the Crown (and to other social interests) into a time/space to which the act of commentary has no access and for which it cannot be held responsible. As Žižek had noted in respect of the *Indignados*, this way of talking “do[es] no[t] (yet) claim that no one will do it for them [Māori], that (to paraphrase Gandhi) they themselves have to be the change they want to see”.<sup>29</sup> Responsibility here, for bringing about such a resolution, effectively passes to some anticipated Other whose intervention will suture the gap between the existing situation and the idealised response. And to this end, as Zupančič notes of this kind of speech, the commentary operates as “guardian of the negative, of the incommensurable and the impossible”.<sup>30</sup> This practice of projecting commentary into an inaccessible, and therefore immediately impossible space, has the potential to waylay analysis with a troubling pleasure that alienates it from the otherwise transformative potential of what is being said.

A third style of critical engagement with the RMA operates by way of a discursive circulation that Lacan had called the analyst: by a position that appears to be without any substantive social interests of its own. Its goal is to identify the dynamics of desire which lie latent within the subject material – here, freshwater and its management – which have been prohibited from expression by the discursive realities which the historical practices of freshwater management have produced. As the likes of Žižek and Kristeva have indicated, this kind of intellectual capability is, however, unsustainable for the contemporary subject outside of reifying processes which congeal apparently transformative ideas into packages

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29 S. Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, London and New York: Verso 2012, 79; J. Kristeva, *Powers of Freedom: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press 1982, 210.

30 A. Zupančič, “When surplus enjoyment meets surplus value”, in J. Clemens and R. Griggs (eds.) *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Duke University Press: Durham and London 2006: 167.

of instrumental thought.<sup>31</sup> Rephrasing the point, the subject finds it difficult to sustain itself in the kind of disinterested state suggested by the figure of the analyst, outside of the mediating function performed by some or other logic. As such, the position of the analyst can only intermittently be achieved: it can never reach the state of a full subject position, of a position by which the subject can experience themselves as being fully and completely that of ‘the analyst’.

In terms of academic critique, the position of the analyst can be maintained through the deployment of some or other analytical strategy for the advancing of critical insight – of desire, power, undecidability, belief, and so on. Two themes of this kind have appeared in the analysis of New Zealand’s Resource Management Act: an incalculable “*gamble on the other*”;<sup>32</sup> and a “planning for the Others’ desire”.<sup>33</sup> The first of these emerges from a perception that existing mechanisms for the sustainable management of the environment depend upon legally-inscribed ‘logics of death and sacrifice’, and that an incalculable ‘gamble on the other’ could bring about an ethical condition of ‘reciprocity/hospitality’ towards the environment. The second points to a rigidity that characterises the field of resource management on account of an assumption of ‘certainty’ that pervades environmental legislation, and that an ethos of ‘planning for the Others’ desire’ would enable moments of ‘intuitive performance—virtuosity’ to instead occur.

Traction for these critiques doesn’t come from where it might be expected, from the content of the two themes being deployed. To be clear, I personally warm to both. Ironically, however, in both cases the ability for critique to operate as a catalyst without any substantive interests of its own depends upon its analytic strategies obtaining solid form (here, the concepts of ‘hospitality’ and ‘virtuosity’). The process of critical commentary can only operate to the extent to which those strategies are reified by the act of critique itself.

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31 See, for example, S. Žižek, “The structure of domination today: a Lacanian view”, *Studies in East European Thought*, 56, 2004, 383–403.

32 R. Arnoux, R. Dawson, and M. O’Conner, “The logics of death and sacrifice in the resource management law reforms of Aotearoa/ New Zealand”, *Journal of Economic Issues*, 27, 4 1993, 1081–1082. Original emphasis.

33 M. Gunder, “Passionate planning for the Others’ desire: an agonistic response to the dark side of planning”, *Progress in Planning*, 60, 2003, 243–244.

This outcome is implied by Lacan's *mathème* for the discourse of the analyst. Within that schema, the production of new knowledge gives rise to a new master signifier ( $S_1$ ). This signifier has all the appearance of an organising principle but, however, is structurally impotent, being the mere effect of the analytic process and anchored by the (split) subject:

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \quad \frac{S}{S_1}$$

The ability of critical commentaries of this kind to remain in circulation comes to depend upon a paradox: such concepts need to be readily recognised as constructions of the analytic abstraction involved, at the same time as those concepts need to pertain to a concrete situation outside them so as to be made durable.<sup>34</sup> It is this impossibility which generates the particular kind of troubling pleasure (*jouissance*) which drives the reproduction of such critique, and which sustains the semblance of the analyst in the absence of a subject-supposed-to-know.

One last form of analysis has emerged in respect of commentary on the RMA, operating in the manner of the discourse of the master. Itself a minor approach to the mapping of freshwater management – relative to those of the university, the hysteric, and the analyst – it argues for the establishment of a non-governmental, ethical figurehead that could oversee the field of resource management. It thereby argues, literally, for a new Master. Just one instance of this form of analysis has emerged in respect of the RMA – an argument for “Guardians of the Environment”.<sup>35</sup> Building upon the notion of a constitutional separation of powers, which in Aotearoa/ New Zealand encompasses not only a separation of police and judicial functions from the executive, but also of its key economic institution (the Reserve Bank); the Guardians would operate free of direct governmental oversight. “Uncommon quality and temper”, coupled with “the rare combination of balance and vision” on the part of

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34 This resonates, also, with the situation of McLennan and Osborne's ‘modified romanticism’. In the cases being discussed here, the ‘concrete situation’ to which the analysis is being indexed appears to be a condition of legitimacy that is tacitly ascribed to the authorial sources of ‘hospitality’ and ‘virtuosity’: to the names of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, respectively.

35 J. Morton, “The future of New Zealand conservation: ethics and politics”, *Pacific Conservation Biology*, 2, 1995, 2.

incumbents would ensure that popular subordination would follow to the “courageous decisions” of this “special race” of individuals on matters of environmental sustainability.<sup>36</sup>

The productivity of the knowledge that comes to be generated through this final pattern of discursive circulation does not lie with the strength of its recommendations (for an *uber*-class of environmental guardians). Rather, it lies with the relationship with exists between the position of authorship and the envisaged Master (the “Collegium”).<sup>37</sup> Within that relationship, the productive capacities demonstrated by the author in the presentation of the argument for the Collegium becomes surplus to the requirements of that body: the skills that the Collegium will require of its members concern abilities to defend the environment rather than to generate innovative knowledge about constitutional arrangements, as the paper itself exhibits. And to this end, the authorial performativity through which the recommendations themselves emerge, with its capacity to develop knowledge that outstrips the human capacities needed by the Collegium to function, become simultaneously activated in and rendered redundant through the writing. And it is the allure of this difficulty (the *jouissance* of the argument), rather than the proposal for a ‘guardianship of the environment’, that sustains movement within and of the argument. Fittingly then, given the excess which that authorial moment poses for its own argument, evidence of the paradox emerges by way of a completely gestural statement with which the essay closes: there exists a kind of work to be undertaken around the protection of the environment in which not even the recommended guardians, with all their regulatory architectures, their lines of accountability, administration of tenure, and more besides, can engage. This work takes the form of a *practice* of analysis around problems that lack conceivable (immediately intelligible) solutions. The writing thereby creates in its last breath a container for the performativity of its own production, fittingly doing so (given the excessive character of its own performance) without comment, explication, or justification: citing for inspiration the thoughts of J. K. Galbraith, the writing finishes – “It is possible that some conflicts are irreconcilable in principle but not in practice”.<sup>38</sup>

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36 *Ibid.*, 6.

37 *Ibid.*, 6.

38 *Ibid.*, 6.

Each of these four modes of commentary share a single characteristic: each engages in the criticism of existing environmental-protection policies and practices through modes of discursive circulation which produce, and are sustained by, forms of *jouissance* that lock the generation of knowledge within their own orbits. If transformative variants were sought from each of these approaches, the repertoire of possibilities would be all too easily predictable: a tautological quest for reflexive research methodologies to escape the bio-political effects of university discourse (as visited upon both research subjects and researchers alike); the emergence of a new set of knowledge-claims about the management of freshwater as a truth upon which new positions of (apparently) self-generating political activism can be built (class warriors/ indigenous peoples); the emergence of new 'reflective' analytic strategies that sit beyond critique and which thereby become containers from which undisclosed acts of power can be further enacted; and master-plans which are beset by *aporia* which the operationalisation thereof seeks to unsuccessfully contain. None of these trajectories escapes the patterns of discursive circulation from whence they emanate. As a consequence, moreover, this field of analyses of freshwater and its management closes in upon itself, alienating those who would use them from the transformative potential of the ideas involved.

The task of traversing this predictable set of trajectories will see analysis seek out alternative forms of *jouissance* from within the discursive architecture of freshwater management. Hosting discussion on how this engagement of a different genre of troubling pleasure might proceed is the document that has come to structure the governance of freshwater management in New Zealand: the *National Policy Statement on Freshwater*.

### The special case of the *NPS on Freshwater*

Movement towards a state of 'integrated management' of freshwater has become a central goal of New Zealand environmental governance, and has followed two trajectories within the regulatory environment created by the RMA. The first of these has seen attempts to develop cross-



sectorial collaborative management projects within designated groundwater catchment areas. Two, particularly, have received considerable academic attention: the Taieri catchment area in Otago<sup>39</sup> and the Motueka catchment in the Nelson area.<sup>40</sup> In addition, two projects unrelated to specific regional locations have attempted to create models for mapping the development of integrated management (of freshwater) across New Zealand as a whole. The first of these later projects (operated by the New Zealand Landcare Trust and funded, for the period 2003–2004, by the New Zealand Ministry for the Environment) has attempted to facilitate the transfer of knowledge between practitioners and clients of regional planning services, about integrated forms of groundwater management.<sup>41</sup> The second of these non-geographically based endeavours, driven by the Environmental Management Department of Lincoln University, sought to address a range of generic planning problems experienced at the catchment level: the adverse impacts of economically embedded intensive farm-production processes upon land and water; the difficulties associated with balancing interests between in-stream and out-of-stream water-users; the insufficiency of national-level problem solving mechanisms for the addressing of localised needs; and the requirement by Māori for involvement in the management of water resources.<sup>42</sup>

A recurring outcome of these various projects across the two trajectories (spatial and thematic) has been the formulation, in each case, of a methodology that promises to enact a sustainable and integrated form of groundwater management. Somewhat predictably, given the divergent regions and purposes for which each project was instituted, each venture created for its methodology a unique set of co-ordinates, each with a

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39 M. Parkes and R. Panelli, “Integrating catchment ecosystems and community health: the value of participatory action research”, *Ecosystem Health*, 7, 2, 2001, 85–106.

40 A. Fenemor, N. Deans, T. Davie, J. Dymond, M. Kilvington, C. Philips, L. Basher, P. Gillespie, R. Young, J. Sinner, G. Harmsworth, M. Atkinson, and R. Smith, “Collaboration and modelling – tools for integration in the Motueka catchment, New Zealand”, *Water SA*, 34, 4 2008, 448–455.

41 N. Edgar, *ICM Project Final Report on the ‘Integrated Catchment Management: Sharing Best Practice Nationally’ Project*. Prepared for the New Zealand Landcare Trust and the New Zealand Ministry for the Environment, June 2004.

42 A. Memon, B. Painter, and E. Weber, “Enhancing potential for integrated catchment management in New Zealand: a multi-scalar, strategic perspective”, *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management*, 17, 1, 2010, 35–44.

distinctive name. In this manner, for example, the ‘Taieri Plains project’ sought not only to create a framework for managing the flows and withdrawals of water from rivers in that catchment area, but attempted to develop that knowledge in conjunction with an understanding of ‘community health’ in that region. Water quality and the quality of community health were thereby positioned as dialectical twins for the production of knowledge.

In a similar manner, the ‘Motueka project’ has sought to integrate technical knowledge about bio-physical processes in that particular catchment area with an extensive range of collaborative initiatives. The desired outcome has been the involvement of the various ‘stakeholder’ groups in the pursuit of sustainable management policies and practices. Together, these technical and social elements constitute an analytic device that has attracted the technical-sounding name of Integrated Dynamic Environmental Assessment System (IDEAS).<sup>43</sup>

Alternatively again, the project coming out of Lincoln University argues for a methodology whose co-ordinates are purely spatial in kind (rather than cognitive and social).<sup>44</sup> Indicating the geographical orientation of the project’s architects, the methodology pivots upon a ‘multi-scalar’ form of modelling – involving scales of globalisation, the national space, regions, and catchments. Grafted on to this, also, are non-spatial sets of interests – of Māori and various networks of collaboration – and of regulatory mechanisms awaiting development.

Over and above each of these projects is an umbrella programme of the New Zealand Landcare Trust that has come to be known as Integrated Catchment Management (ICM). This programme attempts to subsume each of the above methodologies within its own logic. In recognition of the diversity involved in those various projects, the ICM Project of Landcare has instituted a meta-method for containing and giving expression to the diverse kinds of knowledge being produced; of what has come to be called ICM Information Management.

A series of observations in and from these various sites suggests the operation of a power that Lacan associates with the discourse of the university. The managers of ICM, to begin, note a pattern of resistance to

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43 Fenemor *et al.*, “Collaboration and modelling,” 453.

44 Memon, “Enhancing potentiation for integrated catchment management in New Zealand”.

their framework from the various water-users whom the designers had initially envisaged as clients. Emblematically, the chief architect of the ICM Information Management system vents considerable frustration when describing attempts to create local buy-in to the concept of integrated catchment management:

My experience with the ICM Project indicates to me a lack of community and agency understanding of the concept of integrated environmental management. This has resulted in considerable time engaging in trying to define ICM, in trying to explain its value and power.

Although such discussion can be informative, it can also take up a great deal of time and energy, with the potential to further overwhelm the audience! Some simple acceptance of ICM as a construct, open to interpretation regarding its scope and application, would reduce the amount of time spent debating semantics and intangible philosophies [...].<sup>45</sup>

Less directly, the IDEAS programme within the Motueka catchment district has encountered similar kinds of resistance. The extensive mechanisms that were developed to produce a collaborative form of decision-making between stakeholders (“collaborative learning”)<sup>46</sup> has been less successful than the model had predicted. Despite trialling twelve various approaches for enhancing that communication (from the development of formal ‘Reference and Learning’ groups, to *hui*,<sup>47</sup> to workshops, to on-line fora, and so on) resistance repeatedly emerged towards the goal of producing shared knowledge and toward the inducing of “commitment of resource users towards sustainable resource management”.<sup>48</sup> Expectations that the model might resolve conflict around competing interests relating to the meaning, and practices, of sustainable water management appear to have dissolved. Bluntly, the model “does not provide [such] a framework for conflict resolution”.<sup>49</sup> You can apparently get a water-user to visit the collaborative trough but you can’t make them drink.

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45 Edgar, “ICM project final report on the ‘Integrated Catchment Management: Sharing Best Practice Nationally’ project”, 32.

46 Fenemor *et al.*, “Collaboration and modelling”, 448.

47 *Hui* are a forum used by Māori to debate issues of collective significance.

48 Fenemor *et al.*, “Collaboration and modelling”, 451.

49 *Ibid.*, 454.

Reflection on the Taireri catchment project by the architects of that project raises another source of resistance which indicates the ‘university’ character of the discursive circuit by which ideas are being produced: that of the architects themselves:

As well as advocating for integrated, participatory, and equitable approaches to inquiry and problem solving, researchers and decision-makers also carry a responsibility to recognize, value, and develop the tacit skills required for the practice of boundary crossing—both in themselves and others.<sup>50</sup>

Quite apparently, the act of moving across the fields of biological science and social science – in addition to traversing the range of university, governmental, business, and ‘community’ interests – does not come naturally. Researchers must be inducted into the practices of ethical engagement with the other, in order that they act in responsible ways. The Aristotelian character of this recommendation – that practice will make perfect – suggests that the subject-positions within the research process are as much a product of methodology as will be any of the research findings that are generated. To this end, the discussion continues, “(n)ot least are *the skills* of listening, critical reflection, humor, and humility that are often essential to genuinely reflexive, innovative, and evaluative processes”.<sup>51</sup> The act of presenting subjective states such as humor and humility as technical skills that need to be learned and strategically deployed demonstrates an important point about the way in which this process of knowledge production is functioning here: it filters questions about the management of freshwater through a research methodology that has the effect of configuring subjectivity as a kind of empty vessel, as a site which requires a bio-political re-configuration in order for it to be made productive. Indeed, the statements quoted here comprise statements of bio-political administration at their purest.

The second of the national-level trajectories through which an integrated approach to freshwater management has developed – in addition to these regionally-located programmes – has involved the construction of the *National Policy Statement on Freshwater*. In a precursory move in the development of that text, the incumbent government engaged an in-

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50 Parkes and Panelli, “Integrating catchment ecosystems and community health”, 102.

51 *Ibid.*, 102–103. Emphasis added.

dependent think-tank to advise on possible content for, and administrative directions of, the statement. That body was the *Land and Water Forum*.

Birthered in 2008 at the annual conference of a group called the Environmental Defence Society, the Forum had emerged as a non-statutory and collaborative collection of business, environmental, and recreational interests that sought to inform national debate on land and water usage. In time the membership would reach over sixty agencies. The growth in the range of interests which came to be expressed in that membership prompted a change from the initial title of the forum, from that of ‘Sustainable Land Use Forum’, to ‘Land and Water Forum’. Informing the establishment of the group were stories of success about Scandinavian experiences in the development of collaborative models of decision-making. That prospect of success was coupled with a hope that such processes would neutralise the highly adversarial forms of engagement which had emerged over water resource allocation in Aotearoa/ New Zealand during the preceding decades. In apparent recognition of the social standing and intellectual capability of the Forum, the incumbent government authorised the group to prepare a document – *A Fresh Start for Fresh Water* – which would inform its own policy on freshwater management.<sup>52</sup>

Two well-circulated documents had set the terms with which the Forum would deliberate on water. The first of these comprised a voluntary code of compliance (an ‘Accord’) between the leading dairy-industry cooperative of Aotearoa/ New Zealand (Fonterra), regional councils, the Ministry for the Environment, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.<sup>53</sup> Propelling the need for such a document were a number of widely agreed upon assumptions about the relationship between the dairy industry of Aotearoa/ New Zealand and freshwater quality and quantity:<sup>54</sup> dairying comprises 11% of total industrial land-use; it produces 20% of the total export earnings of Aotearoa/ New Zealand; and the in-

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52 Land and Water Forum, *Report of the Land and Water Forum: A Fresh Start for Fresh Water*. Wellington: Land and Water Forum 2010.

53 New Zealand Ministry for the Environment, *Dairying and Clean Streams Accord: Between Fonterra Co-operative Group, Regional Councils, Ministry for the Environment, and Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries*, Wellington: New Zealand Government 2003.

54 *Ibid.*, 1.

creasingly intensive character of dairying activity is disproportionately responsible for increasing levels of nitrate in one third of the freshwater sites monitored by the Ministry for the Environment (from the use of artificial fertilisers and the run-off of effluent). As of 2008, 5% of ground water sites had levels of nitrate that exceeded health-related drinking-water guidelines and the presence of *E. Coli* (from faecal contamination) was registering at 23% of the monitored sites.<sup>55</sup> The Accord had established targets for water quality that would enable the waterways of Aotearoa/ New Zealand to be “suitable” for fish, livestock, and human use.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the Accord established that the pursuit of these targets by members of the dairy industry – relating to the exclusion of cattle from streams, the appropriate treatment and discharge of effluent, and so on – was to be on a voluntary basis only.

A second document inhabiting the discursive territory in which the Forum’s work would grow, is a discussion paper from the incumbent government on the environment – *A Bluegreen Vision for New Zealand*.<sup>57</sup> With regard to the paper’s discussion of freshwater (in contrast to air, soil, coastal areas, and so on), solutions to problems of deteriorating quantity (understood in terms of rates of water-flow) and of quality (understood in terms of the management of soil erosion, single-point discharges and non-source pollution – typically nutrient run-off from farms) were presented in terms of national policies and standards. This was overtly the case with regard to the issue of water quantity (for which measurements such as rate-of-flow are easily established) and implicitly so with regard to the matter of quality (which was presented in terms of “milestones” which would be monitored through to the point of their achievement).<sup>58</sup>

Characterising the report of the Land and Water Forum on the management of freshwater is an overt recommendation that binding national

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55 Ministry for the Environment, *Our Water: Groundwater Quality*, <[http:// www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/ser/groundwater-quality-info-sheet/index.html](http://www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/ser/groundwater-quality-info-sheet/index.html)> accessed 23 August 2011.

56 Ministry for the Environment, *Dairying and Clean Streams Accord*, 1.

57 New Zealand Government, *A Bluegreen Vision for New Zealand*, Wellington: New Zealand Government 2006. The notion of ‘Bluegreen’ in the title plays upon the colours associated, respectively, with the Conservative identity of the incumbent government (blue) and the environmental movement (green).

58 *Ibid.*, 12–15.

standards on water quantity and quality be established by the State. Such standards are presented as a means by which to address the problems which forum members understood as being constitutive of the challenges around the governance of water. These problems included: the absence of limits with regard to the allocation of finite water resources; the absence of processes for collaboratively setting limits; insufficient regional policy and governance of water resources; an absence of scientific and cultural knowledge about the complexities of freshwater flows; and an underinvestment in infrastructure for the delivery of freshwater. To this end, the opening recommendation of the report is for the establishment of standards: “we need limits and standards and targets” with regard to the quality of water.<sup>59</sup> These would “provide certainty and inform resource users and regulatory authorities if and when a waterbody has been fully allocated”.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, tangible standards would provide a mechanism by which to determine “whether objectives are being attained and thus [determine whether] proper monitoring of the effectiveness of plan provisions” is occurring.<sup>61</sup> To this end, a set of national objectives was called for, a set which could operate as a “directive tool”.<sup>62</sup> The report points to the provision within the RMA for the establishment of a category of enforceable elements which could achieve that outcome: a mechanism called National Environmental Standards (NESs). It is something like these standards to which the Government’s Bluegreen report appeared to be gesturing, and which the Ministry of the Environment had already been using in its own determinations of freshwater health.

Immediately upon specifying the need for a standardising tool that could provide “a mechanism for consistent rules or processes” (for the protection of water quantity and quality),<sup>63</sup> the report curtails the reach, and potentially universalising implications, of that very suggestion. Quantifiable standards, the report directs, nevertheless have to be contextualised in terms of a set of discursive variables – of “national needs, values and objectives” – and to be always applied “taking account of the needs and values and objectives of communities”.<sup>64</sup> Quite apparently, the

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59 Land and Water Forum, *A Freshstart for Freshwater*, ix.

60 *Ibid.*, 18.

61 *Ibid.*, 22.

62 *Ibid.*, 46.

63 *Ibid.*, 46.

64 *Ibid.*, 18.

sense of objectivity which might normally be associated with standardisation means something else here. The presence of this non-objective element gathers gravitas where it might be least expected, in the report's consideration of scientific tools required for the development of knowledge appropriate for the process.

To be clear, the report says in one breath, "(e)ffective water management can only be achieved with quality science and knowledge".<sup>65</sup> In another, however, the knowledge which emerges in conjunction with the experimental method needs to be considered in conjunction with the cultural knowledge of the country's indigenous peoples, from Māori's "living relationship with freshwater" and "the respective cosmologies of each iwi [tribe]".<sup>66</sup> The epistemological distance between the scientific practices of the State and those of Māori has indeed emerged as an object of inquiry in recent years, revealing a state of profound tension animated by claims that scientific methodology contributes to an on-going colonisation of Māori.<sup>67</sup> The reports of the Land and Water Forum remain silent on the politics of this issue, however, as it does on the unresolved debate regarding the relative merits of scientific and Māori epistemologies in the development of knowledge about the natural environment.<sup>68</sup>

These challenging issues are set to one side in the Forum's *A Fresh Start for Freshwater*, as special value comes to be accorded to the idea of 'collaborative decision making'. Indicating the intention of this emphasis, the Report suggests that a "collaborative approach to water management helps people work towards resolutions, identify innovative solutions, or agree compromises together".<sup>69</sup> While not a "panacea to all water management issues", the mechanism of collaboration provides a

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65 *Ibid.*, 54.

66 *Ibid.*, 9.

67 See L. T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, London and Dunedin: Zed Books; University of Otago Press 1999; J. Graham, "Kia ū kia mau ki tō Maoritanga: a whakapapa (genealogical) approach to research", *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, 1, 6, 2007, 57–67; E. Henry and H. Pene, "Kaupapa Maori: locating indigenous ontology, epistemology and methodology in the academy", *Organization*, 8, 2, 2001, 234–242; E. McKinley, "Brown bodies, white coats: postcolonialism, Maori women and science", *Discourse*, 26, 4, 2005, 481–496.

68 On this matter of cross-cultural environmental research in New Zealand, see the special volume of *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 39, 4, 2009.

69 Land and Water Forum, *A Fresh Start for Fresh Water*, 48.



platform of decision-making to occur both within the structures provided by the Resource Management Act and, outside those structures, enabling “communities working together to get positive outcomes”.<sup>70</sup>

The communitarian character of such commitments not only provides a means by which the future might be made manageable through the administrative mechanisms available in the present. It also masks the socio-political power at work in the Forum’s production of knowledge in this manner. The operation of this power, coupled with a simultaneous disavowal of its operation, becomes most apparent in the discussion into which the Forum report moves. That discussion reframes the matter of freshwater management in terms of a dualism between the universality of water quality standards and the particularistic social values by which standards will be administered by local councils: to this end, “(l)ocal objectives for each catchment are [to be] identified by the community to protect and enhance values which are important to them”.<sup>71</sup>

So far, so good: the prescriptive character of national standards is to be balanced with the pragmatism which local authorities must exercise. That balance cannot, however, be sustained for very long. Indeed, the next sentence reveals that at the level of local administration “(v)alue judgments are [to be] made between competing values, and objectives set accordingly. Standards, limits, and targets can then be set to meet the desired objectives”.<sup>72</sup> The existence of a sequential relation between national standards and local values, which the report had implied – such that standards would establish the framework within which values could be expressed – unravels here without explanation. Now, sets of judgments will be made at the local level about competing values between end-users of water, that are informed not by the national standards but by ‘values’ of undisclosed origins. An assumption thereby floats between the lines that such determinations will be made and that, once made, will gain a status of fact. The normative category of ‘ought’ is thereby substituted, problematically, by the descriptive category of ‘is’: what comes to be adjudicated by interests of an undisclosed identity as being in existence will, simply, thereafter be the case.

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70 *Ibid.*, 48.

71 *Ibid.*, 20. The inserted phrase has been added to reflect the aspirational tone of the policy document.

72 *Ibid.*, 20. Emphasis added.

In Lacanian terms, the move constitutes the kind of power-action constitutive of ideas circulating in the pattern of university discourse:

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \quad \frac{a}{S}$$

The schema suggests that knowledge which is produced ( $S_2$ ) through a methodology that has the ability to contain the unruly character of practical knowledge ( $a$ ) – that is, collaborative decision-making – is held in place by an undisclosed power ( $S_1$ ). The operation of that power soothes the inconsistencies and contradictions in the field of knowledge, through interventions which require no commentary, justification, or authorisation outside of what occurs in conjunction with its own performance.

In an apparent Freudian slip with regard to this performativity, the report advances one further substantive recommendation. It recommends the establishment of a ‘National Land and Water Commission’ whose features mirror that of the Land and Water Forum itself. The proposed body is to be non-statutory in its constitution, engaging of indigenous interests, collaborative in methodology, having practical experience of water management issues, and so on.

The primary audience for the report – the Minister for the Environment – subsequently chose to set aside the two leading recommendations from the document: the establishment of measurable and enforceable National Environmental Standards; and the establishment of a National Land and Water Commission. Instead, the Ministry used the provisions of the Resource Management Act to issue a *National Policy Statement on Freshwater*.<sup>73</sup>

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73 New Zealand Government, *National Policy Statement Freshwater Management 2011*, Wellington: New Zealand Government 2011. The government also asked the Forum to report further on its findings. This resulted in two further reports: Land and Water Forum, (2012a), “Setting limits for water quality and quantity freshwater policy and plan-making through collaboration”, <<http://www.landandwater.org.nz/>> accessed 10 December 2012; and Land and Water Forum, (2012b), “Managing water quality and allocating water”, <<http://www.landandwater.org.nz/>> accessed 10 December 2012. Both reiterate the Forum’s preference for the establishment of objective standards for water quality and quantity. Moreover, they outline in further detail, and with prescriptive tenor, the model of collaborative decision-making which the Forum prefers for the management of freshwater. Finally, both reports reproduce the deadlocks which had emerged in the Forum’s original document

In its delivery of the *National Policy Statement on Freshwater*, the government was following the RMA's requirement that National Policy Statements be constructed on fields of environmental activity that are deemed to be of national or global significance. At the time the statement on freshwater had been issued, just one previous statement had been developed (on coastal regions); and policy on water management had long been anticipated as being the next to be written.

Charactering the *National Policy Statement on Freshwater*, as compared to the Forum's reports, is a reduction of expectations around objective standards around water quality and quantity. Rather than quantitative standards, as would be expressed in National Environmental Standards, the Statement presents a set of qualitative objectives to guide decision-making. These objectives concern the safeguarding of "the life-supporting capacity, ecosystem processes and indigenous species including their associated ecosystems of fresh water".<sup>74</sup> This would occur through either, in the case of water quality, "sustainably managing the use and development of land, and of discharges of contaminants";<sup>75</sup> or in the case of water quantity, "sustainably managing the taking, using, damming, or diverting of freshwater".<sup>76</sup> In conjunction with these objectives, additional goals relate to the sustaining, if not improvement of, "overall quality of freshwater within a region", and the correction of over-allocation where it is occurring, coupled with the maintenance of wetlands.<sup>77</sup> As environmental objectives, these goals have much to commend them, recognising as they do the intrinsic value that good quality water in sufficient quantities has for the maintenance of organic life.

In the gap between these objectives and the notion of quantitative standards (to which these objectives gesture), the Statement introduces the notion of 'limits'. In an immediate sense, the idea of limits is indexed to matters of quantity: "the maximum amount of resource use available".<sup>78</sup> That quantifiable amount relates, however, to the extent to which

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around the competing characters of scientific and indigenous epistemologies, and of the divergence between objective (scientific) national standards and locally held values.

74 *Ibid.*, 6.

75 *Ibid.*, 6.

76 *Ibid.*, 8.

77 *Ibid.*, 6.

78 *Ibid.*, 5.

a given limit “allows a freshwater objective to be met”.<sup>79</sup> Notwithstanding the expectation which the word ‘limits’ might generate about their ultimately quantifiable form, its meaning never converges with that of objective measurement.

In the absence of quantifiable measures around quality and quantity, the *National Policy Statement* comes to be organised instead – and in a discursive rather than arithmetic manner – around a binary of *universal/particular*. This binary is also made to resonate with the echo of a recondite objective/subjective dualism: “Enforceable [objective] quality and quantity limits” are to be set at a national level but the meaning of such “must [again] reflect [subjective] local and national values”.<sup>80</sup> Like the report of the Land and Water Forum, the *National Policy Statement on Freshwater* recommends the use of collaborative decision making for the task of mediating the dualisms. Like the Forum report, also, the Statement validates the content of that process with reference to a pluralised epistemological field. In the case of the *National Policy Statement*, however, the field of indigenous knowledge is not presented in terms of the production of understanding but, in a more static vein, the provision of ‘information’. Only the scientific method appears to be trusted for the task of producing knowledge and, to this end, “(t)he process for setting limits [on freshwater quality and quantity] should be informed by the best available information and scientific and socio-economic knowledge”.<sup>81</sup>

With the matter of *process* emphasised over that of *outcome*, the objectivity which might be associated with ideas of ‘quality and quantity limits’ becomes quite muted. That muting continues by virtue of a set of ambiguities which infuse the meanings given in the report to the ideas of “life supporting capacity” and “ecosystem processes”.<sup>82</sup> These ambiguities reach their zenith in the absence of any indication as to the levels at which the functionality of a given freshwater capacity or process can be said to be ‘sustainable’. Quite conceivably, sustainability and quality need not correspond at all.

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79 *Ibid.*, 5.

80 *Ibid.*, 3. Emphasis added.

81 *Ibid.*, 3.

82 *Ibid.*, 4.

The ambiguities which thereby surround the functionality of water resources consolidate further within a set of instructions which are then given to regional councils as to how they are to process applications under the Resource Management Act concerning the discharge of contaminants into waterways. Every policy directive which relates to the maintenance or improvement of water quality or quantity of water flows is to be indexed to the notions of 'limits' and of 'targets', for which, however, no objective definitions are given. As such, the policy directives are linked to the *aporia* which haunts the issue of functionality as it pertains to water.

Unlike the outcome recommended by the report of the Land and Water Forum, then, the power to determine the meanings of quality, quantity, limits, and targets is not being divested in an identifiable and institutionalised authority. Rather, it is invested in a process of decision-making that seeks to remain sensitive to context by sustaining a zone of indeterminacy around the meaning of water functionality within the consent application processes of the RMA. Again, in terms of Lacan's schema, the *National Policy Statement* sets the idea of water management in a mode of university-type circulation: the meaning of key terms ( $S_2$ ) occurs through a power ( $S_1$ ) which has become invisible to those affected by the definitions given ( $S$ ), at the same time as determinations on given areas of water come to appear as matters of fact.

The operation of power within the *National Policy Statement* is not, however, altogether as occulted as this analysis suggests. Rather, power takes material form in the terms 'quality/quantity'. The terms emerge as the unequivocal purpose of the Statement, taking on the mantle of an uncanny presence, being sublimated through their correspondence with the operation of power. It is for this reason that the two terms can persist in their organising work throughout the document without having definitions attributed to them that could ever be operationalised. The manner in which the figures of quality/quantity function within the report resonates, moreover, with the state of overdetermination that characterises contemporary symbolic representation: those whose task it is to give body to these concepts – local and regional council planner/administrators – cannot thereby now consider the matters of quality and quantity outside of a raft of differentiated statements, injunctions, and gestural comments given by the Statement relating to their appearance as organising principles. These various matters now become legion: contexts which are to

inform the value given to water (“economic, environmental, cultural and social well-being”);<sup>83</sup> national use-values of water (domestic drinking and washing, animal drinking water, community water supply fire fighting, and so on);<sup>84</sup> intrinsic values of water (the “life-supporting capacity of water [...] the reasonably foreseeable needs of future generations”);<sup>85</sup> objectives of management with regard to water quality and quantity; policy statements with regard to the implementation of objectives; the integration of management levels;<sup>86</sup> the “roles and interests” of indigenous peoples;<sup>87</sup> a schedule for the implementation of the Statement;<sup>88</sup> the details associated with each of these co-ordinates; and more besides.

The overdetermination of the figures of quality and quantity by this diverse set of co-ordinates is at risk of producing an effect, associated with bio-political administration, which Lacan again had associated with the discourse of the university: an interminable demand for ‘more, yet more’ of that which is not/cannot ever be defined. In the case of freshwater, this ‘more’ is ‘more quality and greater quantity’. Unsurprisingly, that demand emerges as a preoccupation with process, with the installation of administrative technologies that can ensure adherence to decision-making procedure. To spin the point in an ancillary direction, any sense of materiality that might now be associated with water can, at best, only now emerge as affectively charged concerns about the terms used to *manage* groundwater resources.

## Amplifying the significance of context

Notwithstanding the idealism which infuses the *National Policy Statement*, the document’s discursive structure provides an alternative and

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83 *Ibid.*, 3.

84 *Ibid.*, 4.

85 *Ibid.*, 4.

86 *Ibid.*, 10.

87 *Ibid.*, 10.

88 *Ibid.*, 11.

fertile pathway for the management of freshwater. That alternative constructs neither an ultimate set of standards nor procedural markers for decision-making. Rather, it points to the manner by which ideas about freshwater might simultaneously speak to issues of immediate concern and to alter as those fields of concern themselves change. To this end, the emphasis given by the *National Policy Statement* to the contextual character of ‘freshwater quality’ is not mistaken. The meaning of ‘quality’, with regard to water, has long been recognised as being highly dependent upon context. Standards depend upon a range of variables: the purposes to which the water is to be put (potable or non-potable); the physical status of the water (being either abstracted from water bodies or *in situ*); the character of the users (individuals or species-populations); the nature of toxins affecting quality (singular or multiply-interacting), and so on.<sup>89</sup> Where such points are made within the *Statement* regarding the importance of local context, they are made, however, in ways which indicate that the ideas are circulating in the pattern of university discourse: the matter of how local values are to be weighed against national interests is to be determined by a set of decision-making procedures (a methodology) that will determine, in any given context, the meaning of ‘quality’. One further characteristic indicates that the document is animated by the discourse of the university: it sediments a power within those procedures that, at the level of the text, is thoroughly disavowed – the reign of free-market forces, as is indicated by the recurring assumption that all user-groups bring to the decision-making process equal socio-economic power.

An alternative pathway opens up within the discursive field created by the *National Policy Statement*, however, which also recognises the context-dependent character of ‘quality’. This option appears able to function without recourse to a veiled power. It lies with a non-scriptable space which opens up between the *Statement*’s simultaneous *sublimation* of water-management into the ideas of ‘quality/ quantity’ and its *desublimation* of that same water-management into the array of bureaucratic co-ordinates by which the report attempts to engage with the substantive content of freshwater and its management (the various references to con-

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89 See R. W. Edwards, “Introduction”, in P. J. Boon and D. L. Howell (eds.), *Freshwater Quality: Defining the Indefinable?*, Edinburgh: The Stationary Office 1997, 1–8.

texts, to values, policies, cultural imperatives, administrative imperatives, and so on). Under such discursive conditions as given here, as Žižek's work suggests, an interpretative condition of *radical desublimation* becomes possible; a hermeneutic movement by which both these movements in the signification of 'freshwater management' can be set in motion, sheltered from the corralling effects of a power lurking between the lines.

## From methodology to subjectivity

A disclaimer is required for what follows: the act of presenting any alternative always has the potential to undermine the very intent of any such approach. The problem turns upon the paradox that utopian thought faces: in the process of being made legible, an alternative must adopt the prevailing terms which are framing the object in respect of which the alternative is being posited. As a consequence of this framing, the 'competing' quality of the alternative comes under threat. For the purposes of sustaining the faith of the reader, however, that there might indeed be a rabbit down the hat into which the author's hand reaches,<sup>90</sup> the practices of knowledge production popularised in the multi-award winning television series of *House* (Fox)<sup>91</sup> could well be envisaged as a form of radical desublimation appropriate to the collective production of knowledge in Aotearoa/ New Zealand around freshwater and its management.

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90 Simon Critchley attributes this metaphor to Žižek, wherein Žižek is purported to have said "I have a hat but I have no rabbit." See S. Critchley, "Foreword: why Žižek must be defended", in P. Bowman and R. Stamp, (eds.), *The Truth of Žižek*. London: Continuum 2007, xvi. Žižek's point is the very same one as is being made here: to claim possession of the alternative (the rabbit) is to undermine what is at stake – the production of thought that might transform under the impulse of its inevitably shifting conditions of existence.

91 The show has won many awards including the following: five Primetime Emmy Awards; two Golden Globe Awards; a Peabody Award; and nine People's Choice Awards. It is distributed to 66 countries and in 2008 recorded the highest global viewership of all television programmes (see Wikipedia, "House", <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House\\_TV\\_series](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_TV_series)> accessed 24 April 2012).



*House* centres on the life of a fictitious Dr Gregory House (played by Hugh Laurie), leading diagnostician at the imaginary Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital. The programme sees House and his hand-picked group of diagnostic doctors facing a series of patients who have rare and life-threatening conditions for which existing diagnostic practices have proven ineffective. Cases are only referred to the team, and accepted, if they have these qualities. Our interest here lies with the manner in which knowledge comes to be generated in such cases; that is, with cases where existing practices of knowledge production have shown themselves to be insufficient.

House manages his team not through process of collaborative interaction, as favoured by the Land and Water Forum, but through practices of ritualistic humiliation. A heightened degree of insight into the machinations of human subjectivity, on the part of House, enables him to identify vulnerabilities in his team members; liabilities which he then systematically amplifies and exploits. The effect repeatedly destabilises those individuals, sustaining them in states where they cannot easily draw upon the psychological defence mechanisms which their personalities would otherwise bring to the diagnostic task. This condition of recurring discombobulation loosens the movement of key signifiers in the diagnostic task at hand from the rehearsed sets of associations to which they would all otherwise be tethered. Through the engineering of psychical chaos within the diagnostic environment, insights emerge to treat these rare and complex cases.

An outer limit exists to this process, however, which materialises in the persona of Gregory House himself. The unruliness of the diagnostic environment which he manufactures cannot reproduce itself and neither can House, himself, do so. Throughout the series he exhibits awareness that his capacity to sustain that environment depends upon his remaining open to situations which will personally dislocate him, just as he dislocates others. To the extent to which he does this, his capacity to fuel the environment endures.

In Lacanian terms, a fantasy structure is operating here which sustains a gap between the field of objects (patients, doctors, diagnostic processes) and *objet a* (the end point of the diagnostic production of knowledge). That fantasy has been of the kind which suggests that the end point in the production of diagnostic knowledge is always both *knowable* and *can be symbolised*. This has been Foucault's fantasy also,

with regard to the movement of ‘discursive relations proper’: in the end, the performativity of discursive movements can be scripted in language. To this end, and in terms of the presentation of episodes in the series, each involves the resolution of a case, typically in terms of a diagnosis which is proven by circumstances to be right (the patient lives, or the patient dies for reasons that are then understood). An awareness which House exhibits, that the continual production of correct diagnoses depends upon a condition of dislocation within himself – and which he cannot himself directly engender – produces a particular effect with regard to that fantasy. The object which would routinely occupy the place of *objet a* – the emergence of successful diagnosis through the operation of unruly intersubjective processes – has to be repeated over and over in the absence of a reliable ‘operating system’ which could keep the whole movement in motion. That endless pursuit of correct diagnoses indicates that the process is being driven by the dynamic of desire.

The final episodes in the series shifts that dynamic. Moreover, they do so in ways that move askew to the intersubjective pattern of diagnostic production which had dominated the storyline up to that point. House is confronted with the imminent death of his closest friend, the ritualistic humiliation of this particular companion having also been absolutely central to House’s dislocatory practices with his diagnostic team. The impending disappearance of that element within House’s process threatens the ability of the ‘correct diagnosis’ to remain meaningful. The situation reveals that the diagnostic production of knowledge depends upon a set of material conditions which now disclose themselves to be entirely transient: the life of his closest friend. The final episode moves towards House accepting that his friend is going to die and that the underlying conditions which enable him to produce diagnostic outcomes (and to which his friend is central) are passing.

At this point, the underlying fantasy of the diagnostic production of knowledge shifts, such that insights begin to emerge into how these conditions – now crystallised around the figure of death – are simultaneously *knowable* (House and his friend can now begin to talk about the death) and *unsymbolisable* (death can never be fully integrated into the field of what they know). Jameson’s words echo here: House might well now be able to say, that, “it has never been said that death was unknowable, but merely that it was unrepresentable, which is a very different matter.” And with this shift in the fantasy form – from the field of knowledge

being knowable and symbolisable to that of knowable and unsymbolisable – *objet a* begins to move simultaneously along the countervailing vectors of radical desublimation: the unknowable character of death comes to be sublimated into discussion about death at the same time as the movement of that discussion shows its topic to be a shared and unintelligible limit-point of conversation.

In contrast to the models being pursued by the New Zealand State and the Land and Water Forum, the case of *House* suggests that interpersonal collaboration is not a sufficient condition for the development of knowledge where the object in respect of which knowledge is sought is characterised by a high degree of uncertainty (if not a state of *aporia*). Such is the situation with the paradox that constitutes the field of freshwater management, in which the management of freshwater presumes the existence of a state which, if it indeed existed, would not require the exercise of management. The paradox indicates that the field is not one in respect of which the production of technical knowledge will suffice. Moreover, the technocratic character of such approaches threatens to open up the zones of uncertainty within the decision-making processes to occupation by powers of various kinds. The lesson to be taken from *House* is that transformative kinds of knowledge might well only develop under such conditions where a shift occurs in the fantasy structure which is animating the production of knowledge, such that the structure can leverage the ambiguity of *objet a* associated with the prevailing cultural condition of representational differentiation. The durability of such a fantasy structure will, itself, be found depending upon the emergence of a social bond between language and the body which can sustain the movement of *objet a* in that state.



## 8 The subjectivising effects of discursive spaces

The ability of *utopia* to motivate ideas in a manner askew to the troubling pleasures associated with the prevailing circuits of discourse – of the master, the hysteric, the analyst, and the university – depends upon the possibility of alternative relations emerging between language and the body. It has become a guiding proposition, here, that the ability of ideas to induce transformative traction under the cultural conditions of a differentiated field of representation, depends upon the development of an alternative relation of that kind.

Notwithstanding the attempt here to set aside methodology as a means for bringing about an alternative kind of relation, the presentation of how this might occur could easily invoke the assumption that we remain in need of something akin to a method or analytic strategy: we simply need, for example, to replicate the (technical) lessons of *House* in the production of knowledge about how to manage freshwater. And from this, a set of ‘best practice’ principles around the operation of fantasy could be derived. To this end, we could find ourselves tempted to assert that the production of an adaptive form of management requires the refashioning of the fantasy structure by which the object in question is being interpreted. Without denying that such a hermeneutic will be involved, another element comes into play in the refashioning of the fantasy structure: the transformative prospects of ideas turn upon the manner by which processes of knowledge production subjectivise those who seek to know.

This mutually constitutive relation between the generation of knowledge and the generation of subjectivity thereby becomes pivotal for understanding the prospects of a discursive space like *utopia*, and of its hermeneutic of radical desublimation. Such has been an insight associated with Foucault’s work on “technologies of the self”, concerning how the subject forms in relation to the development of self-knowledge.<sup>1</sup> To paraphrase Foucault’s lesson, processes of knowledge production are

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1 L. H. Martin, J. Gutman, and P. H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press 1988.

always also regimes of subjectivisation. In colloquial terms, we emerge in relation to the manner by which we learn.

The salience of Foucault's work on subjectivisation lies less, however, with what it says directly about how subjectivity forms in relation to different modalities of knowledge production. This is not to deny the value of the insights his writing thereby produces for us, insights into the various mechanisms of knowledge development through which the self has historically operated (both in the self-constitution of the subject – the “technologies of the self” – and with regard to the individual in its relation to organised governance – “technologies of the individual”).<sup>2</sup> Foucault's investigation into these matters invites a reflective observation that his own text, too, is operating as a regime of subjectivisation. Of what kind is that subjectivisation? What effects does it produce in the subject who wishes to understand the role of knowledge production in the development of subjectivity? And to what alternative end could those effects be put? At stake here is the possibility of a relation between subjectivisation and the production of knowledge that can exceed the strictures which the very act of having a knowledge about that relation (here, of Foucault's) produces in the subject.

## Technologies of self-knowledge

Foucault's *Technologies of the Self* suggests the existence of a strong correlation between the social practices available for the development of knowledge and the formation of subjectivity in the one who seeks to know. It begins by indicating an intention, on Foucault's part, to move askew to his previous studies. Foucault refers here to the attention he had been drawing through texts since *Discipline and Punish* to the means by which domination and power shape human subjectivity. Now, alternatively, he seeks to develop understanding of the “technologies [...] which permit individuals to effect by their own means [...] a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls [...] so as to trans-

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2 Two essays on these respective elements comprise Foucault's contribution to the text *Technologies of the Self*.

form themselves”.<sup>3</sup> His device for doing so, which will again resonate with the archaeological kind of enquiry he had previously adopted, is a “hermeneutics of the self”.<sup>4</sup>

Central to the question which motivates his inquiry, as to “how an individual acts upon himself”, is another query concerning an earlier injunction to “care for oneself”.<sup>5</sup> Foucault locates the emergence of this latter question within late Antiquity and notes the manner in which it has come to be associated with, yet also differentiated from, a later axiom to “know yourself”.<sup>6</sup> The mechanisms for this melding of the two come from the Stoic and early Christian traditions, and bring about an innovative set of modalities in which the self is able to form: self-knowledge (through acts of physical display and discursive articulation); methods of experience (through devices such as calculation, remembering, self-renunciation); purposes for which experience is sought (political power or personal salvation); objects of attention within the self (actions, thoughts, and mental pictures), and the various fields in which the act of self-knowledge can occur (education and politics being of particular interest to Foucault). Together these comprise the domain which Foucault calls technologies of the self.

Two purposes appear to propel Foucault’s shift in focus from the genealogical study of ‘power’ to a hermeneutics of ‘technologies of the self’: the identification of various continuities and discontinuities in the operation of these technologies between the Stoic and Christian contexts; and the location of significant points of rupture within those trajectories which indicate the possibility for subjects to exceed the forms of subjectivity which those practices enable. In terms of the socio-political context within which Foucault finds himself operating, one rupture in particular enables the production of his own text: a “decisive break” with the practice which had developed in sixteenth century Christianity whereby the subject had articulated its thoughts to authority figures for the purpose of attaining salvation (primarily through the disclosure of sinful elements of the soul).<sup>7</sup> The break pivoted upon an alteration in the practice of articu-

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3 *Ibid.*, 18.

4 *Ibid.*, 17.

5 *Ibid.*, 19.

6 *Ibid.*, 19.

7 *Ibid.*, 49.

lation, upon which Foucault understands his own work to be predicated, such that the practice of talk no longer comes to operate through an erasing of the self for future ends (for eternal salvation) but, rather, through a foregrounding of speech's own productivity. The performativity thereby attributed to the speech act comes to inaugurate a positive constitution of subjectivity – of “a new self” – that finds itself thrown always into the present.<sup>8</sup>

Foucault's second discussion in the text *Technologies of the Self* – which is buffered from the first by a series of essays from co-participants in the seminar, from the University of Vermont – unexpectedly shifts register back to the question of power: “I would like now to give you an *aperçu*, not of the technologies of the self but of the political technology of individuals”.<sup>9</sup> The essay does so by offering a treatise on the Hobbesian question concerning “the way by which, through some political rationality of individuals, we have been led to recognize ourselves as a society, as a part of a social unity, as a part of a nation or of a state”.<sup>10</sup> By recourse to this shift, Foucault moves back to his well-developed theme of the constitution of ‘the social’, thereby suspending his latest interest into the constitution of ‘the self’. Implicated in questions about the fabrication of ‘the social’ are not, then, the mechanisms involved in the construction of ‘the self’ but, rather, technologies involved in the construction of ‘the individual’. These new technologies are seen to operate through the emergent bio-social power to which Foucault had drawn attention in his work during the 1970s on governmentality: ‘the police’, and an emergent knowledge (that of statistics). Together, these innovations in the operation of power give rise to social practices that can ensure the productivity of people in their relations with themselves, with each other, and with their physical environments.

The purpose of this new assemblage is neither simple political power nor individual salvation but the phenomenon of life itself, of “the permanently increasing production of something new, which is supposed to foster the citizens’ life and the state’s strength”.<sup>11</sup> With this new purpose there emerges a novel object within which power is to be invested,

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8 *Ibid.*, 49.

9 *Ibid.*, 146.

10 *Ibid.*, 146.

11 *Ibid.*, 159.



that of population. What's more, population cannot be separated from the physical environment in which it exists, the two existing in "a perpetual living interrelation".<sup>12</sup> The inseparability of the two, as the domain of the state, gives rise to that new form of politics to which Foucault had already given considerable attention: of bio-politics.

The apparent singularity of this new form belies, however, a paradox that comes to be constitutive of modern governance: governance involves in equal measure the capacity to foster life (though public health, social welfare, and so on) and to extinguish it (through acts of mass incarceration to those of genocide). Sub-populations can become superfluous to population itself and this period thereby bequeaths, for Foucault, a chilling slogan: "Go get slaughtered and we promise you a long and pleasant life".<sup>13</sup> Outside of the rarefied domain of ethical language, and inserted into the domain of administrative practice, the fields of 'life insurance' and 'a death command' thereby come to mean much the same thing.

Moreover, this paradoxical circumstance has no exterior in respect of which it can be challenged, that absence showing up in that truism of "law and order".<sup>14</sup> Law, the capacity to differentiate between classes of objects in a performative and unlicensed manner, cannot now be dissociated from an apparently contrary impulse to order. Any attempt to reconcile the two fails "because when you try to do so it is only in the form of an integration of law into the state's order".<sup>15</sup> As a consequence of that integration, it comes as no surprise that the (legal) power to install life (through the differentiation of classes of people, for the purpose of bestowing legal rights) becomes simultaneously a centralised political impulse to order the social through the deployment of various mechanisms, including the social distribution of death.

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12 *Ibid.*, 160.

13 *Ibid.*, 147.

14 *Ibid.*, 162.

15 *Ibid.*, 162.

## The subjectivising effect of the text

The switching that occurs between a ‘hermeneutics of the technologies of the self’ and a genealogy of ‘the political technology of individuals’ indicates the location of the mechanism by which the text subjectivises its participants. The inscrutable power by which that mechanism operates, lies within the co-ordinates of the text’s content; within its descriptions of the two kinds of technology. Nevertheless, into its operation the reader needs to be drawn if they are to participate in the insights being generated.

Innocent statements convey the operation of the machine which activates this movement between the hermeneutic and genealogy: “There is another field of question that I would like to [...]. I would like now to give you an *aperçu* [...]”. From one vantage point, it might appear that the machine is no less than Foucault ‘himself’: a quizzical possibility from the pen of one who teaches on the death of the subject. Alternatively, and in a manner which is more in keeping with Foucault’s sense that context counts enormously in the constitution of subjectivity, the act of shifting analytic registers reveals another possibility. Key here is the absence of any content within the text which could explain that switching of analytic optics; that movement suggesting, instead, the operation of a purely performative power (of ‘discursive relations proper’, as Foucault might himself name that space).

As Lacan’s elaboration of discursive circuitry suggests, the subject will always find itself unable to develop an identity in relation to power of this performative kind. More particularly, Lacan’s observation relates to the discursive circuit by which bio-power and the logic of capital operate, which is characterised by the animation of knowledge by a power which can never be identified (signalled in the schema as  $S_1$  in the place of Truth):

$$\begin{array}{ccc} S_2 & \xrightarrow{\quad} & a \\ S_1 & \xleftarrow{\quad} & S \end{array}$$

Impotence

Within this circuit, the subject (S) finds itself in a state of “impotence” relative to that power.<sup>16</sup> People are unable to find a source of identification in that power, for the power itself remains always murky and indistinct (as with the various shadowy figures which populate conspiracy theories). As Žižek adds in this regard, and drawing upon the work of Eric Santner, the subject experiences under such conditions a ‘crisis of investiture’, an inability to find itself sufficiently formed within and by the powers which animate the operation of bio-power/capital. In compensation, the offer of “individual choice” – as is made available through cultural plays of multicultural plurality, of moral tolerance, of consumer sovereignty, and so on – proliferates:<sup>17</sup>

The usual notion of the relationship between excess-enjoyment and symbolic identification is that symbolic identity is what we get in exchange for being deprived of enjoyment; what happens in today’s society, with its decline of the Master-Signifier and the rise of consumption, is the exact obverse: the basic fact is the loss of symbolic identity [...] the ‘crisis of investiture,’ and what we get in exchange for this loss is that we are all bombarded with forms and gadgets of enjoyment [...].<sup>18</sup>

In its own interpretation of this condition, of the operation of biopolitics, Foucault’s analysis adjusts subjectivity towards the very same effect which it presents for critical examination – the operation of undisclosed power. It readies subjectivity to accept such an operation of power as normal by interpolating the reader with the performativity by which the text itself shifts its analytical register. The lure of this interpolation lies with the promise being presented, that those who take on the insights will, too, gain this performative ability. The analysis thereby, however, draws the reader into the same discursive mechanism by which biopolitical administration operates, to the operation of a power whose performative impulse remains always slightly out of reach.

A politically regressive condition then has the potential to envelop the reader, insofar as the act of seeking insight from the text risks the

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16 J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX. Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–73*, New York and London. W. W. Norton 1998, 16.

17 This resonates with the close relationship which now operates between the biopolitical injunction to ‘Enjoy!’ and the consumptive mechanisms of late capitalism.

18 S. Žižek, “The structure of domination today: a Lacanian view”, *Studies in East European Thought*, 56, 4, 2004, 399.

possibility that subjectivity will not find itself able to realise the promise; to locate, so to speak, the tools which can dismantle the Master's house. Instead, the subject stands to find itself adjusted to the enjoining messages of that administration: "Yes you can! Yes you can crack the code of this message and become other than it requires. Yes you can!"

How might this adjustment occur? The pluralisation of methods that characterises Foucault's analysis (involving the use of both the hermeneutic and genealogical analysis) produces a fantasy mechanism which enables knowledge to develop about the varied forms, through time and across cultures, which subjectivisation has taken and continues to take. That fantasy takes the form of an assumption that such knowledge is fully dependent upon the socio-historical context in which it develops. Such knowledge thereby floats free of any trans-historical condition. The totality in respect of which the movement of knowledge occurs, if we can indeed continue to talk in that way, floats out of grasp as an amorphous condition of aggregated multiplicity. To this end, explanatory understanding cannot develop about the various forms of subjectivisation, only rich descriptions of how such knowledge has come into being and as to how it has vied within the political struggles which get waged from time to time about the truth of itself (in political debates, for example, about the meaning of personal 'responsibility', of individual 'rights', and so on).

That fantasy mechanism plays an important role with regard to the subjectivity being hailed through the text. It protects the subject who seeks insight into how subjectivity forms. It protects them from the non-existence of any ultimate rationale for why particular methodological practices – as are enumerated here by Foucault – come to be privileged over others, and by which individuals are made into subjects. They are protected in that process, moreover, from the absence of understanding which could prime the question of 'what is to be done?' in relation to those practices.<sup>19</sup>

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19 This is not to say, as Jameson indicates, that knowledge of those forms cannot be constructed. Clearly, many, and variable, narratives can be, and have been, constructed about the interplay between capitalism and the nation-state. His point is, rather, that the interplay cannot itself be represented, given that the position from within which such representations are attempted are always creatures of that same phenomenon. Neither, however, is the effect of this simply a silence which smotheres the possibility of representative knowledge.

Typifying this kind of fantasy mechanism is, for Žižek, a range of new consumer products. Amusingly emblematic is the “chocolate laxative”, being an innovative sort of “product containing the agent of its own containment”.<sup>20</sup> Insofar as chocolate can cause constipation, chocolate laxative contains an ingredient that enables the consumption of itself to continue. Inventively, the object (chocolate) absorbs its own excess (constipation). Scaling up the phenomenon, this kind of fantasy mechanism can also be observed at the level of an operating system as a whole. There now emerges, Žižek asserts, a “cultural” capitalism which builds into commodities sets of mechanisms which assuage the guilt consumers might now share about the ecologically and culturally destructive effects that flow from their consumption of goods and services.<sup>21</sup> To this end, for example, the act of buying coffee from multinational corporations includes various elements that can appease our guilt about the economic inequality of the coffee market (that the corporation from which we buy has only purchased Free-Trade coffee beans, that they lobby financiers on behalf of coffee farmers, etc.). In terms of the link to which Foucault’s work draws attention – between the production of knowledge and the production of subjectivity – an injunction emerges which contains an agent that can corral its own excess (the indeterminate power of performative labour): produce more insights into the production of subjectivity in keeping with each and every slice of socio-historical experience, and you will know. To the extent to which the subject contextualises its knowledge in this manner, their subjectivity attunes itself to the demands of powers that forever remain of a murky and inscrutable kind.

## Toward an alternative subjectivisation

An alternative means can be recovered from within Foucault’s text, however, by which the relationship between the production of knowledge and subjectivisation might be engaged. The critical insight for this move comes not from anything in particular that Foucault says

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20 *Ibid.*, 401.

21 See S. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, London and New York: Verso 2010, 356.

about the histories of subjectivisation. It lies, instead, with what the analysis does in splitting the description of subjectivisation between the mechanisms which produce the individual (technologies of governance) and those which produce the subject (technologies of the self). There appear to be different objects involved here upon which the text operates, whose differences are themselves contained by the text (those objects being ‘the subject’ and ‘the individual’). The desire that something akin to one of them operates in the text – of the subject who can know, for example, such that the act of naming the objects in their difference can occur – indicates that *objet a* takes here a very singular form. Of course, *objet a* never appears as an empirical object, ‘as such’, with the effect that it can be said ‘there it is’. This gets to an incisive observation that has been made by Robert Strozier about the continual haunting of Foucault’s work by the figure of the subject: “The disappearance of the subject in one place [of Foucault’s framework] simply marks its appearance in another”.<sup>22</sup> Rather, the form which *objet a* takes can be deduced from the co-ordinates of the authorial intent which forms around that object. In this case, the text exhibits a singular intent to name the objects of the self in their perpetual state of differentiation one from the other (taking the form, in the text, of a differentiation between ‘the subject’ and ‘the individual’).

As singular, a twinned set of effects can be expected to occur around *objet a* for any who occupy that discursive space: a desire to name the objects relating to personhood, in their condition of fundamental differentiation; and the channelling of that desire into an interminable process of producing descriptions of those objects in the minutia of their context-dependent relations. The first effect reflects also the impossibility of the desire which has been unleashed by the text, to master the code by which the speaking position has itself been configured. The second effect – which resonates with the state of continual self-regeneration which characterises the logic of capital – sees the integration into itself of the text’s unsymbolisable surplus: the state of pure performativity – with which the subject is left upon engaging with the text – congeals into a state of perpetual intellectual production.

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22 R. M. Strozier, *Foucault, Subjectivity and Identity: Historical Constructions of the Subject and Self*, Detroit: Wayne State University 2002, 78.

Neither of those effects can usefully prime the discursive space of *utopia* on the operation of technologies of subjectivisation. Rather, the subjectivising effect which Foucault's text produces has the potential to waylay the audience with the *jouissance* which the act of engaging such a text invokes. To this end, such analysis is at risk of igniting a state of continual production that is without purpose, animated by the undisclosed power characteristic of discourse of the university, and of the differentiated state of representation which it maintains.

The alternative pathway of subjectivisation lies with the ambiguity which *objet a* displays when the production of knowledge suspends the symbolic mandate which is given to the subject by the analytical strategy of naming of things in their difference. That alternative, as the work of Lacan indicates, interrupts the work of desire. Such processes of knowledge production then gain a potential to work through *objet a* in its simultaneous movements of sublimation and desublimation. It is to such processes that we now move. The manner by which knowledge might thereby be produced will, moreover, alter the subjectivisation which Foucault had mapped in relation to both the technologies of the self and of the individual (towards self-knowledge and towards social-productivity). Moreover, it also will depart from the subjectivisation which Foucault's own analytic produces (in its unintended effect of making the subject vulnerable to inscrutable forms of power). Rather, subjectivisation will be animated not by the lure of desire but by a state of lack which has no lack, by the overdetermining effects of *anxiety*.





## 9     Anxieties of the utopian urge

The discursive space of *utopia* presents a particular challenge when approached as a vehicle for the construction of alternative futures. That challenge concerns the manner in which it implicates the formation of subjectivity, at the point where ideas develop about those future arrangements. To reiterate a central tenet that has been emerging here, the use of *utopia* to recover a normativity dimension within knowledge involves the subject obtaining *jouissance* in relation to an ambiguity in the constitution of language. In Lacanian terms, that ambiguity pivots upon the status of *objet a*, and can be felt in the manner by which fantasy operates within the production of knowledge claims. History is on our side with this, insofar as the culture of late capitalism now normalises that ambiguity, through the differentiation of representation by which the logic of capital discursively operates.

A challenge specific to this practice, of sustaining strategically significant signifiers under the impress of this ambiguity, is that it requires a suspension of the boundary between the positions of the subject and the object. It is through the suspension of that boundary, at the level of the subject, that the signifier is enabled to remain in that state of slicing anew into the realities of which it speaks. Such a suspension invokes for the individual, in the first instance, not new knowledge but, however, the spectre of anxiety. This is not anxiety as might be associated with the experience of fear, within which anxieties emerge around a given and identifiable threat (with, as Žižek expresses it, “the terrifying and fascinating abyss of anxiety that haunts us”, of the kind of anxiety already “constituted” by a particular fantasy).<sup>1</sup> Rather, this alternative anxiety – of a “constituent” kind – emerges where the process of knowledge production also engages “the void, the gap, filled up by the fantasmatic object”, involving thereby a “‘pure’ confrontation with *objet a* as constitut-

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1     S. Žižek, “*Objet a* in social links”, in J. Clements and R. Grigg (eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2006b, 116.

ed in its very loss”.<sup>2</sup> To this end, the anxiety invoked in this manner is not an emotion (like fear) but an affect. Moreover, anxiety of this kind possesses a unique quality, insofar as it is the one affect, as Lacan observed, “which does not deceive”.<sup>3</sup>

The maintenance of a border against the ambiguity into which *objet a* falls, especially within the culture of late capitalism, has been pivotal to the development of knowledge within the positivist tradition. Attempts which have been made to suspend that boundary so as to enhance the contextual relevance of new knowledge-claims, through techniques of methodological reflexivity (as championed by the likes of Pierre Bourdieu), appear to effect such a suspension. They risk, however, the production of an effect which we identified in the preceding discussion on Foucault’s insights into the relation between knowledge and subjectivisation: that the methodological manufacture of knowledge fashions the subject, as much as it does the knowledge-effects, as an artefact of the inquiry process. As the earlier discussion on the work of Ruth Levitas has also suggested, the subject thereby finds themselves never being able to fully satisfy the demand to be reflexive: they can never be reflexive enough.

A series of inquiries follow, here, into organic crises which presently rive the world-system. Their collective value lies with the manner in which each appears to elude this outcome to some degree. They variously explore the following: the emergence, since the 1970s, of financialisation as a logic of global capital; the subsumption of workerist subjectivity to the logics of capital; and the amplification of the carbon rift as a consequence of industrial-capitalist development. Shared by each is an productive use of anxiety in the development of analytic insights into these crises. It is this state of anxiety which enables the insights to go beyond a state of reportage and, moreover, to reinvest critical thought with Lenin’s question of ‘what is to be done?’.

Notwithstanding the significant differences which exist between these three cases as to how they deploy the condition of constituent anxiety – or more insightfully, by which they refuse analytic strategies which

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2 *Ibid.*, 116.

3 J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), trans. by Alan Sheridan, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company 1981, 41.

would reinvest critical inquiry within conventional fantasmatic structures<sup>4</sup> – they collectively demonstrate the productivity that comes from deploying the ambiguity that is opened up around *objet a* by the differentiation of representation. These three differ, however, in their respective abilities to do so. Those differences correlate (albeit negatively) with the degree to which each is able to integrate the unruly state of psychical surplus which they generate at the level of the subject. The greater that integration becomes, paradoxically, the less the approach can sustain *objet a* in its ambiguity; and the less it can sustain strategically significant signifiers in a transformative state of cutting new surfaces upon reality.

## The challenge of financialisation

Dominating critical commentary on the emergence of finance capital – the ‘financialisation of capital’ – have been a set of narratives which associate its rise with a global fall in the rate of profit within the manufacturing sector in the post-war period.<sup>5</sup> While the key dynamics of that rise are interpreted differently – in terms of dissimilar time scales (the 16<sup>th</sup> Century onwards;<sup>6</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> Century onwards;<sup>7</sup> post-1970s;<sup>8</sup> 2008 to the

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4 Emblematic of those fantasy structures would be the argument, for example, that the emergence of financialisation is simply and only an artefact of class struggle.

5 D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2005; M. Hudson, “From Marx to Goldman Sachs: the fictions of fictitious capital, and the financialisation of industry”, *Critique*, 38, 3, 2010, 419–444; N. Potts, “Surplus capital: the ultimate cause of the crisis?”, *Critique*, 38, 1, 2010, 35–49; H. Ticktin, “The crisis and the capitalist system today”, *Critique*, 38, 3, 2011, 355–373; R. Wade, “Financial regime change?”, *New Left Review*, 53 (September/October), 2008, 5–21.

6 G. Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*, London and New York: Verso 1994.

7 Ò. Jordà, M. Schularick, and A. M. Taylor, “Financial crises, credit booms, and external imbalances: 140 years of lessons”, *IMF Economic Review*, 59, 2, 2011, 340–378.

8 J. Rasmus, “The deepening global financial crisis: from Minsky to Marx and beyond”, *Critique*, 36, 1, 2008, 5–29; Wade, “Financial regime change”.

present<sup>9</sup>); or in terms of different logics of economic organisation (Keynesian, neoliberal, financialised)<sup>10</sup>; or in accordance with various interpretations of economic crisis (“classic recession”/ “epic recession”)<sup>11</sup> – their internal coordinates largely map onto one other. Financialisation is presented as a set of strategies which enables the deregulation of financial systems (including the blocking of regulations on new financial products) such that a continual expropriation of wealth by economically privileged classes occurs.<sup>12</sup> To this end, this set of narratives is animated by a dialectical bridge comprising the figures of economy and politics, with the political dimension of this couplet providing a fulcrum by which the end of economic exploitation might be imagined. Emblematic in the imagining of such narratives is the set of programmatic responses for class-action proposed by David Harvey in his analysis of neoliberalism and finance capital.<sup>13</sup>

Less common, though by no means less comprehensive, is a brace of analyses which are animated not by the dialectic of economics/politics but by *economics* and *space*, to capitalism as a geo-economic machine. Although the aforementioned Harvey is closely related to this analysis of capitalism’s shifting geographies,<sup>14</sup> it is the work of Giovanni Arrighi which has achieved the most historically commanding analysis of financialisation as a geo-historically embedded dimension of capitalism. His historical analysis reveals a series of major shifts in the location of capitalist innovation – from Genoa (*via* Spain), to Holland, to the UK, to America<sup>15</sup> and now to China.<sup>16</sup> For Arrighi, a consistent pattern emerges

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9 S. Polillo, “Wildcats in banking fields: the politics of financial inclusion”, *Theory and Society*, 40, 4, 2011, 347–383.

10 Wade, “Financial regime change”.

11 Rasmus, “The deepening global financial crisis”.

12 L. C. Bresser-Pereira, “The global financial crisis and a new capitalism?”, *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, 32, 4, 2010, 499–535.

13 See for example Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 183–206.

14 See also M. Dunford and G. Yeung, “Towards global convergence: emerging economies, the rise of China and western sunset?”, *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 18, 1, 2011, 22–46; S. Michael-Matses, “Greece and the world capitalist crisis”, *Critique*, 38, 3, 2010, 489–502; A. Pike and J. Pollard, “Economic geographies of financialization”, *Economic Geography*, 86, 1, 2010, 29–51; H. Veltmeyer, “The global crisis and Latin America”, *Globalizations*, 7, 1–2, 2010, 217–233.

15 Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*.

with regard to each of these shifts: the leaps are precipitated by the encountering of limits relating to the geographical spaces of capitalist accumulation; limits which are buffered, temporarily, by a transfer of capitalist activity from manufacturing activities to the trading of finance and financial services. The emergence of finance as a dominant modality of capitalist activity thereby signals, for Arrighi, the exhaustion of the territories in which capitalist innovation has been active. Echoing the French historian Fernand Braudel, “the stage of financial expansion” is always “*a sign of autumn*”.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, each of the structural impediments being encountered by the entrepreneurial class – sequentially in Genoa, in Holland, in the UK and so on – are met not by a simple shifting of geopolitical location but by an amplification of the scale of business operation. In its latest expansive reconfiguration, as Jameson vividly describes the dynamic involved, capital now “exhausts its returns in the new national and international zone and seeks to die and be reborn in some ‘higher’ incarnation, a vaster and immeasurably more productive one”,<sup>18</sup> this time, as transnational flows of finance. Capital thereby itself becomes “free-floating”, both deterritorialised in its form and deterritorialising in its effects.<sup>19</sup>

Resonating, also, with the attention which Arrighi draws to the phenomenon of spatiality as a key dimension of finance capital, Deleuze and Guattari animate their analysis of financialisation with a relation between *spatiality* (conceived as ‘lines of flight’ and the ‘deterritorialisation’ of capital) and *abstraction* (the representational impress of a ‘body without organs’ upon the surfaces of ‘desiring machines’, through sets of ‘inscribing *socius*’, ‘codes’, ‘axiomatics’, and so on; which then materialise in epistemological states of ‘paranoia’ and ‘schizophrenia’).<sup>20</sup> Indeed, so significant does this dialectic between the spatial and abstraction become that it all but relegates capital to the status of a screen upon which is projected the interplay between space and abstraction. To this end, their analysis can barely qualify as ‘economic’ – as the likes of Harvey and

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16 G. Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London and New York: Verso 2008.

17 Braudel, quoted in Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 6. Original emphasis.

18 F. Jameson, “Culture and finance capital”, *Critical Inquiry*, 24, 1, 1997, 260.

19 *Ibid.*, 259.

20 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1983.

Arrighi would welcome – that being a status which Deleuze and Guattari might, anyway, categorically reject.

The historical significance of this attention to the operation of abstraction, which Deleuze and Guattari bring to the question of social transformation, is not lost on Jameson: any contemporary transformative analysis of financialisation needs to inhabit the dialectic of *abstraction* and the *economics* by which capitalism as a global system now functions.<sup>21</sup> Jameson's work enlarges the specific notion of abstraction as used by the French duo – of abstraction as a state of figurative fragmentation – such that its engagement with the economics of financialisation draws also upon the two abstractive devices appearing in the works of Harvey and Arrighi: of narration as the principle mechanism by which to understand the relation between finance capital and class-politics; and of history as a (spiralling) enlargement of geo-political structure. The cumulative effect of these trajectories is a productive movement within the interpretation of financialisation. Sustaining that productivity, moreover, is an approach to the writing of that interpretation in which the anxiety produced by this inhabitation of a highly differentiated field of abstraction is not annulled. As a consequence of this refusal to contain the dislocating effects of anxiety, as might occur with the positivist production of knowledge, the transformative idea which animates analysis in the work of Jameson – *ideology* – finds itself transforming not only our understanding of the field upon which the idea is being shone (the financialisation of global capital) but itself in the process of being deployed (the constitution of ideas).

The phenomenon of financialisation emerges, in the work of Jameson, not simply as an empirical entity whose co-ordinates call for a descriptive mapping of the global economy (in terms, for example, of 'monetarism', 'investment and the stock market', 'profit without production', 'securitisation', and so on). Neither does it suggest a simple phenomenon whose emergence in the 1970s begs systematic explanation (in terms of class struggles, of the actions of key politicians, etc.). Rather, financialisation is seen to initially register within social life as a state of undifferentiated angst amongst the citizenry of capitalist political communities; manifesting as "vague perplexities [and] quizzicalities that we never paused long enough over to form into real questions", and which

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21 Jameson, "Culture and finance capital".

would subsequently cut two ways within thought about the new economic form.<sup>22</sup> Those concerns would, initially, bear upon changes in the non-material elements of contemporary economic processes: what does productivity mean within service-based economies? How can the value of knowledge in an information-based economy be determined? Secondly, unease would be found at work in relation to the newly emergent financial forms that were designed to manage risk ('securitisation' and the trading of 'derivatives'). More particularly with regard to the latter, the unease condenses around an increasing distance that appears to exist between these new forms of finance and the material world upon which productive processes work: the floating on stock markets of assets' capacities to produce profit, all the while the ownership of those assets being retained by a set of primary stakeholders (this being the 'securitisation' of assets); and the pricing and trading of "asset exposures" in a manner that affects neither ownership nor performance (what are commonly called 'derivatives').<sup>23</sup>

In relation to this popular disquiet about the newly emerging machinery of global capital, concerns of another two kinds have come to animate the critical analysis of this same field. Together, they question the ability of the primary analytic strategy of choice within western Marxism – of *ideology* – to support the task of interpreting the augmentation of capital by a globalised financial industry. Moreover, and compounding the interpretative problem, no obvious point of mediation seems to exist between the two kinds of apprehension which have been brewing. Characteristic of Jameson's work at this point is an intention not to interpret these problems as deficits in the analytic machinery but, rather, to historicise the state of *ideology*: the value which ideology has as an analytic strategy for interpreting the financialisation of global capital thereby depends upon its ability to embody that same condition of cultural impasse; an impasse within which, and against which, the notion of ideology is being used as a lever of critique.

Within this situation, the core task of western Marxism – that of demystifying ideologies which the prevailing economic classes deploy in

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22 *Ibid.*, 255.

23 D. Bryan, R. Martin, and M. Rafferty, "Financialization and Marx: giving labor and capital a financial makeover", *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 41, 4, 2009, 458–472.

naturalising their appropriation of wealth – appears to lose its ability to meld the fields of political theory and of political engagement. To restate the point, the demystification of ideologies no longer produces workable states of praxis. In the process of western conceptions of political freedom becoming absorbed into the idea of ‘market freedom’ (beginning in the 1970s under the urges of Hayek and his ilk), the blatant nature of class struggle was becoming all too obvious across the liberal-capitalist landscape, with the effect that radical politics no longer needed “an elaborate machinery of decoding and hermeneutic reinterpretation”.<sup>24</sup> Instead, “the guiding thread of all contemporary politics” had now become worryingly that “much easier to grasp, namely, that the rich want their taxes lowered”.<sup>25</sup> The prospect that “an older vulgar Marxism” might be more appropriate for this time,<sup>26</sup> seemed incongruous with the poststructuralist interpretative innovations which had inflected Marxism for understanding the operation of capitalism’s superstructural elements. As a consequence, an impasse developed within western Marxism between the intellectualisation of critical thought and the reappearance of vulgar class struggle.

Second, the applicability of an older Marxism for interpreting the now-financialised phoenix of a once-moribund global manufacturing/service capital has highlighted, in turn, the underdeveloped strengths and/or insufficiencies in that older Marxism. More particularly, the limitations of Marx’s labour theory of value become evident, as an explanatory mechanism for grasping the objective character of the money form which has come to animate financialisation. Thus, the need has arisen for an understanding of money that would go beyond Marx’s tendentiously dismissive account of finance capital as a ‘fictitious’ epiphenomenon of the ‘more real’ category of money. As Deleuze and Guattari would subsequently note in this regard, the pressing issue would become no longer the form that each kind of capital might take, empirically, in relation to the other but, rather, of the consequences which follow from the emergence, now, of an “unfathomable abyss” between “merchant capital’s

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24 Jameson, “Culture and finance capital”, 256.

25 *Ibid.*, 256.

26 *Ibid.*, 256.



economic force” and “the flow that is derisively named ‘purchasing power’”.<sup>27</sup>

Arrighi’s presentation of financialisation as a recurring stage in the spiralling history of capitalism has provided some initial leverage, in Jameson’s mind, for managing the anxiety provoked by the emptying of the interpretive space previously sustained by the practice of ideology-critique. It has enabled understanding to develop, both in terms of geographical fixes and temporal movements, of this most recent supplement to capitalism, of global financial capital.

Even with that leverage to hand, the phenomenon of finance capital proves elusive. Finance capital shows itself to be far more than the money form associated with the geo-political movements of material production and consumption. The capacity of finance capital to now float free of productive money suggests a newly emergent capacity on the part of capital to sustain itself in an elevated state of abstraction and to exercise an enhanced ability to abstract objects from their material bases. The phenomenon of finance capital thereby augments – becomes fully “a part of”, rather than running oblique to – “the problem of abstraction”.<sup>28</sup> Finance capital cannot now thereby be spirited away, as Marx’s original analysis in the third volume of *Capital* appeared to wish, on the basis that the phenomenon ultimately has no material substance. New forms of perception, and new practices of abstraction, have emerged which now suspend – without fully effacing – the differentiation between that which is real and that which is not. In this manner, “risk, uncertainty, and volatility” have become primary characteristics of the speculative economy.<sup>29</sup> To this end, the enlargement of which Arrighi speaks with regard to the means by which capital exceeds its physical limit-points, finds in this differentiation in the practices of representation a weathervane most subtle, on which the movement of this strange weightless force of finance now registers within the subject.

For Jameson, such is the space within which social transformation is now to be rethought: in terms of a dialectical condition between economic exchange and the differentiation of abstraction. In shorthand this is the contemporary form in which the struggle is mounted to create a zone of

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27 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 238.

28 Jameson, “Culture and finance capital”, 260.

29 See Pike and Pollard, “Economic geographies of financialization”, 31.

freedom out of Necessity. Only through that fantasmatic frame can social transformation be productively interpreted. Any other alternative – as with the economic/politics dialectic, or that of the economic/spatial variant – always constitutes a vote in favour of one of the various modes of representation now available – of realist, modernist, or postmodern representations of global financialised capital. Moreover, it signals a condition of tacit assent to some or other reified lever of transformation as produced through the chosen modality of representation. Such has been the outcome, for example, of Harvey’s tendentiously modernist representation of financialisation and its reification, again, of ‘social class’ as the vehicle for a transformative politics; and of Deleuze and Guattari’s postmodern representation of the phenomenon and the nomination of ‘schizophrenia’ as the associated vehicle for change.

For Jameson, then, the differentiated field of abstraction amongst which meaning must now move provides a more productive means by which not only can the dialectic between contemporary economy and abstraction be expressed but also (paradoxically) the absence of any means by which the difference between the two fields can be productively engaged. The form which productivity now takes within this situation is an absence of limitation upon the act of interpretation. This absence does not take the form of a postmodern fragmentation of meaning but, rather, an enabling of the central signifier in the analysis – that of *ideology* – to remain suspended in a state of cutting new surfaces upon financialised capital, surfaces which are thereby unencumbered by socio-politically committed intentions for the future meaning of economy, and upon which alternative futures might find themselves inscribed.

In its state of cutting such surfaces upon finance capital, the work of ideology thereby produces images of money as being

both abstract (making everything equivalent) and empty and uninteresting [...]. It is thus incomplete [...] it directs attention elsewhere, beyond itself, towards what is supposed to complete (and also abolish) it. It knows a semiautonomy, certainly, but not a full autonomy in which it would constitute a language or a dimension in its own right. But that is precisely what finance capital brings into being: a play of monetary entities that need neither production (as capital does) nor consumption (as

money does), which supremely, like cyberspace, can live on their own internal metabolism and circulate without any reference to an older type of content.<sup>30</sup>

This set of new surfaces (monetary entities that need neither production nor consumption; that can circulate without any reference to an older content) becomes akin to “a Real which can never find its ‘objective’ scientific knowledge”:<sup>31</sup> the (absent) historical cause of financialisation draws breath unnoticed amidst the chatter of referent-based knowledge claims being spoken in truth about the state of contemporary global capitalism.

In the process of any new knowledge being produced about financialisation, the figure of ideology thereby itself alters in form. Any attempt to now find a stock of objective knowledge – that having traditionally been the enabling work of ideology – must, on account of the differentiated state by which abstraction now operates, be animated otherwise than by the sole idea of propositional, testable knowledge. Such attempts need to now also invoke the place of enunciation, the subject-position indicated by the discourse of the university as the primary product of knowledge production: they must

always be triangulated by the attempts of those who seek to represent it to include their own absolute epistemological and historical and class limits within their impossible representation.<sup>32</sup>

Why is this always an impossible representation? Because the crisis of investiture prevails, by which the subject finds itself unable to locate itself within the power edifice which animate the logics of bio-political administration/capital. Any attempt by the subject to script itself in relation to the knowledge it seeks, thereby finds the subject up to its eyeballs in the form which ideology now takes under such historical conditions; in the unsettling state, as per Althusser’s formulation of ideology, of their ‘imaginary relationship’ to ‘their real conditions of existence’. There exist no external points from which the subject can gain knowledge about itself in relation to its material conditions, other than an impulse to know which outstrips the ability to know.

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30 Jameson, “Culture and finance capital”, 272–273.

31 *Ibid.*, 363.

32 *Ibid.*, 363.

Least this invite pessimism either about the possibility of knowledge or of subjective experience, the process of dragging knowledge across the variegated surface of representational differentiation can “alone today furnish the clue to current ideology and offer some chance at the intermittent approximation of the Real”.<sup>33</sup> That process requires, however, that the subject who seeks a symbolic mandate that can exceed the truncated forms made available through the apparatuses of capital/state – and whereby it might come to know otherwise – will tarry with that particular anxiety which does not deceive. In this way, concrete political demands which a class or status block might make – and Jameson makes much of the power which a wholly-reasonable demand for meaningful work might have in subverting the logic of capital<sup>34</sup> – are enabled to remain progenitors only of the real demand to come.

## The subsumption of subjectivity

As with the analysis of financialisation, critical inquiry into the subsumption of workers’ subjectivities by the processes of capitalist production, to which Marx had borne initial witness,<sup>35</sup> has been primarily animated by a fantasmatic frame that centres upon the hope of clear and certain political responses. Viewed in this way, the idea that workers’ reflections on their social conditions are being increasingly scripted by the demands of the work processes that organise their days, produces a number of informative insights about late capitalism. Numbered amongst them are the following: the emergence of an “ownership society” that is predicated upon the projected abilities of wage-earners’ lifetime’s earnings, which has the effect of supporting the credit-based consumption enabled by the financialisation of global capitalism;<sup>36</sup> the progressive

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33 F. Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, London and New York, Verso 2009, 363.

34 See F. Jameson, ‘The politics of *utopia*’, *New Left Review*, 2005, 25 (January/February), 35–37.

35 K. Marx and F. Engels 1975–2005, *Collected Works (MECW)*, *Notebook XX*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

36 M. Mulholland, “‘It’s patrimony, its unique wealth!’ Labour-power, working class consciousness and crisis: an outline consideration”, *Critique*, 38, 3, 2010, 375–417.

recalibration and “enclosure” of home-ownership as a domestic buffer to absorb the national fiscal deficits which have been emerging from the speculative investment that has come to dominate local economies;<sup>37</sup> the dissolution of class-boundaries as a consequence of worker investment in pension-funds, in conjunction with an associated emergence of the “citizen-speculator”;<sup>38</sup> and in the emergence of employee share-holdings of employing companies, with the effect of directly bonding workers’ impressions of the future with those of the businesses by whom they are employed.<sup>39</sup>

Each of these particular diagnoses of subsumption assumes that worker-oriented identities are sufficiently remaining intact such that, if they were to be reinvigorated, class-based interests might reassemble as platforms upon which that general condition of subsumption might be resisted. To this end, for example, Marc Mulholland points optimistically to the continuing existence of a “tendential ‘socialist preference formation’” amongst wage-earners in liberal-capitalist societies and for “socialised mechanisms for the protection of individual labour”.<sup>40</sup> In a similar manner, Bryan *et al.* suggest that a newly emerging and precarious condition of “mutual indebtedness” – by which members of the home-ownership sector now together find themselves “asked to live or die by capital’s internal movement” – has the potential to create a condition of “hostile opposition” of labour to capital.<sup>41</sup>

An alternative interpretation of subsumption, associated with the Italian *operaismo* (workerist) movement, displaces that fantasmatic frame. Rather than continue to imagine a kind of class agency that is capable of reinvigorating radical politics, the *operaismo* movement assumes that there now exists no autonomy for class identities amidst workers’ present economic conditions of existence. The work processes of informational capitalism now integrate the entire nexus of workers’

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37 Bryan *et al.*, “Financialization and Marx”.

38 F. Allon, “Speculating on everyday life: the cultural economy of the quotidian”, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 34, 3, 2010, 366–381.

39 J. Tittlebrun, “Divide and rule: privatisation in Poland and the working class”, *Critique*, 39, 1, 2011, 83–105.

40 Mulholland, “Its patrimony, its unique wealth!”, 417.

41 Bryan *et al.*, “Financialization and Marx”, 471. What the ‘decomposition of the peasantry’ was for the emergence of the industrial proletariat, ‘middle-class decay’ has now become for post-ownership class formations.

intellectual/affective states, such that those personal elements are commodified in equal measure to the units of physical labour power. As a consequence, there exists no element of worker subjectivity – intellectual or material, conscious or unconscious – which is not already scripted in one way or another by the privative logic of capital. To this end, no basis exists for the optimism that class identities can emerge to contest the subsumption of the self by the processes of capitalist production. The terrain upon which alternative futures is to be wrested is instead the very same dissolution of boundaries between subjectivity and the material conditions of its (economic) existence that the contemporary logics of capital are bringing about.

The mechanism through which this dissolution of boundaries is staged within capitalism is identified by the workerists as the organisation of life-processes, which Foucault had designated as bio-power.<sup>42</sup> Such power – “the strategic coordination of [...] power relations in order to extract a surplus of power from living beings”<sup>43</sup> – is presented as constituting the productive processes of our latest – that is, post-Fordist, “informational”,<sup>44</sup> or “cognitive”<sup>45</sup> – capitalism. This particular diagnosis of subsumption thereby begins with the observation that post-Fordist production processes have co-opted both the mechanical power of labour, which typically congeals as sets of mechanical and technological innovation, and the cognitive/affective dimensions by which the beingness of the human condition persists.

The institutionalisation of this co-option suggests an enlargement to Marx’s labour theory of value. Value within commodities is produced not only through the operation of labour (or the stored labour of machines) but also an element which Marx had called the “general intellect”:

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42 See A. Fumagalli and S. Lucarelli, “Valorization and financialization in cognitive biocapitalism”, *Investment Management and Financial Innovations*, 8, 1, 2011, 88–103; M. Lazzarato, “From biopower to biopolitics”, *Tailoring Biotechnologies*, 2, 2, 2006, 11–20

43 Lazzarato, “From biopower to biopolitics”, 14.

44 J. -F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984.

45 C. Vercellone, “From formal subsumption to general intellect: elements for a Marxist reading of the thesis of cognitive capitalism”, *Historical Materialism*, 15, 2007.

The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process.<sup>46</sup>

With an eye to contemporary socio-economic formations, Paulo Virno thereby notes:

In post-Fordism, conceptual constellations and logical schemata that cannot be reduced to fixed capital play a decisive role, since they are inseparable from the interaction of a plurality of living subjects.<sup>47</sup>

To this end, the knowledgability by which subjects daily negotiate their shared existences comes to be co-opted in production processes such that the performance of productive tasks within the workplace cannot be separated from the communicative and imaginative capacities of everyday collective life:

What is learned, experienced and consumed in the time of non-labour is then utilised in the production of commodities, becoming a part of the use-value of labour power and computed as profitable resource.<sup>48</sup>

This shift in register, by which subsumption comes to be explained in terms of an interface between bio-power and political economy rather than political economy alone, brings about the same kind of encounter with anxiety as Jameson's analysis of financialisation. At stake within this engagement of anxiety will be the prospects for the 'general intellect', that concept playing the same analytic function in the issue of subsumption as the figure of ideology plays in Jameson's critical exploration of financialised global capitalism.

Anxiety emerges with the attempt to wrest a transformative state of general intellect from the mechanisms of subsumption. Both bio-power and the attempt to generate a condition of general intellect from *within* the subjectivities which are produced through that power, invoke en-

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46 K. Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, 702–703. Original emphasis.

47 P. Virno, "General intellect", *Historical Materialism*, 15, 2007, 5.

48 *Ibid.*, 5.

gagement with an inscrutable condition which appears, in the writing of the workerists, to be something like *life itself*. In the process of offering an account of bio-power as a new mechanism in the governance of political economy, the analysis finds itself needing to wrest the trajectories of 'life itself' away from the truncated versions of that thing otherwise made available.<sup>49</sup> To reframe the point, bio-political economic governance has established the terrain upon which political struggle must now be waged, and through which any new powers of freedom will emerge.

In its invocation of life's processes, Virno thereby suggests in this vein, the deployment by manufacturing practices of people's everyday linguistic and affective capacities paradoxically inaugurates, within living labour, a productive capacity which can exceed "the 'scientific power' objectified in the system of machinery".<sup>50</sup> Within this move lay the seeds of a transformative general intellect that is specific for people living within the territories of informational capitalism. The shared social capacities, of which Virno speaks, enlarge to become "thoughts and discourses that function as productive 'machines' in their own right, not needing to take on a mechanical body or even an electric soul".<sup>51</sup> Extending this insight, Antonio Negri notes how the contemporary work-related processes of informational capitalism can enable worker subjectivities to enter a potentially transformative state of "excedence",<sup>52</sup> of "becoming".<sup>53</sup> In those situations where workers are able to exercise autonomy in how, where, and when they perform work, capacities can develop for a state of "becoming-intellectual". Where affect and an ability to care are required in the processes of production, capacities can develop for "becoming-woman". Where work processes bridge the divide between biology and actions that are performed upon biology, capacities can develop for "becoming-nature". Where work processes require awareness as to the constitutive power of language, capacities can develop for "becom-

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49 In this same vein, Nikolas Rose lists the contemporary versions as including the management of biological risk, the engineering of the biological self at a molecular level, and of the responsabilisation of the individual in decisions it makes about risk and molecular sculpturing. See N. Rose, "The politics of life itself", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18, 6, 2001, 1–30.

50 Virno, "General intellect", 5.

51 *Ibid.*, 5

52 A. Negri, *Empire and Beyond*, Cambridge and Maldon: Polity Press 2008, 167.

53 *Ibid.*, 181.



ing-linguistic". And, finally, where shared understanding begins to form around the character of these capacities, one further transformative capacity can come into being, that of "becoming-common".<sup>54</sup>

The optimism being exhibited by the workerists lies with an assumption they hold to, that the state of productive proliferation being described has the capacity to exceed the requirements of capitalist production. This heralds the possibility of a popular, transformative force of the kind Marx envisaged with the general intellect. To this end, for Negri, that proliferation – which he will call 'Multitude' – is no less than an "ontological *potenza*" that has the capacity to outstrip the administrative processes by which that capacity has itself been corralled for economic and bio-political ends (ends which Negri has called 'Empire').<sup>55</sup> It is a state of proliferation that requires for its reproduction, however, a specific political lexicon and to whose innovative form Negri draws considerable attention.<sup>56</sup> That lexicon foregrounds both a new set of objects upon which critical inquiry must focus (of 'Multitude', 'immaterial labour', 'general intellect', 'difference', 'singularity', 'the common', etc.) and an emergent set of social relations ('sovereignty', 'discipline', 'control', 'war', etc.).

Moreover, the state of productive proliferation requires that this lexicon dissolve the boundary between itself and its point of enunciation such that "the *potenza* of the person speaking the language" is revealed.<sup>57</sup> With the dissolution of that boundary, speech itself will progressively morph in conjunction with the particularity of the time and place of its deployment, becoming able to manifest the material conditions of its own existence. Such an effect will, however, much like Jameson's location of ideology within the differentiation of abstraction of capitalist culture, flood the subject who seeks to do so with anxiety.<sup>58</sup>

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54 *Ibid.*, 181–182.

55 *Ibid.*, 170. See also A. Negri, *Reflections on Empire*, Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press 2008, 27.

56 Negri, *Empire and Beyond*, 191–195.

57 *Ibid.*, 192. Original emphasis.

58 Drawing out a latent point being made here, with regard to the reconfiguration of life processes as the material pivot upon which a radical politics might operate, and of the anxiety which attends that pivot, Maurizio Lazzarato notes that the ontological dynamic upon which bio-power operates is, as Foucault put it, "*something other than [power] itself*" (Lazzarato, "From biopower to biopolitics", 14. Original em-

The source of this anxiety differs, however, from that suggested in the work of Jameson. Its form can be detected in a ‘state of nature’ narrative that periodically enters the *operaismo* analysis, of the kind that had characterised nineteenth century political theory: the human condition emerges upon the planet in a condition that is simultaneously social and biological; it being an animal that can reflect intellectually upon (amongst a number of things) the absence of boundaries between its social dimension and the natural environment. To this end, we, the human being, are “the animal open to the world”.<sup>59</sup> This state of openness is, moreover, categorically “dangerous”.<sup>60</sup> In an individual register, that condition of a potentially interminable openness puts the subject at risk of psychical disintegration; in a collective register, it can lead political communities into catastrophic “states of emergency” that become without apparent end.<sup>61</sup>

This capacity to reflect upon the state of the ‘animal open to the world’ – as given by the bio-anthropological *potenza* of the subject inhabiting the place of enunciation – enables individuals, moreover, to inhabit that opening in an intellectual register. The significance of this capacity for progressive reflection, as it has existed from the outset of human existence, merely amplifies with the political crisis labour power faces when corralled by the logics of subsumption.

From this diagnosis, descriptions of various technologies of the self emerge within the *operaismo* literature, each of which become strategies for productively deploying the anxiety which that space of dangerousness generates. The ability of those technologies to fuel transformative ideas will find itself circumscribed, however, in ways which the figure of ideology avoids in Jameson’s analysis of financialisation. That re-

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phasis). Fuelling this idea is the observation that the deployment of power requires as its own condition of possibility a state of freedom wherein “there is always the possibility of changing” (*ibid.*, 18). Such freedom cannot itself be imagined as a unitary object, as it only ever emerges as historically specific movements of the “governmental technologies” that lie between the “states of domination”; states by which power is exercised upon individuals and upon the plethora of small, fluid, and reversible “strategic relations” by which people interact (*ibid.*, 18–19).

59 P. Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*. Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2008, 11.

60 *Ibid.*, 14.

61 As with the perpetual state of war that now characterises liberal capitalist society. See Negri, *Empire and Beyond*, 184–190.

striction occurs by dint of the fantasmatic frame – the ‘state of nature’ story – within which those technologies are articulated.<sup>62</sup>

In the first of two technologies we shall examine, a key to the production of transformative ideas is the installation of the spatial and temporal conditions, by which those ideas are being generated, within the ideas themselves. A powerful metaphor for this action is that of the theatre.<sup>63</sup> The dramaturgy of theatre invokes, for Negri, the manner in which discourse is always moving through series of spaces. It is only as a consequence of moving between spaces that ideas remain in a state of agency. Any cessation of movement will see the ideas decay at the same rate of the particular parchment on which they are inscribed. Moreover, such movements shape the manner in which discourse develops. In theatrical terms, those spaces relate to the places of the author, the actor, and the spectator. Each inhabitant has the role of reproducing the discourse in the process of moving it on. Moreover, the movement between spaces invokes a temporal dimension, a temporality that is non-linear in kind. To this end, a complex space-time dialectic can be seen at work. The movement of discourse between spaces operates through temporal moments of anticipation about what ideas will come to mean as they move towards states of articulated maturity, and of retroactive reconstructions of meaning as those end points are reached. To this end, in theatrical terms, the author writes in anticipation of the actors who will portray his/her characters, who themselves anticipate the reactions from the audiences to their portrayal of those characters, who in their own right provide feedback during the event of a performance to the actors, which then informs the manner by which the author’s intentions are to be interpreted in the next act, and so on. Within this complex dialectic, the meaning of a dramatic narrative is simultaneously projected as an object in its own right, and reconfigured as it passes across the variegated surfaces of those diverse spaces and countervailing temporalities.

In a more elaborated manner, Virno presents this same inhabitation of the place of speech – this anxiety-inducing cusp between the social

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62 Indeed, as noted earlier, this is Žižek’s concern about the *operaismo* perspective: an attempt to inaugurate something like that purely performative condition threatens to eviscerate the field of fantasy and the movement of *objet a*. Setting aside that criticism for now, we instead wish to understand the analytic purposes to which anxiety might be put in the study of organic crises.

63 Negri, *Empire and Beyond*, 210–219.

and the biological, this ‘*potenza* of the person speaking the language’ – in terms of the theological-politico notion of *katechon*.<sup>64</sup> This term refers to a political strategy for the containment of ‘evil’. It works not by seeking the eradication of malevolence but its restraint, through the creation of spaces for “containing it, maintaining it, detaining it within itself”.<sup>65</sup> In politico-philosophic terms, this strategy comprises a “republican” task of drawing in and

foiling the two catastrophic eventualities that can radically undermine social interaction: the case in which the regularity of species-specific behaviours becomes prominent [and a social environment without rules becomes the norm, around which a routine use of violence to govern emerges] [...] and also the case [...] in which a system of rules is in force, rules [...] demanding an automatic and uniform application [and within which governance occurs through a set of abstract rules and naturalisation of bureaucracy].<sup>66</sup>

Significantly, for Virno, the act of occupying this unruly space of *katechon* does not bring about any “operative synthesis” between ideas and people across different spaces and times, such that their combination might validate any political action which follows.<sup>67</sup> Such was the fanciful dream involved, he notes, in Carl Schmitt’s association of *katechon* with the State.<sup>68</sup> Neither does there appear to be any basis upon which a sense of class-for-itself can now be reinvigorated. Rather, the relationship of *katechon* with the times and spaces of ideas in their movement is both more singular and more universal than any emergent synthesis.

On the one hand, the spatial and temporal coordinates by which this capacity to bind evil exists are as contingent and singular as is the variable flotsam riding the tide of history. Thereby writes Virno, “*katechon* is tightly bound to circumstances and occasions”.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, all references to the spatial and temporal contexts in which struggles will be waged forever remain indexed to the universality of language: they always forever remain artefacts *of* language. The dumb domain of the

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64 Virno, *Multitude*, 56–65.

65 Espoisto, quoted in Virno, *ibid.*, 60.

66 *Ibid.*, 61.

67 *Ibid.*, 61.

68 Such might be, also, the fantasy of routine occupations of city squares by participants in the new social movements.

69 *Ibid.*, 60.

symbolic order, thereby, establishes a trans-historical meta-context of politics.<sup>70</sup> To this end, for Virno, a set of three linguistic structures confronts the subject who wishes to wrest from that space a set of ideas that could meaningfully seed alternative futures. Resonating with the ahistorical character of the ‘bio-anthropological fact’ of the human-animal open to the world, these structures take the form of abstract co-ordinates of the symbolic system. They include: a structure which produces knowledge through the operation of negation; a structure which enables “the possible” to form in all its variability; and a structure which enables a “regression to the infinite” that keeps knowledge fully open to itself.<sup>71</sup> At the same time as this set of linguistic structures enables the subject to entertain the dangerous indeterminacy which the space of *katechon* designates, the act of inhabiting that set itself represents “the force that restrains” the very danger posed by the animal open to the world.<sup>72</sup>

Productively, this capacity on the part of the *operaismo* perspective to integrate back into itself the surplus it generates through projects such as theatre or *katechon*, might enhance the likelihood of its use by others in the analysis of organic crises (relative, that is, to the unruly utopianism of ‘political demand’, generated in Jameson’s treatment of ideology). The guarantee which is provided, by which the risk of inhabiting *katechon* is contextualised within a primal state of freedom associated with the emergence on the planet of a talking animal, absorbs the unruliness which subjectivity might otherwise encounter within itself in that place of *katechon* or the theatrical. In a tendentially regressive manner, however, that capacity to corral the surplus does have the capacity to tether the transformative reach of the general intellect to the story of a pre-given human potential: social life has always potentially been *this* way (and forever will be. Amen).

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70 This sense is thereafter captured by Virno in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e) 2004.

71 Virno, *Multitude*, 63. Original emphasis deleted. We can note resonances, here, with the notion of a differentiated field of representation as described by Jameson.

72 *Ibid.*, 56.

## Amplification of the metabolic rift

Like the investigations into the financialisation of global capital and the subsumption of worker subjectivities under late capitalism, a minor line of inquiry in the field of climate change research engages a condition of anxiety for the production of analytic insight. Like the analysis provided of subsumption by the Italian *operaismo* movement, the approach generates a surplus at the level of subjectivity in those who seek to know. This is a psychological surplus which cannot easily be integrated into the subsequent analysis of climate change without introducing an object which compromises the contextually-located character of the account.<sup>73</sup> The fact of this unruly tendency does not negate the value of the approach. Rather, it clarifies the challenges that emerge from writing under the impress of differentiated representation; that is, that come from writing in a manner attuned to – and not abstracted from – the cultural condition of late capitalism/bio-politics.

Running obliquely to the various debates around the sources of climate change, and the various programmes to cope with severe weather events, are a ream of discussions within Marxism animated by the concept of ‘metabolic rift’. The concept productively seeds thought about the relationships between ecological processes and the political processes of economic exchange. Contemporary use of the concept emerges with John Bellamy Foster’s reading of Marx’s *Capital*, in which Marx introduces the idea of metabolism in relation to the labour processes of capitalist production.<sup>74</sup> Under the impress of metabolism, labour takes the form of “a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature”.<sup>75</sup> Humans, here, appear to dominate the relationship between themselves and ecological processes. The context for this statement is a cleavage which Marx observed opening between country and urban life, as a consequence of capitalist production. For

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73 In the case of the analysis of subsumption, that object is the ‘state of nature’ narrative.

74 J. B. Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, New York: Monthly Review Press 2000.

75 Marx, quoted in Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, 141.

Marx, this gulf threatened the symmetrical patterns of metabolic exchange by which social forces and biological nature had interacted under feudal processes of production.

A significant assumption for the trajectory of Marx's diagnosis is that humans, primarily, regulate the metabolism of social and biological exchange. To this end, something akin to an *a priori* distinction is held to exist between the domains of social and biological life; a distinction which operates, moreover, in favour of human existence. This assumption is underscored further when Marx declares of the communist condition which is to come:

With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by a blind power.<sup>76</sup>

With the Promethean hubris of Marx's declaration declining within contemporary Marxist uses of the concept of metabolism, and the Malthusian concern about impacts of physical limits upon development now being taken seriously, debate emerges over the meaning of 'dialectical' in relation to the cusp between social forces and biological life. Two primary schools of thought have arisen, respectively advancing, on the one hand a (Cartesian) dialectic which presents social and biological life as being discrete and interacting objects;<sup>77</sup> and, on the other, a dialectic in which the two states are fully contiguous with one other.<sup>78</sup>

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76 K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume III*, Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1976b, 820.

77 Key texts in this regard include: J. B. Foster *Marx's Ecology*; B. Clark, and R. York, "Carbon metabolism: global capitalism, climate change, and the metabolic rift", *Theory and Society*, 34, 2005, 391–428. Illustrating this position, Clark and York inform: "There is widespread agreement in the natural sciences that observed increases in average global temperatures over the past century are due in large part to the anthropogenic (human generated) emission of greenhouse gases, primarily stemming from fossil fuel combustion and land use changes (e.g., deforestation). Many social processes have been identified for their contribution to climate change. However, few theoretical approaches have been used to study systematically the relations of the social with the biosphere. Our goal is to illustrate how the theory of metabolic rift provides a powerful approach for understanding *human influence on the carbon cycle and global climate change*" (Clark and York, "Carbon metabo-

While the Cartesian image of metabolism has dominated critical inquiry into the amplification of the metabolic rift, it remains vulnerable, however, to an internal limit-point. It presents the *results* of critical inquiry into the metabolic rift as being somehow prior to the *material pre-conditions* of that inquiry itself. Findings which indicate the amplifying effects of industrialism on climate, for example, tacitly confirm that an ontological separation exists between the domains of social life and ecological processes. To this end, the knowledge which emerges has the effect of presenting the field of social and biological relations as “a purified *social* repertoire of agents and a purified bundle of *environmental* effects”, and thereafter pivots upon their abstracted character.<sup>79</sup> To this end, the approach is at risk of reproducing “the very alienation of nature and society it seeks to transcend”.<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, the particular movement of ideas which the Cartesian dialectic generates, has the effect of resonating with, rather than challenging, the logic of exchange-value: the Cartesian impulse surveys and calculates the effects of capitalism’s depredations upon the natural environment in the very same way that “capital surveys, accounts, and quantifies nature’s utility for accumulation”.<sup>81</sup> The dialectic of society/nature thereby reproduces the form of capitalist exchange at the level of the language which is being deployed for the critique of that exchange.

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ism”, 391. Emphasis added). See also J. B. Foster, “Marx’s theory of metabolic rift: classical foundations for environmental sociology”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 105, 2, 1999, 366–405; B. Clark and J. B. Foster, “Ecological imperialism and global metabolic rift: unequal exchange and the guano/nitrates trade”, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 50, 2009, 311–334; R. Clausen and B. Clark, “The metabolic rift and marine ecology: an analysis of the ocean crisis within capitalist production”, *Organization Environment*, 18, 2005, 422–444.

78 Key texts in this regard include: J. W. Moore, “Environmental crisis and the metabolic rift in world-historical perspective”, *Organization Environment*, 13, 2000, 123–156; J. W. Moore, “The modern world-system as environmental history? Ecology and the rise of capitalism”, *Theory and Society*, 32, 2003, 307–377; J. W. Moore, “Transcending the metabolic rift: a theory of crises in the capitalist world-ecology”, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1, 38, 2011a, 1–46; J. W. Moore, “Ecology, capital, and the nature of our times: accumulation & crisis in the capitalist world-ecology”, *American Sociological Association*, 1, 17, 2011b, 108–147.

79 Moore, “Transcending the metabolic rift”, 3. Original emphasis.

80 *Ibid.*, 3.

81 *Ibid.*, 3.



The criticism which is offered of the Cartesian interpretations of climate change, typified by the work of Jason Moore, suggests an alternative sense as to the significance of the metabolic rift. Our interest in the criticism is that it comprises not simply an alternative set of ideas about that rift. Moreover, it suggests a way of producing insights into climate change whose effects upon subjectivity install transformative movement within the emergent ideas themselves. As a consequence, the hope emerges that subjectivity can find itself in movement in keeping with the movement of its material context (climate) *via* the knowledge held about that context.

The interpretation turns upon the invoking of anxiety within the act of understanding the rift. To this end, the metabolic rift comes to speak of a dislocation that has been provoked by industrial-capitalist production within the mutually constituting field of “nature-society relations”,<sup>82</sup> the latter being a state of mutual constitution to which there can be no return but out of which new relations need somehow to be fashioned. The goal of this interpretation of the metabolic rift is thereby unambiguously normative in kind, pointing towards the re-establishment of social and biological processes in a state of co-evolution one with the other. At stake within this, however, is a bid to establish a normative state of co-evolution *through*, rather than in spite of, the overdetermining effects upon ideas of the symbolic differentiation by which the logics of industrial-capitalist production now function.

The fantasmatic frame which comes to be deployed in the work of Moore for conveying this project takes a particular form: “My term for it is the *oikeios*”.<sup>83</sup> As might be expected in light of the kind of work which such a frame needs to achieve – with regard to both naming and holding open the space of co-evolution – *oikeios* comes to convey a variety of meanings: “the *oikeios* as dialectic”,<sup>84</sup> “capitalism as *oikeios*”,<sup>85</sup> and the “ecological” as *oikeios*.<sup>86</sup> In keeping with the reach which such a signifier thereby conveys, *oikeios* harbours a synthesising impulse towards the production of knowledge about itself. Moore signals this impulse as be-

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82 *Ibid.*, 1.

83 *Ibid.*, 5.

84 *Ibid.*, 5.

85 Moore, “Ecology, capital, and the nature of our times”, 113.

86 Moore, “Transcending the metabolic rift”, 5.

ing an intellectual mechanism, “theory-method”.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, for Moore, when it comes to the matter of global warming, theory-method needs be “red-green” in character: it is Marx’s insights alone into the role that industrial-capitalist development plays in the disruption of the carbon cycle – and of the amplification of that rift to now global proportions – which provides the most comprehensive explanation for contemporary climate change. The fantasmatic frame thereby enlarges to become a “red-green theory and method of world-historical change”.<sup>88</sup> As to the productive effects of that frame for the production of transformative responses to climate change, a novel and analytically prescient proposition emerges: capitalism is not simply a source of ecological effects, as the Cartesian interpretation of the metabolic rift suggests and which a thoughtful transformation of the economic system could reverse: rather, “capitalism exists *as* ecological regime”.<sup>89</sup>

capitalism is constituted through a succession of ecological regimes that crystallize a qualitative transformation of capital accumulation [...] within a provisionally stabilized structuring of nature-society relations.<sup>90</sup>

At the same time as this frame becomes a source of propositions suitable for empirical testing, it cuts loose from itself the matter of the subject-position from which those propositions are generated. The use of the idea that species’ pathways of evolution cannot be separated from one another, such that the path of each implicates the others, prevents any assumption from emerging that there can exist a privileged subject position from which any such proposition can be validated. The very proposition of co-evolution thereby risks a confrontation with anxiety of a constituent kind, whereby a stand-off emerges between the authorial position from which the proposition is drafted and *objet a* “as constituted in its very loss”.<sup>91</sup> The very act of speaking in this way subverts thoroughly the social privilege assumed by the symbolic mandate which is enabling such speech. Each and every human speaking position is dependent on a

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87 *Ibid.*, 15.

88 *Ibid.*, 15.

89 *Ibid.*, 34. Original emphasis.

90 *Ibid.*, 34.

91 S. Žižek, “*Objet a* in social links”, in J. Clements and R. Grigg (eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2006b, 116.

network of relations with non-human species, ecological processes, and objects which variously flow within, through, and beyond itself.

In one register, the central proposition emerging in the analysis – as to the co-evolution of species – enables anxiety to congeal into a productive force for the production of responsive ideas on climate change. Moreover, the proposition enables a kind of knowledge production to develop which effectively (that is, in a thoroughly reasonable manner) decentres the human subject to that of an element interconnected with other objects that make up the carbon cycle. In another register, at the level of the subject-supposed-to-know, that same anxiety manifests as a state of unanswerable uncertainty. Anxiety of this more troubling kind manifests in a question about the veracity of the knowledge produced. Notwithstanding the reasoned solidity of the proposition that capitalism is an ecological regime, Moore wishes to point out that it constitutes just one “necessary point of departure – but far from the final word” on re-thinking the relations of capitalism and ecology,<sup>92</sup> being just “one of many possibilities”.<sup>93</sup> Punctuating the flow of argument, then, is not simply concern about the durability of the proposition but of an anxiety concerning the status of the labour power of which the proposition itself now has no need – that is, the performative capacity to generate knowledge. The meaning of the labour power by which this analysis of the metabolic rift has progressed is projected into spaces that are yet to come, to be settled by the success of future projects in producing better insights into the relation between economic and ecological processes. We might recognise this as a common move within those research programmes guided by strong theoretical or methodological mandates, made in so very many closing statements of research projects.

Even as the text expresses anxiety about the status of the labour power by which it has come into being, however, the project does not unravel. It remains intact because of the form which the fantasmatic frame takes: of the “red-green theory and method of world-historical change”. More particularly, it remains intact because of the form which *objet a* takes in that fantasy frame: *objet a* having been given a singular designation, that of the *oikeois*. The effect of that designation is to keep at bay the condition of constituent anxiety – of confrontations with *objet*

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92 Moore, “Transcending the metabolic rift”, 39–40.

93 Moore, “Ecology, capital, and the nature of our times”, 140.

*a* as constituted in its own loss – and for anxiety to instead be corralled within its more manageable ‘constituted’ form, within and through the enigmatic character of *oikeois*.

The expression of co-evolution within the context of the *oikeois*, which is then given programmatic form as a red-green theory and method of world-historical change, produces a paradoxical condition for the production of knowledge into climate change: the anxiety which propels the productivity of the analysis is contained by the reduction of itself to the figure of an expression of co-evolution within the context of the *oikeois*. To the extent to which that tautological equation suggests to the subject-supposed-to-know that they might yet crack this code, which positions not only their objects of inquiry but they themselves, the analysis will continue to produce insights into capitalism as an ecological regime. What it might be less able to do, however, is to regenerate itself anew in keeping with any significant mutations which might occur within the *longue durée* of capitalism or of planetary ecological processes.

## On the productivity of underdevelopment

These three analyses participate in a practice of invoking the condition of constituent anxiety in the formation of analytical insight. To be sure, they differ both in the ways in which they undertake this interpretive move and of the degree to which they can sustain the operation of that anxiety. For the modest purpose here of simply identifying the coordinates of such a move, of the deployment of anxiety in the constitution of transformative ideas, the similarities will outweigh the differences. That said, some attention to those differences will enhance our understanding of what is at stake in the use of anxiety in the production of transformative ideas; the act of sustaining proximity with the condition of constituent anxiety being the central subjectivising dynamic of radical desublimation.

The three analyses differ in the degree to which they have been able to sustain that state of anxiety around their respective concepts. The differences between them speak to a relation which can be seen to exist between the analyses and the form of discursive circulation by which the

logics of capital and of bio-political administration are reproduced, that is, with the discourse of the university. The more aligned the relation, the less is the level of anxiety available to sustain analysis in a state of movement. Such analyses become, however, more stable. Central to that relation appears to be the extent to which each analysis – here, of financialisation, subsumption, and of the metabolic rift – integrates back into itself the surplus which this particular form of discursive circulation generates at the level of the subject, of the subject-supposed-to-know ( $\$$ ). Central to this mechanism, and providing the means by which the integration of that surplus occurs, is the operation of fantasy within the discourse of the university:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} S_2 & \rightarrow & a \\ & & \diamond \\ S_1 & \leftarrow & \$ \end{array}$$

In the respect that both the analyses of subsumption and of climate change offer stable objects in the place of  $a$  – a bio-anthropological account of the place of enunciation by which the human animal is enabled to speak (the place of ‘dangerousness’; the *potenza* of the speaking subject); and of a principle of co-evolution between biological and social processes (the *oikeois*) – the discourses prove to be ‘mature’: they can effectively integrate the performativity of the pure labour expended in the development of analysis back into that object. To reframe the point, they offer to the subject in those objects a symbolic mandate, a place from which to speak. Any unruliness which the subject might otherwise experience in the process of analysing the subsumption of subjectivity, or climate change, can thereafter be accounted for in those terms: the author, as with humans in general, is an animal naturally in a state of unruliness; co-evolution is naturally a complex phenomenon from which the author’s own words cannot be completely extricated.

Even, then, however, that ability to give name to the object in whose exploration a condition of surplus is generated, is offset in part by the inscrutable quality of the objects in question: the historical emergence of an animal open to the world; the state of co-evolution. Neither of these objects exists as a referent which can be known in any direct way and, as such, their existences are always yet to be demonstrated. And, hence, a set of logical difficulties surround the use of such terms that keeps the door open for the re-engagement of anxiety in the further development of

these respective lines of inquiry. To this end, the symbolic mandates which those terms offer will always prove (perhaps productively) insufficient for the task of stabilising the analysis. There will always be something 'left over' that cannot be fully integrated back into the analysis.

It is this additional move which Jameson's analysis of financialisation amplifies. His work thereby demonstrates the potential which lies within the hermeneutic of radical desublimation. It indicates the possibility of staging, within analyses of the organic crises, the differentiated cultural apparatus of the system which is now constituted by those crises. The object in respect of which that system now moves never obtains, in Jameson's analysis of financialisation, the status of a thing that can be represented. 'Ideology', as that object, following Althusser, is no longer available to the subject; and neither is it available to Jameson, as writer. As a consequence, there exists no pattern of thought by which a comprehensive and correct mapping of the social space of the individual can be achieved. And, to this end, no hope exists of a symbolic mandate from which the subject can speak. This is not to say that the object of ideology cannot be understood. Indeed, Jameson makes it quite clear that he is talking about this object. Moreover, he can offer an explanation of the current state of ideology: the loss of ideology occurs as a consequence of the cultural logic of late capitalism, and that lack now supplements the drive of capitalist relations. That absence of ideology can never, however, be represented as such: there exists no form of expression which can climb outside of, or attain a position above, the state of differentiated abstraction which produces this loss. Indeed, the absence of a condition of ideology is not experienced as such. Rather, it registers within subjectivity as a state of overdetermination. Perhaps no clearer example exists of this than the proliferation of Reality TV: such shows present real people performing their lives; in ways that are highly staged; in a format that seamlessly blends entertainment and reportage; and with the matter of 'the truth' of the phenomenon expunged from the format itself. This is what Lacan meant, also, when he said that the agent of the prevailing discursive circuit (of capitalism, of modernity) is  $S_2$ , of knowledge in a state of unfettered differentiation. Any claims to be able to cut through this state of overdetermination, to access the really-real, will always at some point reveal themselves to simply be a romanticised variant of one of the forms which makes up that field: in Jameson's reckoning, of sci-

entific realism, sociological modernism, or of postmodernist fractured narration.

A profound effect follows for the work upon which Jameson embarks, for the recovery of the phenomenon of ideology: if the object of ideology is to inform analysis, of, for example, financialisation, it is only by way of that thing being staged in the text. It will exert textual power not through what is simply being said about ideology (that is, what ideology 'is', as to 'why' it has its present form) but also through the manner by which it constitutes the form which the text takes at the level of its 'parts of speech'; by the manner in which ideology in its presently non-representable character thereby exerts force upon the trajectory of analysis.

In one register this insight appears to be no more than a matter of logic: that which cannot be represented *per se* can only come to exceed what is understood about it by virtue of a physical manifestation of itself within the text which utters its name. In order to succeed, the substantive content of the critical commentary must thereby proliferate in the same manner as the figure of ideology which that content attempts to map.

In another register this concerns the strategic matter of how a transformative commentary might be offered on the logic of late capitalism, using the cultural conditions of that very same system. That is, the strategic question becomes one of how to express insights into that system in a manner that engages the state of overdetermination, by which subjectivities are forming within the social spaces of our latest capitalism. This has been the challenge set down, also, by the *operaismo* movement: workerist subjectivities increasingly experience themselves less in terms of a state of deficit relative to the economic system than, rather, one in which the agentive character of human labour is rearticulated back to the subject through the work processes and consumption practices which those individuals are given to perform.

The subjectivisation by which Jameson's interpretive practice thereby engages the individual, refuses to lift from the subject the responsibility of its historical predicament. This refusal sustains the subject in a place of enunciation which is without any external vantage-point. It maintains the subject in the place of ideology without any means by which to have ideology materialise *per se*, such that s/he could refashion an absolute understanding of their situation that might furnish them with alternatives to their prevailing circumstances. To work towards that pos-

sibility, the subject must continue to narrate the socio-economic condition in which it finds itself and compose demands appropriate to those conditions. And s/he must do so without the advantage, ordinarily given within the discourse of the university, of a full-and-final textual platform or legitimated methodological lever by which it might find itself propelled. Marxism in this regard, as one such platform, can hold no ultimate explanatory power: to the extent to which it remains vital, it will do so not because of any universal truth it might be interpreted as containing but because of its capacity to speak to (an increasingly) broad swathe of human experience.<sup>94</sup> The symbolic mandate from which concrete demands and transformative ideas can develop, under this cultural condition, can only form in that process of continual re-narration. Moreover, that task of re-narration has for its guide only historically-specific, always but emergent, traces of anxiety.

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94 On this point, see X. Zhang and F. Jameson, "Marxism and the historicity of theory: an interview with Fredric Jameson", *New Literary History*, 29, 3, 1998, 363–374.



## 10 The sublime object(s) of *utopia*

The question of ‘what is to be done?’ animates not only the critical analysis of organic crises but also the matter of political organisation. Indeed, it is with regard to the matter of political organisation that the decoupling of the normative drive from particularistic analyses of those crises, obtains its clearest public expression. What might it mean for there to exist an organisation of action whose political purposes only ever fully emerge in conjunction with that action? How might such an organisation prevent itself from lapsing either into the convenience of pragmatic justification (doing whatever it takes to bring about an end whose form always remains partially undisclosed) or the proto-religious certainty of idealist conviction (commanded by some or other image of the Social Good)? Moreover, this matter of political organisation animates anew the question of how the discursive space once occupied by *utopia* might now produce transformative ideas.

Badiou’s text, *The Communist Hypothesis*, gestures towards the kind of political organisation that we might associate with knowledge developed through the interpretive practices of radical desublimation and the impress of constitutive anxiety. The suggestions which the text makes on political administration share two points, in particular, with that kind of knowledge production. To begin, political organisation turns upon practices of interpretation rather than the formalisation of operational directives. To this end, the form of transformative organisation with which Badiou aligns himself – *communism* – is a process, being “better understood as an operation than as a concept”,<sup>1</sup> as a “practice”.<sup>2</sup> Second, the organisation of political movement, for Badiou, always embroils subjectivity. Indeed, it self-consciously works through the subjectivisation of individuals. More directly, organisation turns upon the subjectivisation of individuals towards the historical ends implied by the functioning of that organisation. Badiou writes: “The communist Idea is what constitutes the becoming-political Subject of the individual as also and at the

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1 A. Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, London and New York: Verso: 2010, 237.

2 *Ibid.*, 247.

same time his or her projection into History”.<sup>3</sup> To reframe the point, the notion of a communist organisation cannot be separated from the subjectivising effects upon the individual of the ways in which ideas of ‘the common’ are being produced. Together, subjectivity, the production of ideas, and political organisation transform under the mutual impress of each other, the consequences of which stand to be historically significant.

Badiou’s suggestions for a mode of political organisation which is both processual and which recognises the inevitable subjectivisation implied by the production of that administration, turns upon the generation of a particular object. That object is, as intimated, *communism*. To be clear, in Badiou’s hands this object remains disconnected from any specific historical manifestation of communism:

It is essential today to understand that ‘communist’ can no longer be the adjective qualifying a politics [...] [neither] the ‘Communist Party’ [n]or ‘Communist State’ [...] [nor] ‘socialist State’ [...].<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the object refers to something akin to a discursive space, anchored not to empirically existing modes of political organisation but to the trans-historical “Idea”: “the Idea presents facts as symbols of the real of truth”.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is on account of the manner by which transformative political organisation exists as a discursive space, rather than as a code, that

the Idea of communism [paradoxically] allowed revolutionary politics and its parties to be inscribed in the representation of a meaning of History the inevitable outcome of which was communism.<sup>6</sup>

A series of strong injunctions in Badiou’s reflections on political organisation undermine any chance of *communism* being reconstructed as a singular phenomenon. This act of emasculation envelops the object in paradox, however. The most powerful of these injunctions is the cosmology which Badiou presents of the symbolic field within which the idea of communism operates, of a schema akin to Lacan’s troika of the Real,

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3 *Ibid.*, 237.

4 *Ibid.*, 240.

5 *Ibid.*, 246.

6 *Ibid.*, 246.

Symbolic, and Imaginary.<sup>7</sup> It is as a consequence of *communism* being located within that field that it emerges as an object of desire. To this end, for Badiou, History exists as a Symbolic formation by which actions – past, present, future – are articulated. The meaningfulness of any such action occurs only by virtue of the Imaginary, by virtue of those actions’ relations with something beyond themselves; something which promises to show itself as being ultimately coherent in form. In contrast, the rude intrusion of unanticipated events – whose form cannot be integrated into the nexus of Symbolic articulation and Imaginary structuring – indicate the operation of the Real. The act of taking up these events, of allowing them to disrupt the contrived cohesion of our existing intellectual frameworks, Badiou will call ‘truth procedures’. Overseeing that cosmology is the figure of the Platonic Idea, playing a similar structural role as the absent cause in Althusser’s work. The Idea exists as a condition of pure potentiality, of indeterminate multiplicity and differentiation. To this end, Badiou suggests:

[the] Idea, which is an operative mediation between the real and the symbolic, always presents the individual with something that is located between the event and the fact. That is why the endless debates about the real status of the communist Idea are irresolvable.<sup>8</sup>

Under the impress of the truth procedures – which Badiou identifies, following Plato, as being science, philosophy, love, and art – the unsymbolisable kernel of the Idea gains historically specific form. To invoke Althusser’s terminology, that inscrutable source manifests as various effects of itself. To this end, for Badiou, such procedures are “the protocol not of the existence but rather of the *exposure* of a truth in action”.<sup>9</sup> The possibility of transformative political organisation turns upon the functioning of truth procedures such that the Idea gains form as an object fully attuned to its historical location. And that form of political organisation is *communism*.<sup>10</sup>

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7 *Ibid.*, 238–239.

8 *Ibid.*, 246.

9 *Ibid.*, 248. Original emphasis.

10 Badiou goes on to advise that the object of *communism* provides the key to the subjectivisation by which the individual is motivated to identify with that emergent object. There exists a pantheon of communistic heroes, identification with which

The form which fantasy takes in this discussion – as the mechanism through which human bodies and the symbolic order meld to become agency – suggests that the appearance of an object in this manner will itself exert a subjectivising effect on the individuals who seek to use it. That subjectivisation will operate quite independently of the specific organisational devices which subsequently form around that object – of systems of communication, decision-making, dispersal of resources, and so on. Key to that subjectivising effect is the appearance of *objet a* in a singular form (that gives rise to the object of *communism*). In keeping with that same understanding of fantasy, which we have taken from Žižek, it can thereby be anticipated that the approach will generate a condition of surplus at the level of subjectivity. That surplus will manifest as an inability on the part of the subject to find in the code through which *communism* is manifesting (that is, through Lacan's schema) a means by which to contain the indeterminacy of the immaterial labour which the code invokes within the person.

A key question at this point becomes not one of how this tendency in Badiou's work might be thwarted. Rather, the goal becomes one of understanding how that surplus – and the troubling pleasure (*jouissance*) which becomes the subject's experience – might emerge in a form that does not lead the subject into either quirky behaviours that alienate them from the transformative impulses of the idea (*communism*) or, as a particular kind of pathology, a regressively romanticising state of desire for that which does not exist (for a re-establishment of Communism).

Badiou's position seeks to integrate that surplus through the object it places in the space of *objet a*: that is, within the signifier that is *communism*. In doing so, it enables the unbearable infinity of the Idea to be kept at bay. To this end, Badiou explains, "the Idea – and the communist Idea in particular, because it refers directly to the infinity of the people – needs the finitude of proper names."<sup>11</sup> A chain of equivalence between four elements is thereby presented with this effect. Together that chain gives *communism* the appearance of a coherent object: 'communism', 'the Idea', 'the people', and 'communist heroes'.

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provides a readily accessible means by which the manifestation of the Idea, as *communism*, can continue. We might note the tautology involved.

11 *Ibid.*, 252.

Immediately, as is to be expected with the operation of a fantasy structure such as this, its operation in the text is rebuked by the text itself. To this end, the event of each and every truth procedure is presented as needing to be something other than a predicable effect of that chain. Rather, events need to have the constitution of “a surprise”.<sup>12</sup> Badiou explains: “If this were not the case, it would mean that it would have been predictable as a fact, and so would be inscribed in the History of the State, which is a contradiction in terms”.<sup>13</sup>

An interesting quality surrounds this statement which points, again, to a key characteristic in the operation of fantasy under the thrall of strong objects: the ritualistic (rather than unruly) character of such rebukes. “Of course”, it thereby follows, the appearance of an object in this manner is always but a “contradiction in terms”. What then ensues is an equally ritualistic call: the withering of the institution deemed responsible for such contradictions and for the regressive coagulation of the Idea into sets of stable and conserving empirical objects – the organ of “the State”.<sup>14</sup>

A transformative interpretation of Badiou’s suggestions on political organisation would avoid simply discarding the approach on the basis of its inconsistencies. Rather, it would seek to alter the operation of fantasy within it so as to make redundant the fantasmatic structures needed to integrate the unruly surplus of the performative labour otherwise heaped upon the subject. The key to this shift in the operation of fantasy lies with the character of the object being generated. Indeed, the utopian urge of Badiou’s approach, which outstrips the political rationality which it augers, lies with its intimations of the form which that object might take: knowledge in its state of production. As Badiou suggests in this vein “(a)n Idea is always the assertion that a new truth is historically possible”.<sup>15</sup> With regard to the condensation of knowledge into *an object* (in a similar way to which Badiou reduces knowledge to *communism*), and as to the variability of such objects (in a manner akin to the diversity which *communism* needs now demonstrate) and, in addition, to the potential that such objects might demonstrate if they were to circulate through

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12 *Ibid.*, 255.

13 *Ibid.*, 255.

14 *Ibid.*, 256.

15 *Ibid.*, 256.

public spaces differently, the Four Discourses of Lacan again provides a productive springboard.

## On the objects of knowledge

The Four Discourses suggests that each mode of discursive circuitry will bring to the fore a different object belonging to the field of knowledge: with regard to the discourse of the master, knowledgability; with regard to the discourse of the hysteric, the flow of knowledge; with regard to the discourse of the analyst, the master signifier; and with regard to the discourse of the university, the subject-supposed-to-know. As interesting as each of these objects might be in their own right, the potential for an object to inaugurate a fantasmatic structure that can exceed the limitations associated with, for example, the emergence of communism as an effect of the Idea, will lie with the kind of object which will emerge with the hermeneutic practices of radical desublimation.

Within the discourse of the master, to begin, the object which melds language with the body is that of knowledgability. Knowledgability appears in that discourse as the ‘product’ of the discursive movement, as *objet a*:

$$\frac{S_1}{S} \quad \frac{S_2}{a}$$

As Lacan had indicated, the master/slave dialectic which underpins the discourse of the master gives social value to the site-specific knowledge which the slave produces. In that same moment, however, the master cannot give due recognition to the performativity of the knowledge production associated with the subject-position of their slave. As Frantz Fanon observed of this dynamic in relation to the colonial socio-economic subjugation of the ethnic other:

The movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart.<sup>16</sup>

The slave alone must bear the weightless burden of the unruly performativity of that surplus, of their pure labour. Knowledgability continues in that role, as the primary product of the discursive circuit, so long as the subject-slave remains bound to its knowledgability (to its pure labour) by a state of troubling pleasure, by a performativity of labour that binds the body within itself. So long as that fastening continues, the production of knowledgability reproduces sets of social relationships that are based upon the pattern of mastery. And with that durability, the normative impulse which is specifically associated with the discourse of the master is reproduced: the valorisation of authoritative rule.<sup>17</sup>

In a similar manner, within the discourse of the hysteric, the relation between *jouissance* and the symbolic order materialises as an object of knowledge: in this instance the object is the flow of knowledge ( $S_2$ ).

$$\frac{S}{a} \quad \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

As a critical outburst directed at the insufficiency of the master, the discourse of the hysteric creates a steady stream of new (radical) knowledge: knowledge appears here to have a cumulative quality which, if developed ‘appropriately’, has the capacity to eradicate the recurring sources of human malaise associated with authoritarian governance. The appearance of that stream, as the primary output of the circuit, induces angst, however. Angst forms around the question of where that stream of knowledge is coming from and as to how it might persist. The occupation of the place of ‘truth’ by that empty form, *objet a*, explains the source of this misgiving. In its occupation of the position of agent, the subject comes to misrecognise the stream of knowledge as coming from

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16 F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: MacGibbon and Kee 1986, 109.

17 The next section of the Fanon quotation indicates, however, the successful challenge by the subject to that authoritative rule: “The movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self”.

itself: the individual subject appears to be in control of critical knowledge and its production. Given that knowledge in this guise needs, however, to include both statements that are true and untrue – in order for each and every system of knowledge to remain open to that which it cannot immediately comprehend – the self-perception by the subject that it is in control of this flow becomes an impossible one. And yet, neither can the subject jettison this position. Indeed, the inability of the subject to do so normalises a series of liberal political normative visions, of social formations ultimately characterised by a quest for individual freedom. It is not, however, these visions which provide the discursive circuit with durability: rather, its resilience comes from an emergence between language and the body, as an object of troubling pleasure, of an incessant ‘flow of knowledge’ that lacks any apparent truth to itself.

Likewise, with the discourse of the analyst, an object of knowledge emerges upon whose persistence the durability of the discourse depends: the master signifier –  $S_1$  – the signifier whose existence enables chains of equivalence to form between otherwise disconnected signifiers.

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \quad \frac{\S}{S_1}$$

The master signifier, here, materialises this cusp between language and the body insofar as  $S_1$  appears in the absence of any apparent power which could have motivated its appearance. The appearance occurs here as a consequence of how the flow of knowledge is set in motion: by the one object which cannot register within the symbolic order – the part of no part – *objet a*. Here, *objet a* sits in the place of the agent. The ability of normative vision to develop – for the question to materialise as to ‘what should be done?’ – begins to unravel at this point. *Objet a* has neither substance nor a capacity to organise. Neither does the object which appears in the place of truth, the flow of knowledge ( $S_2$ ). In order for any kind of normative impulse to return to the analysis, some or other sense of socio-historical context needs to be introduced. That act of introducing a context – while necessary in order for that normative impulse to reignite – cannot, however, be derived from the discourse of the analyst. This is Žižek’s concern: the operation of the discourse can only presently be understood in relation to the concrete situations in which it emerges; that being, now, the “hegemonic symbolic matrix” of the “su-



perego injunction to enjoy that permeates our discourse”.<sup>18</sup> Such an act – of installing a context that can infuse the analyst’s discourse with normative traction – can be seen in a highly specific situation which Zupančič mobilises to strengthen the contemporary prospects of Lacan’s Four Discourses as an analytic tool: that of “the war on terror”.<sup>19</sup> But the significance of an analytic move such as this cannot be derived from the discourse of the analyst, dominated as that discourse is by the motivating power of *objet a*. Rather, the use of such an example, as with Zupančič’s work, suggests a shift towards a different discursive circuitry from that of the discourse of the analyst; to one associated more with the discourse of the university and its shadowy operation of power.<sup>20</sup>

One final object of knowledge emerges in relation to this fourth member of the discursive circuits associated with modernity: the object Lacan called the barred subject-supposed-to-know, *le sujet supposé savoir* (S̄):

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \quad \frac{a}{\bar{S}}$$

It is within this subject ‘who should know’ that the cusp between *jouissance* and the symbolic order materialises in this circuit. The subject’s capacity to know depends, however, upon the ability of the subject to crack the code of the undisclosed power through which the current flow of knowledge is being motivated. That subject is itself, however, always already a product of that same power. This is Althusser’s point: there now exists no exterior point to the political rationalities of contemporary governance (the ISAs). The successful immobilisation of the code risks an equal immobilisation of the self. To this end, the durability of the discourse of the university depends upon the subject-supposed-to-know being in the thrall of the impossible promise of coming to know the

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18 S. Žižek, “Objet a in social links”, in J. Clements and R. Grigg (eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2006, 110.

19 A. Zupančič, “When surplus enjoyment meets surplus value”, in J. Clemens and R. Griggs (eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Duke University Press: Durham and London 2006, 176–177.

20 To this end, the question arises as to why Zupančič chooses the ‘war on terror’ as her context.

power by which it is being constituted. The normative vision which emerges with this discursive circuit is the insatiable ‘more, yet more’ of the methodologies and theoretical narratives which would appear to provide the subject with those tools.

Further to this elaboration of the objects of the Four Discourses is the matter of the object which might materialise between the domains of *jouissance* and of the symbolic order, within practices of radical desublimation. Such an object might provide clues as to how the performative impulse of Lenin’s provocation ‘what is to be done?’ might exceed, without extinguishing, the inevitably prescriptive content of the diagnostic analyses which the asking of the question invariably presupposes. That object takes the form of the substantivised adjective associated with the practice of radical desublimation, that is, *the sublime*.

In the Lacanian field, *the sublime* is that object of knowledge in relation to which the ‘treasure trove of signifiers’ – knowledge ( $S_2$ ) – moves. Moreover, it exists with that same quizzical quality of being both cause and effect; as Lacan attributes to *objet a* in the domain of desire and which Althusser ascribes to history. In one register, *the sublime* functions as the cause of the historical movement of knowledge. To this end, and in a manner associated with Edmond Burke’s perception of *the sublime*, the sublime object appears as a material force whose enormity challenges the human capacity to corral Nature within the comforting confines of language. Confrontation with *the sublime* will, instead, leave us speechless. In a second register, *the sublime* exists as an effect within the human capacity to name the (overwhelming) situation which it (*the sublime*) has, itself, been inaugurated. And to this, end, the meaning of the concept can be found altering in relation to historically-occurring manifestations of itself, in terms of boundary-bursting experiences; this observation resonating with Kant’s appreciation of *the sublime*.

It is as a consequence of *the sublime*’s character of being the quizzical cause/effect of knowledge that the primary interpretive dynamics of radical desublimation occur. Those dynamics hinge upon the suspension of boundaries between subject and object. Moreover, as a consequence of this characteristic, the signifiers that are used to interpret pressing issues, such as organic crises in the world-system, find themselves able to remain in that state of modulating, as Jameson puts it “into identical

yet distinct spaces”.<sup>21</sup> Such is the case with *ideology* in the case of Jameson, *the general intellect* in the case of the Italian worker’s movement, and of *the oikeios* in the work of Moore. That quality of being both cause and effect also emerges with regard to the figure of *the sublime* as cultural practices of abstraction have come to take on, as Luhmann and Jameson variously indicate, a condition of differentiation that cannot now be simply charted back to one of abstraction’s various historical modalities.

### The objects of *the sublime*: *the sublime* as object(s)

In the guise of an empirical object, *the sublime* had appeared in the works of Edmund Burke as an entity of unspeakable terror. *The sublime* comprised a condition in nature, typically, that threatens the immediate wellbeing of people (if not jeopardising human existence itself). Such an object – and the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 marked for this generation of European thinkers the apotheosis of *the sublime* – always remained, for Burke, separate from the subject who contemplates the terror. And to this end, *the sublime* in Burke mimics that elemental separation of object and subject which characterises the positivist tradition of knowledge production.

For Kant, alternatively, *the sublime* expands so as to invoke not only the empirical thing but also the matter of representation. This merger occurs where cultural processes of knowing come to be inflected by direct experiences of horror. To this end, clear and objective representation of *the sublime* cannot be assumed to have occurred in any description of an object of terror. Rather, the process of giving an account will always have been mediated by the condition of having been enveloped by the inassimilable dread of what is being described. To thereby encounter an object which has the capacity to (arbitrarily) enact the unspeakable not only subverts the imagined durability of the self. It also invokes the existence of a limit to human attempts to portray the domain of events. The

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21 F. Jameson, “Lacan and the dialectic”, in S. Žižek (ed.), *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, London and New York: Verso 2006, 388.

sheer force of the sublime event, the irruption into social spaces of *the sublime*, threatens to outstrip the direct abilities of the human mind to grasp the fact of such occurrences.

Such encounters with the limits of conceptualisation do not necessarily induce, for Kant, a retreat into irrationality (though that is possible). Rather, the experience can produce in the subject a productive ability to reflect upon such encounters, and with pleasurable effects: the subject becomes able to simultaneously experience the terrifying limitations of its material existence relative to the terror, in conjunction with the pleasurable sensation of having its intellectual capacities soar above the existential threat involved. To this end, *the sublime* becomes, in Kant, a condition of “negative pleasure”, a state that is simultaneously affective and epistemological, being simultaneously of the body and of language.<sup>22</sup>

Either of these threads from the Burke/Kant tradition could package *the sublime* as a useful conceptual lever for analysing intellectually challenging situations, such as the present organic crises in the world-system. This becomes immediately clear with Burke: *the sublime* comprises an empirical condition which can be described in ways such that the descriptions can be trusted to correspond with the reality of that condition. This appears to be the case of, for example, analyses of financialisation which approach the contemporary crises of global capitalism as a product of unbridled class warfare, of incalculable human greed, and so on; or of the subsumption of worker subjectivity as an appropriation of human attributes by productive processes; or of the metabolic rift as a calculable cleavage between social forces and natural carbon cycles.

In the case of Kant, alternatively, a slightly more dynamic conceptual lever forms. Here, *the sublime* destabilises the possibility of representation – as is given by Burke – insofar as the attempt to give name to the terror of threatening events invokes a relation between the body and the symbolic order. Were representation of the organic crises to remain in this dislocating register, it might well result in various socially regressive *passages à l’acte* by those who took such interpretations as being the truth of the crises; of widespread acts of violence against the self or of wanton violence against the (typically ethnic) other. Configured in this manner also, however, *the sublime* inflects the practice of represen-

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22 I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Indianapolis: Hackett 2005, 98.

tation with Kant's condition of negative pleasure: the subject can reach a higher state of understanding as a consequence of their trauma.

In conjunction with the differentiation of representation that has come to constitute the culture of late capitalist modernity, two more modalities of *the sublime* now also emerge in addition to that of *the sublime* as an intelligible object. Rather than eradicate the experiences of *the sublime* which the perspectives of Burke and Kant illuminate, they modulate *the sublime* into those identical yet distinct spaces of which Jameson speaks.

In one such guise, *the sublime* appears as an *object barred*; in the other as *an object without limitation*. Both indicate the partiality of *the sublime* as a conceptual lever. In both, the objective state of *the sublime* is now (for differing reasons) no longer accessible. In this state of inaccessibility, *the sublime* has also taken on the attribute of being something of an "un-concept",<sup>23</sup> coming to denote the emergence of a limit-point within representation itself. The inaccessibility of *the sublime* thereby signals the realisation of an outer boundary to the process of conceptualisation by which the scientific production of knowledge operates. In each case by which *the sublime* shows itself to not now be accessible, the condition of inaccessibility refers not to the empirical loss of the object of awe – for, quite clearly, objects of terror remain to be experienced – but to the dimension of *the sublime* brought forward by Kant. Surpassed now is not only the state of negative pleasure which experiences of *the sublime* invoke, but also the stable cultural standpoints through which knowledge could be developed about the very inability of modern subjectivity to apprehend the enormity of the forces periodically unleashed against it. We are unable to, and lack insight into the fact that we now can no longer, know. In Jameson's terms, ideology is not available under these historical conditions. Surpassed also in that process, then, is the optimism which surrounded Kant's orientation, that *the sublime* can exist as a productive lever in the production of knowledge, of negative pleasure being an available epistemological condition.

Propelling the first reiteration of this state of inaccessibility is the emergence, in the mid-twentieth century, of a state of "collective trau-

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23 A. Masschelein, "The concept as ghost: conceptualization of the uncanny in late-twentieth-century theory", *Mosaic*, 35, 1, 2002, 61.

ma” that comes from the experience of humanly-induced cataclysms.<sup>24</sup> Defining the significance of such events is the matter of scale. They exceed the kinds of dislocation that come to be produced in local events. Relative to this genre of trauma, the alarming collapses of post-colonial social movements in the post-war period (into various despotic regimes), pall into insignificance. Rather, their significance lies with the capacity of this genre of events to eclipse the entire Enlightenment narrative of Progress.<sup>25</sup> For Gene Ray, the events of Auschwitz and Hiroshima stand out as emblematic in this regard. Those two events, more than any other moments of modern human governance, indicate a full and purposive submersion of the human condition to the purposes of administration: from here on in, practices of government will entail both the production and the eradication of human life. Vaporised, in the process, are not only the cultures to be taken out but, moreover, any sense of an inherent capacity for benevolent ‘self-regard’ upon which Kant’s image of the sublime of negative pleasure had depended for its cognitive traction.

In the place of these lodestones there emerges a new social totality of collective trauma. In conjunction with that collective experience there arises, also, a condition of mourning as shared fate. This is not simply shared fate in terms of an empty marker for the absence of alternative futures. Rather, “(r)igorous mourning belongs to the revolutionary process and is on the side of those seeking a passage beyond the catastrophe”.<sup>26</sup> For in that condition of mourning resides hope for the recovery of the object lost – *the sublime*.

In the absence of any stable cultural standpoints outside of the emergent totalising horizon of collective trauma, however, the sublime object can never again be enabled to materialise in a positive empirical form, even as artistic work: “The sublime work, it seems, is not the wound itself, but is the effective mimesis of the wound”.<sup>27</sup> Only as the unrepresentable negative of the aesthetic images by which the trauma is

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24 G. Ray, “HITS: from trauma and the sublime to radical critique”, *Third Text*, 23, 2, 2009, 135–149.

25 *Ibid.*, 140.

26 *Ibid.*, 149.

27 *Ibid.*, 135.

offered up for collective consideration can *the sublime* thereby now exist.<sup>28</sup>

In that state of negative representation, as an *object barred*, the possibility emerges for *the sublime* to form anew in both of its semblances as presented respectively by Burke and Kant; but now, as Ray observes, only regressively: as strategies of governmental domination. To this end, the terror of *the sublime* reforms in the guise of a palpable *object*, this time in “the power of genocidal violence that underwrites and globally enforces capitalist order”; and as a rehabilitated state of negative pleasure in the responsabilising condition placed upon individuals to be forever now “moving forward” in the absence of any futures to which such movement might be directed.<sup>29</sup>

The differentiation of representation which now characterises the cultural state of late modernity also gives rise to an additional breed of inaccessibility around the object of *the sublime*. Characterising this third moment in *the sublime* is a transit within that condition of negative pleasure noted by Kant, from that of a lost object which can be recovered (albeit only now through practices of (re)presentational negation) to an object whose disappearance does not even now register within cultural practise of (re)presentation.

Key here is a “waning of affect” associated with the (postmodern) culture of late capitalism.<sup>30</sup> In that waning of affect *the sublime* finds itself in a condition of being staged, rather than forgotten yet recoverable; forming not as an empirical object but as an over-determining and inscrutable presence in relation to which ideas are put in motion. As Stuart Hall notes in this regard, “this is a matter not of too little but of too much”.<sup>31</sup> As a key to this transition, the waning of affect implies a passing from a previous “age of anxiety”, as had been expressed in the “great

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28 Emblematic, here, for Ray is the wristwatch that was recovered from the detritus of Hiroshima, halted at the moment of detonation. What counts is what is no longer present: flesh which once gave the presence of the watch social meaning. What now gives the watch meaning is the fact of that flesh having been vaporised. Such an apprehension marks the watch as “a haunted object” (Ray, “HITS”, 144).

29 *Ibid.*, 149.

30 F. Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism”, *New Left Review*, 146 (July/August), 1984, 61.

31 S. Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence & Wishart 1990, 232.

modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation”.<sup>32</sup> Such thematics as these were signalling not merely the incremental absorption by the logics of capital and administration of the cultural markers by which modern subjects had located themselves (locality, political community, communities of faith, and so on). Moreover, they indicated that the subjective capacities were being suspended by which people could perform that internal separation between self and its external objects, by which a past that can be authentically lost could nevertheless be fabricated.

Provoking that suspension within late capitalist culture has been the particular family of technology in which ‘dead human labour’ now congeals: of machines that do not function by producing artefacts derived from original objects but, rather, which replicate reproductions. Moreover, something of a supra-machine of that kind has emerged at the level of global system, Jameson notes, which normalises culture as a circuitry of simulacra: the securitisation of finance. The ontological category of loss, as is associated with the effects of trauma – and which if still present would at least provide human affect with traction – simply does not register here: there exists no state of mourning in respect of which an object lost can be re-imagined. In apparent synchrony, the world-system operates through an overdetermination of its cultural expressions by an absence of pieces missing, of profusion without purpose, being a machine “whose power or authenticity is documented by the success of such works in evoking a whole new postmodern space in emergence around us”.<sup>33</sup> In conjunction with the absence of lack in the system, *the sublime* proliferates as an object without limitation. It multiplies not, however, *as* ‘the sublime’, for the system possesses no such principle of external force which threatens to limit life, but as an operation of proliferation itself.

What then is the tractive force which comes from knowing about the enormity of force which now outstrips human experience – of *the sublime* in its state of differentiation simultaneously into *object*, *object barred*, and *object without limitation*? Moreover, what might now comprise the capacity to be with the *jouissance* evoked in and through this thing, such that the relation between language and body might propel, in

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32 Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism”, 61.

33 *Ibid.*, 79.



the organisation of political action, the normative impulse of ‘what is to be done?’ Jameson’s attention to the matter of sensorial functionality would seem to again speak to such a task, given the centrality of the senses in the apprehension of objects: if the subject is to produce knowledge of this kind it must undertake a task with the similarly impossible dimensions of growing new organs. If this mention of Jameson’s suggestion appears to have us stepping back into a prior stream of thought, then it might also be apparent that the stream into which we now step in the contemplation of the discursive space of *utopia* – into a swarming of language and the body under the impress of an historically differentiated *sublime* – is no longer the stream in which we had previously stood.



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