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# The Ontology of Crisis: The sublimity of *objet petit a* and the Master-Signifier

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## Abstract

This paper explores how capitalism solidifies its power through Lacanian understanding of subjectivity. The inquiry intervenes in the capitalist ideological fantasy and its inherent antagonisms in order to analyse the way it strives to fill or erase the ruptures it produces in the social order. This is achieved by focusing on the particular proliferation of objects-commodities, which subjectivity transforms into the objects of desire in the framework of capitalist ideology. Furthermore, I focus on the establishment and signification of meaning within the capitalist matrix, as well as its dialectical overlap with the objects proliferated by the socio-economic system in question. The overlap of objects and meaning seems to produce ideological enjoyment, which solidifies capitalist ideology through subjectivity. Therein appears to lie the strength of capitalist ideology and its appropriation of even social phenomena into consumerist categories. This paper therefore tries to understand how capitalism manipulates ideological enjoyment in its quest to create social reality seemingly devoid of its antagonisms. It leans on the much-neglected Lacanian discourse of the Capitalist, revealing how the daily reality of subjects is driven by unconscious fantasy in its dogmatic ideological circle. The text also hints at the homology between Lacan's surplus-*jouissance* and Marx's surplus-value.

**Keywords:** Capitalism, ideology, crisis, ontology, perversion, Lacan, Capitalist discourse

## Introduction

“The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was to convince the world he does not exist,” proclaimed a description of the omnipotent, underground mafia boss Keyser Söze. He was embodied in a limping and awkward small-time thief, pulling the strings in the film *The Usual Suspects* (1995). During the interrogation, Söze utilised random objects in the detective’s office and incorporated them in his story with new meanings that fascinated and ultimately deceived the investigating detective. The latter simply mistook the clumsy crook as a small deviation of the parasitic underworld and merely sought to use him to get to the main suspect. With eyes frivolously set on achieving the goal, he overlooked the dynamics of his aim, i.e. the way of achieving the goal. The crook made sure that the detective shifted his focus solely on the aim,

the proverbial hunt, which led him to suspend the gap between the aim and the goal of arresting the main suspect. The detective consequently got lost in removing the barriers instead of the problem and overlooked he was staring in the eyes of his adversary sitting in his office the whole time. Could we not say something similar about our modern capitalist predicament? Is not one of the greatest tricks capitalism ever pulled its disappearance from any serious debate or analysis during the last three decades? Were we not, just like the detective, dealing with its small-time deviations in a blind hope to stir the socio-economic model in the right direction, unwittingly avoiding the troubling core of the problem? Moreover, does not capitalism embed the subjects into its own reality and confine them to its limits?

We can perhaps relate to our own predicament through such examples, which can help us demonstrate how capitalism seduces the subjects into its own logic. In this sense, subjects misperceive the link between their knowledge or goal, namely what they think they are doing, and action or aim, what they are actually doing. The investigation of capitalist rationality should therefore avoid the analysis from the point of view of a completely self-aware, omniscient subject, which could hinder the results of the inquiry. We should not overlook the awkward, limping system in front of our eyes by creating a distance with constant fixing of its inherent anomalies. "The ultimate idolatry is not the idolizing of the mask, of the image itself, but the belief that there is some hidden positive content beyond the mask," (Žižek 2003: 138). By looking for some deeper truths behind the self-imposed masks, we are creating a distance towards official ideology. This distance, usually considered as a protective measure against ideological dynamics, is in fact redoubled, in itself already ideological and inevitably serves only to perpetuate a limping system.

Considering the mistakes of the detective above, the analysis proper should thus not start with research of deviations related to capitalism, but by striking directly at the very core of the systemic inconsistencies in order to see how they produce the deviations in question. Market discourse has become fundamental and central component of ideological struggle according to Jameson, where everyone surrenders to the various forms of market ideology. Precisely the proposition that the market is a part of the human nature has become the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle of our time (Jameson 2012: 281-282). In this sense, a noticeable shift is occurring in both public and analytical spheres since the 2008 global financial meltdown. The discourse revolving around capitalism first gained momentum by manifesting itself in the form of public uprisings embodied in the anti-globalisation movement and revived analytically through still obscured theoretical schools and institutions. In many cases, instead of a critical approach to the fundamental structure of our predicament, we ended up with yet another version of alternative modernity, critique of postmodern imperialism, or an externalized enemy in terms of the usual suspects, the communist-capitalist China or obscene US profiteering.

Over occupied with the investigation of temporary distortions, these views neglect the conceptual analysis of systemic infringements and fail to see how they affect the fundamental form of capitalist reproduction.

The contemporary systemic crisis has clearly penetrated a whole plethora of economic, political, and social discourses. There is a silent agreement forming among different academics, commentators and analysts of different viewpoints that there is something fundamentally inconsistent with our predominant economic model. The debate is slowly shifting from crisis management to the essential questions of systemic structure and its inherent antagonisms. Despite the obvious negative impacts of the current socio-economic model, the majority of solutions still seem to unwittingly rely on the intervention of the proverbial invisible hand to fix the current distortions and to eventually sustain the status quo. Even some ubiquitous critics of capitalism in reality tremble at the possibility of its potential demise. We can observe a proliferation of crisis analyses looming on the horizon, yet the majority focuses on its overcoming by proposing solutions in the framework that caused the crisis in the first place. Some research is dealing with the system's historical analysis, but few with its ontological crisis, when in fact the two approaches must be conflated if we are to arrive at a feasible critique of our modern predicament. We should be careful not to conceive capitalism as a simple abstraction, an overdetermined totality as a contingent articulation of different economic discourses. In his critique of the political economy, Marx already pointed out that capitalism must be analysed according to its structure with economy as its object. As Žižek noted (2007: 211), "[c]apitalism is *not* just the outcome of multiple discursive strategies and struggles for hegemony - the 'logic of capital' is a singular matrix [...]."

To discern the capitalist ideological matrix, we should approach the analysis at its purest elementary cell that goes beyond the formal discursive analysis, where the need to draw a demarcation line between ideology and factual reality pulls us right back into ideology. As Gramsci has observed through his notion of hegemony, ideology already persist in the word itself.<sup>1</sup> This insight should be complemented with two of Althusser's famous premises: there is no practice except by and in an ideology; there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects (1971: 170).<sup>2</sup> Such approach presupposes that we cannot approach ideological critique on the basis of social reality alone or what Althusser called '*real conditions*'. If ideology is already at work in everything that we experience as reality, we should treat ideology as Lacan's '*not-all*'; namely to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance towards it. Since ideology seems to engulf reality, this place must therefore remain devoid of any positive

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of *hegemony* has become a commonplace thesis in political philosophy, gradually developed in Gramsci's famous *Prison Notebooks* (2011). The concept was widely reinterpreted and scrutinised, with one of the most influential attempts provided by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2014).

<sup>2</sup> See Althusser's famous essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1971).

content (Žižek 2012a: 17). A critical distance towards ideology should also bear in mind the unconscious libidinal attachments that structure subject's reality. Ultimately, the subjects are always stained by ideology since they cannot live in the Real but need substance to sustain their social edifice.<sup>3</sup>

Psychoanalytic approach offers us a unique point of inquiry by endorsing the premise that there is no externality to the above ideological dynamics. It provides a way to observe reality that is ontologically devoid of any positive content. The method allows us not only to see what content fills the place of lack, but also to examine the origin and causes of such content by looking at its form. Psychoanalysis analyses the libidinal economy of the subject invested to fill in this lack, as well as the processes of transference structuring social reality. In the process of filling or repressing its constitutive lack, ideology strives to create a fantasmatic illusion of social totality by concealing its inherent antagonism, a traumatic dimension beyond signification. As Lacan pointed out, the trick lies in the illusion that is already at work in reality itself and is as such redoubled. What people "misrecognise is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity," (Žižek 2008b: 30). The latter is thus already ideological, since the socio-economic system itself embeds the subjects into its own logic through commodity fetishism, where it finds ways to justify relentless valorisation and commodification.<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, even the social categories, perceived liberations and forms of protests can also be a part of capitalist dynamics, its own form of power. This is the point of Lacan's famous observation of the student protests in 1968, claiming that their form of protest only addresses a new master, since it was already unwittingly exhibited in a shopping window. Psychoanalysis intervenes precisely in the dogmatic circle of ideology and "[...] could perhaps enable you to locate what it is exactly you are rebelling against – which does not stop that thing from continuing extremely well. [...] The regime is putting you on display. It says, 'look at them enjoying!'" (Lacan 2007: 208). By looking closely at these processes, we can observe how modern social categories are not produced through institutional power, but by capitalism through saturated markets. The proliferation of the so-called freedoms, varieties, and even transgressions are valorised as niche markets in an attempt to extract from them the surplus-value they bring. The economic form hijacks it to intensify the profit potential and, in the process, converges the capitalist power dynamics with the dynamics of resistance (Massumi 2003: 224).

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<sup>3</sup> The Lacanian order of the Real is a dimension beyond signification. For further reading on the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary orders, see Evans 2006.

<sup>4</sup> For a description of commodity fetishism, see Marx 1982, 164-165; Vighi 2010, 33-35; Lacan 2007.

To analyse the above dynamics, we should first emphasise the Lacanian premise that society is based on its repressed traumatism, which in turn paradoxically structures its very social reality. Since society never fully integrates its antagonistic split in the socio-symbolic order, the distance between the full vision of society and its lack is enacted. This gap is covered by the mechanism of *fetishism*, which simultaneously embodies and denies the structural impossibility of a totalized society in its positive existence. It allows us to observe how class domination has returned in the disavowed mode of fetishist relations between things. A fundamental displacement occurs in the way subjects relate to objects and the way they experience objects relating to themselves (Vighi 2010: 30; Žižek 2008b: 142). The true difficulty of Lacan's insight that illusion is a constitutive part of the subject's reality, therefore, is to think of capitalist ideology in its ontological lack and simultaneously grasping it as consubstantial with the lacking subjectivity. This approach allows us to observe how capitalist ideology justifies endless valorisation and commodification to fill the gaps in the social edifice in an attempt to create a fantasmatic illusion of social totality. Capitalising on the crisis through an uncompromising signification can reveal the method inscribed in the system, striving for its self-reproduction and creating (human) waste as its by-product.

This points to the basic modality of capitalist ideology, which strives to fill the gaps in the symbolic structure by erasing its own impossibility. The fundamental Lacanian lesson on this point is that the subjects are themselves masters of their own slavery. Their whole struggle consists in covering these gaps in the socio-symbolic reality by mediating ontological inconsistency. Conversely, by being mediated and therefore neutralised, that very structural ontological fracture creates their respective socio-historical paradigms. It must be noted that the subject itself does not fill this lack with substance, which is itself ontologically incomplete, but stands in the very place of the antagonism that renders this substance incomplete. The ontological gap shining through the subject and substance is therefore exactly what binds them together and designates the overlap between the subjective and objective dimensions (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 104).

The Lacanian approach to negative ontology shifts the perspective to the subject's libidinal economy that ultimately sustains the totality of its socio-symbolic edifice and is able to observe the manifestation of ideology at the level of the unconscious. It also avoids analysing the always-already ideological content, which is the very trap postmodernism unwittingly lures us into. To round up the above theoretical arguments, the subjects are therefore always divided between what they consciously know about their socio-political organisation of reality and a set of more or less unconscious beliefs they hold in regard to the system's authority. Ideological content then fills the gap between knowledge and belief at the level of the unconscious. It is

therefore the role of ideology to fill or erase the gaps in the symbolic reality produced by the antagonisms of the Real.

### **Fantasy and the sublimity of *objet petit a***

We should avoid the detective's superficial investigation of the omnipotent criminal mastermind by analysing capitalism's structural role in the reproduction of the socio-economic system, rather than its current deviations. Against the dangers of such an approach epitomised in the prevalent, supposedly non-ideological 'End of history'<sup>5</sup> logic, we should approach capitalist ideology in terms of its unconscious libidinal features through Lacanian concept of fantasy. Every successful ideology conceals its inherent antagonisms in the totality of the socio-symbolic edifice that is sustained through ideological fantasy. For Lacan, fantasy is not opposed to reality, since reality is already a mediated subjective process stained by the subject's desire. Fantasy, rather, serves as a protective screen mediating the inherent contradictions of the socio-symbolic order and provides the matrix through which the subject begins to desire. In fantasy, the subject is frequently unperceived, but always present and situates himself as determined by it (Lacan 1994: 60, 185; 2002b: 6).

We can conceive fantasy as the subject's solution to the deadlock of the inherent social antagonism of the ideological order. Fantasy contains the libidinal investment of the subject and is basically the subject's own fantasy. This structure is always stained by an antagonistic split, which cannot be integrated into the socio-symbolic order. The otherness of society in its antagonistic nature is thus the otherness of the subject, where it is possible to observe the overlap of the subject's self-alienation and the alienation in society (Vighi 2010: 99). This objective and subjective overlap is important to keep in mind when thinking of our capitalist predicament. Fantasy provides a framework for social reality by mediating between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of objects encountered in reality. These objects function as objects of desire, which fill the gaps opened in the socio-symbolic structure. The role of fantasy is therefore to provide support for desire and its coordination (Žižek 2008a: 7).

We should also bear in mind that by structure desire is always mediated as it manifests itself through the socio-symbolic order and is as such the desire of the Other.<sup>6</sup> It is constituted in the gap opened up by those signifiers, which come to represent the Other for it (Lacan 2002a: 253). Desire is therefore characterised by its attachment to an object-cause of desire, sliding from one object to another in the structurally failed quest of its satisfaction. While the object of desire can be isolated and identified, the very cause of this desire, the lack embodied in the object, must remain repressed. As desire slides from object to object in its necessarily failed

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<sup>5</sup> See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).

<sup>6</sup> This reverberates the Lacanian premise that the subject's desire is always the desire of the Other. See Fink 2004; Lacan 2002a.

quest to satisfy the subject, the subject on the other hand always encounters a lack in the object that is already stained by certain unattainable excess, causing it to drift from one signifier to another. The proliferation of objects in capitalism should be read in the same way, since desire structurally always fails to bring satisfaction and consequently produces more anxiety in the process. Paradoxically, capitalism as a socio-economic system set out to fulfil all of our desires thus produces an endless stream of more desires to be satisfied.

Desire is therefore sustained by fantasy with the subject following a particular object of desire. This paradoxical object structurally always misses its place of inscription and simultaneously coincides with its own lack. The exclusion of this element from the socio-symbolic reality then paradoxically provides the coordinates for its very frame. In the framework of fantasy, the object of desire plays the role of some fascination, driving the subjects to follow it through the fantasy narration. It is the cause of desire and at the same time posed retroactively by desire. That is to say, this fascinating object only materializes the void of desire around which it moves and is what Lacan termed as *objet petit a*. It functions as a substitute for some missing representation and as such represents its lack, filling out the void of this lost object. That means *objet a* is simultaneously a signifier, which is a part of representation of reality by filling its own impossibility, and also an object, which must be included in the signifying text (Žižek 2008a: 276; 2008b: 69, 178-181, 2008c: xiv).

What these positive objects are filling is not a mask for another order of objects, but simply the emptiness these objects fill. Here lies the sublimity of *objet a*: it is an ordinary object that happens to find itself occupying a position of an impossible object of desire, a positive remainder of the Real from the process of symbolization. It correlates to the subject by filling this void for the subject in the Other (which is ultimately the subject itself). By giving a body to this lack, an object starts functioning as the cause of desire (Žižek 2008a: 105, 276; 2008b: 221-223). In the transition of objects, *objet a* serves the function of delivering the subject from satisfaction of desire, which would otherwise mean its simultaneous disintegration. The socio-symbolic order is therefore always stained by this particular object that shapes the subject's symbolic reality.

In fantasy, *objet a* functions as a mediator between the impossibility of the Real and the empirical objects that start to embody this very impossibility and produce (dis)pleasure for the subjects (Žižek 2001: 97). It is crucial on this point to also think of the function of *objet a* as the element that closes the socio-symbolic signification and simultaneously embodies the very inconsistency of the socio-symbolic order in the subject's fantasy. In a dialectical overlap, it therefore simultaneously enables and prevents the full identity of the subject. This ambiguity is reflected in the subject's inconsistency, ultimately pointing towards the very inconsistency,



the non-existence of the big Other (Vighi 2010: 101).<sup>7</sup> *Objet a* is thus a remainder of the inherent lack of the subject, while its disavowal marks the subject's inclusion into the socio-symbolic network. This allows us to observe how subjectivity and the socio-symbolic order emerge simultaneously by the intersection of their gaps.

A double fracture can now be discerned beneath the enchanting appearance of *objet a*. It stands for the gap that makes objective reality ontologically inconsistent and simultaneously represents this inconsistency in the subject's fantasy. Moreover, if *objet a* is an inert stain, a leftover of symbolization from the Real, it is conversely also the minimal object necessary to produce a semblance of a coherent socio-symbolic edifice. That is to say, if *objet a* represents an ontological inconsistency of any socio-symbolic order, it simultaneously also produces an endless fantasmatic lure that strengthens rather than undermines such order. Its disavowal points to its ontological as well as socio-political role by embodying a certain unattainable excess. The proper task of *objet a* therefore lies precisely in its ambiguous role between devastating inconsistency and promise of harmony. While the emptiness of the object embodying the lack of the subject shines through it, this negativity is simultaneously neutralised by fantasy's pacifying function. Lacan, in the advent of scientific rationality of the University discourse that led to the ruse of capitalism, pointed to the critical historicisation of *objet a*.<sup>8</sup> That is achieved by making its constitutive negativity less and less available by valorising it *via* the commodity form. We should thus conceive the core of desire in capitalism not so much as being attached to *objet a* with its liberating potential, but as a cruel master demanding more obedience to his ideological superego injunction 'Enjoy!'. *Objet a* seemed to undergo a transformation in capitalism from an inaccessible subversive remainder to an effective seal of the signifying operation (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 69-71, 78).

This should be put in context of Lacan's discourse of University, where attempts are made to neutralise the potentially subversive power of *objet a*. Consequently, it also explains how the possibility of experiencing the social link's negative point of articulation has been drastically reduced. Disabling *objet a* as an anxiety laden object of the drive seems to lead to a greater materialization of *jouissance* and with it to an administrated, mechanical society already berated by Adorno and the Frankfurt school.<sup>9</sup> With 'masterisation' of *objet a*, scientific knowledge and society are becoming increasingly totalitarian by establishing a discourse

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<sup>7</sup> The subjects presuppose the Other as a symbolic field of meaning to recognise themselves in it. Consequently, speech and desire originate from the Other, despite the Other being a symbolic fiction of the subject. See Lacan 1994, part 4; Seminar XVI (Lacan 2006).

<sup>8</sup> For the reading on the theory of the four discourses, see Lacan 2006; Lacan 2007; Zupančič 2006.

<sup>9</sup> The libidinal economy of the drive transforms the meaning of signifiers constituting a symbolic construction and is decisive for the articulation of the subject's relation to enjoyment. For an explanation of the drive, see Lacan 1994, particularly Part III; the essay *The position of the Unconscious* in Lacan 2002a.

where anxiety and *jouissance* are incorporated in an unstable object of enjoyment. What gets lost in the process is experience, the ingredient for social transformation (ibid: 73).

Mediating between the fantasy form and positive objects in reality, *objet a* brings forward an array of objects that function as objects of desire from which surplus-value is extracted. In this process, the object that fills the lack in the symbolic structure turns into the object-cause of desire due to that very lack and establishes what we perceive as value (ibid: 98). In capitalist rationality, *objet a* therefore fulfils its function more with its ability to successfully conceal the gaps in the symbolic order, rather than to stand for a disturbing element with subversive potential. That is to say, it still embodies the negativity of the Real disturbing the fantasy structure, however, this negativity is neutralised through valorisation and commodification, which produces an alienated and split subject.

The subversive potential of *objet a* is therefore neutralised and used to extract a certain surplus-value from the objects. In this process, the negativity of the Real embodied in the object is neutralised through fantasy, which inscribes this ambiguous element in the symbolic network of signifiers. These objects thus enter in a chain of signifiers, where they alter and fuse meanings to create a fantasmatic appearance of totality. Their objective and subjective dimensions start to overlap, providing them with the necessary consistency in the framework of the capitalist fantasy. In order to analyse how they fill in the gaps in the symbolic structure, we must first inquire in the processes establishing and sealing their meaning in the socio-symbolic order.

### **Caught in a loop: From *objet a* to Master-Signifier**

To see how meaning supports fantasy, we must first extract the moment when ideology structures its ideological effect, namely the way a certain signifier (*Master-Signifier*) totalizes the symbolic network of the fantasy structure through the ideological kernel of enjoyment. Ideological enjoyment is the last support of ideology, which sustains itself by libidinal satisfaction the subject gets in its attempts to enjoy the symptom. By extracting this moment, which is simultaneously beyond and in the field of meaning, we can observe how ideology produces and manipulates enjoyment structured in fantasy. The content of subject's reality is managed through fantasy and is sutured by a central element through the fusion of signifiers in the field of meaning, which necessarily implies the mediation of the symbolic order, the big Other. Such an element represents an ideal unity beyond its true properties but is simultaneously stripped and empty of its actual particularities (e.g. freedom, liberty). Master-Signifier (S1) therefore symbolizes a certain category and reduces the signified content to its image.

The identity of a certain ideological field is created and sustained by a multitude of ideological elements, the 'floating signifiers', which are stitched into unity through a certain 'nodal point'. They capture the open identity of signifiers into a signifying formation and stop their meaning from sliding. These points are in the heart of the hegemonic ideological struggle, since they compete which of them will totalize the ideological edifice through its meaning and include in its series of equivalences other floating signifiers. This happens when the whole field of signifiers is sutured under the condition that one signifier (S1) 'quilts' the whole field and attaches particular elements to its overarching identity. However, this signifier is not a density of supreme meaning, but on the contrary a bare structural agency of pure difference, an element which holds the symbolic network together. Consequently, meaning is itself additive and the signified is sliding along with the signifier, without being anchored to anything outside of themselves. Particular signifiers are then tied together through an overarching identity, which is determined retroactively (Fink 2004: 89, 112-113; Žižek 2008b: 95-97, 109-110). It is therefore crucial to detect this element that holds a specific ideological field together (e.g. God, Nation, Party...). While this element provides a full ideological experience of the socio-symbolic order, it also manifests an effect of a certain misperception of the ideological text by obfuscating the relation to our own predicament.

How does the operation of establishing meaning take place? In the first instance, particular ideological elements are materialized through their signifiers. A signifier sustains its meaning by a self-referential circulation around a certain void in an attempt to fully represent the object of fantasy. The object that coincides with its own loss, the *objet a* as the lost object of desire, is the embodiment of this void. A signifier works as its substitute, filling out the void of the lost object and as such represents its lack. In other words, the presence of one signifier equals the absence of its opposite.<sup>10</sup> The signifier therefore works on the background of its own possible absence that is materialized and forms a positive experience in the presence of its opposite (Žižek 2008b: 178-180). The objects stained by *objet a* in the order of signifiers are then sutured in the socio-symbolic order through a signifying formation.

Since signifiers represent a set of differences to each other, ideology as a fantasy solution deploys a signifier that functions as an empty container for the other's particular meanings (Žižek 2008a: 95). For a certain social totality or a historical unity to emerge, its narrative must refer to such an empty signifier, which can provide meaning to a certain ideological experience. Historical reality is always symbolized and the experience of its discourse is provided by an experience of its meaning, supported by some meaningless signifier without the signified. That

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<sup>10</sup> In a signifying chain they operate through the process of *differentially* where the opposite of one signifier is not immediately another signifier, but the lack of the first. A signifier represents a gap between its own inscription as to be present and another signifier that would fill this gap when the first signifier is absent (Žižek 2008d: 22).

meaningless Master-Signifier “/.../ is what represents the subject for another signifier. This latter signifier is therefore the signifier to which all other signifiers represent the subject – which means that if this signifier is missing, all the other signifiers represent nothing,” (Lacan 2002a: 304). This paradoxical signifier therefore gives body to lack and is not one in the chain of signifiers but stands as the signifier opposed to its absence and thus for the very presence of difference. This pure signifier does not designate any positive property of the object, since it only refers to its own unity (Žižek 2008d: 52; 2011: 267, n. 199).

The Master-Signifier therefore provides an empty container for another signifier to attach and find itself in the signifying chain. It supplements the chain of knowledge (S2) and thus enables it. The actual notion of reality gets devoid of its properties, but still presents its ideal form of content (Žižek 2008d: 51, 76). However, this dialectical inversion does not change the element inscribed in the chain, but the “modality of its inscription in the symbolic network,” so that the “quilting takes place with a sudden reversal of perspective,” (ibid: 78). That means each signifier in the chain is now interlinked through their particularities with another, which conversely attach themselves to the universal meaning and thus produce the Master-Signifier for all other signifiers (e.g. democracy, freedom, liberty). The Master-Signifier therefore embodies an impossibility of society through a notion, which quilts other meanings to its narrative.

The hegemonic struggle of ideology is won or lost if it is able to successfully refer to and manipulate some extra-ideological kernel that holds the community together, which simultaneously cannot be directly reduced to a leverage of political power. Societal unity can therefore be presented through the reliance on an empty signifier, hegemonised by a particular content of political struggle. The political struggle is therefore the struggle for the content of the empty signifier, which represents the underlying impossibility of a certain society. Politics marks the gap between an ordinary signifier S2 and an empty signifier S1. In the hegemonic struggle of what subjects regard as apolitical content, one particular content becomes successful when its signifier is hegemonised and displaces other particular contents by providing the subject with the experience of an organized, consistent narrative. This narrative predetermines what subjects will experience as reality (Žižek 2008a: 28; 2008c: 207-208, 210, 311-313).

This is how a Master-Signifier unifies a political field and as we have seen, it is not defined by its own content, but by its possibility of transference. We should also bear in mind that the hegemonic struggle and domination of these elements does not rest on force but consent, as Gramsci already pointed out. In other words, the particularities of single signifiers are not suppressed, but provided with an identifiable space where they can alter and fuse identities in their service to the socio-political structure. This is the reason why certain realities of human

existence can be (re)articulated and provided with a (new) meaning to fit the socio-historic dispositions of a certain society. One of the recent of such ominous examples is the re-articulation of torture justified precisely through freedom, where new limitations are sold as additional freedoms in the context of security. The process through the Master-Signifier 'freedom' mystifies and conceals a particular type of un-freedom that lies at the very heart of the social system upon which it relies.

### **Enjoyment: The overlap of lack and excess**

To discern the modality of enjoyment, we should look at how *objet a* relates to the Master-Signifier within the capitalist matrix by observing how lack is perceived as plenitude. We can try to discern that *via* the above-mentioned example of 1968 student protests and Lacan's witty intervention. With it, he pointed out that any subjective resistance within the ruling capitalist ideology cannot provide an authentic subversion and is more likely to end up as a universalized deterioration (see Lacan 2006, Seminar on the 20<sup>th</sup> November 1968). What the students overlooked is that the plurality of identities in liberal capitalism are fixed in the overall economic framework, whereby capital transcends territory and political positions as obstacles to unconstrained commodification. In other words, they found themselves immersed in a socio-economic matrix that can domesticate and integrate excess by turning it into surplus-value.

The same dynamics can be observed for example in the sexual revolution, where excess can be valorised by capitalism as a commodity. What subjects in ideology overlook is how capitalism thrives on their excitement *via* consumerism and how this excitement is one of its profiteering patterns. This is yet another opportunity for capitalism to valorise the surplus-enjoyment by hijacking it to extract the surplus-value. Not only were the protests or the sexual revolution deprived of their subversive potential but monitored and regulated by a perverted master - capital. In times of crisis as in the liberation movement of 1968, the master retains his hegemony by utilizing liberal democracy to appease the rising anxiety. The irrational and valorised subversive stance within the capitalist matrix is therefore more likely to announce new forms of authoritarian political power, whose role is to keep the capitalist matrix in place. From the point of view of capital, excess must be perceived as always available and at the same time depoliticized, criminalized, and deprived of its disturbing sting (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 85-86; Vighi 2010: 28).

Subjects are therefore pushed to experience all kinds of excesses as long as they are neutralised in advance. Even potentially subversive excesses of enjoyment can get confined to the limits of the pleasure principle, meaning to enjoy without enjoyment (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 84). Albeit subjects aim for the full enjoyment, all they get are empty commodified practices, since the subjects can never experience the given object fully. These types of

experiences are then primarily empty in themselves, serving the purpose of profit accumulation. This emptiness can be discerned in the valorised lack they bring (e.g. sweets without sugar, beer without alcohol, coffee without caffeine, adrenalin without danger, love without the fall). Surplus-value can nonetheless be extracted from them due to the overlap of lack and excess observed in the dialectical function of *objet a* and the Master-Signifier, which produces ideological enjoyment. It seems that subjects in capitalist society can best acquire meaning by a sort of silent, sedative enjoyment embodied in the object-commodity, feeding the capitalist dynamics *via* commodity fetishism. It seems that the totality of life in capitalism has been reduced to safe pleasures of frantic consumption in the shape of new products, styles, and experiences, which unwittingly sustain the status quo of the entire socio-economic system.

With these thoughts we are again reaching back to the proliferation of objects *via objet a*. If the task of *objet a* in capitalist rationality is to bring forward new objects but cloak their subversive potential, the crucial dialectical function of the Master-Signifier is then to bind and materialize the overlap of subject and object. This process enables the emergence of subjectivity as well as objectivity. That means the Master-Signifiers quilts, or sutures, the subject's ontological incompleteness. The Lacanian understanding of identity confirms this consideration, since the subject is by definition the result of a detour through the Other. The subject borrows the available identity of the social order but, simultaneously, objective reality emerges through the self-alienating acceptance of the mediated role of language (ibid: 67). It is crucial to understand this operation as consubstantial to the dialectics of *objet a* and S1 described above.

In comparison, both *objet a* and the Master-Signifier conceal the gap whose radical disavowal determines the fantasmatic formation of a meaningful world. However, despite both embodying a paradoxical lack, they perform a different function. According to Žižek, the key difference lies in their quilting role, where the Master-Signifier indicates "the point at which the signifier falls into the signified," while "*objet a* is on the side of the signifier, it fills in the lack in/of the signifier," (2012b, 599). In their relation to lack, *objet a* embodied in an object can be seen as a more revealing and more explicit element in the socio-symbolic order than the Master-Signifier, which points to its ontological and implicitly political role.

It is very useful on this point to turn to the last chapter of Lacan's *Seminar XI* (1994), where he points to the short circuit between S1 and *objet a*. As discussed above, *objet a* in capitalist rationality performs an effective seal of the signifying operation *via* commodification and valorisation of the lack it embodies, rather than pointing to socio-symbolic inconsistencies. Due to the minimal embodiment of this lack, its function in this disposition translates in the superego injunction to enjoy *via* the object, an arrangement also found in the discourse of perversion as

articulated by Lacan.<sup>11</sup> We can argue on this point that the mode of capitalist drive tends to function by commodifying *objet a*, which now increasingly functions as S1, closing the signification loop of the capitalist ideological fantasy. As Feldner and Vighi point out, the enjoyment attached to the commodity then becomes a paradoxically occupies the place of the Master-Signifier, while the positive object becomes its compulsive enjoyment. The injunction to enjoy as a part of desire is therefore ushered by a cruel master, demanding obedience from the point of unconscious (2015: 71).

### The unconscious logic of the Capitalist discourse

Above considerations have finally brought us to two important insights: first, *objet a* under capitalism does not only seem to successfully seal the ruptures in the socio-symbolic edifice, but also transforms into the Master-Signifier where the injunction to enjoy is coupled with the temporary object; second, it identifies Capital itself as the new Master, pointing to the much neglected and underdeveloped Lacanian discourse of the Capitalist.<sup>12</sup> We can approach this claim through the four discourses as described by Lacan.<sup>13</sup> The question that remains to be answered is how to detect this master in the context of the mentioned discourses. In terms of today's capitalist crisis, we can observe the anticlockwise regression of the four discourses from the discourse of the Master to the discourse of the University, which captures the crucial role of the Master-Signifier. It is important to note that in the passage to the modern University discourse, the supposedly objective scientific knowledge has merely substituted the role of the Master.<sup>14</sup>

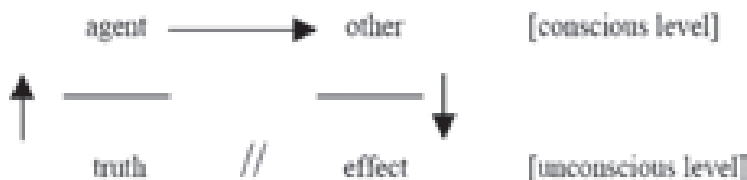


Figure 1: The four discourses in question are produced by an anticlockwise rotation. These terms stand in a fixed relationship with each other and rotate by a *quarter* turn, thus giving shape to the four different discourses (Feldner and Vighi, 2015: 77).

For Lacan, knowledge is the conflation of subjective and objective dimensions, the foundation of which is both material and unconscious. With knowledge in the place of the new master, the chain of knowledge (S2) now occupies the hegemonic place of the agent and becomes objective by pretending it has abandoned its foundation in *jouissance*. What is remarkable on

<sup>11</sup> The pervert instrumentalises himself through the object perceived as missing in the Other. By strengthening the Other, by working for the Other's enjoyment, the latter provides the pervert with libidinal consistency, i.e. a sustainable identity. I will approach the capitalist matrix through perversion in the subchapter below.

<sup>12</sup> See Lacan 1978.

<sup>13</sup> See particularly *Seminar XVI* (2006) and *Seminar XVII* (2007), conceived in the aftermath of the 1968 protests.

<sup>14</sup> For an elaborate description of the four discourses and its mathemes, see Zupančič, 2006.

this point is the organization of work-value in capitalism and the historical appearance of knowledge on the market as commodity. As Lacan argued (2007: 80), “the secret of the worker himself is to be reduced to being no longer anything but value,” where the “surplus *jouissance* is no longer surplus *jouissance* but is inscribed simply as a value to be inscribed in or deducted from the totality of whatever it is that is accumulating”. That leads the capitalists to buy the knowledge from the workers, the production of which they effectively do not pay for. Consequently, the logic of capital itself occupies the position of the master, while simultaneously depriving the workers of their subversive potential. If the above anticlockwise turn installs ‘the new tyranny of knowledge’ as the new master, it also modifies the link between the other and the production of objects of desire (*a*). This link is now occupied by a short circuit between knowledge and new others or commodities. The main effect of such disposition is that the place of production in capitalism is occupied by the subject of the unconscious (\$), which is produced by and foreclosed to universal knowledge (Lacan 2007: 82-83; Vighi 2010: 52-54).

#### Discourse of the University

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

#### Discourse of the Master

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

#### Discourse of the Capitalist

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

Figure 2: The three mentioned discourses of the Master, University, and Capitalist with their respective changes (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 77).

This brings us to the discourse of the Capitalist, which does not follow the rotating logic of the other discourses but is arrived at by a way of inversion of  $S_1/\$$  into  $\$/S_1$  in the discourse of the Master, foreclosing castration. This signals the change from the Master discourse, where mastery is antagonized by its unconscious truth, to the Capitalist discourse, where the truth of the barred subject (\$) is the Master-Signifier. Furthermore, in both the Capitalist and University discourses, the Master-Signifier occupies the place of the unconscious, while the agency in the Capitalist discourse is taken over by knowledge ( $S_2$ ) and the barred subject (\$) (ibid, 77-78). What emerges is a perverse situation where the self-alienated subject believing in his own omnipotence is in the place of the agent, in the command and production of knowledge. The subject is then duped into believing it can access the truth *qua* mastery, creating a discourse where the gaps opened by intrusions of the Real are suspended. In both discourses, however,



the social link is in danger of imploding since it is constituted by a foreclosed Master-Signifier, despite having supposedly neutral scientific knowledge or the omniscient subject at its helm.

It is important to note that the relation to the truth *qua* Master-Signifier is very different in the two discourses. We can approach these phenomena *via* the University discourse, where knowledge attempts to address and control the lost object (*a*), producing a subjective division (\$). S1 in this case is disavowed as ungraspable truth and the leftovers from the process of symbolization are producing cracks in the socio-symbolic order. These gaps in the social edifice, however, gain a different form of relations in the Capitalist discourse, emphasised by Lacan (1978) in his Milan talk with an arrow pointing downwards from \$ to S1. It points to a different type of disavowal, which can be analysed according to the fetishist reading of ideology.<sup>15</sup> In both of the discourses, then, we are dealing with a disavowed S1, although the relation to this disavowal in the Capitalist discourse is enacted by a fetishist distance. Fetish in this case is merely a lie that enables the capitalist subject to control the truth.<sup>16</sup>

The paradox presenting itself is that the barred subject of the Capitalist discourse is very well aware of the truth of the discourse. To control it, he finds reasons to suspend its symbolic efficiency through fetishist disavowal ('I know very well, but...' - the position of the pervert who directly identifies with the object of enjoyment).<sup>17</sup> A prime example of such a parallax object can be found in money; the subjects are well aware that money as such is a piece of paper with numbers on it, but they endow it with an aura of fetishist belief due to its structural role in capitalistic society. Hence, what we are dealing with is a case of implicit perversion. The perverted subject believes he is in control, but it is the fetishist distance itself that is ideological and causes the subject to overlook the dynamics in which he is an instrument to the enjoyment of Capital. The structural role of S1, however, remains the same; if we are to disturb this element, the whole system implodes. The subject of capitalist rationality is therefore unable to grasp the truth *qua* S1 to the point where mastery reappears in the guise of injunction to enjoy.

We can observe this operation through the above described formation of meaning through S1 and its dialectical overlap with *objet a*, which triggers the proliferation of the objects of desire. Since capitalism produces an endless stream of commodities according to our structurally failed desires, what the subjects in capitalist discourse therefore really get is the lack of things. Following this logic further, the meaning imposed on objects in capitalism is established

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<sup>15</sup> For further reading on the symptomatic and fetishist reading of ideology, see Žižek 2008b, particularly chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> For reading on the notion of fetish, see Freud 1956; Lacan 2007. For further clarification of fetish in ideological critique, see Žižek 2001, particularly part 1; 2008a, chapter 3.

<sup>17</sup> The notion of fetishist disavowal suspends the knowledge on the inherent antagonism of the socio-symbolic order by tying the subject to the enjoyment of its disavowed core. This point is illustrated through Mannoni's (1969) formula '*Je sais bien, mais quand-même ...*' (I know very well, but ...), which enables the subjects to continue believing in the system despite the materialisation of its antagonism in the social edifice. To put it bluntly, fetishist disavowal suspends the distance between knowledge and action.

through the process of differentially on the basis of what they are lacking, not by their excess. The reason behind capitalist persuasiveness is the subjects' belief that what they are really getting is what they perceive as lacking, i.e. what they really want (we can again resort to the signifier 'freedom'). We can read this process as consubstantial to the capitalist discourse of production: it is able to produce more and more commodities available for purchase, because the subjects believe that they are actually getting what they really want. Despite being aware of the truth, the fetishist disavowal enables them to believe they are really purchasing the accumulated *jouissance*, the lack embodied in the object-commodity. Nonetheless, the objects (*a*) are in fact substitutes brought about by *objet a* as the embodiment of certain surplus of *jouissance* that sets desire in motion.

As Lacan pointed out in his references to Marx's critique of political economy in *Seminar XVII* (2007: 80-83), the capitalist discourse is a fundamentally perverse discourse because it relies on the accumulation of *jouissance* and its ambivalent lack for the consumer. A closer look also reveals that *jouissance* cannot be accumulated precisely because it relies on lack. Since lack cannot be accumulated, the subjects in capitalism organise their relation to the lack in the object and ultimately to *jouissance* through perverse disavowal. Capitalism therefore manages to convince the subject that he is enjoying the real *a*, the lack that the subject is desperately seeking but never able to attain. This discourse is perverted exactly because it pretends to produce the real lack as accumulated *jouissance*, while it merely produces its valorised imitation. The consumer society thus derives its meaning through such production and it is in this perverted fantasy that capitalism found a way to achieve its ultimate goal – the endless accumulation of surplus-value. As Lacan (2007: 81) warned through Marx, what the latter rejects in surplus-value is exactly the plundering of surplus-*jouissance*. The capitalist ideology therefore manages to convince its subjects that they are getting 'the real thing', the proverbial 'it' they are searching for, while in reality what they get is exactly the embodied lack of this 'it.' As Alenka Zupančič (2006: 170) put it: "The revolution related to capitalism is none other than this: it found the means of making the waste count. Surplus value is nothing else but the waste or loss that counts, and the value of which is constantly being added to or included in the mass of capital."

The Capitalist matheme confirms the above claim of *objet a* serving the duty to a harsh master, who demands obedience to the unconscious command of enjoyment. Subjects act as free agents in their self-determination but are in fact under an unconscious injunction where the mastery occupies a displaced position of truth. If the Master demanded 'You must obey!', the University command is 'You must know!' transforming into the Capitalist command 'You must enjoy!', despite both of the latter two being experienced as spontaneous (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 78).

“The crisis, not of the Master discourse, but of the Capitalist discourse, which is its substitute, is overt (*ouverte*). I am not saying to you that the Capitalist discourse is rotten, on the contrary, it is something wildly clever, eh? Wildly clever but headed for a blowout,” (Lacan 1978: 10-11). At first glance, the outcome is formally the same as with the Master discourse, since the Capitalist discourse produces a *qua* lack. However, a closer look reveals a profound change in the lower unconscious level where S1, the disavowed master of the barred subject, is unable to relate to its product or effect (*a*) of its discourse. That means that the subject of the unconscious, either the consumer or the worker, is paradoxically situated in the position of command and production. This unconscious position dupes the subject of the Capitalist discourse into believing he has the access to objective knowledge and thus the full understanding of society. As Althusser already warned, ideology is most efficient when it remains concealed.<sup>18</sup> The capitalist worker or consumer therefore addresses the other as objective knowledge and the effect of this link is the production of surplus-value, the so called valorised surplus, a distortion of the surplus within *jouissance* as a deadlock to any social link. Crucially, we thus arrive at the truth of the discourse embodied by Capitalism as the Master-Signifier (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 79).

Let us put Lacan’s above observation into perspective. Capitalism is ‘wildly clever’ exactly because it inserts in the desiring subject the illusion of full autonomy. It simultaneously pushes desire to make a one-way trip into production and consumption, while disregards their dynamics and consequences. It therefore serves only its own logic of valorisation and accumulation *via* commodification. It is the same logic that consequently elevates consumption and work into highest priorities of desire. The more the subject enjoys its power, the emptier he becomes since the true object-cause of desire *qua* lack keeps eluding him. In the relation to mastery, we can discern how Capitalist discourse replaced the Master with a disavowed authority that is unable to connect with what it triggers *via* the subject, i.e. the accumulation of surplus-value. The genius part of it all is exactly the neutralization of this split, namely the barred subject *via* its elevation to the position of command (ibid: 79, 81). This dynamics is also the reason why Lacan claims capitalism is ‘headed for a blowout’. In other words, the capitalist subject only thinks he knows what he is doing and where he is going, while the relation to his actions is obfuscated by ideology. The capitalist subject is thus a fetishist in practice rather than in the mind, since the subject of the unconscious in command of production listens to the orders of a disavowed master. We can thus read both the University and the Capitalist discourse as two faces of modernity, where lack is disguised as plenitude and “capitalism

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<sup>18</sup> See Louis Althusser’s essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1971). Exemplary fetishistic distance concealing what Althusser called *real conditions* is a total immersion in and identification with the ideological presuppositions mentioned above as the idea of ‘End of History’ (Fukuyama 1992).

reign[s] because it is closely connected with this rise in the function of science,” (Lacan in Feldner and Vighi 2015: 80).

## Conclusion

The above analysis identifies an ontological crisis in the heart of capitalism, since the latter devours its subjects in the name of endless accumulation of surplus-value inherent in its logic. We can say we came back to Marx’s point to analyse the economy as the object of capitalism discussed at the very beginning (1981: 385): “The *true barrier* to capitalist production is *capital itself*. It is that capital and its self-valorisation appear as the starting and the finishing point, as the motive and purpose of production.” The ruthless valorisation therefore does not point to capitalism’s external limit in terms of resources but discerns its inherent ontological limit, which is why I call this crisis ontological.

It is only a short step from here to grasp the homology between Lacan’s surplus-*jouissance* and Marx’s surplus-value. Capitalism has the ability to commodify all types of categories in the name of surplus-value and has in the search for profit valorised human category as well, where the poor serve as its entropic waste. Through the commodification and valorisation, the initially lost surplus-*jouissance* returns in the shape of masses of excluded subjects, whose status undermines capitalism as a social mode of production. As a social mode of production, capitalism converts and exchanges the loss in the product (a) solely for the purpose of producing more value by hijacking human unconscious. It simultaneously reproduces a mass exclusion from work as a radical condition, a structural anomaly that threatens our very social fibre. The disturbing lost object of capitalism is ultimately the failed connection between the capitalist drive and surplus-value.

We can again use the example of our detective at the start, lost in solving the obstacles instead of the problem. His *modus operandi* points more to his satisfaction in dealing with the aim of getting the main suspect, instead of the main suspect himself. That is to say, there was more satisfaction for him in the proverbial hunt, rather than achieving his actual goal. Translated in the Lacanian terms of the drive, its function is to put in question what is satisfaction for the subject.<sup>19</sup> Its purpose is not to reach the goal (destination, object) but to follow its aim (satisfaction), which is to circle around the object, or in the detective’s case, the Keyser Söze sitting right in front of his eyes.

Does this not neatly correlate to the capitalist rationality and the subjects embedded in it? There is a gap in capitalism as well, positioned between its explicit goal – profit – and its aim – endless accumulation through self-destructive valorisation. Put differently, while the capital’s

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<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that drive is not something primordial or ultimately given, but a thoroughly cultural and symbolic construction (Lacan 1994: 162, 166-168).

authoritarian drive works well to keep the consumer subjugated ('Enjoy!' as the ideological injunction), it is impotent with regard to its actual goal. The paradox simply lies in the mode of production that ignores how the accumulation of surplus-value influences the worker's or consumer's ability not only to produce, but also to purchase the objects of desire. The production–consumption axis is counterproductive because of the capitalist drive towards endless expansion (Feldner and Vighi 2015: 79-80). Let us not forget Lacan's warning: "After all, it is the cleverest discourse [Capitalist] that we have made. It is no less headed for a blowout. This is because it is untenable," (Lacan 1972: 11). If capitalism persists on ruling the global population with its logic, it is because we continue to fetishize its fruits that seem to neutralise the inherent excesses of our lives.

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