

CHAPTER FOUR

ECONOMY, SURPLUS, POLITICS: SOME QUESTIONS ON SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK'S POLITICAL ECONOMY CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM[†]

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The premise of the series is that the explosive combination of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist tradition detonates a dynamic freedom that enables us to question the very presuppositions of the circuit of Capital. (Slavoj Žižek, Preface to the Verso Book Series, *Wo es war*)

Psychoanalysis meets Marxism

The psychoanalytical act of Slavoj Žižek has affected a significant shift of perspective in the way we understand how ideology functions in capitalism. Žižek has systematically insisted on the constitutive, and not merely supplementary and/or illusory, role that enjoyment and libidinal investments play in the maintenance of capitalism. Through encircling the “subjective logic” of enjoyment that supports the “structural logic” of the circuit of capital, he has exposed, while avoiding the liberal humanist ideology of individual choice and responsibility, ways in which the subject is ethically implicated in the reproduction of capitalist relations. Our own intervention begins with the belief that Žižek’s intervention has ramifications beyond the particular economic form of capitalism. “Enjoyment as an economic factor,” adopted from the subtitle of Žižek’s, *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991), efficiently summarizes the essence of the research agenda that Žižek has initiated for Marxian class analysis. The task of this project, in our view, is one of reconceptualizing “the economic relations to class” as fantasmatic and libidinally animated formations, structured around a fundamental impossibility. Informed by Žižek’s work, we call this impossibility *class antagonism qua real*, an impossibility that stains all attempts to institute a stable and harmonious

organization of the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor (Özselçuk and Madra 2005, 85-86).¹

If all relations to class are caught within and tainted by enjoyment, however, this does not mean that all relations are the same. In this paper, we seek to address the question of how to conceptualize a *psychoanalytically informed economic difference* that pertains to class. An impasse in Žižek's work on capitalism emerges with his inability to imagine the ethico-political principles of a non-capitalist and non-exploitative relation to class. Žižek adamantly seeks to "restore to the 'economic' domain the dignity of Truth, the Potential for Events" (2005, 125) and continually points out the limitation of contemporary critiques of liberal democracy, insofar as they fail to acknowledge the primacy of class struggle in their framework. However, Žižek is in complicity with his own accusations, given that he is neither clear as to what the *object* of class struggle is, nor indicative of what a new way of organizing our enjoyment to the economy might be. For instance, his pertinent question of "how to move beyond capitalism without reverting to a utopian notion of communism" (2000, 19-20) is quickly annulled by the all too familiar sentiment that "[c]apital is here to stay" (2005, 118). Similarly, his occasional and passing invocations of certain exceptional social agents as the harbinger for revolutionary politics provide little in the way of substantiating and qualifying the relevant conditions behind such anticipations.

Given the hold of libidinal investments, there is admittedly no easy recipe for undoing capitalist relations. There is also the justified concern of not wanting to impose yet another fantasy of communism. Still we think these reasons fall short of explaining Žižek's reluctance to discuss the traversal of capitalism. Rather we entertain the following hypothesis: the difficulty to think *economic difference* is conditioned, at least in part, by the particular ways in which Žižek and the psychoanalytical literature on capitalism that his work has inspired tend to operationalize Marx's concepts of circuit of capital and surplus value. This tendency is most easily discernable at those moments when this psychoanalytical critique articulates the concept of enjoyment within an "accumulationist" narrative, which presupposes the contradictory unfolding of the expanded reproduction of capital as a built-in and automatic process.

This narrative ultimately erases any possibility of conceiving of contingency within, or difference from the process of capitalist reproduction. Further still, this rendering of capitalist reproduction as self-constituted and self-driven also obliterates Žižek's original attempt to embed the constitutive impossibility of capitalism within the discordant economy of enjoyment, since it disconnects the "structural" from the vital support of the "subjective." In this paradoxical regression to the traditional Marxian vision of capitalist expanded self-reproduction, what seems to "detonate," to return to the opening quote from

Žižek, is not so much “a dynamic freedom that enables the questioning of the very presuppositions of the circuit of Capital” but the very project of articulating Lacanian psychoanalysis with the Marxist tradition.

This is not to say that understanding capitalism as a formation driven by necessity (i.e., the self-conflicting, self-expanding logic) is a conception foreign to the Marxian tradition. Indeed the “efforts to discern capitalism’s destiny-determining inner contradictions” have largely dominated Western Marxism since Marx’s death (Norton 2001, 23). What is problematic, however, is the equation of this current with the totality of the Marxian discourse. This, unfortunately, displaces another tendency within Marxian tradition, one that focuses on the unique object of Marx: “the analyses of the multipartite, historically changing and historically changeable workings of surplus labor performance and surplus labor distribution. Class” (Norton 2001, 23). Reintegrating this second current into Marxian tradition gives us the conceptual language that is necessary for producing contingency and difference in the configuration of class. That is why we find it imperative to begin our analysis by reclaiming “organizations of surplus labor,” rather than the “accumulation of capital,” as the particular entry point of Marxian discourse before we interlace Marxian political economy with Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to conceptualize both the impossibility of, and difference in, class relations.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we review the contemporary psychoanalytical critique of capitalism and find its treatment of the Marxian circuit of capital inadequate. We argue that this critique does not only limit the “subjective” element in capitalism to the final moment of the circuit, to the moment of consumption, while implicitly understanding the reproduction of the rest of the circuit as automatic, but also tends to confine the scope of some key Marxian concepts to the analysis of capitalism. These shortcomings, in turn, prevent the critique from articulating *contingency* and *difference within*—as well as *difference from*—capitalism. We then take issue with Žižek’s interpretation of Lacan’s thesis pertaining to the homology between surplus *value* and surplus *jouissance*. We reformulate the terms of this homology as that between surplus *labor* and surplus *jouissance*. In doing so, we opt for a different relation between psychoanalysis and Marxism in which we rethink *economic difference*, more precisely difference from capitalism, in light of psychoanalytical discourse without losing sight of one of the unique contributions of Marxian theory: the study of the historically changing relations of surplus labor. To this end, we shift the focus in psychoanalytical theory from consumption/exchange to the moments of production, appropriation, and distribution and conceive the different ways in which communities organize their relation to surplus in terms of *sexual difference*. Drawing from Alain Badiou’s axiomatic politics, we formulate a feminine politics of the “non-all”

that dynamites not only capitalism, but all other forms of relating to surplus labor, including forms of communism, which are organized around the masculine logic of exception.

Psychoanalysis of capital: The ideology of impossible enjoyment

Žižek argues that “‘ideological interpellation,’ proper to global capitalism is no longer that of the sacrificial devotion to a Cause, but...the reference to an obscure Unnameable: ENJOY!...” (2007, 10). This insight—one that can be traced back to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*—has in fact generated a new field of research which can perhaps best be called the psychoanalysis of capital. Earlier contributions in this area are evidenced in the work of Yannis Stavrakakis (1997; 2000; 2003), but we should also note Jason Glynos (2001), Todd McGowan (2003; 2004), and most recently Alenka Zupančič (2006).² A distinct emphasis, which one can single out from these very insightful and refined analyses, including those offered by Žižek (1989; 1991; 1999), concerns the role played by the late capitalist superegoic injunction to enjoy without inhibitions and through the accumulation of goods. Zupančič, for instance, claims that the fundamental slogan of our times is “Impossible is not possible.” In other words, in contrast to an earlier, perhaps corporatist, capitalism (New Deal) that relied on a prohibitive and productivist superego, contemporary capitalism (Neoliberalism) claims that there is no taste that cannot be satisfied, no commodity that cannot be delivered to our doorsteps, no enjoyment that cannot be enjoyed.³

But it is important to keep our gaze away from the glitter of the commodities, for “we enjoy,” McGowan reminds, “the events leading up to the denouement...not the acquisition of the object itself. The moment of acquiring the object represents the end, not the beginning, of our enjoyment” (2004, 3). This implies that consumption as a means of enjoyment is bound to fail. Yet, at the same time, this dissatisfaction is not a reason to abandon shopping (in this sense, it is perhaps useful to distinguish “shopping” and “consumption” as two distinct economic moments/categories). As long as the subjects of capitalism continue to believe that an ultimate enjoyment is possible, capitalism will continue to feed off of the very disappointment that the act of consumption produces and shopping will go on ceaselessly.

This is why Stavrakakis (2003) argues that the problem with capitalism is not so much that it produces false needs, desires, and alienated subjectivities but rather that it has become a successful “administration” of enjoyment. This distinction is crucial: while the former position endorses the humanist idea that there are “true” needs, the latter shifts the focus from whether or not our needs

are manufactured (they always are—to a certain extent) to the way in which capitalism thrives on the very structure of enjoyment *as such* (regardless of the content of enjoyment). In other words, the success of capitalism resides not so much in *what* it dictates that we enjoy, but the way in which it has begun to exploit *how* we enjoy. The circuit of capital completes its round again, and again, without any disruption, and begins each time anew, because it has been successfully articulated with the libidinal economy of enjoyment, the structure of how we enjoy.

What are the issues that we raise with this analysis? This particular mode of psychoanalytical critique has both strengths and weaknesses. To start with, this literature offers an invaluable alternative to the existing economic theories of consumption: to the neoclassical theory of demand as well as to the classical Marxian theory of alienated needs and desires, both of which rest on the humanist ideology of a unified subject who is or can ultimately be conscious of his/her true needs. Moreover, the logic of desire provides a meaningful frame not only to understand how the administration of enjoyment has become constitutive of capitalism through enabling the sale of commodities (hence, securing the realization of capitalist surplus value), but also to inventively formulate a different relation to enjoyment within the field of consumption.

This latter possibility hinges on articulating a relation to enjoyment that does not chase after the promise of fullness. If the notion of ultimate enjoyment is structured by the masculine logic, whereby our libidinal investment in an exceptional state of enjoyment fuels the continual displacement of our desire from one object to another in search of that impossible limit experience, then a different relation to enjoyment, one that might very well disrupt the circuit of capital, is the decidedly ethical act of saying “no” to the superegoic injunction to “Enjoy!”—an injunction that imprisons the subjects in a *regime of difference within a frame delimited by capitalism*. It is by refusing the bribe of impossible enjoyment that the subjects of this libidinal economy of desire are able to break from the endless consumption of commodities, whose flow is shored up by the ready-made signifiers (qua regime of difference/value) that are cleverly propagated by the advertisement discourse. Even though this possibility, which depends on a particular ethical reading of Lacan’s formula of sexualization, is rarely, if ever, explored, it is within the realm of the conceivable for these psychoanalytical critics.

However, as far as the moments of the economy other than consumption are considered, contingency remains inconceivable within the psychoanalysis of capital literature, and so does the possibility of politicizing those moments. We conjecture this is because the sophisticated critique of “the administration of enjoyment under late capitalism” attributes a certain necessity to the rest of the circuit of capital to function without any friction. In response to this

presupposition, we are compelled to ask: what is the precise mechanism that propels the capitalist corporations to produce the commodities that are to be purchased by the consumers? In representing the perpetuation of the expansion of value as automatic, we discern a tendency to understand capitalism in terms of the “accumulation drive.” This is an essentializing theoretical maneuver, which effectively removes contingency from the reproduction of capitalism by positing capitalism qua drive as “the index of a dimension in human existence that persists for ever, beyond our physical death, and of which we can never rid ourselves...” (Žižek 1999, 293). To the extent that the production and reproduction of capital is seen as a “structural” (as opposed to “subjective”) process governed by an “impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of *expanded self-reproduction*” (Žižek 2006, 61, emphasis added), it becomes difficult to conceptualize contingency in the constitution of the circuit of capital and, from there, to introduce class difference into the other moments of the circuit of capital.

We reject this Marxist humanism that imputes a drive for accumulation as the essence of the anthropomorphized Capital, not only for the sake of theoretical soundness but also for its impoverishing effects on an anti-capitalist class politics. To the extent that the process of expansion of value is taken to function automatically, the moment of consumption (i.e., realization of surplus value) ends up being the only subjective moment within the circuit of capital where *the ethical* can have a say and *the difference from capitalism* can emerge as a possibility. In the rest of the paper, we question and refuse the exceptional status that the psychoanalysis of capital literature tacitly assigns to the moment of consumption, with a view towards proliferating the subjective moments that are potentially open to an “evental site” where *difference from capitalism* can emerge.

Production and reproduction of capital

In order to admit contingency and contradiction into the circuit of capital, we follow Marx's lead and enter “into the hidden abode of production” to “see not only how capital produces, but *how capital is itself produced*” (Marx 1976, 280, emphasis added). In doing so, we read “the production of capital” in two different yet complementary ways. On the one hand, this phrase refers to the *production* of new value, to the self-expansion of value (newly created surplus value, *mehr werth*, will be *accumulated* only when it is re-invested in the circuit of capital and added to the total mass of capital circulating within the capitalist economy). On the other hand, the production of capital refers to the *reproduction* and *maintenance* of the circuit of capital as such. Underpinning our argument is the appreciation of this dual sense in which “capital is itself

produced.” Since the circuit of capital provides the context within which the expansion of value (i.e. the production of surplus value) occurs, since the reproduction of the circuit of capital is a pre-condition of the production of capital, we will begin our analysis from there.

According to our reading, the circuit of capital (M-C...P...C'-M') is Marx's attempt to identify the moments of the movement of capital from one form to another in the process of creation of value. In other words, the circuit of capital does not prescribe an invariant, unmediated, self-constituted logic, a “law of motion,” but rather *formalizes* the metamorphoses of capital: first, capital is to transform from its money-form (finance capital) to commodity-form (when the industrial capitalist purchases the means of production and the labor power and puts them to work); then, once the new commodities are produced, capital is to transform back into money-form in order for the surplus value performed by the living labor to be realized.⁴

For Marx, the creation of value is never a smooth and frictionless process. Each transformation of capital is contingent upon and continually maintained by the social technologies that animate and enable the various economic agencies that participate in the circuit. Throughout the three volumes of *Capital*, Marx shows how the industrial capitalists need to (1) raise funds (which makes them dependent upon the financial capitalists), (2) make sure that the workers work hard and produce the commodities (which makes them dependent not only upon the maintenance of the mental/manual division of labor, factory supervision and legislations, but also on the social agencies and institutions of reproduction, such as the trade unions, the government, the family, and so on),⁵ (3) ensure that the commodities are sold in the markets so that the capital does not remain in commodity-form but attains its original money-form (which makes them dependent on the merchant capital, the services for storage and transportation, the demand for commodities, and so on).

It is to this third moment of realization of surplus value (i.e., consumption) that the psychoanalytical intervention tends to limit itself. Such a limitation, in turn, makes it impossible to see *the other moments within* the circuit, such as production, appropriation, exchange, and distribution, as potential sites of subjectivation. In recovering these moments, it becomes relevant again to reconsider some distinctively Marxian concerns: Who appropriates the surplus value? How are the means of production secured? What are the particular social and technical relations of producing surplus value? What happens to the realized surplus value? What are the concrete struggles over its distribution? As these questions are being posed, the circuit of capital and its continued maintenance will start to appear more and more uncertain and susceptible to disruption by a host of social antagonisms and competitive battles. And to the extent that capital's movement is dependent upon the social technologies that

organize the economies of enjoyment, the categories of psychoanalysis will continue to have relevance. In this sense, a more nuanced Marxian treatment of the circuit of capital will not only reveal the contingency of the social reproduction of the process of expansion of value, but also expand the scope of applicability of psychoanalysis beyond the hustle and bustle of the shopping mall and into the “hidden abode of production.”⁶ To put it differently, rendering the constitution of the expansion of value (the circuit of capital) contingent opens a space within the moment of production for conceptualizing a *psychoanalytically informed economic difference* that pertains to class. The concept of class here refers to the organization of different affective relations to the surplus labor, in which the relation to surplus value, the *capitalist form* of surplus labor, becomes one relation among many.

In our attempt to develop a psychoanalytically informed class difference, however, we encounter another resistance, namely, a particular psychoanalytical approach to Marxian discourse, in which the scope of some key Marxian concepts is limited to *the form* they take within the specific discourse of capitalism. We find the virtual absence of surplus labor in the psychoanalytical literature symptomatic in this respect. Rather, surplus labor appears in only one conceivable form, the *capitalist form of surplus value*. Such a reduction of Marxian concepts to their particular form within the discourse of capitalism eliminates the possibility of conceiving different relations to surplus labor (and hence to class) as integral to conceptualizing economic difference from capitalism. The following sections, therefore, pursue two tasks simultaneously. On the one hand, we problematize the particular way psychoanalytical literature universalizes surplus value by decontextualizing it from the particular (capitalist) class form that it represents within Marxian discourse. On the other hand, we reclaim “the organization of surplus labor,” rather than “the accumulation of capital,” as the entry point of Marxian discourse to rethink both the impossibility of, and difference in, class relations. It is only then we can re-theorize surplus value as *one* mode of relating to surplus labor.

Since so much of the analysis of the form of surplus value within Žižek's work as well as within the broader Lacanian tradition seems to build on Jacques Lacan's insights on the structural similarity between surplus jouissance and surplus value, we find it important to first elaborate the stakes and implications of the two different interpretations of this conceptual encounter: an interpretation that we develop and one that is assumed by Žižek.⁷ To anticipate our argument, we will approach the “homology” that Lacan locates between the concepts of surplus value and surplus jouissance by way of a detour through Louis Althusser. Reading Lacan through Althusser will enable us to establish not only the epistemological pre-conditions that make such a homology conceivable in the first place, but also the extent to which the homology can be

sustained without blurring the important conceptual distinctions between psychoanalysis and Marxism. In turn, we will demonstrate how preserving this conceptual demarcation is important to be able to introduce difference into the concept of the organization of surplus labor, hence, to theorize economic difference from capitalism.

Althusser and Lacan

In his writings on psychoanalysis, Althusser reflected upon the similarities between psychoanalysis and Marxism. In these interventions, Althusser characterized these respective theoretical fields as “new continents:” each, by founding a new *object*, simultaneously occasioned an “epistemological break” with previous modes of thinking, more specifically, with the ideologies of humanism, idealism and historicism, thereby compelling all existing disciplines to irreversibly question their formative assumptions and frontiers. In his pointed article “Marx and Freud,” Althusser describes these singular objects as “the theory of the conditions, forms, and effects of the class struggle...and that of the unconscious” (1996, 105-106).

From Althusser’s perspective, then, the “homology” between psychoanalysis and Marxism—although he did not use this language—referred to the two intertwined attributes. On the one hand, both discourses were “scientific.” That is, in their respective rejection of the myth of “homo oeconomicus” and “homo psychologicus,” psychoanalysis and Marxism displaced the ideological protocols that secured social unity premised on centered subjects, and instead, founded a new theoretical practice that could think social relations in their irreducible antagonism and complexity. On the other hand, through producing new *objects*, class struggle and the unconscious, both discourses produced new knowledges of social interdependency and social antagonism as well as new frameworks for the practice and understanding of real change.

It is important to note that, while Althusser highlighted the affinities between psychoanalysis and Marxism, he was careful to retain the independent existence and the distinct objects of each theoretical discourse. In other words, his comparisons did not collapse, through some self-evident translation, the differences between the discrete concepts of these emergent sciences. Furthermore, by highlighting the different “conditions, forms, and effects” of relations to class struggle and the unconscious, Althusser established a space for theorizing the constitutive outside of, along with the internal differences within, the objects of each discourse. It is with this theoretical spirit of Althusser that we wish to revisit Lacan’s insights on the homology between surplus jouissance and surplus value.

Lacan's seminars *XVI* and *XVII*, delivered in the aftermath of May 1968, include many favorable references to Marx's discourse and the significance of the concept of surplus value. It is in seminar *XVI* that Lacan, in order to underscore the intimate relationship between surplus jouissance and surplus value, emphasizes the term "homology," thereby evoking the idea of a fundamental similarity in the *structure* and *function* of these two concepts, a sameness that needs to be strictly distinguished from a cursory resemblance between two discrete entities:

...*surplus enjoying*, appeared in my last talk, in function of a homology with respect to Marxist surplus value. Homology, clearly means—and I underline it—that the relation is not one of analogy. It is indeed the same thing that it is at stake. It is a matter of the same stuff in so far as what is at stake is the scissors' mark of discourse. (2002, Section III: 1)

Reading this statement by way of Althusser, we see that Lacan understands surplus value and surplus jouissance to be the movers of two structures, respectively, the Marxian and psychoanalytical discourses. What these concepts share is the way they set in motion a "discourse" revolving around them, if by discourse we follow Lacan's references to *an impossible and dynamic structure with consequences*. "Dynamic," because there can be different relations to surplus jouissance as well as to surplus (with surplus value in capitalism being one such form). "Impossible," because just as there is no means of harmonizing the subject with jouissance in psychoanalysis, there is no final moderation of class, no final organization of surplus labor in Marxism. "With consequences," because both master signifiers cause discourses that make us see the structure of the world differently. We are guided here by Lacan's statement on the scissors' mark: "If one makes the scissors' cut somewhere, relationships change in such a way that what is not seen before is seen afterwards" (2002, Section II: 3).

Our interpretation of the encounter between Marx and Lacan begins from conceiving the homology as one between two nodal points (surplus labor and surplus jouissance) that set a new "discourse" in motion that revolves around them. Žižek, on the other hand, understands the homology as one between surplus jouissance as the object cause of desire and the surplus value as the "cause" which sets in motion the circuit of capital. His analysis differs from ours primarily in its oversight of the Marxian distinction between surplus labor and the particular form it takes under capitalism, surplus value. This, in turn, as we shall demonstrate, leads to a representation of capitalism as the only game in town. We believe that with the absence of the epistemological dimension of the homology that insists on retaining the independent existence and the distinct objects of each theoretical discourse, the attempts at articulating psychoanalysis with Marxism fail to do justice to either discourse. In order to clear the ground

for an articulation that utilizes the internal richness of both discursive formations, in the next section, we will reflect on the theoretical closures and slips unduly effectuated within Žižek's formulation of the homology between surplus value and surplus jouissance.

Surplus value and surplus jouissance

Žižek persistently reminds us that Lacan modeled surplus jouissance on the Marxian notion of surplus-value. Moreover, he argues that the concept of surplus jouissance embodies the truth of surplus value and "Marx failed to cope with the paradoxes of surplus-enjoyment" (Žižek 1989, 53). Indeed, even Lacan, when he suggests the homology, speaks with a qualification: while Marx elucidated the structure of capitalism, and pertinently analyzed the function and the devastating consequences of the extraction of surplus value, he failed to recognize the real nature of his discovery. In fact, Lacan's seminars include elusive suggestions that this oversight was partly responsible for the circulation of idealist conceptions of socialism, revolution, proletarian politics, and so on.⁸ What then, for Žižek, is the precise nature of the homology between the two concepts and what was it that Marx failed to recognize? What additional insight does the psychoanalytical concept of surplus jouissance bring into the Marxian concept of surplus value?

For Žižek, surplus jouissance is essentially "a residue, a remnant, a leftover of every signifying operation" (1989, 180) that gets "embodied" in the Lacanian *objet petit a*. The Lacanian *objet petit a* "is just an objectification of a void, of a discontinuity opened in reality by the emergence of the signifier" (95). Zupančič adds that surplus jouissance is a pure waste, an excess, a senseless and entropy-inducing refuse of signification that results from "the inadequacy of the signifier to itself, its inability to function 'purely,' without producing a useless surplus" (2006, 159). However, surplus jouissance is not a simple, ordinary waste or excess that could be disposed of without consequence. Quite the contrary, in its status as the limit of signification, surplus jouissance (or *objet petit a*) is where the cause, the kernel of enjoyment is. The *objet petit a* is the "'surplus' in the object which stays the same in all possible worlds" (Žižek 1989, 95): because it lacks consistency, because it is "just an objectification of [the] void" of signification, it simultaneously frustrates and incites our desire to pin its meaning down to a concrete attribute. Nevertheless, the subtraction of this excess, this surplus, this "something in it more than itself" will not deliver a balanced desire:

[*Surplus jouissance*] is not a surplus which simply attaches itself to some 'normal', fundamental enjoyment, because *enjoyment as such emerges only in*

this surplus, because it is constitutively an 'excess.' If we subtract the surplus we lose enjoyment itself, just as capitalism, which can survive only by incessantly revolutionizing its own material conditions, ceases to exist if it 'stays the same', if it achieves an internal balance. This, then, is the homology between surplus-value—the 'cause' which sets in motion the capitalist process of production—and surplus-enjoyment, the object-cause of desire. (Žižek 1989, 52-53)

For Žižek, the structure of capitalism mimics the structure of enjoyment. The homology is not so much between the concept of surplus value and the concept of surplus jouissance as it is between the way capitalism responds to its constitutive lack and the way the subject of desire relates to the constitutive lack embodied in the *objet petit a*. What then is this "fundamental, constitutive lack" that "sets in motion the capitalist process of production"?

According to Žižek, the constitutive contradiction/discord of capitalism is the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, defined as the contradiction between "the social mode of production and the individual, private mode of appropriation": "*It is this very immanent limit, this 'internal contradiction', which drives capitalism into permanent development*" (1989, 52-53, emphasis in the original). For Žižek, far from being a source of weakness, the constitutive discord of capitalism (embodied in the "private" appropriation of the socially/collectively produced surplus value) is "the very impetus of its development". Indeed, branded by an immanent want of balance, "incessant development is the only way for [capitalism] to resolve again and again, come to terms with, its own fundamental constitutive imbalance, 'contradiction'" (52). Unfortunately, Žižek does not produce a detailed Marxist argument as to why this discord drives capitalism into "permanent extended [sic] reproduction" (i.e. accumulation) and not into a non-teleological and "endless circular movement" of simple reproduction. Nonetheless, he does argue that because capitalism is marked by a constitutive imbalance, it is impossible to reform it or eliminate its foundational discord between the forces and relations of production. Just as one cannot obtain domesticated, balanced desire without surplus jouissance, one cannot maintain a regulated capitalism without an incessant push towards capital accumulation that continually revolutionizes its conditions of production and reproduction.

Utopianism or dystopianism? No, thanks!

For Žižek, the impossibility of domesticating the constitutive discord of capitalism is an insight that is achieved precisely by importing the psychoanalytical concept of surplus jouissance into Marxian discourse. Accordingly, for Žižek, Marx betrays his own radical insight the moment he entertains the possibility of superseding capitalism with a socialist order that

would bring its immanent imbalance/discord under control through “planning” (1989; 2005; 2007). In turn, this misconception about the finality of capital’s constitutive antagonism keeps alive a certain fantasy of communism as a transparent social order that capitalism would unintentionally deliver, as an ideal system in which social forces of productivity would finally thrive, purged of capital’s ruinous excesses. In fact, Žižek justly calls this “the capitalist fantasy” insofar as it can only think communism in the figure of an idealization of capitalism as the order of unhurdled productivity/technological progress *without* the rummaging social consequences.⁹

To the extent that Žižek’s critique takes as its object the fantasies of social reconciliation and transparency that support and reproduce *all* forms of organization of surplus, including capitalism and communism, we are in agreement. Nonetheless, Žižek’s critique does not quite imply this or, rather, it implies more. Motivating his treatment of the homology between surplus value and surplus jouissance, we detect not only the justified critique of the fantasy of communism as a transparent and harmonious social order but also the unwarranted presumption that singularizes capitalism as the disharmonious and contradictory mode of production *as such*, and thereby, eternalizes it. This assertion becomes most apparent when Žižek argues, to our surprise, that the capitalist mode of production is unique in the sense that unlike the “previous” modes of production, which can achieve a “normal,” “balanced” state, it thrives on imbalance and discord:

[In the previous modes of production], we can speak of periods of ‘accordance’ when the process of social production and reproduction goes on as a quiet, circular movement, and of periods of convulsion when the contradiction between forces and relations aggravates itself; whereas in capitalism this contradiction, the discord forces/relation, *is contained in its very concept.* (Žižek 1989, 52)

In granting the possibility of “periods of ‘accordance’” under “previous modes of production,” Žižek implicitly suggests that the social subjects who participate in non-capitalist modes of production (e.g., feudalism, slavery, primitive communism) were able to construct social links that could establish a balanced and harmonious organization of surplus labor and eliminate, perhaps within delimited periods, the smear of surplus jouissance. Unless the homology holds only under capitalism, we cannot see how this position can be sustained. For if the homology is between surplus *labor*, which applies to both capitalist and non-capitalist forms, and surplus jouissance, then all modes of production, all forms of organization of surplus, and not just capitalism, should be marked by a constitutive discordance. Nevertheless, for Žižek, precisely because he does not distinguish between surplus labor and surplus value, the homology holds only under capitalism, between surplus value and surplus jouissance. When this is

the case, the homology implies that, to the extent that surplus jouissance is here to stay, the capitalist form of organizing surplus labor, which is the only conceivable form of organization of surplus labor for Žižek, is also here to stay.

If we were to distinguish surplus labor from surplus value and reconstruct the proper homology as one between surplus labor and surplus jouissance, then an entirely different picture emerges. In this alternative construction of the homology, not just capitalism but *all* forms of production, appropriation, and distribution are disrupted by the paradoxical topology of surplus jouissance. By universalizing the psychoanalytical insight, in this manner, to all class formations, we intend to steer away from the dual dangers of utopianism as well as dystopianism. On the one hand, we reject utopianism by acknowledging the impossibility of a social link purged from surplus jouissance and the impossibility of the class relation, echoing the Lacanian insight pertaining to the impossibility of the sexual relation. On the other hand, we would be rejecting dystopianism by not restricting the homology to capitalism and retaining the Marxian insight pertaining to the possibility of another way of relating to surplus. Moreover, through our reconstruction of the homology, we will be able to produce a more robust and distinctively Marxian explanation as to why surplus labor/value, and not an inexorable accumulation drive, is indeed the absent “cause” that sets the circuit of capital in motion.

“There is no class relation”

The unique entry point, the “scissors’ mark” of Marxian discourse is the simple distinction between necessary and surplus labor (Marx 1976, 325). Necessary labor refers to the abstract labor-time performed by the direct laborer to reproduce his/her socially contingent means of subsistence.¹⁰ However, the direct laborers do not only perform necessary labor. Given that “the conditions of reproduction of the economy are not reducible to the reproduction of the individual labourers” (Hindess and Hirst 1975, 27), and because the sociality is always more (or less) than the aggregation of its individual parts, in every mode of production the direct laborers will need to perform more (*mehr*) abstract labor-time (i.e., surplus-labor) than what is socially necessary for reproducing their own immediate conditions of existence as laborers (i.e., necessary-labor).

To prevent any misunderstandings, we do not consider abstract labor to be the true measure or the irreducible substance of economic value. In this sense, we differentiate our approach from those modernist traditions within economics that seek to found value in a transcendental essence (“labor” in classical political economy, “utility” in early neoclassical economics, and “choice” in late neoclassical economics). We also believe that the numerous refutations and reinstatements of the labor theory of value, by reducing it to a theory of price

determination, obscure Marx's radical insight pertaining to the impossibility of the class relation. Rather we have a very strategic understanding of the concept of surplus labor. When we view the economy through labor-time accounting, we see *social interdependency* formed in relation to abstract-labor production and distribution instead of the harmonious reconciliation of the fully-constituted interests of rational actors in market equilibrium, as purported by neoclassical economic theory. Similarly, the split between necessary- and surplus-labor is important for us as a discursive device to read social interventions in terms of struggles over class processes. The distinction allows us to politicize the economy around a classed understanding of *social conflict*.

Let us take a closer look at this. For Marxian economics, neither the respective quanta of necessary- and surplus-labor nor the potential destinations of the appropriated surplus-labor could be determined a priori. Indeed, there is no stable and universally accepted logic for conducting and institutionalizing the process of the performance, appropriation, and distribution of surplus-labor. To the extent that there is no true, correct, or just way of dividing the total labor-time performed by direct laborers into its necessary and surplus components and distributing the surplus labor to their destinations, *all* social organizations of surplus labor will be structured around a foundational, constitutive lack.

This is the sense in which we construct the homology between surplus labor and surplus jouissance. Since there exists *no* pre-constituted/pre-given guideline or knowledge as to how to organize the surplus labor, there exists a *surplus* of knowledge. Indeed, historically concrete forms of the social organization of class (that designate who is the lord and who is the serf, who is the master and who is the slave, who is the capitalist and who is the worker) are already so many different, and ultimately failed, attempts to overcome this constitutive impossibility of the class relation and make up for the *absence* of a ready-made knowledge of what to do with the living labor. Yet each formation, each form of organizing surplus labor is inevitably thrown out of balance, insofar as all social links are smeared with surplus jouissance. At the end of the day, to the extent that we are speaking of surplus labor, whether it is directly materialized in products/services or in currency with which one can buy products/services, the dialectics of desire as well as the obdurate logic of partial drives will be present.

All social links, therefore, including class formations, are structured around a constitutive lack that simultaneously invites and frustrates the communities. We consider this foundational, constitutive lack as the absent cause, the foundational antagonism, the constitutive impossibility, around which sociality is constructed. As Žižek once put it, the antagonism between the “bosses” and “workers” is “already a ‘reactive’ or ‘defence’ formation, an attempt to ‘cope with’ (to come to terms with, to pacify...) the trauma of class antagonism”

(Žižek 1998, 81). The homology, therefore, is not so much between the surplus labor and surplus jouissance as it is between the way a particular organization of surplus labor is a response formation to a foundational impossibility and the way the desire of the subject is sustained by a fantasy formation that wraps itself around the constitutive lack embodied in the *objet petit a*.

Diverging from Žižek, we do not restrict the conceptual content of surplus labor to the paradoxical logic of capitalism, although we concur that there is a capitalist way of organizing the surplus labor, just as there could be a feudal or a communist way of organizing it. This seems more in tune with the original spirit of Marx. While he discussed surplus value as the form of surplus labor under capitalism, Marx neither derived the concept of surplus labor from, nor reduced it to, capitalism. Rather, the concept emerged as a consequence of Marx's repeated attempts to make sense of the changing forms of economic organizations that existed side by side in the long process of the so-called transition from feudalism to capitalism. To argue otherwise and assert that Marx constructed surplus labor exclusively through his focus on capitalism would be to neglect how Marx persistently studied, theorized and compared the different economic forms, such as feudalism, primitive communism, simple commodity production, capitalism, and so on, before he arrived at the concept of surplus labor. In this precise sense, we consider surplus labor to be the "concrete universal" of the Marxian tradition. While surplus labor as a concept emerges out of Marx's analysis of its various concrete manifestations, it always fails to be given a final shape by any one of these forms.

Masculine economies of surplus labor

In this vein, it is only appropriate to consider the different organizations of surplus as various institutional attempts to furnish us with a knowledge of how to come to terms with the impossibility of the class relation. Under feudalism, for instance, the feudal manor constitutes a set, an *all* gathered together under the feudal lord qua the exception to the set. While all feudal agencies (from the knights that protected the manor from the attacks of the other lords and the vassals that managed the lord's demesne to the church that provided the rules of conduct under the feudal order), receive a cut from the surplus for the services and functions that they render, it is only the lord who occupies an exceptional status that designates him as the sole recipient of the (products of the) surplus labor performed by the serfs.¹¹

This highly stylized description of the feudal system can be formalized through the masculine logic of exception, where the exception to the set (the feudal lord) that appropriates the surplus labor, delineates the boundaries of the affective and political economy of the feudal order. Provided that the

exceptional status of the lord is upheld, the social agencies that fall under the feudal form can engage in endless struggles with each other. Moreover, the endless variations that the feudal form has passed throughout the long transition from feudalism to capitalism (Dobb 1946; Hilton 1976; Ashton and Philpin 1985) as well as its continuing (albeit highly fragile and unstable) presence in the contemporary household (Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff 1994; Gibson-Graham 2006; Safri 2006) attest to the fact that it is both fairly resilient yet at the same time highly unstable.¹²

Marx was fond of constructing a chain of equivalence between slave-labor, serf-labor, and wage-labor and we believe he did this for a reason. In that regard, we insist on reading the term “wage-slavery” not simply as a rhetorical stab at capitalism but as a theoretical concept in the strict sense of the term. Indeed, we discern the masculine logic of exception that Marx identified in the feudal system (the universal set of the feudal manor constituted around the lord as its constitutive exception) in the other “canonical” modes of production, including slavery and capitalism. For instance, under the modern capitalist enterprise (i.e., the joint-stock company whose existence can be traced back all the way to the inception of Dutch East India Company in 1602), *all* the factors of production, “*all* individuals *really* active in production from the manager down to the lowest day labourer” as Marx puts it (1991, 568, emphasis added), must give something to get something (a portion of the living labor): the workers have to perform labor, the managers have to manage, the accountants have to keep the accounts, the financiers have to loan capital and so on. In this sense, under the joint stock company, “the capitalist” qua entrepreneur dissolves into its functional components and, thereby, evaporates.

Nevertheless, this universal set of *all* subsumed under the capitalist enterprise is still constituted by an exceptional entity, or better yet a function, that enjoys “other people’s surplus” without giving anything in return: the Board of Directors. As long as the reproduction of the exceptional status of the Board of Directors as the sole appropriator of surplus, as the entity that gets “something for nothing,” is not jeopardized, the affective and political economy of capitalism can accommodate an infinite range of distributions of surplus, a wide array of consumption practices, and a variety of modes of exchange. According to our reading, therefore, (portions of) surplus value becomes the object cause of desire (as the currency that enables these subjects to participate in the commodity economy) for the subjects of this capitalist-all only within the delimited frame constituted by the exception to the exchange-function universalized by the market system: from the worker who demands a union premium (efficiency wage) to the executive manager who tries to secure funds for new investment in R&D, they all struggle with each other to justify (to the

symbolic Big Other) why they should get a larger cut from the surplus appropriated by the Board of Directors.

The drive-effect

What then is the precise mechanism that propels the capitalist corporations to produce the commodities that are to be purchased by the consumers? Is it the profit motive? Or, is it the drive to accumulate? Would psychoanalysis be of any use in understanding the logic that perpetuates the circuit of capital? Early on in the paper, we welcomed the recent psychoanalytical literature on “the administration of enjoyment under late capitalism” and its analysis of the logic of desire in consumption. And then, in concretizing our “There is no class relation” thesis, we argued that surplus labor/value is the object cause of desire for the subjects of capitalist-all (or any other exploitative form structured around a constitutive exception). In both cases, we were able to identify concrete desiring subjects. Nevertheless, if we are speaking of the case of a joint stock company and if there is no actual capitalist but only a series of functionaries subsumed under the capitalist-all, then how are we going to impute a desire or a drive to the capitalist corporation?

In his *The Parallax View*, Žižek recognizes this problem and distinguishes the *drive of capitalism* from *desire within capitalism*. In contrast to desire, which is located on the side of the interpellated subjects of consumption who jump from one commodity to another in search of satisfaction, drive

...inheres to capitalism at a more fundamental, *systematic*, level: drive is that which propels the whole capitalist machinery, it is the impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of *expanded self-reproduction* (emphasis added). We enter the mode of drive the moment the circulation of money as capital becomes “an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital has therefore no limits.” [...] (2006, 61)

According to Žižek, therefore, while desire (for consumption) is constituted in the field of ideology, drive (qua accumulation) “inheres...at a more fundamental, *systematic*, level” (61). In this demarcation of the drive and desire, it is impossible not to discern yet another homology, where Capital's *drive* for accumulation corresponds to the *base* and the concrete consumer-subjects' *desire* for capitalist commodities corresponds the *superstructure*. For Žižek, the demarcation is so firm that even if capitalism “manipulates the desire in a way which takes into account the fact that the most elementary desire is the desire to reproduce itself as desire (and not to find satisfaction), [...] we have

not yet reached drive” (Žižek 2006, 61). Drive, for Žižek, is the accumulation drive of Capital.

From our perspective, to assume that “expanded self-reproduction” is the foundational invariant of capitalism, unless we are willing to anthropomorphize Capital and impute a drive to it,¹³ is to assume that all the concrete institutions and agencies that reproduce and maintain the circuit of capital, at the end of day, not only succeed in guaranteeing its movement in a manner that transcends and “sublates” all internal contradictions but also give this movement a teleological directionality towards “expanded self-reproduction.” As noted earlier, Žižek borrows this economic determinist narrative from a particular tradition within Marxism that has long defined “expansion through contradiction” as the “law of motion” of capital, and saw in it the telos of capitalism’s end (Norton 2001). Žižek’s innovation is to turn this narrative upside down and associate drive with capitalism’s resilience rather than its destruction.

Even though a pantheon of Marxist political economists, including Paul Sweezy, David Gordon, and David Harvey, posit that “accumulation for accumulation’s sake” is “the rule that governs the behaviour of all capitalists” (Harvey 1982, 29), the argument that the endless circular movement of the circuit of capital is propelled by an accumulation drive is not necessarily one that Marx himself would subscribe to. Another Marxian economist, Bruce Norton, through a close reading of Marx’s *Capital*, convincingly argues that, for Marx, it was Adam Smith and other classical political economists who claimed that “accumulation for the sake of accumulation, production for the sake of production” is “the historical mission of the bourgeoisie in the period” in which classical political economy has dominated (Marx 1976, 742). Ridiculing the pompous virtuousness of this position even in Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx highlights the historical shift from Smith’s accumulating capitalist to the capitalist spender, who is now compelled to devote a part of the surplus to conspicuous consumption and yet another part of it towards maintaining its “business status” (1976, 741, cf. Norton 2001, 45).¹⁴

Indeed, if we were to expand our concept of capitalism to include Marx’s explorations in Volumes 2 and 3, and his analysis of the numerous claims on surplus value, then it becomes very difficult to reduce the movement of capital into a self-regulating “expanded self-reproduction.”¹⁵ We have already noted that, within the masculine universe of the capitalist corporation, in the shape of endless struggles over the surplus, we find “an infinite movement of the desire within a finite, delimited frame” (Zupančič 2000, 289). An endless number of social agencies located within and outside of the actual corporation (but, to the extent they do not question the status of the constitutive exception, within the “capitalist-all”) strive to receive a cut of the surplus and to this end, they need to struggle with one another and, on occasion, justify their “necessity” for the

continued existence of the capitalist form of extraction and distribution of surplus value.

This capitalist-all (with its constitutive exception embodied in the Board of Directors) frames the field within which a whole range of “competitive battles” takes place (Ruccio and Amariglio 2003, 239-244). The agencies of these competitive battles could be different recipients of surplus distributions within a corporation, different corporations (within and across industries), different forms of capital (industrial, financial, and merchant), and even nation-states and trans- and inter-national institutions (Resnick 2006). In this sense, the capitalist-all is a topological whole and its consistency is sustained by the taboo status of the exception: as long as (the institutional form that embodies) the exception is sustained and remains unquestioned, the particular location of a particular claimant/recipient of surplus value is only incidental.

We have already argued that, what sets in motion the circuit of capital is a host of social technologies of reproduction. Therefore, from our perspective, the question is not so much what propels the circuit of capital and the process of the self-expansion of value, but rather what throws it out of balance. In fact, the aggregate outcome of the internal dynamic fueled by the logic of desire at the level of the subjects of capitalist-all is the mad dance of capitalism caught in a circular movement, sometimes resulting in expanded reproduction, sometimes in simple reproduction, and sometimes in non-reproduction. What are economic recessions and depressions, if not the unexpected aggregate outcomes of the uncoordinated activities as well as the competitive battles among the subjects of the capitalist-all?

Therefore, the cause of this directionless circular movement is not a drive to accumulate or “an impersonal compulsion to engage in [...] expanded self-reproduction” (Žižek 2006, 61). Rather, the blind movement of the circuit of capital is the overdetermined outcome of, on the one hand, the social technologies of reproduction that uphold/maintain the exception, and on the other hand, the competitive battles and intractable contradictions that crisscross the capitalist-all. And if there is a drive, it is either at the level of the particular subjects of the capitalist-all, or, if it is at the aggregate level, then it is only as a *drive-effect*—not really as a drive, but rather a semblance of drive, giving an impression of inevitability and necessity in what seems like a “repetition compulsion.”

The question of difference

In introducing this paper, we articulated that our aim was to conceptualize a psychoanalytically informed economic difference that pertained to class. More precisely, we stated that we wanted to carve out a theoretical space to conceive a

psychoanalytically inflected difference from capitalism. Thus far, our discussion has confined the treatment of difference to the contexts of the organizations of surplus labor that are delimited by an exception (of appropriation). On the one hand, we have touched upon and highlighted economic difference as it is inflected within capitalism, in the figure of the different claims on the distributions of surplus value. On the other hand, we have demonstrated the different forms of configuring the relation to surplus labor within the delimited economies of capitalism, feudalism, and slavery. Nonetheless, in order to explicate what we mean by the ethico-political in the realm of the economy, we need to produce a particular notion of difference that embodies not only a break from the libidinal economy of capitalism but from all delimited structures of class. To be able to think this difference, we turn to psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis holds a critical, restrained attitude towards the concept of difference and deploys it in a very precise sense. Underpinning this critical perspective on difference is, in part, the prevailing view that capitalism is itself a generator and domesticator of difference, an appropriator of otherness. In fact, such a political economy critique of difference is not unique to psychoanalysis but is upheld by various traditions of critical theory. The work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari has spurred the conceptualization of capitalism as a “difference engine.” Fredric Jameson’s (1991) analysis of late capitalism posits postmodern difference, the incessant and invariant logic of cultural commodification, as the contemporary cultural logic that ultimately reproduces sameness within capitalism. Zupančič defines capitalist production as “a constant production of otherness,” in which capitalism’s “hijacking of surplus jouissance” for the purpose of ever more valorization infuses even the potential of resistance, usurping the radical dimension of different claims and identities, hence, real difference itself (2006, 174-175).

Even though these perspectives attribute yet another drive to capitalism (i.e., as generator and appropriator of difference), they justifiably point towards a sameness beyond an apparent or a banal presence of difference within capitalism. We share the spirit, if not the letter, of this critique in our critical exposition of economic difference within and among the class structures delimited by an exception. What seems to escape these otherwise persuasive analyses of difference, however, is the possibility of formulating a meaningful economic difference that would unsettle the capitalist field of differences. We proffer that, when grafted onto the Marxian field of economic difference, sexual difference (qua Lacan’s formalization of Kant’s dynamical and mathematical antinomies) helps to articulate *difference as such*. It allows distinguishing *between* the kind of difference within the delimited frame of the masculine logic of *exception*—including the differences among the various class structures that

fall under the masculine logic of exception—and the difference between this masculine logic and the feminine logic of *non-all*.

The masculine logic defines a whole, an all, by positing a constitutive exception. Within the bounds of this set, all kinds of differences are permitted—with the proviso that the constitutive exception remains untouched. The feminine logic of non-all, on the other hand, refuses to posit an exception at the expense of failing to constitute a coherent whole. Contra capitalism, or any other exploitative form of appropriation of surplus (e.g., slavery, feudalism), the logic of non-all refuses to assign exclusive appropriative rights to any particular set of social agents. This also includes those who were exploited under the *ancien régime*, namely the workers. Communism is generally understood to be the reparation of collective justice or the completeness of social being, which would be achieved once what is stolen from the workers is given back to them. Rejecting the substitution of one exception (i.e., board of directors) by another (i.e., the worker), the logic of non-all disrupts this fantasy.

It is important to note that the exception that constitutes the capitalist-all is a *function*, even though it is embodied in the institution of the Board of Directors in our contemporary social formations.¹⁶ That is, various economic ideologies can sustain the function assumed by the Board of Directors. The ideology of *economic growth*, for instance, as the unchanging answer of classical political economy, neoclassical economics, and late neoclassical economics to their constitutive and shared problematic of how to reconcile rational choice and social harmony, seems to be a prominent example. In a passage, uncharacteristic in its declaration of the inevitability of capitalism as a “fetish,” Žižek skillfully argues for the need to counter this discourse:

Whenever a political project takes a radical turn, up pops the inevitable blackmail: ‘Of course these goals are desirable in themselves; if we do all this, however, international capital will boycott us, the growth rate will fall, and so on.’ [...] Many fetishes will have to be broken here: who cares if growth stalls, or even becomes negative? Have we not had enough of the high growth rate whose effects on the social organism were felt mostly in the guise of new forms of poverty and dispossession? What about a negative growth that would translate into a qualitatively better, not higher, standard of living for the wider popular strata? *That* would be a political *act* today...(2004, 74)

Žižek aptly exposes the efficiency with which the superegoic imperative of growth holds back the contemporary subjects as its captives. The discourse of “negative growth” is a sobering gesture to undo the grip of the growth fantasy. However, our emphasis is on interrupting the *logic of exception* in all of its manifestations, irrespective of the particular economic discourses that sustain it. After all, this logic can be perpetuated not only in the ideology of growth, but

also in the economic fantasies of “local development,” “alleviation of poverty,” “enhancing human capital,” “creation of jobs,” “economic efficiency,” “freedom of choice,” and so on. That is why we approach economic difference instigated and materialized by the “non-all” as a moment, a perspective, a principle, which refuses the exception as such, and not just the particular social group that occupies the position of the exception, or the particular social discourse that articulates this function. We call this difference the communist moment.¹⁷

From politics of the extimate to axiomatic politics

This concern incites our interest in the axiomatic politics of Alain Badiou (1999) with its universalist aspiration. Inspired by the latter, we offer to reformulate communism as a universal principal, an axiom that asserts that no one can have exclusive rights over the appropriation of surplus. Rather than a prohibitive slogan, or a social ideal to be achieved, this axiom should be thought as a departure, a new beginning, a shift of perspective. What is this new perspective? What kind of a politics does it offer? Rejecting the idea of having “exclusive rights,” the axiom of communism posits a new way of relating to the surplus. More precisely, by dynamiting the exceptional position of appropriation, the axiom not only renders an economic division/difference (exploitative vs. non-exploitative) visible, but also opens up an indeterminate field of struggle and invention regarding the question of how to handle the surplus. In this particular sense, the axiom of communism re-introduces the ethico-political to the economic.¹⁸

Maintained under all circumstances, the axiom is *indifferent* to particular social sites, subjects, and ideologies. Thereby, the politics of communism (as axiom) also breaks with a traditional vision of revolutionary politics, which Žižek, at times, seems to assume. Such a vision searches for exceptional social agents that would replace the proletariat in transforming capitalism. Slums, in Žižek’s recent work, seem to be the privileged site for such social agents. Marginalized and dispossessed of “all but their chains,” “excluded from citizenship,” slumdweller, for Žižek, hold the position of the extimate, the “part of no part,” the torque that could unravel the capitalist system (2007, 56-58). We wonder, however, whether this political vision is not rendering Žižek susceptible to the same critique that he has previously extended to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. We are referring here to Žižek’s critique of Hardt and Negri’s politics of immanence and its reliance on a messianic awakening in which the dormant potential of the multitude realizes itself (2007). Is the politics of the extimate, at least in the manner occasionally articulated by Žižek, not premised on a similar understanding of political agency that is simply

asserted, rather than constructed—although this time, the political agent refers to some exceptional social group (i.e., slum dwellers) rather than the multitude?

Initially, Žižek's notion of the extimate appears to differ from the Hardt and Negri's use of immanence. By rendering capitalism and its potential opposition as perfectly overlapping, a politics of immanence eliminates the theoretical space needed to actually construct a position of real difference from which economic transformation can proceed. For Žižek, the concept of the extimate refers precisely to such a political position that incarnates real difference. At a closer look, however, both Hardt and Negri and Žižek are unable to situate difference. If all difference collapses into a (capitalist) sameness in Hardt and Negri, difference is introduced in a manner that remains arbitrary and unwarranted in Žižek. This common shortcoming does not come as a surprise to us. Žižek shares with Hardt and Negri a similar ontology of the economy, permeated by the logic of self-driven and self-regulating capitalist accumulation. Limiting the constitution of the economy to the masculine logic of the capitalist-all, Žižek is hard pressed to carve up a position within capitalism that is heterogeneous to it. The latter, then, is arbitrarily assigned to a selected set of marginalized positions, such as slum collectives, with an alleged disposition to revolt.

Slums could certainly be a potential site for social transformation, or they might not be. What we wish to question, however, is the political cogency of trying to locate the "real" social agents of change. After all, Marxian history is replete with stories of resentment when class-in-itself fails to transpire into class-for-itself (that is, when certain dominated and marginalized groups, anticipated to resist and mobilize due their marginalized position, fail to do so).¹⁹ Axiomatic politics enables us to extricate ourselves from limiting the potential of transformation to a privileged set of social groups, economic sectors or geographical scales. It displaces the agent of class transformation from a social group to an abstract principle that could insert itself into every occasion in which decisions over the use of surplus are being instituted, rendering each concrete class organization an inconsistent and failed attempt.

Yet, it is also important not to confuse the communist gesture of refusal of an exception with the hysterical questioning of the Master. If the communist axiom fails to constitute an all, this is not because it has doubts about the authenticity, the legitimacy, the validity of that which occupies the position of the exception. By leaving the exception in place, such an understanding would remain blind to the radical commitment of the axiom. Rather, it is because the axiom, to repeat Joan Copjec's perceptive claim, is only "half-said" (2002, 171, 175). That is, the potential of the axiom is only actualized as it encounters and engages with the function of exception in various concrete contexts, as its universalizing aspiration propels it to move beyond the cooperative workplace

to the local economy, beyond the local economy to the nation-state, and beyond the nation-state to a community of states, and so on.

† An initial version of this paper is presented at *The Žižek Conference: Did Somebody Say Ideology? Slavoj Žižek in a Post-Ideological Universe*, Cardiff University, School of European Studies, September 15-16, 2006. We would like to thank the organizers of the conference, Heiko Feldner and Fabio Vighi, as well as the other participants for their engaging reception. We also thank Todd McGowan for his support and critical engagement and Kenan Erçel and Andrew Skomra for their perceptive comments and careful reading.

¹ Note that here we define the real of class antagonism not as an antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeois classes, between the serfs and the lord, or between various agencies who claim a cut from the (realized) surplus value in capitalism, but rather the very impossibility of instituting a non-antagonistic form of the social organization of surplus.

² This list, without doubt, is incomplete. A broader list would include Joan Copjec (2006), Henry Krips (1999), Kiarina Kordela (1999; 2006), as well as others.

³ This is not to say that tastes are satisfied, commodities are provided, or enjoyment is had. On the contrary, we always fail: goods don't exist, they are never delivered properly, and our enjoyment is always spoiled. But this is precisely the ordinary business of life.

⁴ According to Marxian theory, labor power is a *commodity* sold and bought on the market and its *use-value* ("enjoyed" by the capitalist) is the total value performed by the worker (i.e., living labor). On any given day, the amount of labor performed by the worker (the *use-value* of labor power) must exceed the amount that he is paid (the *value* of labor power). Otherwise, there is no reason for the capitalist to buy labor power. The difference between the amount of labor performed and the amount that he is paid for is the Marxian concept of *surplus value*.

⁵ We can add the schooling system, religious institutions, the gender division of labor, the dissolution of the gender division of labor, and so on, as among such social technologies, some of which Louis Althusser (1971) discusses under the term of *Ideological State Apparatuses*.

⁶ This is not to claim that that the "production and reproduction of capital" as such is missing in Žižek's discourse—although it is missing in much of the psychoanalysis of capital literature. On the contrary, in his discussions of overdetermination, Žižek gives primary importance to the structuring effect of production over the other moments of the circuit. Yet at the same time, the presence of production takes almost a purely rhetorical form. Although, on occasion it is invoked as a reminder that we need to take capitalism as a relational yet structured totality, it is primarily factored in as a moment of the circuit of capital subordinated to a fundamental *drive to accumulate* that "propels the whole capitalist machinery."

⁷ Apart from Žižek's, other prominent analyses of this encounter are by Dolar (1998), MacCannell (2006), and Zupančič (2006).

⁸ For instance, Lacan states that “[i]t is not because one nationalizes, at the level of socialism in one country, the means of production, that one has for all that done away with surplus value, if one does not know what it is” (2006, Section VII: 7). It is interesting to compare Lacan's critical statements with Freud's well-known remarks on socialism in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1961, 67). Here, Freud similarly points to the misguided belief of the communists that abolishing private property would finally deliver the social bonds from aggression.

⁹ Nonetheless, we think that this “capitalist fantasy” is not the only modality framing Marx's discussions of communism. We agree with Althusser (2006, 37) that in works such as *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1966), ‘Notes’ on Adolph Wagner (2002)—but also in the drafts of the 1881 dated *Letter to Vera Zasulich* (1983)—Marx provides analyses that detach communism from idealistic conceptualizations. For an account of how Marx departs from the “capitalist fantasy” of communism in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, please see Özselçuk and Madra (2005, 91-92).

¹⁰ Under feudalism, or other social formations with limited social division of labor, necessary labor is materialized in the form of work done in the fields as well as in the household to actually produce the means of subsistence. Under capitalism, where there is an extended social division of labor, the direct laborer produces the *value* of his/her means of subsistence.

¹¹ This is not to say that the lord does nothing—the distribution of the surplus, for instance, does involve (unproductive) labor and at the end of the day, in return for whatever symbolic or material services he performed, the lord does retain a portion of the surplus already appropriated by him. The point is that the lord does nothing other than being the one designated as the sole and exclusive appropriator of the surplus performed in the feudal manor.

¹² Indeed, Žižek's recent reference to St. Augustine's *Confessions* provides an important insight to the feudal social link:

Envy and *ressentiment* are thus constitutive components of human desire, as Augustine knew well; recall from his *Confessions*, often quoted by Lacan, the scene of a baby jealous of his brother sucking the mother's breast. (“I myself have seen and known an infant to be jealous though it could not speak. It became pale, and cast bitter looks on its foster-brother.”) (Žižek 2007, 54)

Interestingly enough, in the history of economic thought, St. Augustine is usually considered as a predecessor of the scholastic thought—a Christian school of thought that emerged in the twelfth century renaissance and was characterized mainly by its attempts to regulate the “ordinary business of life” through establishing the rules and norms of exchange as to what “just price” is, why usury should be prohibited, and so on (Backhouse 2002). A close reading of the scholastic texts by the likes of Thomas of Chobham or St. Thomas Aquinas will demonstrate that the entire purpose of scholastic thought is to keep the surplus *jouissance* (embodied, perhaps, in the idea of Original Sin) at bay and under control so that the feudal form of extraction of surplus labor can be reproduced.

¹³ While it is true that strictly speaking there is no “subject” of drive, that it is “something in which the subject is caught, a kind of acephalous force which persists in its repetitive

movement” (Žižek 1999, 297), it is still associated with an embodied subject—for it is impossible to understand the logic of drive without reference to its partial objects.

¹⁴ There is long and esteemed lineage within the history of economics (Adam Smith, Jean Baptiste Say, Nassau Senior, Alfred Marshall, Irving Fischer, and so on) that justifies the legitimacy of profit as an income that accrues to the “entrepreneur” with reference to the act of saving. According to this line of reasoning, the entrepreneur capitalist deserves the profit he receives because he was virtuous enough to save and accumulate in the first place.

¹⁵ In a sense, one can suggest that, as Marx moves from Volume 1 of *Capital* to Volumes 2 and 3, he is gradually breaking from an idealist (binary) concept of contradiction to the concept of overdetermination. Perhaps, this is an inevitable shift that results from Marx’s movement from abstract to concrete formulations within the thought-concrete of *Capital*.

¹⁶ See *theyrule.net*.

¹⁷ In this sense, we should distinguish between communism as exception from communism of non-all. The former is the communism qua capitalist fantasy. It presents itself as the overcoming of the real of class antagonism. It is this type of communism that we need to abandon. The latter is communism qua *difference* (as in difference from capitalism), communism as a refusal to posit an exception (exclusive appropriative rights) at the cost of inconsistency. It is this kind of communism which we turn our faces towards.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the axiom of communism in the context of the debate on the Social Security reform in the US, see (Madra 2006, 220-221).

¹⁹ Žižek is often attacked for restaging old style class essentialism. One such recent strike comes from Ernesto Laclau (2006), who provokingly characterizes Žižek’s elevation of slums’ revolutionary potential as the naive position of “waiting for the Martians.”

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