Critical Theory

and the Crisis of Contemporary Capitalism

Heiko Feldner
and Fabio Vighi

Critical Theory and Contemporary Society

series editor DARROW SCHECTER

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Critical Theory and the Crisis of Contemporary Capitalism

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Introduction

Capitalism is not only a mode of production. It is also a religion. When this thought struck German philosopher Walter Benjamin some ninety years ago, he was witnessing one of the most devastating crises of the last century. The debt crisis at the heart of it was resolved two years later, in 1923, by a colossal hyperinflation which wiped out the life savings of millions and paved the way for the economic slump of 1929 and the resistible rise of the Nazis.

Capitalism was not only conditioned by a religious mentality, as Max Weber had suggested in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5). For Benjamin, capitalism was itself a religious phenomenon through and through. It had three essential features. First, it was a purely cultic religion, without theology or theoretical justification. Second, the capitalist cult was permanent in the terrifying sense that each day was a holy day demanding unrelenting devotion without exception. Such was the monstrosity of this religion that, third, it could no longer offer redemption. Instead, the capitalist cult gave rise to '*Schuld*' – debt, guilt and blame rolled into one – and self-destruction as the only path to salvation (Benjamin 1921).

One of the most extraordinary ideological manoeuvres in recent history has been the imposition of austerity rule on societies that only a few years ago, in the autumn of 2008, were blackmailed into getting up to their ears in debt in a collective effort to rescue the banking system. The crisis would be over soon and green shoots would crop up once the silver bullets of state credit (bailout and stimulus packages), money-printing and near-zero interest rates had rectified the situation and put us back on the royal road to growth. When in February 2011 the *Financial Times'* chief economics commentator, Martin Wolf, ventured a historical retrospective on the current economic crisis (Wolf 2011), what had come to a close was the first phase of the greatest corporate looting of public coffers in living memory. Between 2008 and 2011, $15 trillion had been dredged up from the public purse worldwide to combat the crisis, bringing up the total of 'sovereign debt' to a whopping $39 trillion ($39,000,000,000,000), which by the end of May 2014 had risen further to $53 trillion[1] – not a bad

[1]'World Debt Comparison: the Global Debt Clock', in *The Economist*, http://www.economist.com/content/global_debt_clock (accessed 18 February 2011). As we write, the current count stands at $53,450,951,762,901, fast rising (accessed 30 May 2014 @ 2.45pm), which translates into the following figures for public debt per person/public debt as per cent of GDP: Britain: $39,632/96.7

tally for the most efficient economic system we can think of. Now that we brace ourselves for the second wave of the crisis to peak – a global economic contraction with drastic forms of money devaluation lying in wait – is it not time we turned our backs on the fairy-tale account of the crisis, according to which it resulted from a distortion of an otherwise efficient system?

Over the past five years, the controversy about the nature of the current economic crisis has produced a myriad of competing explanations as to what might have caused it, which include the following:

1 unrestrained greed and other psychological propensities rooted in human nature (e.g. Tett 2009; Greenspan 2009 and 2013; Akerlof and Shiller 2010), a rehearsal of the anthropological leitmotif of liberal thought that 'out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made' (Kant 1784: 211);

2 blind faith in neo-liberal theories about the efficiency and self-sufficiency of markets (Davidson 2009; Elliott and Atkinson 2009; Sainsbury 2013 and Carney 2014);

3 the institutional failure to monitor and regulate the financial sector and especially the banking system (Skidelsky 2009; Cable 2010; Hutton 2010 and Acharya et al. 2011);

4 a failure of the collective imagination to understand systemic risk (Besley and Hennessy 2009 and King 2012) as well as to heed the lessons of history: the ever-recurring 'this-time-is-different-syndrome' (Reinhart and Rogoff 2009 and Gamble 2009);

5 severe imbalances in the international financial, monetary and trading systems and the system of global governance, leading to crippling wealth and income inequalities (Wolf 2009; Stiglitz et al. 2010; Roubini and Mihm 2011; Krugman 2012; Piketty 2014);

6 an ill-conceived Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism imposing itself on the world economy (Sinn 2011, as well as large parts of the political elites in central Europe);

7 big government along with too much regulation of the wrong kind (Ferguson 2012; Butler 2012; Dowd and Hutchinson 2010 and Beck 2010);

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per cent; France: $37,786/95.4 per cent; Germany: $34,212/84.2 per cent; Greece: $28,572/153 per cent; Italy: $39,306/121.6 per cent; Spain: $21,891/81.8 per cent; United States: $42,965/83.1 per cent (ibid.). With a shared sense of impending doom, mainstream economists, too, have long begun to refer to the present crisis as the 'Great Stagnation' (see e.g. Cowen 2010 and Denning 2011).

8 a long-term crisis of over-accumulation and profitability (Callinicos 2010 and Harman 2009) as well as underconsumption caused by decades of excessive exploitation (Wolff 2010 and Harvey 2011 and 2014) going back to the 1970s;

9 the historical tendency of the rate of profit to fall as predicted by Karl Marx in volume three of *Capital* (Carchedi 2010 and Kliman 2012);

10 a blockage to the new forms of capital accumulation which are thought to have emerged with the development of cognitive capitalism (Marazzi 2011; Hardt and Negri 2009 and Vercellone 2010);

11 a secular stagnation tendency of monopoly-finance capital – rather than rapid growth – generating a surplus-capital-absorption problem (Magdoff and Yates 2009 and Bellamy Foster and McChesney 2012).

The first seven explanations belong to a cluster which oscillates between two related extremes: one makes the crisis into a 'gigantic intellectual mistake' (Hutton 2012a), the other refers us to our 'animal spirits' – the received wisdom that, rather than rational choice calculation, business and consumer decisions tend to be based on gut feeling.[2] The last four explanations are part of a cluster that stresses how the contradictory nature of capitalism leads systematically and unavoidably to economic crises. What both clusters have in common is the belief, whether explicit or implicit, that the capitalist mode of production possesses the miraculous ability to renew itself eternally, unless it meets with an insurmountable external limit, such as the ecological finitude of earth, or is opposed and overthrown.

This book offers a different view of the nature, causes and consequences of the current economic crisis. In the tradition of critical theorists like Ernest Mandel (1975), Robert Kurz (1999) and Slavoj Žižek (2010) we argue that, as a system of social reproduction, capitalism has not only entered its deepest crisis since the Second World War, but that it has reached its inherent historical limit and is in terminal decline. Its demise does not depend on a cataclysmic breach of planetary boundaries or the rise of a political force that would overthrow it, as is presumed across the political spectrum; nor does it in itself usher in a new social order, far from it. Its historic disintegration, which we experience today, is caused by its vanishing capacity to generate new surplus-value (profit) – the life blood and telos of capitalist economies – which condemns ever-larger parts of the world to permanent unproductivity

[2]The term harks back to Keynes (1936: 162), who considered as an important source of economic instability 'the characteristic of human nature that a large proportion of our positive activities depend on spontaneous optimism rather than mathematical expectations'.

('underdevelopment') and a surplus humanity to the fate of drowning in survival ('unemployment').

From two interrelated angles – Marxian and Lacanian – the book lays out what distinguishes the present crisis from its predecessors: the 'Long Depression' of the final quarter of the nineteenth century, the 'Great Depression' in the 1930s and the stagflation crisis of the 1970s. It explains why the current crisis does not simply mark the end of one particular model of growth that will give rise to a new model sooner or later, provided we are smart enough – a ubiquitous expectation elegantly expressed by Anatole Kaletsky's *Capitalism 4.0* (2011) and overwhelmingly shared throughout the political landscape (see e.g. McDonough et al. 2010; Chang 2011; Haug 2012 and Atzmüller et al. 2013). Would a rerun of Keynesian economic policies resolve the crisis, as Joseph Stiglitz (2010), Paul Krugman (2012) and Mark Blyth (2013) believe? Can a new science and technology offensive succeed, as Will Hutton (2012b) and Nicholas Stern (2009b and 2014) suggest, while the gap between work to be had and work to be done is widening before our eyes? What can Marx offer in the face of the momentous failure of Marxism in the twentieth century? Why, in fact, do we refer to the current economic predicament as a 'crisis'? What understanding of this notion is presupposed thereby and what implications does this have for our ability to imagine a non-capitalist future? This book looks at these and other questions through the lens of a Lacano-Marxian critique of the *value-form* as the unconscious matrix of modern society.

In *Capital,* Marx projects a social totality greater than the empirically verifiable world. The object of this representational strategy is an abstract concept which brings into view a *negative objectivity*, i.e. a mysterious set of forces and effects that we can neither see nor touch, but nonetheless know have a constitutive influence over our existence. The concept designed to perform this representational manoeuvre is 'value'. It designates the historically specific *form* our social being assumes in capitalism, which remains intangible while its presence is experienced existentially.

In *Seminars XVI* to *XVIII* (1968–1971) Lacan developed an often overlooked critique of the value-form *sui generis*. Together with the theory of the four discourses (Master, University, Hysteric and Analyst) as articulated in those seminars, Lacan introduced a fifth discourse – the *discourse of the Capitalist* – which builds on the central narrative of the seminars to denounce modernity's blindness to its own generative matrix, namely the incessant 'valorisation of value' promoted by capitalism. Starting from the postulate that the ruse of modernity consists in transforming the unconscious roots of knowledge into a countable entity, Lacan shows how the invisible

mastery of the Capitalist discourse is more pervasive and commanding than any historically antecedent form of authority. And yet, 'wildly clever' as it may be, capitalism is, in Lacan's prescient words, 'headed for a blowout' (Lacan 1972: 48).

The stress on the value-form (social link, unconscious matrix) as a mode of both objectivity and subjectivity brings together the critique of the political economy with the critique of the libidinal economy, a tradition most effectively developed over the last two-and-a-half decades by Žižek (1989, 2009 and 2010: 181–243). Such an approach leads us out of the disciplinary framings of the crisis in economics, business studies or behavioural psychology. It allows us, instead, to take full advantage of the insight that in order to effect change we have to have a grip on both the dull compulsion of the economic and the deep libidinal attraction of the forms of exploitation and domination that have made us who we are. This is not an exercise in economics then, even though we will deal extensively with economic issues. Rather, our approach combines the virtues of ideology critique with those of critical theory. While the former locates the blind spot of contemporary debates on the crisis, tracing the 'real' of the current juncture through a symptomatic reading, the latter explores it through a conceptual register that cuts across disciplinary grids in philosophy and positive science.

Marx and Lacan are no easy bedfellows and we do not attempt some kind of 'shotgun marriage' here, as Peter Gay (1985: xii) dubbed the doomed endeavour of twentieth-century Freudo-Marxism. The different conceptual frameworks are not eclipsed, nor are diverging implications obscured. In this book we develop them as complementary perspectives in the parallactic sense that they illuminate two different modes of appearance of the capitalist matrix, thereby allowing its constitutive distortion and historical limit to emerge more starkly. The argument is structured in five parts.

Chapter 1 traces the roots of the current economic crisis through the prism of Marx's uncanny story of the value-form as that which escapes much contemporary debate on the crisis, but whose very absence throws it out of kilter. We will shed some light on this 'absent cause' through a series of explorations of topical contemporary and historical issues, which demonstrate why the capitalist matrix has asserted itself historically through a social dynamic that is as material and objective as it is directional and irreversible, leading to the dwindling dynamic of capital valorization at the heart of the current crisis.

The second chapter takes a closer look at 'the strange non-death of neoliberalism', to borrow a phrase from Colin Crouch (2011), and the continuing fascination with free-market economics. Against the background

of the unprecedented form of structural violence which capitalism constitutes historically,[3] we will look at the meteoric rise and thumping triumph of *homo economicus* as the subjective incarnation of the value-form, and the attendant belief in the economic and moral superiority of the capitalist form of social reproduction.

Chapters 3 and 4 attempt to delineate the significance that an 'ontology of crisis' might have for the critique of contemporary capitalism. Chapter 3 introduces and develops the theoretical stakes of the argument by focusing on Lacan's discourse theory as articulated in the late 1960s. It claims that the notion of lack plays an ontological role in Lacanian dialectics, and as such provides a uniquely enlightening entry point to develop an investigation of today's capitalist crisis that aims to avoid the 'narcissism of the lost cause' detectable in much of critical theory's work on the subject matter. Chapter 4 expands on the central theoretical tenet of the previous chapter by looking closely at Lacan's discourses of the Master, University and Capitalist – the latter discourse having been briefly and somewhat enigmatically introduced by Lacan in the early 1970s. At the same time, this chapter examines Lacan's understanding of the capitalist valorization of knowledge by verifying its affinity with Marx's theory of value, and develops the outlines of a Lacanian critique of labour with far-reaching political implications.

Finally, in Chapter 5 we consider Giorgio Agamben's messianic approach to today's crisis. We argue that the popularity currently enjoyed by Agamben's thought is deeply symptomatic of the deadlock that typifies contemporary critical theory's relation to the crisis of capitalism. We construct our argument by mapping the distinctive elements of Agamben's philosophy against the previously presented ontology of crisis. Our enquiry leads us to identify two divergent and ultimately irreconcilable critico-philosophical positions which highlight the fundamental political issue relating to how, today, we confront the crisis of capitalism.

The unifying concern underpinning the entire book can be summarized as follows. What we are witnessing today is neither primarily a structural crisis of the postfordist, postmodern or neo-liberal model of capitalism, nor simply a systemic crisis of capitalism in the traditional Marxist sense of an economic system based on capitalist private property, class domination and market anarchy, leading to endemic over-accumulation as well as underconsumption. Rather, what we are experiencing today is in all likelihood the onset of an all-out crisis of the generative matrix of modern society as such. This crisis is not going to free some hitherto restricted substance,

[3]In a recent study, Gary Leech (2014) has shown the extent to which this form of violence constitutes a 'structural genocide'.

such as ‘Life’ or ‘Labour’, for our comforting utopias of a self-transparent life in truth. On the contrary, we are confronted with an ‘ontological break’ or ‘apocalyptic zero point’ in the history of human civilization, as Kurz (2005b: 13) and Žižek (2010: X) have put it. This book is a contribution to the collective efforts to render legible the character of this new epoch at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

1

Collapse without salvation?

Assuming it is out of the question to hang, draw and quarter Sir Fred Goodwin [the former CEO of the Royal Bank of Scotland], pluck out his intestines while they are still warm and wriggling, stuff them into his greedy mouth and then display his severed head on a spike at the Tower of London, could we settle for shooting him instead?

RAWNSLEY 2009

The political economists who pretend to explain the regular spasms of industry and commerce by speculation, resemble the now extinct school of natural philosophers who considered fever as the true cause of all maladies.

MARX 1980 [1857]: 401

Bankomania

'We are what we pretend to be,' as we know from Kurt Vonnegut (1961: 5), and must therefore 'be careful about what we pretend to be'. The delightfully excessive jokes about CEOs, their stupendous bonuses and untold greed, cannot hide the fact that there is a widespread, disconcerting readiness to embrace the fateful tradition of opposing (constructive, manufacturing, hard-working, respectable, *schaffendes*) productive capital with (parasitic, profiteering, interest-bearing, exploitative, *raffendes*) finance capital, with the former representing the 'real economy' while the latter is identified with

capitalism *per se* or bad capitalism, which, in this view, is seen as the cause of economic crises.[1]

Right from the beginning, the most popular reaction to the current crisis has been to blame it on the greed of the bankers and financial speculators, and to call for a more moral form of capitalism which not only puts an end to 'casino banking … murdering honest-to-God commercial banking' but includes the public 'checks and balances that keep capitalism honest' and ensure it 'will be arranged more fairly in future' (Hutton 2008, 2009 and 2010: ix). Business analyst William Keegan expressed the spirit of the imagined new era of honesty and responsibility when he concluded that 'the fact of the matter is that a capitalist economy runs on debt; it is just that banks and consumers need to regain a sense of proportion' (Keegan 2009). Understandable as it is, to blame rapacious CEOs as the central causal agent of the current dilemma is politically misleading and factually wrong.

A brief look at *Capital* is instructive in this context. Right at the beginning, in the preface to volume one, Marx felt obliged to 'prevent possible misunderstandings' of his critique of capitalism by pointing out that, even though he did not 'depict the capitalist and the landowner in rosy colours', his standpoint 'can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them' (Marx 1990: 92). Indeed, the vast majority of 'greedy' managers have acted in conformity with the imperatives of the capitalist system, insofar as their primary responsibility within this system is neither to serve their customers, nor to look after the common good, but

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[1]Without exaggerating the point, it is worth recalling the trajectory of this tradition. When in his infamous 'prophecy speech' to the Reichstag on 30 January 1939, Hitler threatened 'the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe' should 'the international finance-Jewry inside and outside Europe … succeed in plunging the nations into a world war yet again', the reasoning went as follows:

> Europe will not have peace until the Jewish question has been cleared up. … The world has enough space for settlements, but we must once and for all break with the notion that … the Jewish people have been chosen by the dear Lord to be the parasitic beneficiary of the body and the productive work of other peoples. Jewry must adapt itself to respectable constructive work, as other peoples do, or it will sooner or later succumb to a crisis of unimaginable proportions. (Hitler 1939: 741; our trans.)

There are good reasons for Robert Kurz to refer to the ideological opposition between parasitical finance and honest production, which has been emblematic of much left-wing critique of capitalism from its inception to this very day, as 'structural anti-Semitism' (Kurz 1995). For a detailed discussion of this misguided form of '"anti-capitalism" that seeks to overcome the existing social order from a standpoint which actually remains intrinsic to that order', and its deep-structural connection with Nazi-Fascism and the matrix of modern ideology more generally, see Postone (2003: 81–114; qtd 93) and Žižek (2006b: 253–60).

to make profit, and enough of it to stay afloat and keep their shareholders happy. Far from being a pathological preference of the individual entrepreneur, 'the production of surplus-value, or the making of profits, is the absolute law of this mode of production' (Marx 1990: 645). That the bankers were dealing with 'toxic' rather than 'honest' products did not matter much so long as the going was good. On the contrary, their financial wizardry triggered waves of rapture while the social standing of hedge fund managers reached staggering heights. Now that things have turned sour, we may as well skip the ritual lament over the usual suspects – greedy bankers, incompetent government, the idle rich – and turn to the elementary question of why the banks were able to act so 'irresponsibly' in the first place, knowingly dealing with 'toxic assets' from subprime mortgages and collateralized debt obligations to credit default swaps and other 'derivatives'. In fact, why they *had to* act like this.

As we are writing these lines, the Bank of England and the European Central Bank put forward a joint paper, published on 27 May 2014, which proposes to revive the market for asset-backed securities, i.e. the category of assets which had been castigated as 'toxic' because of the part they were playing in triggering the financial collapse in 2008 (BoE and ECB 2014). A week later, when questioned on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, Deputy Governor of the Bank of England Jon Cunliffe acknowledged that the reputation of asset-backed securities has been tarnished by recent events, but insisted at the same time that with the right safeguards in place they would be a useful mechanism for lending.

> Securitisation is a mechanism, it could be exploited, it could be abused. And what happened in the financial crisis, particularly with assets originating in the US, is that it was exploited and abused and it spread risk, the so-called toxic assets, through the system. But in the end securitisation is just a mechanism for banks to make loans, to bundle up those loans and to be able to sell on those loans to other investors who want to be lending to the real economy, to households, to businesses. (BBC Radio 4, *Today* programme, 2 June 2014, 6:15am)

Securitiation in itself then is a neutral instrument which could be put to good or bad use. The aim of the banks' proposal would not be to take the risk out of lending but to make it transparent and easy to understand. As Cunliffe added: 'Some securitisations will be securitisations of high risk lending; there is nothing wrong with that as long as the people who buy that know what they are getting and feel that they are able to manage those risks' (ibid). In other words, 'Securitisation is now back in vogue', as Jennifer Rankin puts it, 'as it is seen as a cheap source of funding when many investors are still struggling

to get credit' (Rankin 2014). The rhetoric of transparency and intelligibility turns the systemic problem of asset-backed securities into one of good policy, sufficient knowledge and proper conduct, while shifting the responsibility for potential failure onto the individual economic actors – you only have yourself to blame!

Neoliberalism was not a mistake. While it did give rise to a regime in which 'finance exploits us all' by 'profiting without producing' (Lapavitsas 2013), it has not unbalanced or distorted an otherwise productive, 'honest-to-God' system. Rather than pathologize the current crisis, naturalize the economic system that gave rise to it and hunt for scapegoats, we have good reasons to look at the neo-liberal turn of the past three-and-a-half decades as a rational response to the historic crisis of industrial capitalism in the 1970s. Deregulation and financialization – the economy's shift in gravity from production to finance – were not simply mistakes that could be reversed, but utilitarian responses to an irreversible profit crunch.

Let us recall the structural crisis of the 1970s. When the Fordist growth model of industrial society hit the buffers, the state-capitalist economies of the Soviet bloc tumbled into a state of collapse, while in the West the reign of Keynesianism ended in stagflation – the double bind of stagnant growth and rising inflation. In either case, the attempt by the state to subsidize the lack of real growth had proven unsustainable. The hour had come for the 'neoliberal revolution'.

In the event, the crusade to subordinate all aspects of life to the imperatives of the corporate bottom line did much to damage the fabric of society, but it could not bring back the growth dynamic of the post-war boom. The growth rates of the OECD economies continued to fall from a buoyant 5.3 per cent per year on average in the 1960s to 3.7 per cent (1970s), 2.8 per cent (1980s) and 2.5 per cent during the 1990s. Furthermore, the deregulation of the labour markets aggravated the problem of declining purchase power, while the ostentatious anti-state fanaticism ruined the public infrastructure required for long-term profitability. Intoxicated by their own ideological trademark belief that money was simply a 'veil over barter' (Say 1816: 22), the class warriors of neoliberalism had merely shifted the debt problem from the state to the financial markets. Two-and-a-half decades of debt-financed growth ensued, based ever more on money without substance. The rest is history.[2]

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[2]As Marx (and Engels) aptly put it: 'The production process appears simply as an unavoidable middle term, a necessary evil for the purpose of money-making. (This explains why all nations characterised by the capitalist mode of production are periodically seized by fits of giddiness in which they try to accomplish the money-making without the mediation of the production process)' (Marx 1992: 137).

When the debt bubble burst in 2008, a nostalgic pining for a return to Keynes led to the oxymoronic hybrid of *neo-liberal Keynesianism* as a last-ditch response. As the bailout and stimulus packages shifted the debt problem back to the state, the crisis of the financial markets morphed into a sovereign debt crisis, only on a much higher level than in the 1970s and with no leeway to repeat the operation of finance-driven growth. In their doomed endeavour to square the circle, policymakers have finally 'run out of policy rabbits to pull out of their hats' (Roubini 2012). We have been living on borrowed time, as Wolfgang Streeck (2014) has put it, and we continue to do so, since the cynically disguised nationalizations of corporate debt have been paid for by state resources that have yet to be contrived. The success of the latter relies on the creation of future surplus-value at a historic magnitude that is most unlikely ever to materialize. Without real growth, however, it is not only that the question of debt sustainability becomes trickier. The ideological covenant of capitalist societies itself is rendered nil and void, as the acceptance of capitalism as a social partnership is inextricably linked to the prospect of a good life.

Sovereign debt

'Even by his own high standards, Nicolas Sarkozy excelled himself,' reported the *Guardian's* European editor, Ian Traynor, on Saturday, 15 May 2010, from Brussels. 'The French president bounded out of the emergency summit of European leaders and onto a specially made-for-TV stage. The tension was palpable, the theatrics mesmerising.' What had happened? When in their emergency meeting on the previous weekend, which was designed to resolve Greece's sovereign debt crisis as the most pressing issue in the unfolding saga of the European sovereign debt crisis, the Eurozone leaders did not seem to get anywhere after their Friday supper, France's head of state finally had enough:

> Sarkozy claimed the political leadership of the 16 members, announced a defining victory against the markets and the 'speculators' wrecking the currency. The metaphors were all martial. Europe was at war. He would not give away his 'lines of defence'. But by the time the markets opened on Monday morning, the enemy would have learned its lessons and beat a retreat. … In the previous hour upstairs at the summit, Sarkozy had thrown a wobbly. 'It was really a drama,' said an experienced European diplomat. 'A very abrupt end to the summit – because Sarkozy said he had had enough and really forced Merkel to face her responsibility.' A European Commission

> official added: 'He was shouting and bawling. The Germans were being very difficult, and not only the Germans. It was a big fight between Sarkozy and Merkel.' … 'Sarkozy went so far as banging his fist on the table and threatening to leave the euro,' an unnamed Zapatero [the then Spanish prime minister] colleague told the paper: 'That obliged Angela Merkel to bend and reach an agreement'. (Traynor 2010: 44)

What an extraordinary drama. Teutonic eagle versus Gallic rooster – have we not known this all along? Yet it was not only the Germans and the French that were at loggerheads, far from it:

> The French had Spain, Italy, Portugal and the European Commission lined up behind them. On the other side stood Germany, ranged alongside the Dutch, the Austrians and the Finns, all quietly hoping Merkel would prevail. The leaders' after-dinner debate signalled that Europe was in the throes of an existential crisis. … 'It was a fundamental discussion about sovereignty, about the role of the member state, about what the EU is for, the role and power of the European Commission', said a second diplomat. Sarkozy claimed the outcome as a famous victory. In fact, he had bought himself some time, with the leaders agreeing to convene an emergency session of the EU's 27 finance ministers the next day to agree the fine print. By 2.15 am on Monday, the deal was done: a €750bn (£639bn) safety net for the single currency, made up of three elements – a fast-track fund run by the European Commission, a much larger system of loans and loan guarantees from the 16 eurozone governments, with the International Monetary Fund putting up one euro for every two from the Europeans. Europe was opting for shock and awe. Repeatedly in the past two weeks, Merkel had declared that 'politics has to reassert primacy over the financial markets'. This was the attempt. (Traynor 2010: 44)

Away with lowly animosities: all for one and one for all, and everyone united in the struggle against plutocracy. Yet there is a lot more to this than meets the timid eye. After all, Sarkozy was by no means the only one to make a mighty stand for sovereignty. The US administration was discontented as well, for old Europe's crisis management had clearly been out of control.

> Joe Biden, the US vice-president, privately told European leaders to get their act together. A few hours before the Sarkozy show on 7 May, Timothy Geithner, the US treasury secretary, pressed European finance ministers for a big decision and promised help from the US Federal Reserve or central bank. Then last Sunday, President Barack Obama went on the phone to

> Sarkozy and Merkel. 'The €750bn fund was the idea of the Americans, who insisted on the need to mobilise massive money to impress the markets and to stop bleeding confidence. That was their concrete message,' said a diplomat. … By early on Monday, the finance ministers were rushing to meet Sarkozy's promise that the huge rescue package would be ready by the times the markets opened in the Far East. They missed the deadline for Australia and New Zealand. Outline agreement had been reached on the European fund of €500bn. But who would control it? The Germans insisted that had to be national governments, not the European commission. They won that argument and Christine Lagarde, the French finance minister, pushed for a rapid conclusion before the Tokyo traders switched on their computer screens. (Traynor 2010: 44)

This, precisely, is what sociologist Bob Jessop calls the weakening of 'time sovereignty' (Jessop 2007: 178ff.). Time sovereignty is the right of national states to have at their disposal 'the time required for considered political decision-making'. It is eroded by the demands and pressures of economic globalization ('fast capitalism'), leading to 'fast policy', i.e. to governments' 'shortening of policy development cycles, fast tracking decision-making, rapid programme rollout, continuing policy experimentation, institutional and policy Darwinism, and relentless revision of guidelines and benchmarks' (Jessop 2007: 191 and 193).

The results of such resolute reassertion of the primacy of politics over the financial markets were staggering indeed. For a couple of days after 'the most momentous weekend in Brussels for years', the euro made a recovery in the markets, only to plummet to 'its lowest point against the dollar in 18 months' before the week was over, with German bankers issuing warnings to the taxpayers of the country that they were not likely to see the money they had lent to Greece ever again (Traynor 2010: 44).

Neither the euro nor Greece have recovered since from the sovereign debt crisis, it might be added, and nationalism is rampant today at levels not seen in Western Europe since the Second World War. As a matter of fact, the 'Greek crisis' was only the beginning. After Greece came Portugal and Ireland. In June 2012, then, it was the turn of the Spanish state to ask for €100 billion from the European Financial Stability Facility to prevent the collapse of its banking system. The effectiveness of crisis management could by now be measured in hours. The mild euphoria displayed by the financial markets after the bailout had been announced lasted literally only a few hours, while Spain's unsustainable borrowing costs on the capital markets, which were meant to be lowered by the injection of €100 billion, failed to fall. On the contrary, Spain's bond yields would rise further still.

What, then, is 'sovereign' about 'sovereign debt'? The third edition of the Oxford *Dictionary of Economics* from 2009 clarifies for us what sovereign debt is, defining it as the 'debt of the government of independent countries' (Black et al. 2009: 422). So far so good. But what are they independent of? Of one another, like Greece of Germany or Germany of Greece? Not likely. Of the financial markets? The rapid evaporation of 'time sovereignty' repudiates this as well. What, then, is the meaning of 'sovereign' in the term 'sovereign debt'? Here is the answer:

> With the debt of an individual or corporation, it is generally possible to use legal procedures compelling them to pay the interest and redemption payments due, to hand their assets over to the creditor if they do not pay. Such legal sanctions are not available against governments, unless they choose to submit voluntarily to legal procedures. There is thus the risk that sovereign debt may be subject to repudiation, interest reductions, or compulsory rescheduling. (Black et al. 2009: 422)

So there are after all solid reasons to speak of sovereignty and independence, if only in the cynical sense that, as debtors, national states are legally unaccountable to their creditors unless they choose otherwise. Looking at it from this angle makes lending money to governments seem a rather tricky proposition, as 'the only protection for the creditors of sovereign debtors is the borrowers' concern about loss of reputation: default makes it difficult or expensive for them to borrow in the future' (Black et al. 2009: 422). In short, it is a matter of economic confidence in the credibility of governments and states.

What distinguishes the current crisis from its predecessors?

Without question, the voyeuristic obsession with the political theatre and the idiosyncrasies of its cast – from Berlusconi and Merkel to Obama and Putin – only serves to fudge the nature of the relationship between national states and 'the economy'. The state is in no way a sovereign actor *vis-à-vis* the mode of production on which it rests. So when we call for the primacy of politics over financial markets and political leadership in tackling the crisis, it is worth recalling that the capitalist state is not some kind of guardian angel but rather an element within the circuit of capital. In its material capacity to act (by raising taxes, for example, or borrowing money) it is not only at the mercy

of rating agencies and financial markets, as we are reminded every day, but is sustained on the drip of the economy of capital valorization (the expanded reproduction of the economy through the competitive extraction of money profit) – the basis for enduring growth as we know it.

There is another sense of *déjà vu* in that each and every mayhem in the markets provokes renewed talk about the system being ready to explode at any moment, as well as the urgent need for reform, as was the case in the wake of Lehman Brothers' demise in September 2008. The word 'system' stands here for the institutional framework and management of the (global) economy. To be sure, there is plenty of room to improve the architecture of the financial and monetary system, the trading system and the system of global governance in order to tackle the endemic wealth and income inequality, as Joseph Stiglitz and other leading Keynesians have demanded for years (e.g. Stiglitz et al. 2010 and Piketty 2014). But this will do little to address the underlying crisis, which is a crisis of capital valorization itself.

What then distinguishes the current crisis from its predecessors? To answer the question, we need to let go of the postmodern illusion of an infinitely malleable reality. By producing goods and services the way it does, capitalism creates a historical dynamic which is as material and objective as it is directional and irreversible. While we are desperate for the light at the end of the tunnel to emerge as usual, there is no reason to believe that capitalism is endowed with an enigmatic capacity for eternal self-renewal. The present crisis does not simply spell the end of one specific model of capital accumulation ('growth') that will give rise to a new one sooner or later, provided we are smart enough. Put differently, the crisis is not merely cyclical, structural or limited to finance, nor is it simply down to factors such as over-accumulation, underconsumption or global imbalances.

Building on Ernest Mandel's analysis of the 'specific nature of the third technological revolution' (Mandel 1975: 184ff.), Robert Kurz has blazed the trail for a critical understanding of the historical peculiarity of the current economic crisis, which he explored in a series of incisive analyses against the background of the history of modernization over the past 250 years (Kurz 1991, 1999, 2005a and 2012). What sets the current crisis apart is the unprecedented scale at which human labour power – the only source of new surplus-value and, by implication, growth – is made redundant by scientific rationalization. Whenever we get cash from a cash machine rather than a teller or use the automated checkout to pay for our daily shopping, we see the evidence of technology displacing human labour. This has long been anticipated from a variety of angles by luminaries as diverse as Norbert Wiener (1948: 59ff.) and Hannah Arendt (1958: 4–5). Three decades ago, economist Wassily Leontief wrote that the 'role of humans as the most important factor of production

is bound to diminish – in the same way that the role of horses in agricultural production was first diminished and then eliminated by the introduction of tractors' (Leontief 1983: 3–4). This has come true in the form of digital automation and jobless recoveries. The engine of the 'beautiful machine' – the business corporation – cannot be fazed by this calamity. Engaged in the civil war of competition, it must obey the law of acceleration to survive. With the rise of the knowledge economy we have reached the historical tipping point: for the first time more labour is made superfluous than can be remobilized through market expansion strategies (Kurz 2012: 296; see also M. Smith 2010: 1–23).

In other words, melting away like the Greenland ice sheet, the social substance of capital – labour – cannot acquire a new lease of life. This spells doom for a society in which the great majority can only access the means of existence through wage labour. The economic policy response to this predicament was the engineering of growth without substance, i.e. the mere simulation of growth, which hit the buffers in 2008. What should have been a blessing has turned into a nightmare: the capital valorization economy cannot return the productivity gains engendered by technological automation back to us as free disposable time we could put to good use while working fewer hours. Quite the contrary, today's much-evoked 'Third Industrial Revolution' (Rifkin 2011 and The Economist 2012) leads to social Darwinism 24/7 and the savage barbarization of our public and private lives ('austerity').

Walter Benjamin considered his 1921 fragment *Capitalism as Religion* untimely. His bleak prophecy remained unfinished and he never published it. However, future generations staring ruin in the face would be able to recognize the self-destructive imperative of the capitalist cult. Let us hope he was right. While the economic crystal ball has yet to be invented, this much is clear: the current crisis will force us to confront the political choice that defines the twenty-first century. Either we come up with an alternative to the dynamic of the capital valorization machine before it is too late, or the unfolding socioecological catastrophe will run its course. The uncanny story of the grow-or-die society is coming to an end one way or the other.

The required alternative, however, is not 'prosperity without growth' (Jackson 2009) or 'degrowth economics' (Latouche 2009 and Ellwood 2014).[3] The notion of a capitalism without surplus-value or growth imperative is a red herring. Not only is it hopelessly nostalgic. It also rests on the implicit belief that

[3]The current debate on degrowth economics points to a long tradition (e.g. Georgescu-Roegen 1971 and H. E. Daly 1977 and 1996) which can be traced back to John Stuart Mill's exploration of the 'stationary state' in his 1848 classic *Principles of Political Economy* (Mill 1904: 452–5). See also Kallis (2011), Eisenstein (2011) and 'Degrowth Declaration Barcelona' (2010).

with globalized capitalism we encounter only incontrovertible *external* 'limits to growth', from climate change to finite energy and freshwater resources, whereas there are in principle no insurmountable *internal* limitations to the process of capital valorization which could continue *ad infinitum* if only it were managed properly. This belief is obsolete. In the course of the last half-century, we have reached and partly crossed *both* 'the boundaries of the "planetary playing field" for humanity', as the new science of planetary boundaries forcefully demonstrates (Resilience Alliance 2009 and Cho 2011),[4] *and* the boundaries of the economic playing field, as it were, of capitalism as a historical form of social reproduction. Though the former problematic cannot be reduced to the latter, it cannot be addressed without it either. What is therefore needed at this juncture is no longer alternative capitalism, such as eco- or 'natural capitalism' (Hawken et al. 2010; Heinberg 2011; d'Humières 2010 and Sainsbury 2013), but an alternative to capitalism itself.

Between monetary hygiene and Keynesian hydraulics: The value of Marx

This, of course, is not the gospel according to mainstream economics which identifies the social either with the market or with the state. Like the Newtonian clockwork universe, wound up by the watchmaker-God, the liberal notion of the market as a self-regulating force of nature sees the market as a gigantic machine of impersonal forces which is imbued with potential energy that will be running it *ad infinitum*. Like in the Newtonian universe, the laws of the market universe require occasional intercession, notably in times of crisis. The corrective surgery is carried out by the state. The surgeon is expected to withdraw again once the transformation of the patient's potential energy into kinetic energy is resumed. What, though, if that does not happen?

Marx had predicted such a historical impasse where the economic expansion required to exit the state of recession and prevent permanent contraction and decline was no longer forthcoming. He anticipated the arrival of a constellation where entire regions would go out of business because the capital valorization economy could no longer generate enough surplus-value due to its inherent compulsion to displace human labour with cost-cutting

[4]It distinguishes nine planetary boundaries which define humanity's safe operating space: climate change, changes to the global nitrogen cycle, rate for biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone, global freshwater use, land system change, chemical pollution and atmospheric aerosol loading. It estimates that we have already transgressed the first three of these boundaries and are likely to be on our way towards crossing others (Resilience Alliance 2009 and Cho 2011).

technologies. After all, within the process of capital valorization human labour has a dual character. On the one hand, it is a pesky cost factor which has to be reduced come what may. On the other hand, human labour is the social value-substance of capital, its living state of aggregation as it were. The exploitation of the human capacity to work is the only source of surplus-value and, by implication, sustainable capital accumulation and profit. As such, labour is indispensable for a society whose material reproduction is contingent on the competitive extraction of money profit. In *Capital,* Marx considered the historical breakdown of capital accumulation as an abstract possibility, and in the *Grundrisse* as an inevitable consequence of the development of human productivity within the parameters of capitalist economies (Marx 1990, 1992 and 1993: 692ff.).

If we follow Marx's reasoning, what would happen in such a scenario? Most notably, the relative devalorization of the value-substance of capital (a secular process that typified the history of capitalism throughout the twentieth century and manifested itself in the establishment and collapse of the Bretton Woods system) would turn into an absolute desubstantialization of capital accumulation and the value-form of social wealth itself (ideologically reflected by the postmodern belief in 'fiat money' and 'finance driven growth'). With the ever-tightening noose of the value-form around their necks, capitalist societies would be confronted with the inconceivable dilemma of rampant mass impoverishment in the face of a capacity for wealth creation that has never been greater in human history.

This, however, is exactly what we are experiencing in the current crisis. Triggered historically by the microelectronic revolution since the 1970s, the current crisis is not simply an expression of a sharp increase in the relative tendency of the rate of profit to fall, as theorized by Marx in volume three of *Capital* (Marx 1991: 315–75). Rather, it is a manifestation of the momentous fall in the absolute mass of profit, as anticipated in the 'machine fragment' in the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1993: 690–712). Put differently, the present crisis gives us an indication of the extent to which the compensatory mechanism of external and internal economic expansion, which in previous crises prevented the relative fall in the rate of profit from turning *irrevocably* into an absolute fall in the mass of profit, has ground to a halt (see Kurz 1999: 782ff. and 2012: 274ff.). As a result, the creation of 'jobs' and by implication livelihoods, let alone the maintenance of acquired living standards, has become 'unaffordable' – a stark reminder that the right to exist under global capitalism hinges for the vast majority on the dubious fortune of being utilized on profitable terms.

Here is an example of the practical implications of this. A large-scale study of the finances of employed households in the United Kingdom, conducted by the think tank *Experian Public Sector*, found out that in 2012 nearly 'seven

million working-age adults are living in extreme financial stress, one small push from penury, despite being in employment and largely independent of state support'. They have only 'little or no savings, nor equity in their homes, and struggle at the end of each month to feed themselves and their children adequately' (Hill 2012). Bruno Rost, head of the think tank, notes laconically: 'These are the new working class – except the work they do no longer pays' (qtd in Hill 2012). To put some figures on this, research from the leading accountancy firm *KPMG* into the extent of sub-living wage employment shows that in October 2012 some 4.82 million UK workers were paid less than the living wage. The latter, which stood at the time at £8.30 per hour in London and at £7.20 in the rest of the United Kingdom, is a voluntary pay rate meant to allow its recipients to afford a basic standard of living. In other words, in the country with the seventh largest national economy in the world, measured by nominal GDP, and the eighth largest if measured by purchase power, almost one in five workers struggled on wages which did not allow for a basic standard of living (KPMG 2012). If we relate this figure to

- the official unemployment rate of 7.9 per cent of the economically active population, as published by the *Office for National Statistics* for June to August 2012 (2.53 million people overall, which represents an increase of 883,000 since the summer of 2007), and consider both against the backdrop of,
- the economic inactivity rate of 22.5 per cent for those aged from 16 to 64 during the same period (i.e. 9.04 million economically inactive people in this age bracket),
- the UK employment rate from June to August 2012 of 71.3 per cent, i.e. the fact that 28.7 per cent of people from 16 to 64 were for one reason or another not in employment at a time when ever fewer households can choose to live on one income alone,
- and the fact that of the 29.59 million employed people (the figure includes the 4.20 million people in self-employment and other employment groups), 8.13 million were in part-time employment during the summer of 2012 (2.14 million men and 5.99 million women, with an overall increase of 724,000 compared to summer 2007), at a time when part-time employment poses not only an acute risk of redundancy but is increasingly linked to old-age poverty due to inadequate pension provisions (all figures from ONS 2012: 1, 2, 5, 35), we get a rough picture of the dimension of the problem in Britain.

This is of course not a *British* problem. Rather, it is endemic to all OECD countries which, since the beginning of the crisis in 2008, have been increasingly pressurized by the historical consequences of total capitalism (see e.g. Therborn 2013: 101–50 and Stuckler and Basu 2013: 57–94). Is it not remarkable that, after 200 years of unprecedented productivity gains, the immense time-saving and wealth-creating potential of modern societies cannot but register negatively in the forms of under- and unemployment? How, indeed, is it possible that in the twenty-first century we witness the return of mass poverty in the traditional centres of capitalism under the slogan that we cannot 'afford' otherwise?

John Maynard Keynes, the greatest economist of the twentieth century, was acutely aware of the 'new disease … of technological unemployment'. But he considered it 'only a temporary phase of maladjustment', while in the long run the 'strenuous purposeful money-makers' would 'carry us all along with them' into an 'age of leisure and of abundance', where we would be able to 'spread the bread thin on the butter – to make what work is still to be done to be as widely shared as possible', with 'fifteen-hour weeks …, for three hours a day is quite enough to satisfy the old Adam in most of us!'. The only problem he could foresee was a cultural one, namely 'how to use [the] freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for [us], to live wisely, agreeably and well' (Keynes 1930: 364, 367ff.).[5]

Keynes could not see that at the core of capitalist societies there is an intracivilizatory barbarism at work, a negative force field from which they derive their laws of functioning.[6] Marx's term for this 'occult quality' that has locked modern society into a self-destructive historical trajectory, while simultaneously lending it the appearance of a quasi-natural order, is *capital* or '*self-valorising value*, value that gives birth to value' (Marx 1994: 461). The concept of self-valorizing value brings into focus the generative matrix of modern society constituted by what Marx describes as the system of *abstract labour* – the systemic 'combustion' of human energy within the circuit of work, money and consumption – which forms the enigmatic (abstract but real) social substance of capital. Marx's focus on the value-form of social reproduction

[5]'But beware!', he cautioned, 'The time for all this is not yet. For at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves and to every one that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight' (Keynes 1930: 372). And pretend we did.

[6]Keynes' basic misconception of the implications of disposable time under capitalist conditions is by no means a notion that belongs to a bygone era (see e.g. Coote 2013; Jackson 2013 and Skidelsky 2013).

brings also into view what, with Foucault, we might call the *historical a priori* of capitalist societies, i.e. the network of transcendental categories constituting the social world as we know it. Contrary, then, to the legendary account of *Capital* – according to which Marx set out to defend the dignity of labour as a wealth-creating force throughout the ages and so revealed the secret of its exploitation under capitalism, which explained why labour had to be liberated and the proletariat emancipated *via* an alternative path to modernization – *Capital* should be read today as the uncanny tale of the value-form of social reproduction, a critique of capital as well as labour, relating the story of a compulsive expansion disorder turning cancerous.[7]

It is precisely this story and its leading character, the 'automatic subject', as Marx (1990: 255) calls the socio-pathological dynamic of self-valorizing value, which escapes the 'dismal science' of economics. Mainstream economic thought reflects the current crisis in the 'whodunnit' mode of the investigative journalist-detective, exposing people living beyond their means, bankers rocking the boat and politicians failing to develop a 'shared horizon-scanning capability'.[8] It cannot think – other than in the mode of paranoia – an objective historical dynamic resulting from a transcendental totality which imposes itself on every nook and cranny of society. This is no coincidence.

Dominated for more than a century by marginal utility theory with its purely subjective notion of value, mainstream economic thought identifies value with price and derives the notion of price, in turn, from the subjective utility calculus of the market actors. Strictly speaking, neither neo-Keynesianism nor neoliberalism intends to explain what constitutes capitalism any longer. While the former at least retains the notion that 'a country is not a company' (Krugman 2009), the latter has increasingly confined its academic business to offering mathematical representations which optimize the reasoning of market participants (governments included). It is by no means an accident, but rather a hallmark of the deepening intellectual surrender accompanying the crisis, how, over the last three decades, the dismaying inability to conceptualize the social totality has been masked by a feverish mathematization of economic processes. This should not come as a surprise to us. Historically, *homo economicus* saw the light of day not only as a cynical 'realist' driven by perceived self-interest. From the very beginning, he was also afflicted with blindness towards sociality as a whole, a misfortune – as we will see in Chapter 2 – which was bound to turn him into a veritable sociopath.

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[7]To be clear, Marx was himself in two minds about which story to tell. The 'legendary account of *Capital*' was not a misunderstanding but a historical reading rooted in an era when capitalism was an expanding economic system.

[8]As the open letter from 22 June 2009 by leading British economists to the Queen put it (Besley and Hennessy 2009). We will take a closer at the letter in Chapter 2.

While the public debate between neoliberalism and neo-Keynesianism is in full swing, it has not gone unnoticed in either camp that the choice between 'austerity' and 'growth' is in reality a choice between suffocating and drowning. There is also a growing recognition that the current crisis might not be yet another Schumpeterian event of 'creative destruction' in which the foundations for new thrusts of economic expansion are being laid (Schumpeter 1942: 71ff.). Is not the ubiquitous reluctance of policymakers to allow the finance and sovereign debt bubbles to burst, i.e. the destruction of 'bad assets' to run its course as a prerequisite for productive investment and renewed growth, a telltale sign of the widespread premonition that the days of 'creative destructions' might be numbered and that 'scorched earth' could be the more apt metaphor for economic crisis in the twenty-first century?

Are we growing yet?

But then, the store of illusions is inexhaustible when social formations fall. Jared Diamond has shown how historical societies like the Maya and Viking Greenland collapsed. What they had in common was that at the very moment when the insight arose that their conditions of existence had become precarious, they began to intensify all those strategies and practices which until then had appeared successful. They continued to operate on the basis of past experience and practical reason, while their conditions of existence had fundamentally changed (Diamond 2006). Similarly, today, while the neo-liberal and neo-Keynesian cards have both been played to devastating consequences, there persists the unshakeable belief that a new science and technology offensive would get us out of jail, that 'growth in Britain and the west will return when that combination of innovation and good capitalism is rekindled' (Hutton 2012b); in fact, that it would allow us to hit several birds with one stone.

Few have written about this as authoritatively as Nicholas Stern, the former chief economist of the World Bank, author of the influential *Stern-Report* on the economics of climate change (Stern 2007) and current chair of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the London School of Economics. In *The Global Deal*, he offers an accessible 'blueprint' of 'how to manage climate change whilst creating a new era of growth and prosperity' (Stern 2009a: 7), a green new deal which, since the outbreak of the economic crisis, he has further elaborated in a series of papers explaining the link between climate change, world poverty and economic recession. While the way we act on climate change and poverty 'will define our generation', Stern argues, the current recession, severe and protracted as

it may be, constitutes a 'short-term crisis' that has to be overcome within the parameters of a strategic response to these two defining challenges of the twenty-first century. What is more,

> the financial and economic crisis brings the critical opportunity and the requirement to find a driver of long-term sustainable economic growth to lead us out of this crisis: we do not want again to sow the seeds of the next bubble as we emerge from the crash of the last. (Stern 2009b: 9)

With reference to the 'US$2 trillion global fiscal stimulus for 2009/10', Stern emphasizes how a worldwide stimulus,

> if implemented with a long-term vision, offers the chance to invest in new technologies and investments for low-carbon growth. In the next few years we can invest in new patterns of growth that can transform our economies and societies, in much the same way as the railways, electricity, the motor car and IT did in earlier eras. (Stern 2009b: 9)

Provided the 'green component of the world stimulus' would be sufficiently large, i.e. 'around 20% of the global package',

> this could enable us to grow out of this recession in a way that both reduces the risks for our planet and sparks off a wave of new technologies which will create 2 or 3 decades of strong growth and a more secure, cleaner and more attractive economy for all of us'. (Stern 2009b: 9; see also Stern 2009a: 195)

To be clear, the selected passages highlight what has been indicative of a broader debate on green capitalism (see e.g. Jaeger et al. 2011 and OECD 2011). They do not do justice to the complexity of Stern's argument. In the face of unreconstructed climate change deniers like Stanley Feldman, Nigel Lawson and Ian Plimer, we could not agree more with the urgency of his call that 'climate change is here now' and requires joined-up and decisive action (Stern 2014).

However, the underlying assumption that a new generation of green technologies would enable new patterns of growth that could transform our societies in the same way as railways, electricity, the automobile and information technology did in the past, is historically unfounded. While it might be energizing and politically expedient to suggest that 'low-carbon technologies can open up new sources of growth and jobs' (Stern 2009b: 5) – a belief echoed by green-minded policymakers throughout the world – they

cannot do either. Whereas railroading, electricity and the Fordist motor car exerted a dynamizing effect on growth and employment in the nineteenth and lengthy spells of the twentieth century, this cannot be repeated historically. The impact of ICT and especially the microchip computer, which inaugurated the post-industrial era, has been fundamentally different. The unprecedented rationalization potentials of the digital revolution were not only a central factor in the economic breakdown of the state-capitalist labour regimes of the Soviet bloc but also the technological driver of the neo-liberal turn during the 1980s, the class war against the working classes and the attendant virtual escapism into simulated growth, which have led us to where we are today.[9]

Whatever we might think of the nature and effectiveness of 'good capitalism' or 'sustainable growth', capitalism cannot return to a technological infrastructure with labour-intensive production lines and full employment. As long as we are stuck with a regime of social reproduction based on solipsistic business enterprises producing for anonymous markets and the extraction of human labour, neither the technological blind flight nor its social (unemployment and poverty) and economic consequences (profit squeeze and economic contraction) can be stopped. With each and every technological innovation we will continue remorselessly to saw away at the branch on which we sit.

But is this not some kind of brute economic determinism which makes a mockery of human creativity and free will? Yes it is. The brutishness, however, lies not in the critique but in its object. We live in a world of globalized economic compulsions, the most insidious of which is the compulsion for human beings to turn themselves into combustion engines of human energy that can be offered for hire, a fate that can only be borne if it is elevated to a moral good and aspirational way of life.

Besides, the plausibility of the belief that technological innovation would be the driver of long-term sustainable growth that would lead us out of the current economic crisis, rests on three problematic assumptions: first, that economics would be about the production and distribution of goods and services in the face of scarcity of resources, as every economics textbook from Samuelson (1976: 3, 18) to Krugman and Wells (2009: 6) explains. However, within the overwhelming majority of contemporary economies – if they are indeed the subject of economics – the production and distribution of utility values like

[9]Will Hutton, one of Britain's leading Keynesian economists, overlooks the crucial difference as well: 'It is the great general purpose technologies (GPTs) – the steam engine, the aeroplane and the computer – that transformed our lives and economies. … In the 1930s, evolving GPTs helped drive economic recovery, aided by a capitalism that had been reformed after the excesses of the 1920s. Recovery from today's barely contained depression will require the same alchemy' (Hutton 2012b).

goods and services is little more than an epiphenomenon subordinated to the generation of exchange-value (money) and money profit.[10]

This leads us to a second, related misconception according to which we would live in a market economy, with all its illusions – such as freedom, choice and equal opportunity – attached to it. In reality, the 'market' is a fleeting, if crucial, episode within the economy of capital valorization. It is the sphere in which the surplus-value extracted through the exploitation of wage labour must be turned into money profit to be available for reinvestment. While the notion of the market economy affords us the illusion of historical timelessness (circularity, eternal return), the capital valorization process is characterized by a historical dynamic which does not 'repeat' itself. The structural crises of capital valorization are only superficially expressions of the ever same ('Minsky moment', 'overproduction' and 'underconsumption', 'market adjustment'). While historically they might well have wiped the slate clean periodically and temporarily, they did so on an ever-increasing level of productivity, which, in turn, changed each time the historical conditions of capital valorization fundamentally and irrevocably.

Third, the notion that technological innovation could be the catalyst for sustainable growth that would lead us out of the current crisis conflates the drivers of business success with the drivers of macroeconomic prosperity. Indeed, from the viewpoint of the business enterprise, technological innovation and rationalization are the drivers of profitability and economic expansion. From the viewpoint of the capital valorization economy as a whole, however, this is not necessarily the case. Why? Because surplus-value is a social category, as Marx explains in volume three of *Capital*. Individual businesses do not 'produce' it in the same way as they produce cars, computers or other goods and services. The surplus-value created by individual businesses is not a verifiable property of any single commodity they produce. Rather, it aggregates with the surplus-value created by other businesses to form the total social mass of surplus-value in existence at any given time. The individual commodities represent the 'spectral', socio-symbolic materiality of this social mass of surplus-value. Just how much of this mass an individual business manages to capture, however, depends on its competitiveness in the market place, which in turn is an expression of its technological capacity to cut labour costs – i.e. to eliminate abstract labour and thereby the only source of surplus-value – while forcing others to follow suit. Ironically, then, the businesses, which most successfully harness the spirit of innovation, are the ones that

[10]We will take a closer look at the implications of this self-understanding of economics and the scarcity theorem, which is constitutive of this view, in Chapter 2.

undermine the social mass of surplus-value, and with it the general foundation for long-term sustainable growth, the most.

Given where we stand today, a new science and technology offensive can therefore yield the desired results only for a short period and only for some, while directly or indirectly pulling the plug on all the rest. Those who manage to bolster their technological competitiveness through economic ('common' markets and currency zones) and extra-economic violence (global governance and warfare) will control the remaining isles of prosperity. We can catch a glimpse here of why the forceful plea that 'the developed world must demonstrate for all, especially the developing world, that low-carbon growth is not only possible, but that it can be a productive, efficient and attractive route to overcome world poverty', that 'it is indeed the only sustainable route' (Stern 2009b: 8), might send shivers down the spine of many.

Though Marx did not foresee the large-scale financialization of capitalist economies during the twentieth century and the concomitant devaluation of the money-medium, his concept of 'fictitious capital' goes a long way in explaining what is happening today. It expresses very well the accumulation of capital without substance that typifies the crisis of contemporary capitalism and the remedies pursued so far. It captures the essence of all fetishistic illusions, namely that capital can be valorized without the hassle (or moral outrage – take your pick) of exploiting wage labour. In other words, that capital does have a life beyond labour. Money-begetting-money is the dream scenario of capitalist utopia. Of course, what we witness today is the practical proof of its impossibility. If, however, we live in a world where fictitious capital has come to dominate the process of capital valorization – not temporarily and by accident but irreversibly and by necessity – where capital accumulation is to an overwhelming extent already fictitious (i.e. by no means 'imagined', but insubstantial), why should we continue to use the economic extraction of money profit as the yardstick for what we consider 'efficient', 'realistic' and 'affordable'? To question the notions of financial affordability, economic efficiency and fiscal realism is far more than a hysterical gesture. It is a precondition for transcending the logic of mere crisis management.

Reloading Marx?

Like Jason Barker (2011), Terry Eagleton (2011), Benjamin Kunkel (2014) and many others in recent years, we make a case here for a Marxian critique of capitalism. However, a note of caution is required before we move on. Marx's work is ambiguous and Janus-faced, split as it is between liberal modernization theory and radical critique. What is more, the political history

of the Marxist movement thwarts forever any sleek return to Marx. After all, Marxism did not become an influential political force in the twentieth century because the *Communist Manifesto,* or *Capital* for that matter, was uniquely plausible and persuasive, but first and foremost because it was upheld by an indomitable political machine. Its temporary hegemony among emancipatory movements rested on its institutional anchoring within the labour movement and its political organizations, rather than on its intellectual potency.

With the decline of industrial capitalism in East and West, labour movement Marxism, as the most powerful political incarnation of Marxism, has ceased to exist as a historical force. While its corpse keeps battling on, this amounts to little more than last-ditch skirmishes of identity politics. This is no coincidence. Labour movement Marxism has always been a champion of identity politics. Its chief ambition was to gain due recognition for labour, which it perceived transhistorically as the 'prime basic condition for all human existence' (Engels 1876: 452) without which social life would grind to a halt. The political task was to secure a position for the working classes that would adequately reflect the central wealth-creating role labour played in society. On closer inspection, however, this 'society' invariably turned out to be founded on the holy trinity of work, money and consumption. As such, labour movement Marxism was always part and parcel of the dynamics of capitalism as a mode of production and sociopolitical arrangement. While it expressed the really existing demands of the wage-labouring masses for equality of opportunities, distributive justice and social recognition, and while this made good political sense as long as capitalism was a developing and expanding system which was absorbing more labour than it ejected, and where tomorrow's cake could be expected to be larger than today's, with the onset of the terminal crisis of capital valorization we experience today the time of working-class identity politics has come to an end. Identity politics has lost its emancipatory potential once and for all.[11]

If, however, 'labour' is no longer a marker for the axis along which emancipatory politics could be played out, 'Marxism' has also ceased to be a marker for emancipatory thought *per se*. Any return to Marx has to earn its credentials anew. It cannot settle for a partial, nostalgic critique of capitalism (neoliberalism, globalization, corporate and finance capitalism, market anarchy) any longer but must seize those uncanny aspects of Marx's

[11]Labour movement Marxism enjoys a vigorous afterlife not only in contemporary neo- and post-Marxist theory (see e.g. Hardt and Negri 2009) but also in other serious left-wing attempts to overcome the current crisis in a way that protects workers' interests and livelihoods, such as in Ken Loach's recent film *The Spirit of 1945* (2013) which, together with a good dose of working class nostalgia, revives all the illusions of the Keynesian left discussed above (see also Feldner 2011).

work which challenge the very matrix that constitutes capitalism as a transcendental, negative totality ('labour, 'money', the 'market', 'competition', the 'state'). All attempts to 'positivize' the capitalist matrix, i.e. to put it to good use, whether in part (on behalf of identity politics and distributive justice) or in total (in the name of a green-socialist market economy or 'responsible capitalism'), are destined to contribute one way or another to the authoritarian crisis management regimes which are rapidly emerging – under the flag of a growth strategy as a unifying national project for example.

'Labour' or 'work', to use the contemporary term, is no doubt the most deceptive element of the capitalist matrix. As an ethical imperative, economic compulsion and the social substance of capital, it has pervaded all areas of life and, in the event, became indistinguishable from 'purposeful activity', 'creative effort' and acts of 'production' more generally. It clearly is a false friend. As a universalized social abstraction – the expenditure of human energy that is 'measureable, quantifiable and detachable' from the people who 'provide' it in exchange for money (Gorz 2005: 54) – the regime of labour emerged historically from the inaugural scene of capitalism, the original accumulation by expropriation ('primitive accumulation'), which forcibly imposed it on an ever-increasing number of people as the only way to make a living. However, if the history of the capital valorization economy began with the 'liberation' of countless people from their means of production and existence, thereby forcing the character mask of 'worker' on them, it is now 'liberating' the workers from the only activity left to them to earn their crust, leaving behind not only 'a society of laborers without labor' (Arendt 1958: 5) but also of capitalists without capital.

Knowingly or unwittingly, today's champions of 'work', who continue to see a work-based society as the only possible society, support the current crisis management and the apartheid regime it has in store for us. It is worth noting that, in its own distinctive way, the joint venture of neo-liberal Keynesianism has been busy abolishing wage labour for quite some time: by abolishing wages while continuing the regime of work. If at the present historical juncture a politics of 'jobs' ('jobs for all', put-people-back-to-work schemes) is already hopelessly anachronistic, it will soon become reactionary in the extreme. As Jean-Marie Vincent (1991), Robert Kurz (1991, 2012) and Moishe Postone (1993: 4ff. and 2012) never tired to stress: as the flipside of capital, labour must be turned from a privileged standpoint into an object of the critique of capitalism. It cannot be liberated from the constraints of capital. Instead, the regime of 'work' and 'jobs' must be abandoned.

The final word on this, however, belongs to Marx or, more accurately, to the part of Marx that deserves to be critically reloaded:

> 'Labour' by its very nature is an unfree, unhuman, unsocial activity, determined by private property and creating private property. Hence the abolition of private property will become a reality only when it is conceived as the abolition of 'labour'. (Marx 1975: 277)

This leads us to one of the most penetrating criticisms of modern, capitalist rationality: Jacques Lacan's critique of 'work'. But before turning to Lacan, we want to take a closer look at the continuing fascination with free-market economics and its underlying, peculiarly misanthropic, anthropology.

2

Homo economicus: Greenspan's misanthropy in context

When Your Majesty visited the London School of Economics last November, you quite rightly asked: why had nobody noticed that the credit crunch was on its way? The British Academy convened a forum on 17 June 2009 to debate your question, with contributions from a range of experts from business, the City, its regulators, academia, and government. This letter summarises the views of the participants and the factors that they cited in our discussion, and we hope that it offers an answer to your question.

BESLEY and HENNESSY 2009

The Queen had to wait for eight months but eventually received an answer to the question she had posed on 5 November 2008, at the height of the post-Lehman banking crisis. The letter was signed by LSE professor Tim Besley, who at the time was a member of the Bank of England's monetary policy committee, and the historian of government Peter Hennessy. It set out in layman's language how the crash happened and why nobody saw it coming. So where was the problem?

> People trusted the banks whose boards and senior executives were packed with globally recruited talent and their non-executive directors included those with proven track records in public life. Nobody wanted to believe that their judgement could be faulty or that they were unable competently to scrutinise the risks in the organisations that they managed. A generation

> of bankers and financiers deceived themselves and those who thought that they were the pace-making engineers of advanced economies. All this exposed the difficulties of slowing the progression of such developments in the presence of a general 'feel-good' factor. Households benefited from low unemployment, cheap consumer goods and ready credit. Businesses benefited from lower borrowing costs. Bankers were earning bumper bonuses and expanding their business around the world. The government benefited from high tax revenues enabling them to increase public spending on schools and hospitals. This was bound to create a psychology of denial. It was a cycle fuelled, in significant measure, not by virtue but by delusion. (Besley and Hennessy 2009)

It is not reported whether the Queen raised any further questions while opening the £71 million New Academic Building which houses the new Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment.[1] But it is conceivable that at some point in the future a question on climate change might draw a similar response.

Across the Atlantic the MIT economist Simon Johnson, who was chief economist of the International Monetary Fund from March 2007 to August 2008, had a similar confession to make:

> A whole generation of policy makers has been mesmerized by Wall Street, always and utterly convinced that whatever the banks said was true. … Regulators, legislators, and academics almost all assumed that the managers of these banks knew what they were doing. In retrospect, they didn't. AIG's Financial Products division, for instance, made $2.5 billion in pretax profits in 2005, largely by selling underpriced insurance on complex, poorly understood securities. Often described as 'picking up nickels in front of a steamroller', this strategy is profitable in ordinary years, and catastrophic in bad ones. As of last fall, AIG had outstanding insurance on more than $400 billion in securities. To date, the U.S. government, in an effort to rescue the company, has committed about $180 billion in investments and loans to cover losses AIG's sophisticated risk modeling had said were virtually impossible. (Johnson 2009)[2]

What Johnson's admission 'overlooks', as David Graeber (2011: 391) comments wryly, is the possibility that AIG knew full well the implications of their business practices, but could safely ignore them in the knowledge that someone else would pick up the tab eventually.

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[1] http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/studentRecruitment/sturecpdfs/Focus%20Newsletter%201.pdf and http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/granthamInstitute (accessed 28 July 2009).

[2] We owe the hint to Johnson's article to David Graeber (2011: 392).

Former US central banker Alan Greenspan supplied a further turn of the screw by tracing the outbreak of the economic crisis directly to human nature. Speaking to the BBC one year after the collapse of the investment bank Lehman Brothers which had triggered the financial crash in September 2008, the longest-serving chairman of the Federal Reserve (1987–2006) and leading ambassador of the neo-liberal revolution explained that economic crises have various faces. But they all have

> one fundamental source, and that is the unquenchable capability of human beings when confronted with long periods of prosperity to presume that that will continue. And they begin to take speculative excesses with the consequences that have dotted the history of the globe basically since the beginning of the 18th and 19th century. … It's human nature. Unless somebody can find a way to change human nature, we will have more crises. None of them will look like this [one], because no two crises have anything in common except human nature. (Greenspan 2009)

In short, 'stuff happens' as his comrade in arms, the former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, famously retorted when asked how the widespread looting in occupied Iraq had been possible: 'Freedom is untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things' (qtd in Loughlin 2003).

Before his fall from grace, not only Greenspan sounded strikingly different. In a speech at the Stonier Graduate School of Banking, Washington D.C., in June 2006, Ben Bernanke, Greenspan's successor as chairman of the FED, praised how 'banking organizations of all sizes have made substantial strides over the past two decades in their ability to measure and manage risks'. Whereas 'risk-management practices and bank supervision have both evolved over their long histories', it was 'innovations in information technology and in financial markets [that] have caused the pace of change to increase significantly over the past two decades'. He emphasized that it was particularly 'the management of market risk and credit risk' that had 'become increasingly sophisticated' (Bernanke 2006). Robert Lucas, who received the Nobel Prize in economics in 1995, went even further. In his 2003 presidential address to the American Economic Association, he declared that the 'problem of depression prevention has been solved' (Lucas 2003: 5). A typical case of what Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff call the 'this-time-is-different syndrome' (Reinhart and Rogoff 2009: 290ff.).

If ever Greenspan felt some compunction considering the part he had played in what he saw as 'a once in a century type of event' (Greenspan 2009), humble pie did not remain his favourite dish for long. Like other unreconstructed free marketeers, he recovered fairly quickly from the initial shock. Raging against

'anti-capitalist virulence' in the *Financial Times* in January 2012, Greenspan was at his level best again as in the days of old.

> Anti-capitalist virulence appears strongest from those who confuse 'crony capitalism' with free markets. Crony capitalism abounds when government leaders, usually in exchange for political support, routinely bestow favours on private-sector individuals or businesses. That is not capitalism. It is called corruption. The often-assailed greed and avarice associated with capitalism are in fact characteristics of human nature, not of market capitalism, and affect all economic regimes. The legitimate concern of increasing inequality of incomes reflects globalisation and innovation, not capitalism. (Greenspan 2012)

In Churchill mode he added that 'Whatever the imperfections of free-market capitalism, no regime that has been tried as a replacement, from Fabian socialism to Soviet-style communism, has succeeded in meeting the needs of its people' (Greenspan 2012). In other words, while many things are subject to uncertainty and doubt in Greenspan's world, two things are not: the capitalist market economy and human nature. The former offers human civilization a suitably arranged cosmos which we meddle with at our peril; the latter is irredeemably flawed and thus prone to cause disaster at all times. While there is much to be said about Greenspan's distinction between crony capitalism and capitalism proper, in this chapter we want to take a closer look at the unshakeable belief in free-market economics and its underlying, peculiarly misanthropic anthropology, which Greenspan's assessment betrays. Where does this come from?

The obvious answer is of course from Ayn Rand, as Gary Weiss (2012) and George Monbiot (2012) have pointed out. Rand (1902–1985), a native Russian who emigrated to the United States in 1926, developed a political philosophy she dubbed *Objectivism,* which offered a particularly aggressive blueprint for unfettered, 'unregulated' capitalism. It rests on two premises: a) the belief that the pursuit of rational self-interest is the only moral form of existence, and b) the conviction that state government must be restricted to three functions: the army, the police and the courts, while income taxes should be scrapped and along with them practically everything that smacks of welfare state (Weiss 2012: 2–21). 'Objectivists are not "conservatives"', Rand explained:

> We are *radicals for capitalism*. … I want to stress that our primary interest is not politics or economics as such, but '*man's nature and man's relationship to existence*' – and that we advocate capitalism because it is the only system geared to the life of a rational being. (Rand 1967: vii)

What fuelled her interest in the nature of man and the right social order within which they would flourish was '*the clash between capitalism and altruism*' (Rand 1967: viii).

Alan Greenspan has been one of Rand's most devoted followers since the 1950s. He belonged to her inner circle and 'never abandoned her, never doubted her even as others did, no matter how erratic her behaviour', as Weiss (2012: 17) observes. Greenspan himself admitted that it was Rand who convinced him that 'capitalism is not only efficient and practical but also moral' (qtd in Monbiot 2012). In a piece he wrote for *The Objectivist Newsletter* in August 1963 and which was later included in Rand's widely circulating anthology *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (1967), Greenspan roundly rejected the need to regulate businesses, for 'it is precisely the "greed" of the businessman, or, more appropriately, his profit-seeking which is the unexcelled protector of the consumer' (Greenspan 1967: 126). It is for this reason that Greenspan regarded unrestrained capitalism a 'superlatively moral system' which 'holds integrity and trustworthiness as cardinal virtues and makes them pay off in the market place' (Greenspan 1967: 130). No wonder, then, that according to the 'creed of *greedism*' – i.e. the conviction 'that unchecked self-interest furthers the common good', which Greenspan shared with Rand, Milton Friedman and Ronald Reagan – 'the financial markets could do no wrong' (Krugman and Wells 2011). Rand's impact on the evolution of this doctrine over the last half-century can hardly be overestimated. Gary Weiss even suspects that, in the United States, her influence has never been so widespread and profound as it is today in the aftermath of the financial crash of 2008 (Weiss 2012: 2ff.).

And yet, the misanthropic anthropology, which free marketeers like Greenspan share with many of their statist adversaries, has historical roots that reach much further back than Ayn Rand. In fact, the vicious need to monitor and discipline one's fellow human beings in the name of freedom and the common good – which is at once the premise and corollary of Rand's and Greenspan's anthropology[3] – can be traced back to the roots of liberal thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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[3]In this respect, Slavoj Žižek has recently made an interesting remark concerning a hypothetical 'grain of truth' in Rand's 'ridiculously ideological claim' that the only choice is between capitalism and direct relations of domination. In Žižek's typically symptomatic reading, Rand's position implies that 'in the market economy, relations between people can *appear* as relations of mutually recognized freedom and equality: domination is no longer directly enacted and visible as such', but, in Marxian terms, it assumes 'the guise of relations among things' (Žižek 2012: 1004, emphasis added). While there is more than a grain of truth in Žižek's counterintuitive reading of Rand through Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, what we want to stress here is that contemporary capitalism is increasingly embodying *direct* relations of domination.

The anthropological turn

When in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* from 1798, Immanuel Kant castigated the 'stupid mole's eyes of selfishness' characteristic of 'our already corrupted human nature' (Kant 1798: 21),[4] the familiar figure of modern man had been in the making for more than two centuries. At once desiring and calculating, the image of modern man emerged as an integral part of the efforts to conceive of the world of human affairs in terms of regular and law-governed social systems. The latter received their epistemological plausibility from the barnstorming advances in the natural sciences (to use a convenient anachronism), especially in astronomy and physics, which suggested that a social physics might deliver equally convincing results. By the mid-eighteenth century, the search for regular configurations, developmental patterns and laws (secularized rules of divine government) had become a well-established theme in Europe. The *ordre naturel* of the French physiocrats, the *Staatswissenschaften* (sciences of the state) in Prussia and the rise of conjectural history and political economy in Britain are prominent examples of this (see Kondylis 2002 and Rüdiger 2005).

What made it possible for the shifting ground of human affairs – conspicuously flawed as it was by the imponderables of human passion and free will – to be conceived in science-like terms? Were eighteenth-century scholars more astute than their predecessors? Not likely. Three developments are particularly relevant in our context: first, the fundamental levelling of the traditional hierarchy of scholarly knowledge, a process set in motion in the sixteenth century and accelerated during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the two intellectual revolutions known as the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. Second, the challenge to the traditional order of scholarly forms of knowledge was accompanied by an erosion of the plausibility and acceptance of interpretative frameworks associated with Aristotelianism, whose philosophical agenda was eclipsed and in large measure superseded by other types of scientific rationality. Third, the background for the decline of some modes of scientific rationality on the one hand, and the rise of new ones on the other, consisted of broad European changes in attitudes towards knowledge in general and the relations between knowledge and social order in particular. These changes were an integral part of the fundamental transformation of European societies during the century between 1750 and 1850, which gave rise to modern, capitalist economies and has often been

[4]Our translation. In Kant's criticism the mole's eyes of selfishness are expressly 'stupid' [*blöd*] rather than simply 'weak' [*schwach*] as the standard translation suggests.

portrayed in terms of a 'dual revolution'. The industrial revolution, however, was not only accompanied by a revolution in political practices, as embodied in the French Revolution of 1789 and its legacy. The 'dual revolution' was paralleled and reinforced by profound changes in epistemic practices, i.e. practices by which knowledge was secured, assessed and communicated (Wittrock et al. 1998). Three aspects are particularly important here.

Perhaps the single most astonishing feature that a medieval intellectual like Umberto Eco's Franciscan William of Baskerville would have registered in early modern Europe was the revaluation of knowledge produced to achieve practical ends. Broadly speaking, the aspiration to shape society according to rational principles placed intellectual practices increasingly in the service of practical objectives. 'Thinking', Hannah Arendt noted in *The Human Condition*, became 'the handmaiden of doing as it had been the … handmaiden of contemplating divine truth in medieval philosophy'. With the rise of useful or practical knowledge (of trade, for example, or production processes), the contemplation of eternally given truth was to lose its epistemological prerogative. As a result, 'scientific and philosophic truth have parted company' (Arendt 1958: 290, 292).

The belief that knowledge ought to be useful was of course not some free-floating idea. Rather, it was an integral part of the formation of early modern states and the concomitant politics of knowledge. In fact, the practice of government in early modern Europe was increasingly based on the systematic collection of information arranged for practical purposes, such as public finances (*économie politique, kameralnaja nauka*), the mapping of the state territory (cartography), and the welfare and surveillance of the governed (political arithmetic, statistics and *Polizeiwissenschaft*). Not without good reason did Max Weber describe the rise of bureaucracy, one of the key factors in the development of early modern states, as the 'exercise of control on the basis of knowledge' (Weber 1922: 339).

This leads us to the second aspect of the transformation of epistemic practices. The revaluation of useful knowledge was connected with the increasing use of mechanical metaphors for imagining the world. The 'mechanization of the world picture', to use the fitting title of Jan Dijksterhuis' classic, played an important part in the shift away from Aristotelian physics. Construing matter as essentially active and motion as having developmental character, Aristotelian physics ascribed design and purpose to material nature. What is important in our context is that the historically triumphant attempts to establish an alternative theoretical framework, collectively known as mechanical philosophy, modelled nature on the characteristics of a machine. 'Disenchanting the world' (Weber) by construing matter as inert and nature as a causally specifiable machine, mechanical philosophers as different as René

Descartes, Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton were convinced that they had found an intelligible metaphor which made it possible to conceive of nature and its component parts without invoking 'occult forces', such as soul-like properties (animism) and the capacities of purpose and intention (teleology). In fact, it was a widely held belief in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that humans could reliably know only what they had made themselves, either manually or intellectually (see Dear 2001: 80–101 and Shapin 1996: 65–117).

The mechanical metaphor and its attendant conviction that humans could know only what they constructed themselves did not remain restricted to the study of nature. It pervaded all branches of knowledge, as the following passage from Thomas Hobbes exemplifies: 'Geometry therefore is demonstrable, for the lines and figures from which we reason, are drawn and described by ourselves, and civil philosophy is demonstrable, because we make the commonwealth ourselves' (Hobbes 1656: 184).

The epistemological implications of this for the conceivability of a 'science of man' become apparent in Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova* (1744: esp. §331). Expecting secure knowledge exclusively from things that owed their existence to man, the Italian philosopher turned his attention away from the study of nature to history. He reasoned that since it was God who created the natural world, only God could comprehend it. Man himself, however, could expect secure knowledge only from the study of the 'civil world', for the latter was the product of human creativity in the same sense that nature was the creation of God. Although Vico's vision of a new science did not attract much attention at the time, it indicates that, on purely epistemological grounds, the exploration of human affairs could be imagined as a science.

The third aspect that had a profound impact on attitudes to knowledge was the rise of the experiment as a legitimate knowledge-making practice, epitomized in Francis Bacon's dictum of 'putting nature to the question'. The plausibility of the experiment as a knowledge-making activity owed much to the view discussed above that humans could comprehend only what they had made themselves. From the same view the conviction followed that, in order to gain reliable knowledge of things that were not man-made, one had to imitate or reproduce the processes through which these things had come about. Indeed, it is the nature of the experiment that it itself produces the phenomena which are to be observed. 'Give me matter', Kant (1755: xxxiv) exclaimed in his theory of the origin of the universe, 'and I will build a world from it, that is, give me matter and I will show you how a world developed from it.' Kant's words highlight the mélange of making and knowing that was so characteristic of the time. They allow us moreover to catch a glimpse of the awareness that still existed of the link between 'fact' and 'manufacture', two words which were to become near antonyms by the end of the eighteenth

century as 'fact' drifted towards 'datum', i.e. something which is given rather than made.

The critical point here in our context is the belief that lay at the heart of experimental philosophy, and early modern empiricism more generally, namely that proper knowledge was and had to be derived from direct sense experience. This was an assault on yet another pillar of the Aristotelian tradition. Robert Boyle's experimentation with the air pump, which was arguably the most prolific fact-making machine of the era, is emblematic of this attitude. Did Aristotelians fail to grasp the importance of sensory experience? Not at all. They gave, however, a different answer to two interrelated questions. What part can experience play in the constitution of reliable knowledge? And what kind of experience should one seek? Suspicious as it was of the reliability of our sensory experience, the Aristotelian tradition privileged a type of experience that testified to general views of the workings of nature rather than providing the basis for those insights. Experience, while deemed important, was ultimately subordinated to securing an already established knowledge of a general and indubitable nature. In the Baconian tradition of experimental philosophy, by contrast, direct sense experience was to form the foundations of proper scientific knowledge. The purpose of experimentally constituted experience was thus not to illustrate some general point: instead of serving philosophical reasoning, it was to control it.[5]

Yet the experience sought in the experiment was not that of the spontaneous senses of the uninitiated. Experimental philosophers from Christiaan Huygens to Robert Hooke held firmly to the belief that the workings of nature could be fully understood only if the constitution of experience was guided and disciplined by correct rules of method. The 'interrogation' of nature, as it were, was to be carried out 'as if by machinery' (Bacon). To put it another way, the rise of the experiment as an acceptable knowledge-making practice went hand in hand with aspirations to mechanize the production of knowledge itself, i.e. to discipline the procedures of knowledge-making through methodological directions designed to remove or, at least, control the effects of human passion and bias.

The ideal of impartial or impersonal knowledge, and how to achieve it, had been hotly debated throughout the eighteenth century. Codes of impartiality and disinterestedness prevailed in many areas, ranging from legal practices

[5]This type of experience, however, was not to be misconstrued as the mindless collection of data which Bacon likened to the activity of the ant. Rather, it was the result of the combined efforts of both collecting and digesting, as symbolized by the bee. The proposed method of inquiry was therefore inductive and empirically grounded, that is, one was to start out from observational and experimental facts ('particulars') and then rise step by step to causal knowledge and general conclusions.

of testimony evaluation to natural philosophy (see Dear 1992). The rhetoric of perspectival flexibility, i.e. impartiality that rises above all particular viewpoints, was permeating scholarly discourse in fields as diverse as moral philosophy and linguistic theory. Adam Smith, for example, demanded in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that 'the selfish and original passions of human nature' must be transcended and things be viewed 'with the eyes of a third person … who judges with impartiality' (A. Smith 1759: 135). Indeed, transcending individual points of view in deliberation and action appeared to many moral philosophers an important recipe for a well-ordered and harmonious society. Lorraine Daston (1992: 597ff.) has called this attitude to knowledge 'aperspectival objectivity', i.e. the attempt to 'escape from perspective' by eliminating individual and group idiosyncrasies in the name of public knowledge and universal communicability.[6]

It was symptomatic of the epistemological debates in the second half of the eighteenth century that viewpoint and partiality were understood to be inescapable human qualities, i.e. facts of life to be dealt with effectively rather than bemoaned. To try to eliminate the effects of perspectival distortions by calling on the protagonist's moral integrity was, however, increasingly considered inadequate. The emphasis was shifting from moralistic notions of personal impartiality (ethical imperatives) towards a type of aperspectivity and impartiality guaranteed by impersonal rules of method.

Homo economicus

The 'anthropological turn' in early modern Europe, which has found one of its most penetrating depictions in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, manifested itself in many other developments that permeated social life in a number of ways. It led to the rise of the 'life sciences' of anthropology, biology and psychology, as well as a resurgence of vitalism.[7] Around 1750, anthropology, the 'analytic of man' (Foucault 1970: 340), even assumed the

[6]For a recent account of how this 'view from nowhere', as Thomas Nagel (1986) dubbed it, has become an ideological lynchpin of modern society ever since, see Schmecker (2014).

[7]The rise of the 'life sciences' during the second half of the eighteenth century shows the extent to which the 'anthropological turn' included a number of opposite trends. The development of the life sciences was underpinned by a resurgence of notions such as active matter, self-generating motion and purposive development, which regained some of their former currency. 'Organ', 'organism' and 'organization' replaced 'machine', 'mechanism' and 'mechanisation' as lead metaphors in the process. This goes to show that the shift from Aristotelian to experiential idioms, in the sciences as well as in political thought, was neither a clear-cut process nor one that was ever complete. Not only Romanticism, Marx's *Capital*, too, would have been inconceivable otherwise.

role of a lead discipline in various fields of what was to solidify in the shape of the humanities (see Garber 1999).[8]

Two aspects are of particular importance here. First, 'man' had not only taken centre stage but become the point of departure for endeavours to think of society as a coherent, autopoietic system and 'put into motion so beautiful and so orderly a machine' (A. Smith 1759: 167). Second, the human condition 'discovered' in this context was at once a promise and a problem. The early modern forerunners of social systems theory had come to consider 'human nature' simultaneously as agent and affliction of the body politic. The following passage from Hobbes' *De Cive* (1651) illustrates these two aspects:

> Everything is best understood by its constitutive causes. For as in a watch, or some such small engine, the matter, figure, and motion of the wheels cannot well be known, except it be taken insunder and viewed in parts; so to make a more curious search into the rights of states and duties of subjects, it is necessary, I say, not to take them insunder, but yet that they be so considered as if they were dissolved; that is, that we rightly understand what the quality of human nature is, in what matters it is, in what not, fit to make up a civil government, and how men must be agreed amongst themselves that intend to grow up into a well-grounded state. (Hobbes 1651: 98f.)

As far as human nature is concerned, Hobbes was in no two minds 'that the dispositions of men are naturally such, that except they be restrained through fear of some coercive power, every man will distrust and dread each other' (Hobbes 1651: 99). Why? Because, whatever illusions humans may have about themselves and each other, Hobbes reasoned, 'the state of men without civil society, which state we may properly call the state of nature, is nothing else but a mere war of all against all' (Hobbes 1651: 101).

Though Hobbes' account of the human condition was 'a direct product of the intellectual and political strife of the seventeenth century' (Gaskin 2008: xxii), he did not detect anything that in previous centuries had been 'overlooked'. Rather, his intellectual genius consisted in the fact that, as an acribic observer of the social dislocations in seventeenth-century Europe, he

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[8]One of the most striking manifestations of this was the thriving, if short-lived, genre of 'History of Humanity' which construed human civilization as the evolution of humanity in the double sense of the word: as the development of humankind in space and time, on the one hand, and the gradual realization of the potential quality of being humane, on the other. Johann Gottfried Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1782–91) is one of the most prominent examples of this.

was able to anticipate and describe in some detail the solipsistic and cynical market subject that was to emerge from the universal civil war of 'competition'. In other words, what Hobbes adumbrated was not the silhouette of 'human nature', but the newly emerging form of subjectivity that arrived with the historical ascendance of capitalism.[9]

The figure of modern man, as it was shaping up within the discourses of natural law and moral philosophy since the seventeenth century, congealed in the course of the eighteenth century eventually as *homo economicus.* To paraphrase Peter Sloterdijk (2005: 79), the main event of early modern history is not that planet earth was now spinning around the sun, but that money would make the world go round. While the negative anthropology inscribed in the economic universe projected a multilayered creature, seven features are of particular importance in our context.[10]

1. *Homo economicus* cannot be taken for granted any longer as *zôon politikon*. On the contrary, driven by parlous emotions, wants and passions – including formerly deadly sins such as *avaritia* (greed), *invidia* (envy) and *superbia* (hubris) – he is quintessentially 'unsociable' (Kant 1784: 208) if not outright asocial. Indeed, 'the depravity of human nature shows itself without disguise in the unrestrained relations of nations to each other, while in the law-governed civil state much of this is hidden by the check of government' (Kant 1795: 131). By nature ill-suited to life in society, as Hobbes had established, *homo economicus* requires 'a certain beautiful and orderly system' (A. Smith 1759: 166) to flourish, an *ordre naturel* to match the human condition.

2. A prudent politician therefore assumes the worst first, as the physician and moral philosopher Bernhard Mandeville confides in *The Fable of Bees* (1714): good politics must take as its starting point the unbridled passions and vices a human being is capable of. This, however, is by no means bad news for our nascent *homo economicus*, because there is nothing deplorable about 'these Qualifications, which we all pretend to be asham'd of' (Mandeville 1714: 77). On the contrary, those who

> examine into the Nature of Man … may observe, that what renders him a Sociable Animal, consist not in his desire of company, good Nature, Pity,

[9]Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Kant would rearticulate Hobbes' dual vision of 'human nature' as an agent and affliction of the body politic. His famous observation that 'out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made' (Kant 1784: 211) was expressing both an ethical dilemma and a political assignment for the vigilant institutions of the enlightened state, an everlasting conflict as it was at once impossible and necessary to correct the wretched human condition.

[10]In the following we draw on Backhouse (2002), Bockelmann (2004: 344–51), Kondylis (2002), Kurz (1999: 53–120), Milonakis and Fine (2009), Vogl (2008 and 2011: 31–52) and Vovelle (1997).

> Affability, and other Graces of a fair Outside; but that his vilest and most hateful Qualities are the most necessary Accomplishments to fit him for the largest, and according to the World, the happiest and most flourishing Societies. (Mandeville 1714: 53)

This, in a nutshell, is the meaning of the paradigmatic subtitle of *The Fable of Bees*, 'private vices – publick benefits', which, after some initial delay, was to reverberate strongly throughout the history of capitalist modernization and become a mainstay of liberal thought. Mandeville's purpose was 'to shew the Vileness of the Ingredients that all together compose the wholesome Mixture of a well order'd Society; in order to extol the wonderful Power of Political Wisdom, by the help of which so beautiful a Machine is rais'd from the most contemptible Branches' (Mandeville 1714: 54). In other words, what appears as erratic and reprehensible on the level of the individual turns into a dynamic and coherent order as far as society as a whole is concerned (see Vogl 2011: 34f.). What we encounter here is, of course, the idiom of the *invisible hand*, i.e. the secularized hand of God, whose semantic travels since the late seventeenth century were taking it from signifying divine providence in the order of nature to invoking the dynamics of the price mechanism as a social variant of the law of gravitation. The latter, most memorably expressed in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), was thought to vouch for order and harmony (equilibrium) in free-market societies. We shall come back to this in a moment.

What interests us here is another point which easily escapes the limelight, namely that Mandeville's magic formula has a flipside to it. 'Private vices – publick benefits' also means that what used to be reprehensible on the individual level is no longer so. In fact, the 'vilest and most hateful Qualities', as we have seen above, have become 'the most necessary Accomplishments'. A momentous shift manifests itself here. The cruellest, most callous and objectionable of attitudes acquire now the status of secondary virtues inasmuch as they can be claimed to be 'the great support of a flourishing Society' (Mandeville 1714: 77). The 'transvaluation of all values', which has exercised the minds since Nietzsche, had begun long before the onset of the nineteenth century. As an integral part of the formation of *homo economicus*, it provided the ideological accompaniment and moral blessing for the social horrors of the primitive accumulation and the industrial revolution, which were robbing entire populations of their livelihoods and turned them into paupers, vagabonds and proletarians.

If Mandeville's moral-philosophical principle 'private vices – publick benefits' appears somewhat 'paradoxical', as he himself is keen to concede (Mandeville 1714: 77 and passim), the following excerpts from his *Essay on Charity, and Charity-Schools* throw a light on what it entails in practice:

> From what has been said it is manifest, that in a Free Nation where Slaves are not allow'd of, the surest wealth consists in a multitude of Laborious Poor; for besides that they are the never failing Nursery of Fleets and Armies, without them there could be no enjoyment, and no Product of any Country could be valuable. To make the Society Happy and People Easy under the meanest Circumstances, it is requisite that great numbers of them should be Ignorant as well as Poor. Knowledge both enlarges and multiplies our Desires, and the fewer things a Man Wishes for, the more easily his Necessities may be supply'd. The Welfare and Felicity therefore of every State and Kingdom, require that the Knowledge of the Working Poor should be confin'd within the Verge of their Occupations, and never extended (as to things visible) beyond what relates to their Calling. The more a Shepherd, a Plowman or any other Peasant knows of the World, and the things that are Foreign to his Labour or Employment, the less fit he'll be to go through the Fatigues and Hardships of it with Chearfulness and Content. (Mandeville 1714: 294)

Should this be reminiscent of a leaked memorandum from some latter-day department of education, this is no coincidence. Mandeville was the most unscrupulous prophet of this cynical image of society and its concomitant view of human beings, which habitually disguises itself as realism. He had only expressed frankly what later was to recede into the subtext of liberal market ideology. Thankfully, Mandeville has spelt out for us with unswerving clarity who was not going to benefit from 'the wholesome Mixture of a well order'd Society' and why this must be so for 'so beautiful a Machine' to function smoothly.

> Men who are to remain and end their Days in a Labourious, Tiresome and Painful Station of Life, the sooner they are put upon it at first, the more patiently they'll submit to it ever after. Hard Labour and the coursest Diet are a proper Punishment to several kinds of Malefactors, but to impose either on those that have not been used and brought up to both is the greatest Cruelty, when there is no Crime you can charge them with. … A Man who has had some Education … won't make a good Hireling and serve a Farmer for a pitiful Reward, at least he is not so fit for it as a Day Labourer that has always been employ'd about the Plow and Dung Cart, and remembers not that ever he has lived otherwise. When Obsequiousness and mean Services are required, we shall always observe that they are never so chearfully nor so heartily perform'd as from Inferiours to Superiours; I mean Inferiours not only in Riches and Quality, but likewise in Knowledge and Understanding. A Servant can have no unfeign'd Respect for his Master, as

> soon as he has Sense enough to find out that he serves a Fool. When we are to learn or to obey we shall experience in our selves, that the greater Opinion we have for the Wisdom and Capacity of those that are either to Teach or Command us, the greater deference we pay to their Laws and Instructions. (Mandeville 1714: 295–6)

Indeed, Mandeville is not guilty of doublespeak. For the members of the subordinate classes, i.e. for the overwhelming majority, purely functional or instrumental knowledge is the educational dish of the day. Sure enough, the beautiful machine runs at full throttle when the stoker 'remembers not that ever he has lived otherwise', i.e. when full literacy in realism has been achieved. Lest we get lost in the sprawling dales of 'the happiest and most flourishing Societies', Mandeville adds a mnemonic to help us navigate the social map: 'No Creatures submit contentedly to their Equals, and should a Horse know as much as a Man, I should not desire to be his Rider' (Mandeville 1714: 296).

3. While *homo economicus* enters the *stadio mundi* in the dualistic shape of a rational-calculating and an affect-ridden creature, his conduct is ultimately grounded in self-interest. Whatever passions might drive *homo economicus*, they only mask an irreducible element of self-interest. The central place ascribed to the latter within the world of human affairs is neatly captured by the following comparison in Claude Adrien Helvétius' *De l'esprit*: 'If the physical universe be subject of the laws of motion, the moral universe is equally so to those of interest' (Helvétius 1758: 42). For all its mutations and modifications, the belief in self-interest as an irreducible, quasi-atomic substance of our sociality has remained one of the fundamental axioms in the history of Western modernization in general, and the evolution of economic thought in particular, ever since (see Vogl 2011: 35–8).

4. If *homo economicus* sees the light of day as an asocial and cynical 'realist' driven by perceived self-interest, from the very beginning he has also been afflicted with partial blindness. The 'stupid mole's eyes of selfishness', to cite Kant's *bon mot* once again, made him into a being of partial (limited, inverse and fetishistic) rationality. More precisely, it was the worm's-eye view of the business enterprise that condemned him forever to a two-dimensional existence between profit and loss. When all was said and done, *homo economicus* did not derive direction from the distinction between virtuous and sinful, good and evil, or true and false, but rather from profit and loss. In the delightful words of a contemporary business guru: 'Profits aren't everything, they're the *only* thing!' (Cloutier 2009: 1). Once this purpose was installed as a trans-subjective compulsion and universally enforced through market competition, all eyes were fixed on two things: the means required to achieve

it, and the ratio at which to divide the spoils. 'What for' questions lost their meaning in the process and were replaced with 'How' questions.

Since the dying decades of the twentieth century – with his poor eyesight mystified and celebrated as a necessary condition for the invisible hand to perform its blissful miracles for the common good – there has been nothing to prevent *homo economicus* from elevating the supreme criterion of business management, the bottom line, to the status of a categorical imperative for all areas of social life. The underlying reasoning is straightforward: let's all do it like ManCity, and we shall all win the Premier League next year! His blindness towards sociality as a whole has turned *homo economicus* into a veritable sociopath.

5. It is a small wonder, then, that *homo economicus* draws much of his poise from an unquenchable dislike for 'big government'. But his animosity is more than a petty character trait. After all, the *locus operandi* of the invisible hand is a divine place which must remain unoccupied by any worldly actor for the hand to perform its task. The latter will forever be impervious to the mortal mind, and its function can only be corrupted if its place is usurped by some factitious agency. No form of deliberate social communication could ever substitute for the wisdom of the invisible hand guiding the free play of market forces (see Vogl 2011: 40ff.).

However, from the fact that *homo economicus* does not like to be governed, it does not follow that he would be difficult to govern. Contrary to his self-perception, *homo economicus* is a thoroughly predictable and compliant subject. How so? He can be governed with relative ease because the dull compulsion of the economic makes him toe the line in the first place. As a practical Newtonian, *homo economicus* entrusts himself to the laws of the market universe. Simultaneously driven and inert, frenetically active and stolidly passive, he is perfectly at home within the pre-established harmony of 'sociodicy', as the best of all possible forms of subjugation, which impresses itself on body and soul as a second nature (see Feldner 1999: 11ff.).

Using a psychoanalytic register, cultural theorist Robert Pfaller has coined the notion of 'interpassivity' in order to capture this peculiar correlation between frantic activity, passivity and docility (Pfaller 2003 and 2009). By delegating his actions and emotions to an external agency, the interpassive subject evades a potentially disturbing confrontation with his own enjoyment (*jouissance*), as the Other enjoys in his stead. The ubiquitous practice of interpassivity (e.g. canned laughter on TV or the public rituals of PC), which relieves the subject of the overburdening demand to believe and enjoy himself, enables him to be 'passive through the Other', as Žižek puts it: 'I concede to the Other the passive aspect (enjoying) of my experience, while I can remain actively engaged' in other activities (Žižek 2006a: 26). Following Pfaller, Žižek

illustrates the phenomenon of interpassivity by referring to Lacan's figure of the big Other as the subject-supposed-to-know.

> Such a displacement of our most intimate feelings and attitudes onto some figure of the Other is at the very core of Lacan's notion of the big Other; it can affect not only feelings but also beliefs and knowledge – the Other can also believe and know for me. In order to designate this displacement of the subject's knowledge onto another, Lacan coined the notion of the *subject supposed to know*. (Žižek 2006a: 27)

The political point of this, as Žižek explains, is twofold. First, interpassivity has its necessary general obverse in 'false activity', i.e. a scenario where we act incessantly to ensure that the coordinates of a given situation remain the same. The classical psychoanalytic case of this is the obsessional neurotic who keeps the analyst busy by talking frantically so that the treatment could not possibly change the predicament that keeps him trapped in his condition. Second, interpassivity finds its specifically ideological counterpart in political 'pseudo-activity', that is a mode of action in which the subject follows the guilt-induced and -inducing urge to be (seen as) constantly active and occupied with something. Against this kind of activity which serves to prevent meaningful transformative action from being conceived, let alone from happening, Žižek advocates that we 'withdraw into passivity and … refuse to participate' in the rituals of business-as-usual politics (see Žižek 2006a: 22–39, qtd: 26, 27). His term for this attitude is *Bartleby politics*.[11]

What matters in the context of our short portrait of *homo economicus* is the recognition that the 'automatic subject' Marx depicts in *Capital* (1990: 255) – i.e. the compulsive dynamic of the economy of capital valorization and its inherent laws of market competition – is *homo economicus*' subject-supposed-to-know *par excellence*. When all is said and done, it is the markets that know best. The Dow Jones Index is the barometer of how we are doing and what we can reasonably expect. Like an obsessional neurotic, *homo economicus* hurls himself head-down into his daily rat race in order to sustain the automatic subject which decides in advance what is true, efficient and right for him. He can safely victimize himself *vis-à-vis* the big Other – there is nothing one can

[11]Žižek's notion of 'Bartleby politics' is modelled on Hermann Melville's character *Bartleby the Scrivener,* who answers every request with an enigmatic 'I'd prefer not to'. As a strategic withdrawal, Bartleby politics is meant to exert pressure on the points of suture in order to undermine the libidinal economy of the very system from which it withdraws. Whatever its limitations, Bartleby politics forces us to confront the devices through which we distance ourselves from the 'system' in order to convince ourselves that we are not part of the problem. For a detailed discussion of this, along with Žižek's stance on the current economic crisis, see Vighi and Feldner (2010).

do about the constraints of circumstances after all – while feeling utterly in charge of his own business, rejecting any 'big government' interference therein whatsoever. Needless to say, *homo economicus* does not have to believe in the existence of a big Other for it to be effective. His incessant competitive activity makes the big Other do all the believing in his stead.

6. From inception *homo economicus* has been a desiring subject. He is always lacking something – a something that goes beyond the satisfaction of needs, rips away from the unconditionality of demands and confronts him with the soul-piercing feeling of 'not-enoughness'. Indeed, it is arguable that since the eighteenth-century economic subjects have been systematically fashioned through an introjection of lack. As desiring machines they forever have to have what they cannot have and do things they do not want to do, on behalf of a nameless craving which knows no bounds. Thus, as soon as the unconscious was discovered it was ruthlessly commodified in the name of a protean desire whose satisfaction had, however, to be constantly put to test. Lack became lack because what was lacking could be provided – though always as a temporary solution.

In the chapter on money of his unpublished manuscript *Grundrisse*, Marx called this 'abstract hedonism' (*abstrakte Genußsucht*) which, he believed, presupposed historically a society where money had already taken centre stage, i.e. where it was no longer in a 'servile role, in which it appears as mere medium of circulation', but had become 'the lord and god of the world of commodities' (Marx 1993: 221). Next to 'miserliness' (*Geiz*), abstract hedonism was for Marx one of the two forms of appearance of 'monetary greed' (*Geldgier*).

> Greed *[Bereicherungssucht]* as such, as a particular form of drive, i.e. as distinct from the craving for a particular kind of wealth, e.g. for clothes, weapons, jewels, women, wine etc., is possible only when general wealth, wealth as such, has become individualized in a particular thing, i.e. as soon as money is posited in its third quality [as the universal material representative of wealth]. Money is therefore not only the object but also the fountainhead of greed. The mania for possessions is possible without money; but greed itself is the product of a definite social development, not *natural*, as opposed to *historical*. … Hedonism in its general form and miserliness are the two particular forms of monetary greed. Hedonism in the abstract presupposes an object which possesses all pleasure in potentiality. Abstract hedonism realizes that function of money in which it is the *material representative of wealth*. (Marx 1993: 222)

To be sure, Marx struggles here in the fashion of a nineteenth-century thinker to give *homo economicus* a historical place. But to his credit, he could not

have known that only one and a half centuries later there would be a more straightforward solution at hand. It took the genius of an economic chieftain of the early twenty-first century to ascertain that the habitual and the natural are in fact identical, and that the condition of *homo economicus* is indeed the human condition, as we have seen above; an insight whose profundity we can only fully appreciate if we bear in mind that 'unless somebody can find a way to change human nature, we will have more crises'. This leads us seamlessly to the ascent of economics.

When at the end of the nineteenth century, psychoanalysis arose to take a closer look at the pathologies of the desiring subject, it coincided with the rise of the discipline of (neoclassical) economics, which also gave expression to the insatiable abyss of 'not-enoughness' albeit in a radically different way. Let us unravel this briefly by looking at how economists conceive of their discipline.[12] What is economics actually about?

The most commonly accepted definition of economics stems from British economist Lionel Robbins (see Backhouse and Medema 2009: 225). Robbins considered economics the science of scarcity. 'The economist studies the disposal of scarce means', he argued, and the discipline of 'economics is a science which studies "human behavior" as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses' (Robbins 1932: 15). Following in Robbins' footsteps, the most widely studied economics textbook of the second half of the twentieth century, Paul Samuelson's *Economics*, defines the subject matter of the 'dismal science' as follows:

> Economics is the study of how people and society end up choosing, with or without the use of money, to employ scarce productive resources that could have alternative uses, to produce various commodities and distribute them for consumption, now or in the future, among various persons and groups in society. It analyzes the costs and benefits of improving patterns of resource allocation. (Samuelson 1976: 3)[13]

There is even a 'law of scarcity' (Samuelson 1976: 18). Let us see what it says:

> What to produce, How, and For Whom would not be problems if resources were *un*limited. If an *infinite* amount of every good could be produced, or if human wants were *fully* satisfied, it would not then matter if too much

[12]We draw in the following on Backhouse (2012), Backhouse and Medema (2009), Fine and Milonakis (2009), Milonakis and Fine (2009) and Perelman (2006: 21–50).

[13]The most recent edition from 2009, now co-authored by William Nordhaus, retains the definition with its emphasis on the scarcity of resources with only minor modifications (Samuelson and Nordhaus 2009: 20).

> of any particular good were produced. Nor would it then matter if labor and materials were combined unwisely. Since everyone could have as much as he pleased, it would not matter how goods and incomes were distributed among different individuals and families. There would then be no *economic goods*, i.e., no goods that are relatively *scarce*; and there would hardly be any need for a study of economics or 'economizing'. All goods would be *free goods*, the way pure air used to be. (Samuelson 1976: 18)

In a nutshell, the condition of scarcity is the *raison d'être* of economics. What we do not learn from Samuelson's primer – but know from recent history – is that economics itself has been instrumental in extending the condition of scarcity to as many areas of society as possible by providing the ideological ammunition for ever further privatizations of hitherto common resources, 'free goods' and public services. By implication economics has creatively expanded its area of competence and consolidated its reason of existence. What we do learn, however, is two things: a) that there might be a devilish link between affluence and scarcity, and b) that there is little hope we shall ever overcome the condition of scarcity. Samuelson's version of naturalist realism enjoins his fellow citizens to embrace the law of scarcity, i.e. to accept that no matter whether the United States may have 'become an affluent society, economics must still contend with scarcity as a basic fact of life', for

> our total product would have to become many times higher than its present level if the average American were to become able to live at the level of a moderately well-off doctor, lawyer, professor or advertising man – to say nothing of the living standards of the really well-to-do. (Samuelson 1976: 19)

That this is by no means a view from a bygone era can be seen by another Nobel Prize laureate's primer. Paul Krugman's co-authored volume *Economics* (2009) reaffirms the prominent position that the paradigm of 'scarcity as a basic fact of life' continues to hold in economic thought today. The volume's narrative aims to appeal particularly strongly to our common sense. 'You can't always get what you want', it quips in order to establish that 'individual choice' is 'the core of economics'. The question 'Why do individuals have to make choices?' is addressed with the same ostentatious simplicity that positivistic realism affords: 'The ultimate reason is that resources are scarce.' What, then, makes a resource into a scarce (i.e. economic) resource? 'A resource is *scarce* when there's not enough of the resource available to satisfy all the various ways a society wants to use it.' The microeconomic premise of economics has finally an exact macroeconomic counterpart: 'Just as individuals must make choices', the volume avers, 'the scarcity of resources means that society as a whole must make choices' (Krugman and Wells 2009: 6).

Of course, the modern idiom of scarcity has a long and chequered tradition. It made an early appearance as 'overpopulation' in Thomas Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), for example, and it was no stranger to the National Socialists' popular wisdom that 'there is not enough for all' (*Für alle reicht es nicht*.) as Heiner Müller once put it (Kluge and Müller 1996: 85). But this is another story.

What the definition of economics as a science of scarcity conceals is the fact that the 'scarcity' in question is a through and through modern phenomenon. It is neither a transhistorical human predicament nor an accidental feature of our times, but a necessary output of the 'beautiful machine'. The scarcity in question is endemic to the capitalist mode of social reproduction.[14] The overarching criterion which determines the status of a resource as an economic or scarce resource is profitability. The degree to which resources become economic resources is measured against the yardstick of their profit-earning capacity. The soothingly timeless statement that a 'resource is anything that can be used to produce something else' (Krugman and Wells 2009: 6) means under the real-historical conditions of capitalist market competition, where as a rule a resource can only be employed to produce something else if a money profit can be made in the process, that economic resources are *capital* which is by definition scarce. Under the compulsive growth regime of the capital accumulation machine there is always not enough of it. The flipside of this is immediately apparent: from the viewpoint of capital accumulation, all human and social resources have to be turned into economic (i.e. profitable) resources and, by implication, made scarce. This leads to the well-known effect that in the midst of plenitude, readily available productive resources and capacities cannot be utilized because they are not employable on 'competitive' terms. That is, because they have to be kept scarce, which is only possible insofar as the means and conditions to

[14]The rampant immiseration and subsequent mass poverty that accompanied the first industrial revolution – and which has never vanished ever since – cannot be understood with reference to 'eternal features' of the history of human civilization. They emerged with the new mode of production and spread as the latter began slowly but surely to penetrate all area of life. Historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler has pointed out the extent to which in the early nineteenth century there was a clear understanding that this kind of poverty was a new phenomenon (Wehler 2005: 283ff.; see also Thompson 2013: 207–32). Against this background, it is overdue to revise the historically unjustified image of the Luddites as mindless destroyers of machines. The historical significance of the Luddites consists in the fact that they were resisting the dubious honour of being turned into double-free wage labourers. That they were not able to see beyond what was to become the most impenetrable socio-economic formation in human history, and that their stance remained therefore defensive, can hardly count as evidence for a historical guilty verdict. In contrast, the labour movement of the late nineteenth and the twentieth century would embrace with pride the status of worker and even turn it ideologically into the seed corn of the future society of work, in which he who would not work should not eat. The celebratory anticipation of the 'victory of work' (Zischka 1942) is one of the fatal connections of the labour movement with the socialism represented by the Nazis.

employ these resources and capacities are monopolized and not available to all. Modern scarcity – like modern poverty, as we have seen in Chapter 1 – is thus the inevitable consequence of the capitalist growth dynamic, a correlation which is well concealed by the naturalizing common sense approach of economics and its ahistorical conceptual apparatus (see for detailed empirical evidence of this correlation Reinert 2007; Datta 2013 and Leech 2014).

There is another aspect of the scarcity discourse, which should not be overlooked in this context. Already Robbins clarified what the economist studying 'the disposal of scarce means' was really after: 'He is interested in the way different degrees of scarcity of different goods give rise to different ratios of valuation between them' (Robbins 1932: 15). This, of course, is the *theoretical* point of the stress on scarcity: to find a new, 'neoclassical' answer to the question of how to determine the value of commodities, an answer which was now to be anchored in an economy of desires and, by implication, firmly embedded in the paradigm of 'human nature'. The last vestiges of any *objective determination* of commodity values – still a central aspiration of the classical political economy of Adam Smith and David Ricardo – was thereby abolished by neoclassical economics. Economic value was not only reduced to its empirical manifestation in commodity and asset prices. It was now something that lay altogether in the eye of the beholder.

7. Last but not least, as an epistemological, knowledge-seeking subject *homo economicus* is plagued by 'subjectivity'. Always in danger of furnishing the world with unreliable knowledge, he is in constant need of objectivity. Throughout modern history great efforts have been made to try and eliminate, or at least minimize, the distorting impact of human subjectivity on our knowledge and the procedures through which it is produced.

However, while objectivity and scientific method came to be seen as powerful guardians of proper knowledge, what it means to look at things objectively has changed quite dramatically over the past 200 years. The traces of these changes can still be observed in our current usage of the word 'objective', which is hopelessly but tellingly confused. We glide, for example, with ease from ontological assertions about the ultimate structure of objective reality, to epistemological claims to objective truth, contentions about objective methods ensuring the validity of our findings and declarations about the ethos of true scholarliness (self-distancing, detachment, impartiality, self-effacement, or simply: objectivity as a moral imperative). Our notion of objectivity, a blend of essentially different meanings, points to different and conflicting histories, which in turn refer to different intellectual traditions, cultural practices and social contexts of origin in which the various images and ideals of objectivity acquired their respective meanings (see Daston and Galison 2007: 1–55 and Megill 1994).

What has emerged victoriously from this conflicting history is 'objectivity' as an all-encompassing perspective on social reality, which transposes and amplifies the effects of social domination. The call for objectivity invokes a code of conduct which regulates the practices of knowledge-making most notably in academic institutions: a code of conduct which does not allow for a position that cannot prove its proper objectivity. It is on this basis that the science of *homo economicus* has staked its claims to universally valid truths. It evades questions of conflicting interests and promises equilibrium, stability and harmony. Resistance within the terms of this discourse is impossible insofar as it denies any alternative position from which one could speak. Whoever seeks to question the basic assertions about 'scarcity', 'efficiency' or 'growth', let alone 'the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works' (Greenspan 2008), is up against the very objectivity – and by implication the universal communicability – of knowledge itself.

'So beautiful a machine'

From the outset, liberal ideology has been peddling a notion of the market as a rational, self-regulating and self-stabilizing system, where the price mechanism ensures equilibrium between supply and demand as well as efficiency and fairness in the distribution of goods, delivery of services and allocation of resources. On this claim rests the justification of capitalism as a superior social system to this day.

In *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith has given this view of the market its best-known metaphorical expression.[15] 'Led by an invisible hand', the market regime guarantees that the egoistic interests of the individuals combine, despite themselves, to serve the common good (A. Smith 1776: 291f.). The market's urge towards equilibrium is, in an analogous manner to Newton's law of gravity, the natural law of the social cosmos. The market, as it were, abhors disequilibrium.

In Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* we find another famous variant of the motif of the invisible hand. It is worth reading the passage as a whole, as it uncovers the arm to which the invisible hand of liberal market ideology has been attached right from the start.

> It is to no purpose, that the proud and unfeeling landlord views his extensive fields, and without a thought for the wants of his brethren, in imagination

[15]For the chequered history and controversial discussion of Adam Smith's famous motif of the invisible hand, see Wight (2007), Samuels (2011) and Kennedy (2009).

> consumes himself the whole harvest that grows upon them. The homely and vulgar proverb, that the eye is larger than the belly, never was more fully verified than with regard to him. The capacity of his stomach bears no proportion to the immensity of his desires, and will receive no more than the meanest peasant. The rest he is obliged to distribute among those, who prepare, in the nicest manner, that little which he himself makes use of, among those who fit up the palace in which this little is to be consumed, among those who provide and keep in order all the different baubles and trinkets, which are employed in the oeconomy of greatness; *all of whom thus derive from his luxury and caprice, that share of the necessaries of life, which they would in vain have expected from his humanity or his justice*.
>
> The produce of the soil maintains at all times nearly that number of inhabitants which it is capable of maintaining. The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of *their natural selfishness and rapacity*, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. *They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal proportions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society*, and afford means to the multiplication of the species.
>
> When Providence divided the earth among a few lordly masters, it neither forgot nor abandoned those who seemed to have been left out in the partition. These last too enjoy their share of all that it produces. In what constitutes the real happiness of human life, they are in no respect inferior to those who would seem so much above them. In ease of body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and *the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security for which kings are fighting for*. (A. Smith 1759: 165; paragraph breaks and emphasis added)

Although much has changed over the last 250 years, the tenets of liberal market ideology have remained remarkably constant. Of course, in the reality of modern history it was instability, imbalance and insecurity, along with existential angst and crippling fear, that would reign wherever societies were organized like markets and human beings were conscripted as *homines economici*. The misanthropic notion that only a combined system of incentives

and threats would be able to prevent societies from descending into barbarism has always been and continues to be a self-serving and self-fulfilling prophecy. For all its distinctiveness, the current crisis is a striking case in point for this.

Against the background of this overwhelming tradition, is it surprising that economic crises cannot be attributed to the system as such? That the causes of crisis have to be located in external factors, such as flawed economic policies or human nature? That we are locked in a sterile debate which oscillates between two positions – 'too much state' on the one hand, and 'too much market' on the other – both of which 'take pleasure in beholding the perfection of so beautiful and grand a system' (A. Smith 1759: 166)?

Alan Greenspan for once has not been able to go beyond this shibboleth. Five years after admitting in his Congressional hearing of October 2008 that he had found a 'flaw' in his economic philosophy, whose significance, however, he had not yet been able to assess (Greenspan 2008), Greenspan has not come much further. In his recent book *The Map and the Territory* from the autumn of 2013, designed to 'understand how we all got it so wrong, and what we can learn from the fact that we did' (Greenspan 2013: 2), he confirms and, if anything, further radicalizes his views from before the outbreak of the current crisis.

As the subtitle *Risk, Human Nature, and the Future of Forecasting* suggests, Greenspan has made further inquiries into the 'verities of human nature'. To little avail, it has to be said. Drawing on behavioural economics to shore up his belief in 'the inbred self-centred nature of our species', he has found out that the 'dynamics of the business cycle' is in large measure 'psychology-driven', consequently blaming the current crisis on the ultimately uncontrollable 'animal sprits' of economic actors, with 'fear', 'euphoria' and 'herd behaviour' figuring as primary suspects (Greenspan 2013: 13ff., 26, 292, 353).

Not surprisingly, Greenspan is also holding on to his trademark convictions about the free market and its enemies. If the United States is to maintain its global economic dominance, he recommends 'the remarkable economically recuperative powers of deregulating markets', while stressing the 'need to lift the burden of massive new financial regulation that is becoming increasingly counterproductive' (Greenspan 2013: 250, 300). Greenspan's unshakeable belief that government intervention would be the main obstacle for overcoming the current economic predicament is arguably the staple of *The Map and the Territory*. The welfare state in particular would be a deadly threat to the United States, with the 'unrelenting rise' of the social benefits bill being the historical root cause of 'the fiscal chaos we are now experiencing' (Greenspan 2013: 293f.). Indeed, Greenspan – whose many successes during his eighteen years at the helm of the FED included the deregulation of the credit industry and the repeal of the Glass–Steagall Act that had separated investment banks

from retail banks – emphatically insists, on his ideal of a liberal society 'where government has little role aside from setting the legal conditions of political freedom' (Greenspan 2013: 260).

Of course, the state has never been on leave, either historically – the absolutist regimes of the early modern period were crucial in establishing capitalist markets, including a 'labour market', and the social dominance of money relations – or during the past three-and-a-half decades of neo-liberal hegemony. The notion that neoliberalism would be about 'free' and 'open' markets is part and parcel of the mythical narrative of capitalism. We only need to recall the monetary policies of the Federal Reserve under Paul Volcker – which in the late 1970s and early 1980s raised the interest rates in the United States towards 20 per cent, thereby creating a fierce recession that scared the labour movement into submission and drove the world's debtor countries into the arms of the IMF – or the deregulation policies initiated by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan throughout the 1980s and later continued by their successors. The capitalist states have been pivotal in rolling out neoconservative policies throughout large parts of the world since the 1980s. In fact, 'the West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion', as American political scientist Samuel Huntington freely admitted in *The Clash of Civilizations*, 'but rather by its superiority in applying organised violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do' (Huntington 1996: 51).

Neo-liberal 'deregulation' is not the absence of government but one of its most violent expressions. It makes the business corporation the model for government (see in detail Dardot and Laval 2009). On the other hand, today's neo-statist rhetoric serves both to discipline and pacify impoverished populations through a mix of paternalistic and authoritarian means. These include economic and social policies designed to provide Leviathanian solutions to the crisis of capitalism reminiscent of the medicine administered against the 'crisis of classical modernity' during the interwar period of the last century (from 'austerity' and the rapid erosion of the vestiges of democratic procedure and the rule of law, to open terroristic dictatorship). With one important exception: today, the giant corporations themselves vie for dominance over – and by extension eclipse our collective memory of – the public space (see in detail Crouch 2011), thus establishing a postmodern warlord regime in which structural violence is increasingly replaced by direct relations of domination. Neoliberalism is the name of the doctrine and governmental practice developed to make this happen. It is not the antidote to the Keynesian state, but its full expression in the twenty-first century.

The final word on this belongs, however, to Alan Greenspan. Looking back on history, including its most recent episodes, he is in no doubt that

> modern industrial capitalism … has been the most effective form of economic organization ever devised. … But at its core is creative destruction, a system of winners and losers. If we wish to achieve ever higher levels of productivity and standards of living, there is no alternative to displacing obsolescent low-productivity facilities with facilities embodying those technologies at the cutting edge. Arithmetic requires it. But there is the inevitable hardship imposed on significant segments of our workforce who lose their jobs and often their homes in that process of displacement. (Greenspan 2013: 299f.)

Regrettably, one cannot 'eliminate the pain experienced by those who are the market casualties of creative destruction' (Greenspan 2013: 255). But then again, 'in a free competitive market', as we have learnt from both classical and neoclassical economics, 'incomes earned by all participants in the joint effort of production reflect their marginal contributions to the output of the net national product' (Greenspan 2013: 259). At the end of the day, we have a choice to make. If we wish to live in a free society 'based on the self-reliance of individual citizens', we will simply have to accept that there is a '"survival of the fittest" aspect to market adjustments'. Whichever way we may look at it, 'we can no more change that than we can change its root: human nature' (Greenspan 2013: 259f.).

Pondering over the rapidly increasing automation of the economy, which we discussed in Chapter 1, Greenspan is at his unequivocal best. 'The United States may continue to lose manufacturing jobs', as he puts it laconically, 'but not manufacturing business', a strategic vision which is founded on the experience that 'the increasingly important use of robots' affords the momentous opportunity to 'sustain the level of production' while at the same time 'significantly decreas[ing] the number of human hours required to produce the output' (Greenspan 2013: 363, 166). To be sure, during 'the prolonged expansion in economic activity between 1983 and 2006 … many were reluctant to engage in cost-saving investments in part because … cost-saving investments … entailed discharging people, an unsavory activity'. Luckily, this deplorable attitude has changed 'following the crash of 2008' when the 'reluctance to shed workers vanished. The payoff was a major increase in profit margins' (Greenspan 2013: 145). Looking to the future, Greenspan asks himself with some delight:

> With … an apparently inbred upper limit to human IQ, are we destined to have an ever smaller share of our workforce staff our ever more sophisticated high-tech equipment and software? Even taking into account population growth, do we ever reach the point when all we have left is a

> small handful of especially talented people who can create and operate new technologies? (Greenspan 2013: 296)

But Greenspan is not getting ahead of himself. From his own trajectory he knows there is a time for everything. For the time being, therefore, he concludes that

> our highest priority going forward is to fix our broken political system. Short of that, there is no viable long-term solution to our badly warped economy. … Fortunately, modern societies have finally abandoned as unworkable the various economic models of socialism that were so popular a century or more ago. But we need to recognize that welfare sates, unless contained, have proven similarly trouble prone. … Democratic societies such as ours require a broad and deep adherence to a set of principles that are not subject to compromise. (Greenspan 2013: 302)

The brave new world projected in *The Map and the Territory* presents us with a remarkably clear and self-assured vision of the apartheid regime neoliberalism has in store for us in the twenty-first century.

If we look back on this chapter through a Lacanian prism, we can detect the historical rise of the *University discourse*, in which instrumental Knowledge begins to dominate Truth and the injunction to methodological impartiality and self-restraint serves to conceal the function of the Master. The second part of the chapter, on the other hand, anticipates the link between the *University discourse* and the *Capitalist discourse*. In the following two chapters, we want to take a closer look at these connections by developing the outlines of an ontology of crisis that intersects the critique of work.

3

Ontology of crisis

Walter Benjamin famously warned against any facile endorsement of the 'storm called progress' when he suggested that revolutions involve pulling the brake, not accelerating on the locomotive of history: 'Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.'[1] The typical Benjaminian image of an interruption of the continuum of history which gives form to a desperate urge to subtract from the 'storm of progress' provides an appropriate starting point to the discussion of the ontological resonance of crisis examined in this chapter.

In order to demarcate the precise meaning of a negative ontology that intersects the crisis of contemporary capitalism, we begin with a brief foray into Slavoj Žižek's reading of German idealism from Kant to Hegel (see esp. Žižek 1993). The overarching feature of this reading, whether or not brought to its full political potential, is the groundbreaking avowal of an 'ontology of crisis'. As is known to any reader of Žižek's work, the negative ontology he derives from German idealism intersects with his reading of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, giving rise to a series of 'dialectical overlaps' that justify the definition of his philosophical method as Hegelo-Lacanian. In a second step, we examine Lacan's theory of the signifier in light of its being anchored in 'the primacy of lack' – or, to use Lacan's words from 1964, in 'the structuring function of a lack' (1998a: 29). What we aim to extrapolate from our discussion is an ontology that is no longer validated by the a priori positivity of being as a condition for determining its possibilities, but which instead recognizes the dialectical role of negativity as the sole mode of both accessing and potentially

[1]This is a preparatory note to 'On the concept of history' in Benjamin's *Theses on Philosophy of History* (Benjamin 2003: 402). A variation on the 'train theme' has been provided by Slavoj Žižek's quip that the proverbial 'light at the end of the tunnel' 'might belong to a train crashing towards us' (Žižek 2008a: 6).

reconfiguring the symbolic fabric of reality itself. In the final part of the chapter, we look at Lacan's formalized discourse theory with a view to connecting its socially critical aspect to a reading of today's capitalist crisis that attempts to identify its disavowed cause.

Slavoj Žižek and the ontological 'crack' within German idealism

In Žižek's Hegelianism, crisis embodies a dialectical 'knot' that simultaneously captures the defeat and the triumph of the idea of rationality championed by the Enlightenment, and critiqued by Immanuel Kant's philosophy of consciousness. The ambiguity of modern reason is best epitomized by the implicit claim, within Kant's 'Copernican turn',[2] that the subject's awareness of things whose nature the mind cannot grasp (the 'things in themselves') is what renders reality accessible to consciousness. The end result of Kant's attempt to prove the autonomy of human understanding from its objects is that *our epistemological limitations are the conditions of possibility of knowledge itself*. Simply put: we manage to 'know things' because something in objective reality is out of reach for us. Despite aiming at a systematic ordering of the categories of thought, Kant is thus seen by Žižek as the first philosopher to have stumbled upon the *ontological* role of lack – the fact that lack grounds our being in the world absolutely. However, Žižek's decisive Lacanian point is that the true 'generative' displacement in Kant concerns *self*-consciousness (the domain inaugurated by Descartes' 'I think') rather than the problem of the subject's consciousness of objective reality. Žižek observes how, in Kant, self-consciousness ultimately coincides with 'the I of transcendental apperception', which is a form of apperception characterized by what we might call 'the necessity of self-ignorance':

> The paradox of self-consciousness [in Kant] is that *it is possible only against the background of its own impossibility*: I am conscious of myself only in so far as I am out of reach to myself qua the real kernel of my being. … The very notion of self-consciousness implies the subject's self-decenterment, which is far more radical than the opposition between subject and object. This is what Kant's theory of metaphysics ultimately is about: metaphysics

[2]I am referring to the famous passage in Kant's Preface to the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* where his hypothesis that objects might conform to our knowledge (rather than the other way around) is presented as analogous to Copernicus' revolutionary hypothesis that the earth moves around the 'heavenly bodies'.

> endeavors to heal the wound of the 'primordial repression' (the inaccessibility of the 'Thing which thinks') by allocating to the subject a place in the 'great chain of being'. What metaphysics fails to notice is the price to be paid for this allocation: the loss of the very capacity it wanted to account for, i.e., human freedom. (Žižek 1993: 14–15)

Žižek's critique of metaphysics as a 'healing of the wound called subject' relies on a disarmingly simple yet crucial observation about the ruse at work in the formation of subjectivity: metaphysics retroactively creates the conditions of its possibility by instituting the illusion of a fully transparent self-consciousness via the primordial repression of the subject's self-splitting. By striving to construct a watertight system of knowledge based on self-consciousness, Kant encroaches upon the subjective inconsistency on whose radical exclusion such system hinges. For this reason Žižek defines Kant as the first post-metaphysical philosopher – the first to have identified, no matter how unwittingly, the 'crack' whose repression allows metaphysics to affirm itself. Kant's insight into this gap did not prevent him, however, from persevering in his search for closure. The antinomies of pure reason, 'scandalous' though they are (Žižek 2012: 740), actually allocated the ontological gap to the domain of epistemology. Because of its failure to fully think through how *self-consciousness is based on self-ignorance*, the whole of Kant's moral (or practical) and aesthetic philosophy works as a kind of 'defence mechanism' against the explosive, truly radical dimension of subjectivity adumbrated in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (see Žižek 1997: 227). Thus, my 'lack to myself' (the fracture that literally constitutes my identity through its primordial repression) is turned into an epistemological impasse, an operation which allows Kant to dislodge human reason from its metaphysical underpinnings. However, as observed by Martin Heidegger (1997), this very attempt to make reason reflexively accountable for its judgements rather than hanging on foundational principles, risks abstracting reason into a reified unity of consciousness which severs itself from being. It is by choosing to ignore its presupposition that the Kantian reason becomes an autonomous regulative apparatus whose task is to synthetically interpret objective phenomena in accordance with its own, transcendentally realized categories of consciousness. By attempting to escape metaphysics, then, Kant's subject qua self-sufficient source of knowledge ends up revalidating the metaphysical task of reflecting the totality of knowledge – a totality limited, and at the same time sustained, by the formal deadlock of reason.

In Žižek's view, the philosopher who endorsed Kant's intuition of the crack within metaphysics was, of course, Hegel. While Kant unwittingly 'opened the door' to an ontology of lack, Hegel walked right through it. Hegel's crucial

accomplishment was therefore to convert Kant's epistemological perspective into an ontological one. He did so by asserting that the inconsistencies and limitations of subjective knowledge are at the same time the inconsistencies of the object of knowledge (see Žižek 2012: 149)[3] – a position which carried the dialectical implication that the subject coincides with the aporia within substance: 'The task is to think the subject's emergence or becoming from the self-splitting of substance: the subject … emerges out of the self-blockage of substance, out of the impossibility of substance fully asserting itself as One' (Žižek 2012: 707–8). Here we should insist on the fundamental ambiguity pertaining to subjectivity in its transcendentally performative function: every necessary subjective intervention in the 'self-blockage of substance' is equivalent to a 'forced gesture' which, ultimately, confirms the contingent nature of the subject itself. Meaning, knowledge and power are 'merely' the other side of the subject's impotence. Thus, far from affirming the ultimate freedom and autonomy of thought as the mediating agent who 'creates reality' – i.e. far from concluding that the dialectical process culminates with the triumph of the Notion, of Absolute Spirit, over the object – Hegel's speculative idealism, in Žižek's reading, asserts that every meaningful concretion of reality is erected upon a negative foundation which is *ontological*, at the same time subjective and objective.[4] To the subject's gesture that seals the epistemic character of external reality corresponds the finite materiality of reality, beyond which there is, literally, nothing. As Žižek claims in most of his books, the political significance of Hegel's radicalization of Kant is unheard of, since the acknowledgement of the ontological status of lack constitutes the necessary condition for any radical political intervention: crucial to any political project is an element of 'groundless' subjective decisionism, which reflects the fact that the gap within the structure *is* the subject.[5] Leaving aside the debate

[3]Žižek (2012: 49) also claims that this passage was part of Hegel's self-development, since 'Hegel becomes Hegel' the moment he recognizes that the difference between *logic* (the study of notions as means to ontological analysis) and *metaphysics* (the study of the ontological structure of reality) is internal to the latter: 'Logic *already is* Metaphysics: what appears as an introductory analysis of the tools required to grasp the Thing is already the Thing'.

[4]From Žižek's perspective, the difference between Kant and Hegel is comparable to the difference between the first and the second Derrida – the Derrida of *différance* and the later 'Kantian' Derrida (see Žižek 2007a). For an excellent investigation of negativity in Derrida and Žižek, see Wu (2009).

[5]The issue of a decisionism based on ungrounded contingent 'acts' is one of the most problematic points in Žižek's politics. Among others (see for instance Boucher 2008: 165–230), Jayne Svenungsson (2010) has argued that 'Žižek's rhetoric … comes dangerously close to the decisionist tendencies … of Schmitt, Heidegger and Friedrich Gogarten', since the problem resides in pessimistically accepting that the only foundation of truth is 'the resolute decision in the face of Nothingness'. While this is a widely shared critical position, it seems to avoid the complex dialectic

around the political dimension of Žižek's theory, what we emphasize here is the dialectical ontology that emerges from his reading of German idealism, where the appearance of reality out of the mind's transcendentally synthetic activity can only be achieved by way of an intervention into the inerasable antagonism constitutive of being. It is such ontology, at once dialectical and negative, that this chapter reflects upon.

A signifier is missing: Lack in Lacan

It is noteworthy that, while modernity is by definition considered 'in crisis', historically such awareness tends to be offset by positive visions or attitudes concerning the *overcoming* of crisis. To give an obvious example, it is in the nature of capitalism to 'capitalize' on crises, turning them into opportunities to reassert its own logic. And while the inherent movement of capitalist expansion ('from crisis to crisis') proves that a crisis is a condition of possibility, the latter statement would seem to apply also to conceptual frameworks regarded as progressive or revolutionary. Think of how, for instance, class struggle in Marx is superseded by the future communist classless society; or how, in Freud, antagonism is confined to the psychic sphere, without necessarily affecting the constitution of external reality. The true difficulty, even within a modernity characterized by postmodern anti-foundationalist scepticism, or even by nihilism, remains to conceive of crisis as ontological, yet without falling prey to what we might label the 'narcissism of the lost cause' that, at least since Adorno and Horkheimer, typifies much of critical theory and the so-called radical left in general.

Within the last century it was Jacques Lacan who, arguably more than any other thinker, provided a consistent theoretical framework where lack is presented as ontological – most eminently in his notion of the Real of *jouissance*. The Real as constitutive traumatism coextensive with lack was fully asserted by Lacan in the latter part of his teaching, specifically from *Seminar XI* onwards (see Lacan 1998a). From that moment on, Lacan radicalized his thesis that being coincides with language in order to propose a formalized discourse theory that hinges on the Real. To put it concisely, for Lacan humans are besieged by an ontological crisis because 'a signifier is lacking' – and the

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of retroactivity on which Žižek's 'decisionism' is founded. In *On Žižek's Dialectics*, Fabio Vighi has framed the problem of the transformative potential of Žižek's theory of the subject as a consequence of his reliance on the Lacanian axiom of radically decentred subjectivity, suggesting that the 'psychotic' dimension of the act as bridge from theory to practice should be reformulated as a radically creative step *within* thought (see Vighi 2010, esp. 153–64).

Real of *jouissance* is, ultimately, what embodies this lack.[6] While attempting to historicize the Real by showing its function within different discourses, Lacan was at the same time reaffirming the Real's ontological character. Every socio-historical determination of discourse is, in the final analysis, reducible to the Real from which it arises.

Lacan's notion of master-signifier (*signifiant-maître*) – as we shall see, one of the key terms of Lacan's discourse theory – allows us to elaborate on the above claim. Updating Saussure's theory of the interdependence of signifier and signified, Lacan (1997 and 2006a: 412–41) asserts the primacy of the signifier (the mental image or phonological element of a given sign) over the signified (the conceptual element of the sign). In a nutshell, this implies that meanings are produced via the potentially endless interplay of signifiers rather than existing independently of them. Precisely for this reason we need master-signifiers, i.e. special words, statements or gestures that, owing to their capacity to embody the ontological lack of signification, paradoxically manage to 'plug the hole' in meaning, thereby generating the (indispensable) illusion that reality is legible, sufficiently coherent for us to engage with:

> Initially, the signifier is to be thought of as distinct from meaning. It's characterized by not in itself possessing a literal meaning. Try to imagine, then, what the appearance of a pure signifier might be like. Of course, we can't imagine this, by definition. And yet, since we ask ourselves questions about origins, we must try to get closer to what this might represent. Our experience makes us constantly feel that these basic signifiers, without which the order of human meanings would be unable to establish itself, exist. (Lacan 1997: 199–200, translation slightly modified)

Since signifiers tend to slide endlessly, the signifying chain has to be halted if signification is to emerge, and this 'quilting' operation is the vital role performed by master-signifiers. When a master-signifier intervenes, it retroactively orders a chain of 'floating' signifiers, fixing their constitutive semantic ambiguity (its metonymic slippage) into a meaning that appears to be stable.

What we should emphasize is that the efficacy of master-signifiers is determined by a purely formal shift: an ordinary word, or a meaningless one, is suddenly loaded with extraordinary affective power. Examples of master-signifiers 'at work' through their pure meaninglessness abound, for example, in advertising. The signifier 'Coke' works as an empty centre of signification

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[6]Such negative ontology should not be confused with the affirmation of a negative theology, which would justify Gilles Deleuze's well-known claim (Deleuze and Parnet 1987: 82) that psychoanalysis teaches nothing but 'infinite resignation', since 'they [psychoanalysts] are the last priests'.

that keeps together a series of meanings which, essentially, have to do with the 'coolness' of the American lifestyle that became associated with it. In politics, floating signifiers like 'democracy', 'freedom', 'state', 'justice', 'war' and so on acquire different significations depending on which master-signifier retroactively 'fixes' them: under the master-signifier 'socialism', for instance, they certainly do not evoke the same meaning as under the master-signifier 'liberalism'.

In relation to its elementary binding role, the master-signifier performs a crucial *dialectical* function in the specific sense that it materializes that overlap of subject and object which allows for the emergence of both subjectivity and objectivity. Essentially, what this means is that it quilts, or sutures, being's ontological incompleteness: the formation of our subjective identities depends on the intercession of a signifier in its 'objectively alien' materiality (the materiality of the letter); at the same time, such intercession forms reality in its necessarily fictional, illusory, fantasmatic framework (i.e. always-already transcendentally constituted, or mediated). Hence the familiar Lacanian theme of the second-hand, reflexive nature of every identity: the self is by definition the result of a detour through the big Other, for we borrow our identity's features from what is 'available' around us (parents, peers, society, etc.); simultaneously, objective reality emerges for us through the self-alienating acceptance of the mediating role of language.

The master-signifier, then, condenses the crucial Lacanian assumption about the emergence of signification through the elementary inconsistency of language. This can be explained by referring to the popular postmodern use of the term 'difference'. As Lacan fully understood, *differentiality* (the basic fact that any identity is the result of a series of differences with other identities) is always-already internal, self-referential, constitutive of identity itself. In a word, it is ontological, since it pertains to being by cutting across the series of specific differences among various identities. In terms of Lacan's theory of the signifier, differentiality means that while each signifier emerges through its difference from other signifiers, at the same time it also stands for *self-relating difference*, i.e. it is deeply antagonized by its inherent 'lack to itself'. As Lacan put it in the unpublished *Seminar IX* (1961–62, *Identification*, lesson of 6 December 1961): 'The signifying difference is distinct from anything that refers to qualitative difference … the signifier as such serves to connote difference in its pure state' (see Lacan 2003). Thus, the signifier is simultaneously *something* (the result of a differential logic) and *its negation or contradiction*. And the master-signifier designates exactly the logic of a signifier that is *explicitly* 'self-differentiated', i.e. whose identity is not established through simple differentiality (or qualitative difference) but by way of a self-referential inversion, whereby what appeared as an external limit

constitutes itself as an internal 'surplus of sense'. For this reason, the logic at work in the master-signifier is homologous to the previously mentioned passage from epistemological limitation (differentiality) to ontological deadlock (self-referential difference).

We can now appreciate how the function of the master-signifier captures the core of Lacan's ontology of incompleteness. As with most Lacanian categories, it is predicated on a good dose of self-ignorance: it is impossible to fully discern why a certain word suddenly starts to function as a catalyst for a whole signifying chain, just as an individual remains fundamentally ignorant as to what it is that lends him- or herself the charisma of a master-signifier. Take the example of the Peter Sellers character in Hal Ashby's film *Being There* (1979). Chance (Sellers) is a simple-minded gardener who has devoted his entire life to two occupations: tending the garden and watching TV. One day, he is accidentally mistaken for a highly educated businessman named Chauncey Gardiner (instead of 'Chance the Gardener') and his simplistic utterances about gardens begin to be interpreted as highly refined metaphors concerning the state of American and world economy, to the extent that even the US President eventually seeks his advice. Like Chance, unknowingly the master-signifier makes lack of meaning (pure contingency) produce (necessary) meanings, arranging a series of floating words, symbols and events into a linear order. As Žižek put it succinctly: 'the Master-Signifier designates the point at which contingency intervenes in the very heart of necessity: the very establishment of necessity is the result of a contingent act' (Žižek 2012: 424). What we have here is the Lacanian topos of the implicit productivity of lack. Crisis itself is not only immanent to the human condition, but, precisely because ontological – i.e. rooted in, and the embodiment of, being – it is the condition of possibility of humanity. If our existence was not deeply antagonized by an 'impossible' feature which can only be captured by an 'empty signifier', there would be no such thing as a society. In a precise Kantian sense, we are the product of the encounter with our ontological limit.

This brings us back to Lacan's dialectics. The so-called objective world in which we dwell and interact is the result of what we might describe as an 'under the table' deal that the subject strikes with the 'paternal metaphor' at some unspecified moment during the formation of subjectivity. Elaborated by Lacan in the late 1950s, the concept of paternal metaphor indicates, essentially, the intervention of a signifier (the Name-of-the-Father) that substitutes the subject's unconditional demand for maternal love to allow for signification to take shape. The subject's alienation in the signifier (language) is therefore the necessary 'sacrifice' we make to enter a meaningful universe. Lacan names this sacrifice 'symbolic castration', inasmuch as only via castration do we create the conditions for our sociality out of our uncoordinated drives. Lacan

shows that subjectivity and objectivity, the central categories of our existence (insofar as they set the spatio-temporal conditions for knowledge and desire to operate), are the product of the subject's clandestine intervention into its own foundational and intractable antagonism. Such intervention involves the 'smuggling' of the heavy antagonistic load that defines the subject across the fictional border that separates self and world. It entails that, to become an 'I' that engages with 'objective reality', the subject *externalizes* its own unbearable, constitutive antagonism. Through this (r)ejection, the gap that constitutes the self (Kant's *abyssal* self-consciousness) is stealthily displaced onto external reality, where, as we have seen, it gets 'quilted' by master-signifiers.

From master-signifier to *objet a*, and back

At this stage, we need to introduce the second key term of our investigation, namely *objet a* – Lacan's term for the enigmatic, evanescent, fascinating object-*cause* of desire. This peculiar object is arguably the most original notion in Lacanian theory. From our viewpoint, it is important to underline that, in its mesmeric presence, *objet a* is not dissimilar to the master-signifier in concealing the *gap* whose radical disavowal determines the fantasmatic formation of the at least minimally meaningful world we inhabit. What it hides, just beneath its luring appearance, is a double fracture: the lack-to-ourselves that we always-already are, and the 'crack' that makes objective reality ontologically inconsistent. However, despite being formally homologous to the master-signifier as a paradoxical embodiment of lack, *objet a* performs a different function. Žižek (2012: 599) has suggested that the key difference between the two resides in the fact that in its quilting role, the master-signifier signals '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'. In terms of their relation to lack, *objet a* may therefore be seen as making such relation more explicit than the master-signifier; it represents a sort of 'thinner veil' to lack.

This leads to a crucial issue, both ontological and, implicitly, political. While master-signifier and *objet a* are masks hiding/embodying an ontological and potentially explosive lack, what truly matters when discussing crisis is to ascertain whether the absence they stand for actually manages to emerge and threaten the foundations of the symbolic framework they inhabit; or, conversely, whether they should be regarded as replaceable 'minimal units of sense' working *for* rather than *against* the ideological texture of the symbolic. It seems that if *objet a* is formally more useful to identify the

ontological inconsistency of any socio-symbolic order, it simultaneously lends itself to be shamelessly manipulated, to the effect of endlessly reproducing the fantasmatic lure that strengthens rather than undermines such order. The ambiguity of *objet a* consists precisely in this undecidable parallax shift between a devastating inconsistency and a conservative lure; while the 'shadow of nothingness' (the emptiness of the object embodying the lack in the subject) shines through it, at the same time such negativity is constantly neutralized by the fantasy in its pacifying function.

Woody Allen's film *Blue Jasmine* (2013) perfectly exemplifies the conservative role of fantasy in the context of a catastrophic event. Told in a series of flashbacks, the film revolves around Jasmine (Cate Blanchett), a New York socialite married to a wealthy yet corrupt financial trader Hal (Alec Baldwin). When Hal winds up in prison, where he commits suicide, Jasmine flies to San Francisco and moves in with her adopted working-class sister. Here it becomes apparent that Jasmine suffers from a severe form of delusion, since she continues to act and talk as if she was still among the '1 percent'. The turning point of the film, however, comes with the flashback where we are told that Hal's downfall had been instigated by Jasmine herself. After discovering her husband's many affairs, Jasmine had demanded an explanation from him, only to be informed of his decision to leave her for another woman he had fallen in love with. In a moment of blind psychotic fury, Jasmine had then phoned the FBI, reporting about Hal's fraudulent dealings, which had led to his arrest. It is at this point in the narrative that the symbolic complexity and implicit political significance of the Blanchett character come to the fore, well beyond the film's stereotypical representation of class difference. The striking revelation of Jasmine's betrayal is characterized by a distinct form of critical pessimism: in itself the event of the crisis, embodied by Hal's downfall triggered by Jasmine's act, will not shift the capitalist fantasy by an inch. The dream of a world filled with commodity-induced enjoyment, the film effectively tells us, will not suddenly evaporate with the breakdown of capitalism. In this respect, Jasmine is a modern Medea, betrayed and revengeful yet unable to let go of the alienating fantasy that had moulded her identity since her encounter with Hal. Lacan's message is simple: it is through the big Other (the symbolic/linguistic 'density' of the world around us, sustained by *objet a*) that we acquire meaning. So when a world undergoes a crisis, no matter how shattering, it nevertheless survives its own death for as long as it remains supported by the subject's unrelenting desire to invest in its fantasmatic constitution, which always represented its substance. As with biological death, a systemic crash tends to be neutralized by fantasy investment. Jasmine loses the material substance of her world (money and status) but remains attached to it through fantasy, which therefore reveals itself to be more material and substantial

than the concrete elements of that world. Although the consequences of this continued investment in capitalist fantasy are devastating for the subject (as shown by the film's last shot, where an utterly delusional Jasmine talks to herself on a park bench, rehearsing conversations from her 'lost' life), the capitalist framework is left unscarred. Jasmine, then, would seem to embody the dangers of a 'politics of the event' which neglects both the critical awareness of the crisis and the construction of a new fantasy sustained by new master-signifiers. A subtractive event alone does not suffice.

Given the inherent political ambiguity of *objet a*, it is revealing that, by introducing the theory of the four discourses (Master, Hysteric, University and Analyst) in *Seminar XVI* and *XVII* (1969–71), Lacan effectively pushed for its critical historicization. For Lacan, the ruse of capitalism, situated within the wider ruse of the University discourse of modernity, which signals the advent of scientific rationality, consists precisely in making the constitutive negativity of *objet a* – its status as, literally, entropic waste – *less and less available* by valorizing it via the commodity form. As Alenka Zupančič has put it: 'The revolution related to capitalism is none other than this: it founds the means of making the waste count' (2006: 170). We therefore argue that in the passage from pre-capitalist to capitalist times, the pervasive commodification of *objet a* turns the latter into a master-signifier, securing the ideological closure of the capitalist structure. As in the Coke example, the enjoyment attached to the commodity becomes a master-signifier – Coke itself becomes its compulsive enjoyment. The passage from the discourse of the Master to the discourse of the University, then, determines what we might call an unheard of 'masterisation' of *objet a*: what one finds at the core of one's desire is not so much *objet a* qua entropic waste, with its traumatic-liberating potential, but rather a cruel master demanding more and more obedience ('Enjoy!'). *Objet a*, then, would seem to undergo a radical involution: from an inaccessible remainder to most effective seal of the signifying operation.

There is an amusing scene in Federico Fellini's Oscar-winning film *Amarcord* (1973) which nicely epitomizes the historical shift in the logic of desire. 'Uncle Teo', confined to a lunatic asylum, is taken for a day out in the countryside by his visiting family. Taking advantage of a moment of distraction, he climbs up a tree and begins to shout, louder and louder, that 'he wants a woman'. Every attempt to get him down fails miserably, since no one can give him what he wants. The decision is eventually made to call the asylum for help. An ambulance arrives shortly after, carrying a 'midget nun', whose face is entirely covered by a large hat. She climbs up the tree, shouts a few incomprehensible words at uncle Teo, and quickly succeeds where the others had failed: uncle Teo tamely comes down and obediently follows the nun into the ambulance, smiling and greeting everyone as if nothing had happened. Lacan allows us

to read this scene against its more explicit signification (an ironic indictment of the authoritarianism of the Catholic Church): the harsh nun is a metaphor for woman, not only as the 'other side' of the sublimated Lady qua catalyst of most of Fellini's films, but more crucially as *objet a* turned master-signifier. Paradoxically, she is the woman uncle Teo wants: an authoritarian master. Perhaps this is where we are today, in a society that bombards us with injunctions to enjoy to such an extent that the entropy of enjoyment, its surplus coincidental with lack – as Žižek puts it, 'objet a … is an excess that subtracts' (2012: 559) – is increasingly experienced as a demand for authority. This is ultimately the reason why the predominant mode of sexuality within the discourse of the University is that of perversion (in line with our example: not the sublimated Lady but the dominatrix).

Here, then, we encounter, the deadlock at the heart of *objet a*, which Lacan fully acknowledged when he theorized the four discourses, representing four social links dealing in different ways with their intrinsic impossibility. As Serge Lesourd (2006) has put it, each of these discourses expresses a 'failure of intersubjectivity'. This failure can be better understood via Lacan's conceptualization of the drive. In *Seminar VII*, Lacan (1992: 127) states that the drive 'can in no way be limited to a psychological notion. It is an absolutely fundamental ontological notion, which is a response to a crisis of consciousness that we are not necessarily obliged to identify, since we are living it.' Updating Freud's discovery of the death-drive as a compulsively repeated 'pressure' (*Drang*) against the narcissistic labouring of the ego, Lacan turned the drive into both the central aspect of clinical treatment and the paradigmatic theme of his negative ontology. We should insist that ontology, in Lacan, implies the dialectical acknowledgement of the basic negativity of the objects of the drive, which simultaneously captures the fundamental de-centredness of the subject. We are not speaking of negativity as complete absence of determinations, as a sort of pneumatic void (non-being); rather, the negative in Lacan is to be intended *dialectically*, as a mode of presence of what is located at the very heart of the subject's self-alienation in/through the Other, which also marks the ontological incompleteness of the Other itself. The Lacanian subject is this essential, concrete 'presence of an absence', which simultaneously corresponds to the abyssal gap within the symbolic framework that sustains what we normally call 'objective reality'.

In connection with drive, the notion that best epitomizes such understanding of negativity is probably *anxiety*, which in Lacan indicates the subject's confrontation with an object – the Other's *jouissance* – that cannot be brought under the binding rule of the 'I' of synthetic unity, i.e. under the domain of narcissistic illusions. The fact that Lacan (2004: 105) claims, against Freud, that anxiety 'is not without an object', confirms the paradoxical status of a

negativity that enjoys a fundamentally concrete presence. The seminar on anxiety (Book X, 1962–63) aims precisely to connect the ontological status of negativity with an object that, as such, makes subjectivity vacillate, insofar as it threatens to deprive it of the framework through which a seemingly transparent and seamless relation to reality is established. For Lacan, the subject proper (as a category of negative ontology) emerges in such relations as to objects of anxiety, which satisfy the drive in sustaining a lack of enjoyment that undermines ordinary identificatory processes.

Thinking *objet a* as object of the drive places us in a better position to grasp the critical dimension at work in Lacan's theory of the four discourses. The historicist dimension of the discourses should be measured, first and foremost, in connection with the attempted neutralization of the intrinsically disruptive aspect of *objet a*. Lacan laments that under the University discourse the possibility of experiencing the social link's negative point of articulation is drastically reduced. As anticipated, our reading of such claim is that, with the advent of capitalism and the type of rationality that defines it, *objet a begins to work as a master-signifier*. By disabling *objet a* as the anxiety-laden object of the drive, the ubiquitous 'masterisation' of *jouissance* that characterizes the modern epoch would seem to introduce us to that totally 'administered' society already chastised by Adorno, Horkheimer and their fellow Frankfurt School sociologists.

Indeed, it is in relation to his discourse of the University that Lacan would seem to come closest to sharing the pessimistic standpoint of critical theory, insofar as such standpoint is a reflection on the *historical reconfiguration of power* within modern scientific rationality. Lacan's criticism of the University discourse responds to the same preoccupations that, already in 1944, tormented Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: scientific knowledge qua instrumental ratio is becoming increasingly 'totalitarian' by inaugurating a discourse where the anxiety and *jouissance* associated with the drive tend to be subsumed under an ever-shifting object-enjoyment, whereby the encounter with the self-difference of the object is positivized as sheer differentiality. What gets lost in the process is the primary ingredient for social transformation, namely the experience, practical and theoretical, of the ontological deadlock intrinsic in every given discourse or ideology.

However, this analysis needs correcting. The fundamental difference between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Adorno's brand of critical theory concerns precisely the old notion of 'dialectical mediation' – a point that we shall develop further in Chapter 5, in relation to Giorgio Agamben's philosophy. To put it succinctly, Lacan developed an ontology of lack based on the *negative* correlation between the two traditional terms of the dialectic, namely subject

and object. The polemical drive within critical theory, on the other hand, emerges from a dualistic conception of the historicized antagonism between modern thought (in its increasingly alienating rationality) and its somewhat 'unspoilt' other (matter, nature, event, utopia, etc.). Even when dialectically construed (as in Adorno), this dualism is overcome by the hypothesis of its resolution in the conflation or overlap of the two terms. From this (critical theory's) perspective, the totalitarian dimension of instrumental rationality can only be critiqued if we posit a – utopian or messianic – 'vanishing' point of contact between nature and culture, *physis* and *nomos*. While Lacan can be said to have started from a similar theoretical premise, he eventually endorsed an altogether different vision, which Žižek (2012: 819) has characterized as fundamentally Hegelian: he abandoned the search for the overlap (or synthesis) between the two dialectical terms and came to the realization that it is precisely the gap between them, the unbridgeable distance that decrees their separation, which constitutes them dialectically, keeping them together precisely via their mutually shared inconsistency. It is, in other words, negativity that acts as mediator, insofar as the negative qua self-split is constitutive of both of them: it is ontological; it designates the point where they intersect, thus constituting each other.

What Lacan rejects, then, is the hypothesis that the central dichotomy within Western thought can be resolved at a threshold level where, for instance, the symbolic collapses into the Real, or subject and object coalesce. While there is no such synthesis, this is not because the opposing entities are radically different and therefore incongruent; rather, it is because the gap between them is ontological, it traverses being itself. In Žižek's succinct words: '"All there is" is the interstice, the non-self-coincidence of Being, the ontological non-closure of the order of Being' (2012: 822).

4

The Capitalist discourse: Digging its own grave

One of the most pressing concerns in Lacan's theorization of the four discourses is the attempt to identify the main problem with capitalism and its self-defining injunction to produce, valorize and consume. In the seminars on the discourses (from XVI to XVIII, covering the period 1968–71) we find continuous references to capitalism and its structural composition. The centrality of this theme is confirmed by the fact that, in his address to the University of Milan on 12 May 1972, as well as in parts of *Seminar XVIII* (1970–71, see Lacan 2007c) and *Radiophonie* (1970), Lacan introduced a fifth discourse, which he aptly named the 'discourse of the Capitalist'. While he did not clarify its meaning, this addition complemented the socially critical analyses already present in the previous four discourses, and particularly in those of the Master and of the University. In fact, we argue that Master, University and Capitalist are strictly interrelated discourses whose primary purpose is to capture a shift in the social link of modernity whereby mastery is not eliminated but rendered more efficient. More precisely, University and Capitalist are complementary in showing how, in modernity, mastery increases its authoritarian grip by making itself invisible and therefore potentially unassailable. At the same time, however, Lacan tells us that the social link embodied by the new mastery of the Capitalist discourse is 'headed for a blowout': '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 1972: 48).

The Real of the discourses

Before evaluating the above statement, let us briefly remind ourselves of what is at stake in Lacan's discourse theory. The four discourses were developed

during the 'second phase' of Lacan's teaching, which had begun with *Seminar XI* (1964) and the 'push to the Real' therein articulated. By theorizing these highly formalized discourses Lacan confronts his growing concern with how to circumscribe the residual Real of *jouissance* (understood as disturbingly excessive/lacking enjoyment) within the signifying structure. In this respect, these discourses represent a milestone in Lacan's turn towards the formalization of language, inasmuch as they provide him with dynamic formulas to attempt to account for the ways in which the disruptive Real is subsumed in the social link. Later on, with *Seminar XX*, Lacan will inaugurate the 'third (and last) phase' of his teaching (see Voruz and Wolf 2007), marked by the awareness of the inextricable conflation of the Symbolic and the Real (language and *jouissance* are now seen as completely bound up). For the purpose of our analysis, the focus will be placed on Lacan's dualistic approach to the Symbolic and the Real as exemplarily represented in the four discourses. This is not meant to detract from the significance of Lacan's later conceptualization of language as 'inundated with *jouissance*', but only to enable us to focus on his explicit critique of the capitalist constellation. To do precisely this, we should keep in mind that Lacan understands discourse as a signifying structure that moulds specific social bonds.[1] As an unchanging formal framework composed of four positions whose rotation illuminates different historical constellations, Lacan's notion of discourse is meant to capture, first and foremost, the ontological failure of signification. More crucially, it tells us that it is precisely this failure or impasse that makes communication and sociality possible. Our socio-symbolic universe, in other words, is dialectically sustained and substantiated by its fundamental meaninglessness.

Each discourse has four fixed positions (agent, other, product/effect and truth) which can be occupied by four different formalized terms (S_1, S_2, *a*, $) representing, respectively, the master-signifier, knowledge, the object-cause of desire and the barred subject. These terms stand in a fixed relationship with each other and rotate anticlockwise by a quarter turn, thus giving shape to the four different discourses. Each one of them begins with the *agent* speaking to a 'passive' receiver named *other*. The result of this speech can be verified in its distorted *effect* or product. Finally, we have the position of *truth*, which gives the properly psychoanalytic inflexion to Lacan's theory, since there we realize that the agent was only apparently in charge: the truth about his discourse was always somewhere else (in the unconscious). The position of truth, which gives a tangible form to the ontological inconsistency of any

[1]In his Milan talk, Lacan defines discourse as that which, 'in the ordering of what can be produced by the existence of language, makes a social link function'. For Lacan, there is no natural social discourse, but only the ones brought about by the alienating intervention of language (Lacan 1972: 51).

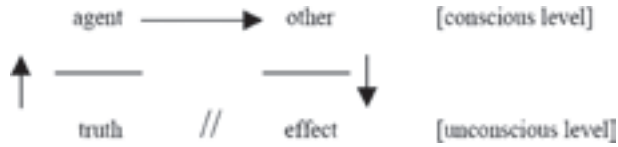

FIGURE 1

communicative logic and social bond, manifests itself in two ways: first, on the upper, or conscious, level (agent and other) we have a relationship of *impossibility*; then, in the lower, or unconscious, level (effect and truth), one of *impotence*. Let us begin with what goes on in the upper level: since the agent's speech is driven by a desire that remains hidden underneath while constituting his truth, the message to the other can only exist as a distorted one. This botched communication becomes, in the lower level, a relationship of impotence, since the effect of the agent's link with the other (what the other makes of the agent's speech) is inevitably incongruent with the truth of the agent. What needs to be stressed is that the social bond described by each of the discourses is coterminous with a fundamental inconsistency that manifests itself at the level of conscious speech and unconscious truth.

As anticipated, the four terms filling in the four positions of the discourse are locked in an unchanging relation with each other. The logic behind their arrangement reflects Lacan's persuasion that the subject does not pre-exist but *is a consequence of* language, of the interplay of signifiers ('a signifier is what represents a subject for another signifier', Lacan 1998a: 157). From the perspective of today's capitalist crisis, we are interested in two specific shifts described in Lacan's theory, namely 1) The anticlockwise regression from the discourse of the Master to that of the University, which captures a crucial change in the role of the master-signifier, and 2) Lacan's previously mentioned hypothesis of a fifth discourse, that of the Capitalist, which does not follow the rotating logic of the other four discourses but is arrived at by way of the inversion of $S_1/\$$ into $\$/S_1$ in the discourse of the Master:

Discourse of the University

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

Discourse of the Master

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

Discourse of the Capitalist

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

What strikes us is how in the two discourses through which Lacan endeavours to demonstrate how our social link is in danger of imploding (University and Capitalist), the master-signifier (S_1) occupies the position of unconscious truth, while agency is taken over by knowledge (S_2) and the barred subject ($) respectively. In both cases, the truth about the agent (whether knowledge or the subject) is constituted by the disavowed master-signifier. This means that although at the helm of the social link we seem to have either an objectively neutral agent (knowledge) or the hysterical subject driven by its unquenchable desire,[2] in truth we are constantly 'under orders', obeying the dictates of a harsh master whose injunctions are rendered more effective by their invisibility. Furthermore, it is precisely because mastery occupies the displaced position of truth that with the University and the Capitalist discourses we are immersed in ideology: we act *as if* we were free agents, self-determining our lives, while in fact we are at the mercy of an unconscious command. As Žižek has repeatedly argued, ideology is at its most dominant when its injunctions are not experienced directly. With the University, the disavowed ideological command is 'You must know!',[3] while with Capitalism it is 'You must enjoy!'. In psychoanalytic terms, both are socially coercive and therefore profoundly ideological superego injunctions despite appearing to us as spontaneous, natural human dispositions.

Let us quickly sketch how these two discourses function. In the University, which amounts to the objective discourse of modern science, knowledge somewhat outrageously attempts to directly address and control *a*, the inherently *lost* object-cause of desire, producing nothing but subjective alienation ($) and at the same time precluding any relation between master-signifier and subject (S_1 // $). In the Capitalist discourse – which signals another regression in respect of the discourse of the Master and yet one that, by not following the quarter turn of the other discourses, would seem to found a new 'universe of discourse'[4] – we encounter the perverse situation

[2]The discourse of the Hysteric also has the barred subject in the position of the agent.

[3]Lacan explicitly links the discourse of the University to the University as such, for example when, in 1968 (*Seminar XVI*), he tells the rebellious students that they find themselves increasingly caught up within 'the market of knowledge': 'The appearance in the reform of a notion like that of credits (*unites de valeur*), in the little bits of paper that you may be granted, the unit of value is that! It is the sign of what that knowledge is going more and more to become in this field, in the market that is called the University' (Lacan 2006b, seminar of 20 November 1968). Lacan reads the introduction of credit points in French universities as a confirmation of capitalist valorization affecting the cultural sphere.

[4]See Levi Bryant's article 'Žižek's New Universe of Discourse' (Bryant 2008), where the Capitalist discourse is seen as opening up an entirely new constellation disengaged from the previous four and potentially populated by three additional discourses that are defined as those of bio-power, critical theory and immaterial production.

whereby the barred subject, by definition powerless in its self-alienation, is empowered (as agent) to set in motion a productive knowledge. If on the one hand the outcome is formally the same as with the Master (since also the Capitalist discourse produces *a* qua lack), on the other hand we register a profound change in what takes place on the lower (unconscious) level, where S_1, the disavowed master of \$, is unable to relate to the effect/product of its discourse. If we translate Lacan's mathemes into their capitalist equivalents, the meaning of this impotence becomes clearer. The agent of the discourse of the Capitalist, whether the capitalist worker or consumer, is the subject of the unconscious (\$) paradoxically situated in a position of command, believing himself to be omnipotent. The capitalist worker/consumer addresses the other as 'expert knowledge' (an illusorily neutral and therefore seemingly all-powerful technological or scientific knowledge) and the effect of this link is the production of surplus-value, i.e. *valorized* surplus, a distortion of the surplus within *jouissance* as deadlock of any social link. Then, crucially, we arrive at the truth of the whole discourse, embodied by capitalism as master-signifier.

Goal and aim of the capitalist drive

Now we can see why Lacan insists that the discourse of the Capitalist is 'headed for a blowout'. If what plagued the discourse of the Master was the radical ambiguity of the master-signifier, expressed as S_1/\$, the new Capitalist discourse is intimately beset by the fact that the capitalist qua disavowed commanding authority is unable to relate to what it instigates via the desiring subject, namely the accumulation of surplus-value (S_1//*a*). The paradox is that capitalism as a mode of production is disconnected from the end product of the mechanism it triggers, for the simple reason that it ignores how the accumulation of surplus-value is necessarily mediated by the worker/consumer's capacity not merely to produce, but especially to purchase the objects of desire. The relation between capitalism and surplus-value is therefore *explosive* insofar as it has to rely on dynamics of production/consumption that can never be brought under control. Put differently, while the authoritarian drive of capitalism works well to keep the consumer subjugated ('Enjoy!' as an ideological injunction), it is impotent with regard to its actual goal. Here we should consider how for Lacan the *goal* of the drive does not coincide with its *aim*, since the drive always aims at missing its explicit goal – that is to say, the object of the drive is *jouissance*, the paradoxical satisfaction brought about by the lack of satisfaction (see Lacan 1998: 178–81). The point, then, is that there exists a gap between the capitalist drive – its *konstante Kraft* or unrelenting tension, to use Freud's words – and

what it explicitly sets out to achieve: while the explicit goal is profit, the aim is the endless, self-destructive continuation of the 'pulsating' fixation that *is expected* to bring profit. Ultimately, as today's crisis is demonstrating, the production–consumption axis can be counterproductive precisely because of the capitalist drive towards endless expansion. Furthermore, Lacan adds that the drive manifests itself in 'the mode of a headless subject, for everything is articulated in it in terms of tension' (181). There is, in other words, no way of 'talking sense' into the drive, no way of constraining it into a rational social model, since its insistence is 'headless', beyond normally functioning (neurotic) rationality. The drive cannot understand what it does, just like Dostoevsky's autobiographical character from his 1867 novella *The Gambler*: 'I laid down the largest stake allowed … and lost it. Then, getting hot, I pulled out all I had left, staked it on the same number, and lost again, after which I walked away from the table as if I were stunned, I could not even grasped what had happened to me' (Dostoevsky 1996: 18). Capitalism is by definition 'casino capitalism'. Lacan's discourse of the Capitalist, then, strongly disproves Adam Smith's famous metaphor about the 'invisible hand' of the marketplace as the ultimate guarantee of social and economic cohesion. In *Seminar XVI* (19 March 1969) Lacan already claimed that

> capitalism reigns because it is closely connected with this rise in the function of science. Only even this power, this camouflaged power, this secret and, it must also be said, anarchic power, I mean divided against itself, and this without any doubt through its being clothed with this rise of science, it is as embarrassed as a fish on a bicycle now. (Lacan 2007a)

In relation to the crisis of the Capitalist discourse, Lacan plays exactly on the double meaning of consumption: on the one hand we must consume (enjoy) endlessly, on the other 'it [capitalism] consumes itself' (Lacan 1972). With reference to this latter form of consumption, it is crucial to underline how Lacan's discourses of University and Capitalism are socially critical not only because they focus on the subtly disavowed form of mastery at work in modernity (inclusive of liberal democracy as its political face); but especially because they identify the ontological inconsistency of these structural sequences, which is substantial and as such denotes the fragility and ultimate impotence of the social links they embody.

Nevertheless, Lacan regards the discourse of the Capitalist as 'wildly clever'. This, we argue, has to do with its creating the illusion that the desiring subject is in a position of full autonomy, while at the same time secretly forcing desire to take the one-way direction of producing and consuming commodities. Through this ruse, capitalism makes sure that no desire can

be stronger than the desire to work and consume. With the two faces of modernity (University as scientific discourse of objectivity and Capitalism), minus is camouflaged as plus and as such employed within the conscious signifying chain (on the upper level of the discourse). With the Capitalist discourse, this camouflaged plus is the worker/consumer himself, whose 'substanceless subjectivity' is surreptitiously invested with an all-powerful command ($ in the position of agency).[5] Yet, the more he enjoys his power, the emptier he becomes, since the true object-*cause* of desire (*a* qua lack) keeps on eluding him. The whole point, however, is that the intrinsic unruliness of the split subject is neutralized via this unheard of elevation to a position of command, as evidenced by slogans such as 'consumer is king'. While, as we shall see shortly, a similar operation of camouflaging is also at work in the discourse of the University, let us first go back to the specific difference between Master and Capitalist.

In *Seminar XVII*, Lacan is at pains to show that in the 'old' discourse of the Master loss was available as an indicator of the basic impotence of that social link. With the Master, the very attempt to set up a consistent connection between signifiers ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$) can only result in the production of 'lost objects' representing the short-circuit in signification as well as the hidden impotence of the master-signifier, whose ultimate truth is $. The more effectively the master-signifier qua agent signals to the other signifiers that '*il y a de l'Un*' (that there is a semblance of the One, of a consistent symbolic order – in other words that 'there is a metalanguage'), the more his actual impotence can be denounced. As Nobus and Quinn (2005: 133) have put it: 'The threat posed by the subject of the unconscious to the master concerns the revelation of the master's fundamental impotence, his self-undermining dependence on the Other to establish a sense of meaning.' By contrast, with the advent of modernity (scientific discourse) such impotence, in itself inerasable from the social link, is valorized and turned into surplus, to the extent that it becomes the key to capitalist accumulation. In Lacanian terms, what takes place within capitalist (but also communist) modernity is, succinctly put, the 'wildly clever' distortion of loss. If, before the University discourse entered the scene, loss as related to (the slave's) production was testament to a real, substantial lack, with modernity this veritable 'roadblock' is openly endorsed as a positive feature of the system, which implies that negativity is further

[5]One can notice here both the similarity and the difference between the discourse of the Capitalist and that of the Hysteric, where $ is also in the position of agency. While consumers can indeed be seen as hysterics on account of the gap between their status ($) and the position they occupy (agent), they nevertheless do not address the master-signifier but knowledge, thus believing to retain a stronger control over the signifying chain.

repressed. However, since the repressed does not disappear but 'returns', at some point one must pay a price for this profound act of distortion. The specific price one pays is, today, generally known with the term 'crisis'. And, as we have shown, the fact that today's responses to crisis are themselves nothing but attempts to positivize its impact suggests, of course, that we are still operating from within the ideological framework of capitalism, whose strongest weapon is the ability to turn any trace of negativity or contradiction – and thus any potential hindrance to its functioning – into an asset.

The ambiguity of enjoyment

We have argued that the discourse of the Capitalist should be read from the point of view of the capitalist worker/consumer. The capitalist agent is the barred subject inasmuch as he never stops working and consuming – insofar as work and consumerism are ideological categories regardless of whether we are in or out of work. The status of the barred subject in the Capitalist discourse is therefore completely different from the one he had in the Master's discourse. Since now he is in charge and sets knowledge to work, $ is, on the one hand, typically characterized by an insatiable desire – a desire for which there is no object but lack itself – and, on the other hand, supported by the knowledge articulated in the big Other, the battery of signifiers that he thinks he has a hold on (S_2). What needs to be highlighted is the profound difference in the two signifying chains, despite the fact that, in both, knowledge is articulated in the big Other: we go from $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$ (Master) to $\$ \rightarrow S_2$ (Capitalist). In the first sequence the master-signifier is in a relationship of command with regard to S_2, and remains ignorant about the knowledge therein expressed; in the second, the capitalist subject is both *empty* and *filled* with the knowledge that sustains the capitalist social link, namely the knowledge about commodities and surplus value. Despite remaining a barred subject, the capitalist worker/consumer qua agent is constantly deluded into believing that 'he can get what he wants' (if only he pays for it); or, which amounts to the same thing, that *he knows how to satisfy his desire*. The fact that this never works out is, of course, the ruse upon which capitalism is based: against our illusion of constant gratification, satisfaction is forever delayed. What Lacan seems to underscore is the specific historical condition of the worker/consumer within capitalist ideology as someone who is simultaneously clueless about what he wants and arrogant enough to persuade himself that he has at his disposal the necessary knowledge to satisfy all his desires (a knowledge provided, in practice, by technology, advertising, experts, talk shows and the media in general, and of course incarnated by money). The perversion of the Capitalist discourse lies precisely in this attitude of 'fetishistic disavowal': I know full

well that the value of commodities (money) is a fake, and yet I act as if it were real. Even though *objet a* remains fundamentally hidden in the lower right-hand side, the subject within the Capitalist discourse dupes himself into believing that he can access its secret.

With specific reference to the desire and enjoyment promoted by capitalism, the entire system thrives on the fact that we *do not* enter into a relationship with *jouissance*, i.e. that we perceive enjoyment not as lack but as a fluid type of plenitude, a ubiquitous substance that, by telling us that happiness is within reach, it fills our life and confers meaning upon it. Here we are again faced by a parallax: although enjoyment in its deepest connotation is always a painfully frustrating lack, we feed our social-symbolic order by perceiving this lack as a form of plenitude that colonizes every aspect of our lives. Emptiness becomes a category of an untrascendable plenitude. This ambiguous split between lack and plenitude is indeed constitutive of enjoyment. While it is true, in theory, that the pre-packaged enjoyment offered on the market is actually *jouis-sans*, namely the lack of enjoyment that structures desire, in practice the commodity-form feeds the pleasure principle – it makes sure that there is enough oil in the wheels of capitalist ideology. Žižek claims that when we break a Kinder egg what we find inside is nothing, i.e. a stupid plastic toy equivalent to the void at the heart of the commodity (see Žižek 2003: 145). This is undoubtedly true; yet, what this claim misses is the basic fact that the fetishistic objectification of emptiness named commodity actually fills our lives, conferring upon them the fantasmatic support they need in order to be considered 'worth living'. It is for this reason that every consumer is by definition 'childish'. Even the argument that the enjoyment marketed by consumerism is directly connected with depressive affects, or what Freud called *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (discontent in civilization), fails to consider the larger picture where these affects are always-already 'hijacked' and positivized. Although, in truth, by giving in to the logic of consumerism we betray our desire and choose to amass the 'ersatz-enjoyment' prescribed by our *gourmand* superego, which can have devastating effects, the bottom line remains that within our social link we acquire meaning only in direct relation with the anodyne enjoyment embodied by the object-commodity in front of us (whether a real object or a life-experience) – to the deplorable extent that we have grown totally unable to even imagine a social link that is not ruled by commodity fetishism. The sanity of our entire existence depends on the thrilling consumption of arrays of ever-changing products, lifestyles and fashions, without which we would be deprived of the very framework in which meaning, for us, is inscribed and articulated. In this respect, we should avoid all illusions and fully endorse Lacan's lesson on subjectivation: we form our identity via the big Other. The simple lesson is that the 'madness' of the capitalist drive, and by implication its constitutive imbalance that cuts across different historical

epochs and superstructures, is not only fed but also offset by the 'fetishistic common sense' of consumer demands masqueraded as desire. This is how our symbolic order registers our inclusion, gets our approval, and therefore manages to retain a degree of balance.

If, despite a crisis that is proving to be catastrophic, the capitalist framework retains its appeal, it is because we continue fetishizing its fruits, which in turn blinds us to the apocalyptic scenario looming on the horizon. And, it must be added, we enjoy its fruits because, even if only in fantasy, they seem to neutralize the inherent excess of our lives. The debilitation of subjectivity under capitalist conditions is a guarantee of its durability. Working and consuming are compulsively therapeutic; if this is not enough, a range of other stabilizing forces are ready at hand to cure any related existential turbulence, from (the return of) religion and tradition to welfarism, love of local and green economies, and of course the ever-thriving pharmaceutical market. Thus, in a weird loop, existential angst is both cause and effect of consumerism: capitalism produces nothing but the very angst it promises to cure. And as angst-ridden workers/consumers, we enjoy by keeping *jouissance* at a safe distance. In fact, the injunction to enjoy is always-already kept under surveillance by market forces. It operates within the framework of a well-ordered regime of enjoyment that has been at the heart of capitalism since its Puritanical origins. Excess must be perceived as available everywhere, while it is simultaneously depoliticized, criminalized, deprived of its disturbing sting. Ultimately, the market behind consumerism, like the culture industry for Adorno and Horkheimer, is at the same time 'pornographic and prudish' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 140). We are egged on to experience all kinds of excessive pleasures, but only insofar as they already contain their own antibodies.

In *Seminar XVI*, Lacan had observed that although the reinvestment of profits 'does not put the means of production at the service of pleasure', we nevertheless end up with a 'practice of pleasure'. In fact, this practice is forced on us and at the same time must be experienced as the result of our spontaneous yearning, so as to prevent 'the sovereign pleasure of contemplative *far niente*'. The decisive claim here is that the success of the pleasure principle must be measured against its power to intervene 'in the catacombs', 'in the underground *Acheronta*', namely in our unconscious. Any access to enjoyment, Lacan reminds us, takes place through the complex topology of the subject. This is to say that no matter how excessive and potentially destabilizing our experience of enjoyment under capitalism is, it nevertheless falls under the tempering jurisdiction of the pleasure principle. Although we aim right at the heart of enjoyment, all we can hope for are 'practices of recuperation'. Moreover, precisely in preventing what Horace had called *otium cum dignitate* – the dignified subtraction from the imperative to

work – capitalist hedonism proves all the more coercive (see Lacan 2006b, seminar of 15 January 1969). In brief, at a subjective level capital intervenes in the battle between the pleasure principle and its beyond by relentlessly converting the latter back into the former – which explains why, for instance, the injunction to enjoy is today primarily marketed as 'enjoy wellbeing', i.e. 'enjoy without enjoyment'.

The political upshot of all this is that any subjective resistance from within the current reigning ideology is more likely to end up being a 'generalised degeneration' than a real subversion. As Lacan told the students during 1968, their 'taking the floor' was more akin to 'taking tobacco or coke' than 'the taking of any particular Bastille' (see Lacan 2006b, seminar of 20 November 1968). Along these lines, in his 'Impromptu at Vincennes' he called the Marxist–Leninist students 'helots', referring to those serfs owned by the Spartan state in ancient Greece. When one of the students-agitators scornfully called Lacan a 'liberal', he replied:

> I am, like everybody is, liberal only to the extent that I am antiprogressive. With the caveat that I am caught up in a movement that deserves to be called progressive, since it is progressive to see the psychoanalytic discourse founded, in so far as the latter completes the circle that could perhaps enable you to locate what it is exactly that you are rebelling against – which doesn't stop that thing from continuing extremely well. And the first to collaborate with this, right here at Vincennes, are you, for you fulfill the role of helots of this regime. You don't know what that means either? The regime is putting you on display. It says, 'Look at them enjoying!'. (Lacan 2007b: 208)

The University and Capitalist discourses are one and the same here. Lacan insists that the social link where students find themselves domesticates and integrates all excesses, turning even Marxist–Leninist revolutionaries into surplus-value. Hence his point that the students have failed to realize how capitalism thrives on their excitement about the (sexual) revolution in the same way as it thrives on the excitement of consumers in front of a shop window. The students, Lacan charges, are unable to see how their revolutionary enthusiasm is one of the effects of the paradigm shift determined by the onslaught of the discourse where capitalism flourishes. From this point of view, 1968 represented another chance for capital to demonstrate its ability to valorize surplus-enjoyment. In 1968, capital 'enjoys' (makes a profit out of) looking at students enjoying/copulating (either enjoying playing at the revolution, or enjoying the sexual revolution). The revolutionary spirit was hijacked and turned into a valorized spectacle, a commodity whose 'explosive potential' was not only constantly monitored, but also scientifically produced and regulated by the perverted master of the Capitalist discourse. The explosion of political

jouissance (extra-parliamentary splinter groups, armed struggle, etc.) was itself dexterously manoeuvred by capital (whose sole interest was to retain its hegemonic role during a period of crisis), with the kind intercession of its historical political ally, liberal democracy. Precisely by virtue of the background presence of the market stage-managing social upheavals, Lacan warns the leftists to 'sound the depth of their commitments':

> Meaning is provided by the sense each of us has of being part of this world, that is, of his little family and of everything that revolves around it. Each of you – I am speaking even for the leftists – you are more attached to it than you care to know and would do well to sound the depths of your attachment. A certain number of biases are your daily fare and limit the import of your insurrections to the shortest term, to the term, quite precisely, that gives you no discomfort – they certainly don't change your world view, for that remains perfectly spherical. (Lacan 1998b: 42)

What happens, however, when a structural crisis begins to concretely deprive us of our specific consumer enjoyment? Does our worldview remain 'perfectly spherical'? Perhaps the most likely outcome is a collective sinking into a delusional condition where lack of enjoyment is compensated by the pathological intensification of fantasy. Perhaps Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine*, previously referred to, offers us a gloomy premonition of what will happen if we keep relating to today's crisis without both a critical conscience of it, and the creative desire to completely rethink our social constellation, inclusive of its specific forms of ideological enjoyment. The risk ahead, at least for the immediate future, is that we become pathologically delusional like Jasmine, which will inevitably hamper any attempt at radically reconfiguring the big Other. In fact, a generalized delusional attachment to the lost fruits of capitalism is more likely to usher in and fuel new forms of authoritarian political power, whose role will be to keep the capitalist matrix in its commanding place despite its chronic historical inability to produce any kind of growth.

If all this is still relevant today, then the pressing question to ask is: what chances do we have to 'become subjects' and take responsibility for our actions in the current condition of capitalist crisis?

Work's *jouissance*

If one way of reading the discourse of the Capitalist is to show how it confronts the problem of the positivization of loss from the point of view of the capitalist subject (the barred subject in the commanding position), the discourse of

the University provides the same critique from a wider systemic perspective (knowledge, here, is the agent). As anticipated, the two discourses should be read together, since, we argue, a crucial feature of modernity is that the inordinate weight associated with scientific knowledge and the type of rationality it purports is the flipside of the subject-turned-worker/consumer's arrogation of wisdom with regard to desire and enjoyment. We inhabit, in other words, a discourse where the aim of knowledge is to reduce all aspects of life to abstract values to be produced and consumed. This is the main feature of the discourse of the University criticized by Lacan, which leads us to the often overlooked yet key Lacanian understanding of work.

The central theme in *Seminar XVII* is probably the idea that knowledge and work cannot be seamlessly valorized, and glorified, without serious consequences for the human congregation. The moment 'knowledge that is put to work' (Lacan repeatedly talks of *savoir-faire*) begins to be valorized – i.e. the moment the capitalist buys the means of production to extract surplus-value from the workers' labour power – is also the moment a profound transformation takes place at the level of what Lacan calls surplus-*jouissance*. The latter captures precisely the lack that is consubstantial with every social link: an entropic, always-already lost dimension that accompanies the entry into play of the signifier. Everything for Lacan begins with language. Our universe of sense, the discourse in which we are immersed, depends on how the battery of signifiers is organized. More crucially, while overlaying the world with meanings, such intervention produces the effect of a loss of meaning, and that is what makes every discourse fundamentally inconsistent and at the same time vulnerable. Differently put, language splits us: the signifier introduces a cut that separates the articulation of 'known knowledge' from a knot of 'unknown knowledge', and this frustrating division is what defines both the status of the subject and that of the symbolic order (discourse).

In *Seminar XVII*, Lacan paradoxically defines knowledge as the 'Other's *jouissance*' (Lacan 2007b: 14–15), by which he means the limit-dimension, the proverbial 'bone in the throat' of any discourse whatsoever insofar as it is defined by the fact that it carries meaning and sustains our experience. Hence the breach between *savoir* and *connaissance*: the former stands for an obscure knowledge that overlaps with *jouissance* and, as such, brings to light the gaping hole at the heart of the 'closed whole' (30) that constitutes the latter. *Savoir*, then, has to do with unconscious enjoyment, while *connaissance* is episteme. In focusing on *savoir*, and specifically *savoir-faire*, Lacan calls into question the rationality of modern science and, within it, the concept of productivity embraced by capitalist and socialist economies alike. It is a social link where 'everything is merely to be counted – where *energy itself* is nothing other than what is counted' (80, our emphasis). At the same time,

the goal is to demonstrate that despite its obdurate reliance on *connaissance*, the University discourse presents 'an element of impossibility' – even though, as anticipated, it is much more difficult to locate.[6] Crucially, the senseless remainder of the process of signification enjoys a substantial status in Lacan, inasmuch as it constitutes the Real, the hard kernel impervious to signification around which our being is woven:

> Sense, if I may say so, is responsible for being. It does not even have any other sense. The only thing is that it was observed some time ago that this is insufficient for carrying the weight – the weight, precisely, of existence. A curious thing that non-sense carries the weight. It grabs you by the stomach. (56–7)

In pre-capitalist times, the 'substantial senselessness' of the signifier that carries the weight of existence was preserved in the *savoir-faire* of those who were acting under the Master's orders, namely the slaves. With the anticlockwise 'quarter turn' of modernity, however, knowledge ceases to be in the hands of those who do not count, and instead becomes the discourse's engine, occupying the place of mastery itself. In such a position, it demands that what once was its unknown substance (the slaves' *savoir-faire* qua unconscious knowledge) emerges in broad daylight and is put to work under the aegis of a ubiquitous injunction to valorize. Thus, surplus-*jouissance*, this paradoxical substance shot through with negativity, is surreptitiously turned into surplus-value, a violently contradictory attempt to make loss countable – while the Capitalist discourse begins to bear its fruits.

Lacan, then, goes to the heart of the question concerning the creation of surplus-value. As we have seen, the novelty and ruse of capitalist abstraction hinge, originally, on an operation founded upon the extraction of knowledge-at-work from the slave of pre-capitalist times. What is effectively plundered here is the surplus-*jouissance* intrinsic to the slave's work. The moment the slave's unconscious and uncountable knowledge-at-work is converted into wage labour, a profound mystification takes place at the level of human activity itself: its entropic roots are 'foreclosed', while abstract work is installed as its sole representative. The upshot is that loss – the possibility

[6]The centrality of this element of failure or negativity in Lacanian psychoanalysis allows us to clarify that, for Lacan, structuralism itself is inseparable from the identification of the point of failure of structure (see Nobus and Quinn 2005: 116–17). His theory of the four-legged discourses is meant to provide evidence that any structural link is inseparable from its deadlock: 'In supposing the formalization of discourse and in granting oneself some rules within this formalization that are destined to put it to the test, we encounter an element of impossibility. This is what is at the base, the root, of an effect of structure' (44).

of perceiving the hole opened up by the signifier – progressively disappears from the horizon of the modern mind. The capitalist's conversion of this loss-effect into value, something to be counted and exchanged for the sole purpose of producing more value, spawns a generalized blindness with regard to the real substance of knowledge-at-work. If at the dawn of capitalism work begins to be fetishized as never before in the history of humankind, it is because its essential quality – the fact that human activity as such is rooted in the unconscious – is hijacked and transformed into a means towards the production of surplus-value. The ideological injunction to elevate work to the driving moral, cultural and economic principle of life goes hand in hand with the progressive destruction of the experience of knowledge-at-work as inseparable from a surplus (lack) of sense. Thus, science and economy become indistinguishable from morality, in a way that goes beyond even Max Weber's landmark discovery concerning the Protestant ethics of capitalism. Both the University and the Capitalist discourse originate in a logical sequence where scientific knowledge ('known knowledge') feeds into an idea of work that sustains the capitalist production of surplus-value. It is worth repeating that before the 'capitalist revolution' set in, human activity was not reducible to labour power, to a valorized commodity, since, in Lacan's words, 'the slave's labor is the labor that constitutes a non-revealed unconscious' (30).

Lacan's critique of the University discourse can therefore legitimately be seen as a radical critique of the specific understanding of work that characterizes capitalist relations. In capitalism, the fetishistic abstraction of work distorts the way humans interact with nature, precisely because it is based on the pervasive and perverse valorization of such interaction. In its elementary function, on the contrary, the signifier brings into the equation a surplus of sense that defies quantification, thus establishing a relation to truth: 'This is where work begins. It is with knowledge as a means of *jouissance* that work that has a meaning, an obscure meaning, is produced. This obscure meaning is the meaning of truth' (51). Already in *Seminar XVI* Lacan had defended the creative dimension of the encounter with unconscious truth as 'the place where "that means nothing" commands a replacement "that means"'; in other words, truth for Lacan is what 'we question in the unconscious as *creative* failure of knowledge' (seminar of 23 April 1969, our emphasis; see Lacan 2006b). The distinctive and substantial quality of *savoir-faire* can only be subsumed under value via a dangerous sleight of hand which goes by the name of abstraction. With the discourse of the University, knowledge and the work it commands have been uprooted from their place in the big Other, coming instead to occupy the driving seat, ascending to the position of agency. It is owing to their 'new tyranny' (32) that knowledge and work become abstract principles of human life.

On the contrary, human activity *per se* defies abstraction, i.e. codification and equivalence; it is untranslatable. In Alenka Zupančič's words: 'There is something in the status of work (or labor) which is identical to the status of enjoyment, namely, that it essentially appears as entropy, as loss, or as an unaccounted-for surplus (by-product) of signifying operations' (Zupančič 2006: 162). What is nestled in any signifying operation is the ontological opacity of the Real, and thus of any discourse: 'everything that is produced through work – I mean this in the strict, full sense of the word "produced" – … is going to join company with this knowledge insofar as it is split off, *urverdrängt* [primordially repressed], insofar as it is split off and nobody understands a thing about it' (Lacan 2007b: 90). The object of Lacan's scathing attacks against the University discourse is modernity's silent but fully operative belief in an abstract and fully valorized universe, a universe dominated by a 'knowledge-at-work' transformed into value, and where value is given to any knowledge as 'knowledge that works'. The modern notion of knowledge (*connaissance*), and the concept of work it intersects, 'is what brings life to a halt at a certain limit on the path to *jouissance*' (Lacan 2007b: 18); in other words, it is what prevents the subject from experiencing 'the imp of *jouissance*' via the ontological gap that qualifies experience itself in its abyssal contingency.

Against this fundamental mystification that drives modernity and its concept of work, Lacan forthrightly claims that 'knowledge is a means of *jouissance*' (50). As he clarifies, there exists a logical concatenation between 'knowledge-at-work', 'entropy' and '*jouissance*':

> When it [knowledge] is at work, what it produces is entropy. This entropy, this point of loss, is the sole point, the sole regular point at which we have access to the nature of *jouissance*. This is what the effect the signifier has upon the fate of the speaking being translates into, culminates in, and is motivated by. (50–1)

The key to grasping the critical dimension of Lacan's psychoanalytic discourse is neatly captured in the above quotation: the effect of the network of signifiers spreading over the surface of the world (discourses, knowledges, epistemes) is not only that, when set to work, they determine meanings that regulate our lives; but also, crucially, that they simultaneously create a loss, they 'punch a hole' in meaning. This hole becomes a means of *jouissance* insofar as it allows us to access an untranslatable excess, a nonsense experienced as enjoyment, that in fact is what drives our subjective existence in its being 'beyond the pleasure principle'. It is this hole qua excess/lack of meaning that the University discourse, and capitalism with it, attempt to convert into

a countable entity. Such is the unheard of act of gentrification that qualifies all forms of capitalist abstraction.

From our perspective, it is vital to notice that it is 'knowledge-at-work' (language, the signifier) that is responsible for the emergence of that surplus/loss of meaning named *jouissance*. The main novelty of Lacan's return to Freud is arguably his assertion that the signifier comes first – and, by coming first, it brings in its obscure double, which installs itself at the core of our subjective experience. Every time we try to make sense of things via the signifier (since there is no other way for us to make sense) we also 'produce' *jouissance* as 'an obscure meaning' which is 'the meaning of truth' (51). It is from this perspective that a critique of capitalist work can be articulated, for the discourse of modernity tends to abolish the connection between human activity, *jouissance* and truth (in the strict Lacanian sense of *mi-dire*, half-saying, insofar as 'we are *not without* a relationship with truth', 58). This claim can be expressed in simplified terms: what is capitalist valorization if not the attempt to erase the unknowable yet substantial enjoyment at work when humans interact with the world? And, of course, by becoming value workers provide further evidence of the specific distortion operative in modern rationality: 'Once a higher level has passed, 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. … The worker is merely a unit of value' (80–1).

There is, however, a significant corollary to all this. If capitalism affirms the indestructible connection of knowledge, work and value by seeking to turn the ontological limit of the social link into its productive engine, Lacan insists that the limit does not disappear, and this is why we are heading for a blowout. It is precisely because value tries to colonize every aspect of life that the price to pay for progress is deprivation.

A myth called progress

Through their emancipation from slaves to proletarians, workers have not merely progressed. Rather, they have lost what was distinctive about their position, namely their specific knowledge, their *savoir-faire* as intimately related to surplus-*jouissance*. Pressed on the function and position of the proletariat in his theory of the four discourses, Lacan argues that it belongs where 'knowledge no longer has any weight. The proletarian is not simply exploited, he has been stripped of his function of knowledge. The so-called liberation of the slave has had, as always, other corollaries. It's not merely progressive. It's progressive only at the price of deprivation' (149). The point about the

weightless worker, dispossessed of his particular knowledge, is decisive if we are to grasp the anti-capitalist potential of Lacan's stance, and more generally his critique of abstract labour. With the inception of capitalism, *savoir-faire* has been turned into a commodity to be bought and sold with the only purpose of creating more money. Lacan's argument is very subtle: while the Master of pre-capitalist times knew nothing about how things were made (he simply gave orders and enjoyed the results of other people's work),[7] the new Master appears as an invasive knowledge that incessantly and seamlessly translates into work, attempting to control everything precisely on the strength of this link. The truth, however, is rather more paradoxical: precisely because he knew nothing about how knowledge worked in producing things, the old Master and his discourse preserved the surplus-*jouissance* attached to work, a surplus which functioned 'underground' where it could be accessed, albeit illusorily, via fantasy (whose formula is reproduced in the lower part of the Master's discourse). Vice versa, the sudden and forced conversion of substantial surplus into surplus-value distorts the meaning of human activity to the extent that its entropic quality is turned into the productive engine of capitalism.

In the University discourse, the link between agent and Other undergoes a crucial distortion. What gets addressed by the agency of knowledge (*connaissance*, scientific knowledge) is *objet a* filling in the position of the big Other. The key point to highlight, however, is that the surplus of 'knowledge-at-work' is not hidden under S_2, as with the discourse of the Master, but is instead explicitly targeted and endorsed. Thus, having emerged to the upper level (consciousness) the objects of desire (among which workers themselves) become value, and as such are deprived of their foundational entropy. Ultimately, it is in this crucial distortion of the 'substantial negativity' pertaining to *objet a* that one should locate Lacan's critique of the social link which sustains a mode of production based on the hypostatization of an abstract principle that dominates modern social relations. What Lacan denounces is the universalized abstraction characterizing the rapport between the hegemonic power of scientific knowledge and the valorized objects of desire forming the signifying network of the big Other. The danger, from Lacan's angle, is that within this universe saturated with countable values responding directly to knowledge and work, the possibility of locating the substantial structural inconsistency of the social link gets lost.

However, as anticipated, for Lacan not all loss is lost, since the new discourse, like all others, produces a remainder that simply does not fit (and therefore threatens to disrupt) its well-oiled mechanism. Crucially for our argument, the

[7] 'A real master, as in general we used to see until a recent era, and this is seen less and less, doesn't desire to know anything at all – he desires that things work' (Lacan 2007b: 24).

'objective remainder' of the University discourse coincides with *the subject itself* in its radically decentred status ($). The fact that the subject appears in the bottom right-hand side, in the place of what is produced, implies that it stands for the disavowed 'waste result' of the link between S_2 and *a*, namely both the pathological subject of modern secular society and what Lacan himself calls the sub-proletariat, the excluded masses of our geopolitical universe. It is significant that in some of the most captivating passages of *Seminar XVII* Lacan refers to the production of segregation, of the *lumpenproletariat*, and of shame, as the precise point where the system potentially fails. For instance, in the aforementioned 'Impromptu at Vincennes' Lacan rebukes the subversive students by reminding them that the process of valorization that dominates their lives ends up producing not only exchange-values and wealth, but also a useless human surplus that contradicts the capitalist agenda. Demystifying the notion of brotherhood embraced by the leftist rhetoric of the time, Lacan comments:

> The energy that we put into all being brothers very clearly proves that we are not brothers. Even with our brother by birth nothing proves that we are his brother – we can have a completely opposite batch of chromosomes. … I know only one single origin of brotherhood – I mean human, always humus brotherhood – segregation. We are of course in a period where segregation, ugh! There is no longer any segregation anywhere, it's unheard of when you read the newspapers. It's just that in society … everything that exists, and brotherhood first and foremost, is founded on segregation. (Lacan 2007b: 114)

Later, he suggests that subversion in the University discourse should not be found at the level of traditional class struggle but 'on the other side' of his schema, where shame is produced, i.e. where 'the student is not displaced in feeling a brother, as they say, not of the proletariat but of the lumpenproletariat' (190).

So here we get the final picture of the specific dislocation accounted for by the University discourse: while *objet a* emerges into visibility by morphing into a commodity and losing its entropic substance, its place (the product of signification) is taken by the subject in its proper psychoanalytic status of symptom, 'thing' that by not fitting the symbolic order effectively denounces that order itself. The segregated as 'part of no part' define the contours of a critique levelled against a discourse where knowledge and work attempt to reduce all life to a series of abstract equivalences. Ultimately, these are the two reasons why the lower level of the University discourse provides a key to understanding the crisis of capitalism: 1) $: masses of people are

increasingly rendered superfluous (jobless) by the universal valorization of life (the 'capitalist utopia' if ever there was one) and, 2) S_1: the master-signifier occupies the place of truth, pulling the strings from an invisible and seemingly inviolable position (revealing the truth about the 'invisible hand of the market').

The surplus of surplus-value: Lacan and Marx

Lacan's insistence on the substantial status of surplus *qua* lack is of fundamental importance for a conceptualization of capitalist crisis that aims to imagine a way out of the mode of production that is at the pulsating heart of such crisis. Attempts to politicize Lacan from a leftist perspective often fail to intercept the full weight of the ontological presupposition of Lacan's psychoanalytic epistemology – namely, the idea that any social link is inseparable from an entropic libidinal surplus that embodies its ontological inconsistency. In this respect, we could argue that the historical problem of the left is that it has fought its battles endorsing the same fetishistic valorization of surplus that typifies capitalist ideology. Lacan notices that if there is a contradiction in Marxism it relates to its concept of work as something that both transcends and is over-determined by capitalist categories. He explicitly warns that any anti-capitalist project of radical subversion from within the workers' perspective – whether the proletariat or the intellectual worker of today's information society – is destined to fail, since it shares with capitalism the same belief in work as abstract value. In *Radiophonie*, for instance, when discussing 'the ideology of class struggle', Lacan intimates that 'it only induces the exploited to compete in principle in the exploitation, in order to defend their patent participation in the thirst of the lack-in-enjoyment' (Lacan 1970: 87). It is a fact that leftist categories such as progress and emancipation have mostly been understood and applied *within* those productive parameters that define capitalist valorization.

It is undeniable that Marxism, in most of its historical variants, has tended to locate itself within social and political discourses founded on the acceptance of value, abstract labour and money. Particularly striking is the Marxist cult of productive labour, which indicates that all main leftist oppositions to capitalism have been immanent to it in accepting its basic presuppositions. Arguably, they have tended to ignore Marx's *critique* of abstract labour, as opposed to what Marx calls 'particular labour' in the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1993: 171–3) and 'concrete useful labour' ten years later in chapter 1, section 2 of *Capital* (Marx

1990: 137).[8] However, and more crucially, they have also ignored how Marx, despite opposing the abstraction of labour under capitalist conditions, ends up defining and locating labour within the field of productive values. Similarly, Marx's call for the abolition of work, which resonates in various parts of the *German Ideology*, does not necessarily imply the elimination of productive and valorized work, even if conceived as 'free human activity' (see Arthur 1986). From our perspective, then, Marx's insight into the dual composition of labour can be relevant for a critique of the modern notion of work only if such critique targets also Marx's own ambiguity concerning the concept of labour as a productive value. Conversely, while abstract labour should not be seen as an ahistorical category coincidental with the mere expenditure of human energy (since the abstraction of labour is imposed by the value-form), it follows that human activity intended as Lacan's *savoir-faire* should not be jettisoned as invariably functional to the capitalist mode of production. What matters the most to us is to stress how, today, despite the evidence of the failure of capitalist valorization, the left continues to be unable to imagine a model of society that is not founded on the necessity to sell one's labour power (regardless of how difficult it has become to find buyers). By placing the emphasis firmly on the valueless dimension of human activity as a residue of any signifying operation, Lacan reminds us of the risk involved in the Marxist acceptance of the capitalist battlefield of positive valorization. In fact, Lacan was critical of 'really existing socialism' precisely because he recognized that its scientific organization of work was based on the same principle of abstract valorization that fuels capitalism.[9]

Lacan is aware that, in a social link that has allowed itself a 'relaxation' from the domineering character of the Master's discourse, the injunction to work goes hand in hand with the injunction to know and becomes irresistible: 'Work has never been given such credit ever since humanity has existed. It is even out of the question that one not work. … I am speaking of this capitalist mutation, also, which gives the master's discourse its capitalist style' (Lacan 2007b: 168). That work, for Lacan, is able to attain a different status from the capitalist one can be evinced from a brief, tentative and yet significant allusion to Maoism:

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[8]'A thing can be useful, and a product of human labour, without being a commodity. He who satisfies his own need with the product of labour admittedly creates use-values, but not commodities. In order to produce the latter, he must not only produce use-values, but use-values for others' (Marx 1990: 131).

[9]In *Seminar XVII* he asserts that the University discourse is in 'the driving seat' precisely 'in what is commonly called the Soviet Union of Socialist Republics' (Lacan 2007b: 206). Or even more explicitly: 'It's not because one nationalizes the means of production at the level of socialism in one country that one has thereby done away with surplus value, if one doesn't know what it is' (108).

> I won't risk going into this, I would only go into it cautiously, but if there is something whose tone strikes me in the thematic called Maoist, it's the reference to the knowledge of manual labor. … The renewed emphasis on the knowledge of the exploited seems to me to be very profoundly motivated structurally. The question is knowing whether this is not something that is entirely dreamed up. … Can know-how at the level of manual labor carry enough weight to be a subversive factor? This is how, for me, the question arises. (149)

It is from the perspective of a critique of abstraction that Lacan also takes issue with Marx's notion of surplus-value. The problem he sees in this notion is, ultimately, that it contains two highly incompatible terms (which is why he decides to refer surplus-value back to surplus-*jouissance*): surplus as such cannot be made to coincide with a value; it over-determines value in the precise sense that it cannot be counted. Contrary to this, Marx's surplus-value is eventually caught up in capitalist valorization, with surplus designating the value extracted from labour power. Before elaborating on this, let us remind ourselves that, in Marx, surplus-value originates in unpaid surplus labour. Here is a familiar passage from *Capital* volume one:

> During one period, the worker produces a value that is only equal to the value of his labour-power, i.e. he produces its equivalent. Thus the capitalist receives, in return for advancing the price of the labour-power, a product of the same price. It is the same as if he had bought the product ready-made in the market. During the other period, the period of surplus-labour, the utilization of labour-power creates a value for the capitalist without costing him any value in return. He is thus able to set labour-power in motion without paying for it. It is in this sense that surplus labour can be called unpaid labour. Capital, therefore, is not only the command over labour, as Adam Smith thought. It is essentially the command over unpaid labour. All surplus-value, whatever particular form (profit, interest or rent) it may subsequently crystallize into, is in substance the materialization of unpaid labour. The secret of the self-valorization of capital resolves itself into the fact that it has at its disposal a definite quantity of the unpaid labour of other people. (Marx 1990: 671–2)

Surplus-value therefore emerges from the expropriation of a quantity of labour that is in excess of the purchased labour power. To get surplus-value, whichever its form, the capitalist transforms into value a quantity of labour he has not paid for: 'Half the working day costs capital *nothing*; it thus obtains a value for which it has given no equivalent' (Marx 1993: 324). The self-valorization of capital requires precisely this extraction of surplus-value from the worker's labour power:

> Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is, by its very essence, the production of surplus-value. The worker produces not for himself, but for capital. It is no longer sufficient, therefore, for him simply to produce. He must produce surplus-value. The only worker who is productive is one who produces surplus-value for the capitalist, or in other words contributes towards the self-valorization of capital. (Marx 1990: 644)

Marx is quite explicit when, in the same passage, he claims that 'To be a productive worker is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune' (Marx 1990: 644).

In this respect, his crucial advance in relation to the bourgeois political economists who preceded him (Adam Smith, Ricardo, etc.) is his insight into the specific configuration of the commodity that transforms money into capital, namely labour power. It is this insight that brings us to connect Marx with Lacan. In the *Grundrisse*, echoing a theme that had emerged much earlier in his thought, and especially in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx defines labour power as something that exists 'in potentiality' as the worker's 'vitality', his *labouring capacity* as a living being (Marx 1993: 267). Quite explicitly, he claims that expropriation of labour power means essentially not paying for the *quality* of labour-as-such rather than for its quantity, namely for labour as a non-measurable entity, 'for the fact that *labour, as labour, is labour*' (359). The recourse to this tautology is symptomatic, inasmuch as it suggests that labour cannot be defined otherwise than by the signifier 'labour' which underscores the contingent and unquantifiable surplus signified by the term.[10] The labour power that the worker surrenders to the capitalist is thus nothing other than labour's intrinsic and non-measurable '*creative power*' (307). If, then, 'the great historic quality of capital is to *create* this *surplus labour*, superfluous labour from the standpoint of mere use value, mere subsistence' (325), we ought to think it alongside Lacan's surplus, namely a quality which, before being converted into value, embodies an obscure entropy inseparable from human activity as such.

Capital's ability to instil in the worker the desire to produce excessively and incessantly, forcing him over the centuries to identify with a type of industriousness rooted in his own expropriated surplus-labour, needs to be connected with the psychoanalytic ontology of surplus as entropic libido. In

[10]As Žižek puts it, far from signalling the inability to explain the exact qualities of a given object, a tautology 'announces the miracle of the fragile coincidence of an ordinary object with the absolute Thing' (Žižek 2012: 775). In other words, tautology allows us to discern the presence of a surplus of meaning for which there is no adequate signifier.

Seminar XVI and *Seminar XVII*, Lacan developed this decisive observation by proposing the homology between surplus-value and surplus-*jouissance*. Our contention here is that Marx's surplus-labour, which is the direct cause of surplus-value, is already in itself coterminous with Lacan's surplus-*jouissance*, for it not only refers to the worker's unpaid labour-time, but also to the incalculable quality of work-as-such. That Marx did not develop this insight is consistent with the mould of his historical constellation. Instead, he focused on surplus labour-time, conceptualizing it as potentially detachable from surplus-value and directly available to the workers who, in communism, would use it for the good of the whole society. From Lacan's perspective, then, Marx's ultimate 'reduction' of work-as-such to labour-time corresponds to deracinating the former from its real dimension. To an extent, as anticipated, it is an operation that plays in the hands of the Capitalist discourse inasmuch as the latter is based on generalized abstraction. Lacan's suggestion, by contrast, is that the genesis of surplus-value – the invisible turbine at the heart of capitalist valorization – should be conceived less as a supplementary lapse of non-remunerated labour-time than in relation to the non-quantifiable quality intrinsic to human activity as knowledge-at-work. If the labour power offered by the free worker on the market, as Marx put it, 'exists only as an ability, a capacity [*Vermögen*] of his bodily existence', and 'has no existence apart from that' (Marx 1993: 282), it is precisely as an amorphous and intrinsically entropic power that it should be associated with the Real of *jouissance*.

The thesis we are advancing here is that the historical success of capitalism as an economic as well as socially synthetic system depends, fundamentally, on what we might describe, resorting to the fortunate image popularized by Žižek, as a *parallax shift* from surplus-*jouissance* to surplus-value.[11] What we perceive as value originates in the substantial lack at the heart of being from which the little *a* emerges, this special thing that owes its precious status as object-cause of desire precisely to that lack:

> The first thing one should always bear in mind apropos of *objet petit a* is that, as is often the case with Lacan's categories, we are dealing with a concept that *comprises itself and its own opposite/dissimulation*. *Objet a* is simultaneously the pure lack, the void around which the desire turns and which, as such, causes the desire, *and* the element which conceals this void, renders it invisible by filling it out. The point, of course, is that

[11] In brief, Lacan claims that the unpaid surplus-labour turned by the capitalist into surplus-value is homologous to surplus-*jouissance*. Marx's *Mehrwert*, he avers, is actually *Mehrlust*: his intention is precisely to harness surplus-value to its foundation in the Real of *jouissance*. In psychoanalytic terms, surplus-value is therefore homologous to surplus-*jouissance* insofar as it stands for the specious valorization of the entropic surplus of work.

> there is no lack without the element filling it out: *the filler sustains what it dissimulates*. (Žižek 1994: 178)

We must therefore keep in mind that in positing the homology between surplus-value (*plus-value*) and surplus-enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*), Lacan uses the latter to demystify and reconfigure the former. With *plus-de-jouir*, he plays on the ambiguity of *plus* in the French language, as it stands for both a plus (something in excess) and a lack (a break in, or renunciation, of enjoyment). The capitalist valorization of this ontological lack corresponds to an unprecedented attempt to construct a social order on what we might call an act of recycling, for capitalism achieves its goal through the invisible conversion of surplus-*jouissance* into value.

> Something changed in the master's discourse at a certain point in history. We are not going to break our backs finding out if it was because of Luther, Calvin or some unknown traffic of ships around Genoa, or in the Mediterranean Sea, or anywhere else, for the important point is that on a certain day surplus *jouissance* became calculable, could be counted, totalized. This is where what is called the accumulation of capital begins. (Lacan 2007b: 177–8)

All of a sudden, Lacan continues, 'We are in the field of values.' And 'from that moment on, by virtue of the fact that the clouds of impotence have been aired, the master signifier only appears even more unassailable. … Where is it? How can it be named? How can it be located? – other than through its murderous effects, of course. Denounce imperialism? But how can this little mechanism be stopped?' (Lacan 2007b: 177–8).

Crisis and human surplus

Far from being reducible to a value, then, surplus for Lacan is entropic in two ways: first, in a concretely historical way, as the human surplus of capitalist dynamics, which results from the specific fetishistic distortion of capitalist ideology; secondly, at a more fundamental formal level, as surplus-*jouissance* (*plus-de-jouir*), that is to say as the ontological impasse of any discourse whatsoever. This surplus coterminous with lack is hijacked and 'dressed up in sexy garments' by capitalism; as such, it becomes the engine at the heart of what Marx had aptly named commodity fetishism.

Lacan's analysis would seem to confirm Marx's well-known claim from volume three of *Capital* that the limit of capitalism is capital itself (since, briefly stated, developments in productiveness eventually lead to a fall in the rate of profit). The argument is fairly straightforward: what initially gets lost (surplus-*jouissance*) through the process of valorization does not disappear, but returns in the shape of masses of excluded subjects whose status undermines capitalism itself as a mode of production. As we have seen, Lacan identifies segregation among the most explosive contradictions of modernity and progress. By that he means disposable, redundant, 'useless' human surplus. We argue that today's name for segregation is 'unredeemable unemployment'. Here we should add a second crucial interpretation of what is produced (*a*) in Lacan's discourse of the Capitalist. While it is correct to speak of *a* as surplus-value, at the same time what is *effectively* generated by capitalism – as today's crisis emphatically confirms – is not just unemployment, but a condition of radical exclusion from work which threatens the very foundations of society. Ultimately, the disturbing 'lost object' of the capitalist social link corresponds to the displaced humanity brought about by the failed connection between the capitalist drive and surplus-value.

It is important to insist that Lacan's theorization of surplus-*jouissance* as a parallactic specification of surplus-value functions as a critique of work, a particularly pressing one if read alongside today's capitalist crisis. As anticipated, our view of such crisis identifies the historical limit and explosive contradiction of capitalism in its constantly augmenting production of surplus labour that causes a progressive fall of global capital, since the process of capitalist valorization is systematically tied to the exploitation of the workforce. It is paradoxical, and yet all the more true, that technological development through the centuries has been both the great engine behind capitalist accumulation and the lethal harbinger of its crisis. Scientific development (the University discourse!) has allowed the capitalist to increase productivity in the attempt to maximize profit, but simultaneously it has made the workforce replaceable by machines and therefore ever more superfluous. What today the protagonists of capitalism and liberal democracy seem to ignore, is the Marxist insight that machines by themselves cannot create new value. On the contrary, only 'live' human labour creates profit. The absurdly ideological situation we experience today is that, while wage work is less and less necessary in terms of productivity, at the same time it is regarded as the only form of social mediation available to human beings.

Historically, we see the stagflation of the 1970s, the advent of neoliberalism and the finance industry, and today's economic crisis as a logical sequence

where each passage is nothing but a consequence of the previous one: the answer to the crisis of the Fordist system of production, which determined the stagflation of the 1970s, was the financialization of the economy, whose purpose was to hide the crisis of real growth through the creation of fictitious surplus-value generated by the finance industry. When the speculative bubble exploded in 2008, the system was again faced by the harsh crisis of valorization, to which it is now desperately trying to respond, though no other way is open apart from, again, recourse to the prestidigitations of the finance industry. What all this highlights is that we are close – closer than ever before – to the insurmountable historical limit of capitalism, insofar as growth is hindered precisely by the perverse capitalist connection between the productivity drive and the creation of human surplus aptly described by Lacan more than three decades ago.

While we have proposed a reading of the current crisis that underscores the capitalist tendency to displace human labour – which has been tremendously incremented by the turn to microelectronics and digitalization that qualifies the so-called 'third industrial revolution' – at the same time we have drawn on the Lacanian insight that the capitalist declension of work originates in the valorization of entropic labour power. Since under capitalist conditions only human labour creates surplus-value, the capitalist drive to make the workforce increasingly superfluous can only accelerate the process of crisis to a point of no return. What Lacan allows us to perceive is that the key capitalist contradiction concerning the creation of surplus labour, which hampers valorization and threatens the capitalist system itself, is rooted in the capitalist's original abstraction of labour power. As we have seen, Lacan maintains that the shift from pre-capitalist to capitalist times was based on the attempt to intercept, internalize and reinvest the surplus ontologically inherent to work qua human activity, in its generalized signifying function – work as *savoir-faire*. Lacan tells us that this work, in its deepest connotation, is a function of surplus qua lack. If, therefore, the capitalist utopia resides in converting all surplus into value, of putting everyone to work, today we know this one thing: that it does not work.

5

Agamben's messianism, or: Trouble with the dialectic

The aim of this final chapter is to focus on the deadlock that, we argue, typifies contemporary critical theory's relation to the crisis of capitalism. We take Giorgio Agamben as a case in point inasmuch as, paraphrasing a well-known film by Alfred Hitchcock, we see his thought on crisis as characterized by a 'trouble with the dialectic'. Recall the psychoanalytic wisdom of Hitchcock's *Trouble with Harry* (1955): despite all the efforts made by the film's characters, Harry's dead body simply will not disappear, thus coming to signify a paradoxical vitality which surpasses that of the characters who attempt to conceal its presence. Our argument is centred on the hypothesis that despite Agamben's efforts to dispose of the dialectic as a theoretically dead body, the latter returns not only to haunt Agamben's thought, but also as the sole notion that would be capable of lending it real political weight. We develop our argument by mapping the overarching premise of Agamben's philosophy against the negative ontology that qualifies Jacques Lacan's dialectical method of inquiry. We claim that the usefulness of this comparison resides in unravelling two distinct and ultimately irreconcilable critico-philosophical positions which throw into relief a fundamental political issue relating to how, today, we approach the crisis of capitalism. The question that informs our enquiry feeds on a point already introduced in Chapter 3, namely the relevance of dialectical thought in confronting the momentous crisis we are experiencing. In our view, which draws on Slavoj Žižek's groundbreaking recasting of dialectical materialism as a profoundly Hegelian concept (Žižek 2012), what is at stake is the redefinition of the role of negativity, within the dialectical process, as ontological and concretely antagonistic. Simply put, negativity qua antagonism is not only dialectical and ontological, but also materialistic. While all materialist reconfigurations of Hegel's dialectics have invariably replaced the centrality of the Hegelian 'absolute Idea' with its historical counterpart

(the proletariat and its class consciousness), they have regularly overlooked how, by doing so, they themselves became informed by the idealistic bias they thought they were dispelling. As confirmed by what is probably the most sophisticated of these materialistic 'reversals', namely Georg Lukàcs' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), the bias resides in the subjectivist and 'productivist' positing of the role of the historical agent (the proletariat) that re-appropriates the alienated, objective substance of its activity. The irony is that the attempt to escape the primacy of the Hegelian Idea produced a repetition of the very mistake imputed to Hegel: the proletariat effectively becomes the 'absolute' subject that sublates its alienated substance.[1] The simple (Hegelian) dialectical question to ask here is: where does this privileged subject come from? What sort of historicism can produce such a subject?

As we hope to make clear in the course of the essay, the way out of this deadlock begins with rejecting the reading of Hegel's dialectic as a subjectivist and intrinsically totalitarian process 'devouring' all contradictions and ending in reconciliation. Rather, we should assert that the Hegelian subject is strictly coterminus with objective substance insofar as the latter is self-split, marked by an ontological fracture that prevents it from becoming a positive whole. And, while substance is not the product of the subject's activity, by the same token we should also assert that the subject is not merely the product of substance. Both these views miss the key dialectical insight in Hegel, fully endorsed by Lacan, whereby it is the ontological lack that, by 'perforating' both substance and subject, provides the hinge that keeps them together. Subject and substance are dialectically mediated by their common structural inconsistency, to which they therefore owe their respective appearances, which in turn constitute their socio-historical content. Of course, for dialectical materialism the subject emerges *after* substance. However, two common mistakes are to be avoided here. First, we should be careful not to conceive of substance as One – as the positive plane of being – since the starting point of the dialectic is precisely *the ontological incompletion of substance*, its impossibility to attain any kind of fully consistent positivity. Second, the subject is not the element filling the hole within substance, like the last piece of a puzzle; rather, it is the name of the very antagonism that renders substance incomplete. This is why we say that crisis is ontological: it designates the overlap of substance and subject in their fundamental inconsistency. What this means is that we can never free ourselves of this irreducible gap or inherent antagonism, since this gap or antagonism is what we have in common with substance itself – more precisely, what makes us

[1]In this respect, Adorno's critique of Lukács hits the proverbial nail on the head (see Adorno 1973: 190–1).

part of substance. Signification, and the semblance of positivity it brings, is the necessary illusion that gashes out of the ontological fracture within being. Part of the dialectical process designates precisely this necessary attempt, made by the subject, to confer a positive meaning upon both itself and the world it interacts with. However, negativity remains central and irreducible to dialectical materialism insofar as it embodies the ontological rift that *insists* in every illusory/fictional flow of positivity.

Now, it goes without saying that the destructive and at the same time creative work of negativity against a given status quo is of paramount importance within dialectical materialism. In Alain Badiou's succinct words: 'When the logical framework of political action is of the classical dialectical type, what is fundamental is negation.' Yet, this basic account does not necessarily imply the ontology of negativity we want to endorse here. In fact, Badiou himself suggests that, today, our loyalty to the primacy of the negative in revolutionary situations needs to be relinquished if we are to successfully oppose capitalism. He argues that what is needed is neither Adorno's hyper-negative dialectics nor Althusser's or Negri's affirmative turn against the negativity of Hegel's method, but rather 'a way of reversing the classical dialectical logic inside itself so that the affirmation, or the positive proposition, comes before the negation instead of after it' (Badiou 2013). Badiou's name for the emerging of an affirmative moment that breaks a given order is, of course, *event*. Though the event will not eliminate the necessity of negativity-fuelled strategies of subversion, in itself it stands for a non-dialectical and affirmative political potentiality which has a chance to trigger a radically new set of socio-symbolic relations (a new 'truth procedure'). It is clear, then, that for Badiou negativity is only one moment of the dialectic, not its starting point and constitutive element.

Our Lacanian exploration of Agamben's thought allows us to evaluate both the potential of an affirmative and un-dialectical riposte to our current predicament, and the use we might make of an ontology of crisis that remains firmly anchored within a dialectical methodology. Staging a confrontation between Agamben and Lacan implies assuming the burden of a choice concerning the present and future approach to the pressing questions confronting us today, as we enter the twilight zone of the historical constellation named capitalism. With Agamben, we have the double scenario of the catastrophic degeneration of modern reason and its messianic supplement: he regards the nihilistic outcome of the civilizatory project of the West as the great historical chance to bring into effect an ontological shift that would establish the foundations of a new community once and for all freed from the principle of sovereignty, or the repressive compulsion to identify and exclude. With Lacan, on the other hand, the scenario is catastrophic *ante litteram*, insofar as the very basis of his metapsychological 'return to Freud' is the endorsement of the

inescapable necessity of the division brought about by repression (symbolic castration) as constitutive of the ontological weight of 'being human'. As Lacan (2006a: 700) put it at the end of his famous 1960 text 'Subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious': 'Castration means that jouissance has to be refused in order to be attained on the inverse scale of the Law of desire'. By interiorizing symbolic castration, which alienates us in the Other thus making full *jouissance* impossible, we bring in the law of the signifier (language), which reopens for us the possibility of *jouissance* as embodied by the ineffable object-cause of desire. The subject founded by symbolic castration is thereby condemned to experience *jouissance* as inextricably linked with the lack ushered in by the signifier.

The overriding focus of this chapter lies on the *distance* that separates Agamben's biopolitical ontology, which is founded upon the intrinsic potentiality of a form-of-life (*forma-di-vita*) that, in itself, resists dialectical mediation, and Lacan's ontology, which is simultaneously dialectical and negative. If the overlap between the critique of sovereign power and the rejection of conventional political notions such as 'right' and 'representation' (see esp. Agamben 1998 and 2005) can be rightly regarded as the main thrust of Agamben's thought, as well as the reason for its ongoing popularity,[2] to our mind the discussion has never been brought down to its theoretical roots, which, we argue, are situated in Agamben's ultimate dismissal of dialectics.[3] It therefore seems to us that Agamben's philosophy represents an exemplary standpoint from which to appreciate what is unconvincing about the specific anti-dialectical persuasion that runs through the dominant currents in post-Marxist critical thought, whether falling within the tradition of critical theory inaugurated by a convinced dialectician like Theodor Adorno; the biopolitical tradition that began with Michel Foucault and continued with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; or the evental political philosophy most often associated, today, with the works of Alain Badiou. We claim that what is crucial about Agamben's position, in its proximity to contemporary trends in critical theory, is its rejection of the dialectical ontology endorsed by Lacan. This rejection is at its most revealing in the messianic stance that characterizes all of Agamben's erudite and polyglot production – a stance which, as is well known, is rooted in the total dismissal of the Western political tradition.[4]

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[2]For an informed and far-reaching critique of Agamben's rejection of sovereignty as coterminous with modernity see Jennings (2011).

[3]Alex Murray (2010: 33–6) and Leland de la Durantaye (2009: 81–120) do emphasize Agamben's critique of the dialectic, but they map such critique against the traditional understanding of the Hegelian dialectic as a voracious 'machine' whose ultimate function is to sublate all differences and contradictions.

[4]For a critical analysis of Agamben's messianism, see also Sharpe (2009).

In what follows, we attempt to problematize Agamben's reliance on a substantially un-dialectical method of enquiry that, we believe, crucially hampers his thought's emancipatory aspects. We begin by focusing primarily on Agamben's theory of language as proposed at the outset of his philosophical venture. Such focus allows us to develop the parallel with Lacan while taking us to the very roots of Agamben's philosophy. As detailed in Chapter 3, Lacan's theory of the signifier asserts the latter's primacy over the signified, but only insofar as the signifier is regarded as 'not in itself possessing a literal meaning' (Lacan 1997: 199), in other words as an absolutely alien type of materiality, *the materiality of the letter*. What the signifier makes manifest is, ultimately, a dialectical logic whereby meaning emerges via the fundamentally material inconsistency of language, which therefore remains at the heart of any signification. By the same token, crisis as we have connoted it here is nothing but the ontological presupposition of 'being human'. In specific Lacanian terms, it is only through the swipe of (symbolic) castration and the crisis therein inscribed, which marks us and informs our being absolutely, that we have a chance to access signification.

Lack and plenitude in Agamben

What characterizes Agamben's politico-philosophical stance may be qualified as a seemingly oxymoronic instance of 'optimistic pessimism', as his following statement, taken from Guy Debord quoting Marx, makes clear: 'The absolutely desperate state of affairs in the society in which I live fills me with hope' (Agamben 1999a: 10). Sharing such a powerful Marxist position means, for Agamben, embracing a vision of the world where the commencement of the New does not so much imply an ontological break with the Old, but rather the *staging* of its hidden presuppositions. Already in the conclusion of his first book, *The Man without Content* (a fundamentally Nietzschean book where the reflection on art serves the purpose of introducing the author's messianic philosophy of history), Agamben had claimed that the catastrophic outcome of Western civilization contains its own redemption: 'all' we need to do is achieve the subtraction of human existence from its 'sovereign' supposition that it must be submitted to a goal. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's reading of Kafka, Agamben (1999b: 114) argues:

> Since the goal is already present and thus no path exists that could lead there, only the perennially late stubbornness of a messenger whose message is nothing other than the task of transmission can give back

> to man, who has lost his ability to appropriate his historical space, the concrete space of his action and knowledge.

Far from appearing as the dialectical breaking point that cannot be endured (Lacan's Real of *jouissance*), the progressive historical degeneration of instrumental reason here seamlessly morphs into a messianic vision. As we have argued, today's crucial Lacanian question is: can we envision, and install, new master-signifiers – i.e. signifiers that alter radically both the form and the content of our relation to signification, thus producing a different Other? This is most certainly *not* Agamben's question, for his critical work is sustained by the somewhat mythical figure of the 'living (biopolitical) unity' of subject and object. If there is any dialectical concern in Agamben, it is always and by definition reabsorbed within a substantial ontology whose specifically 'suspended' status does not affect its reliance on inert positivity, or undividedness. Along these lines, Agamben's notion of 'enjoyment' has very little to do with Lacan's *jouissance*, for it connotes the plenitude of a life liberated from the division (repression, exclusion, alienation) introduced by castration and the ensuing disturbing imbalance that qualifies *jouissance*. Agamben's messianic vision consists of 'a *political* community oriented exclusively toward the *full enjoyment* of worldly life' (Agamben 2000: 114, our emphasis).

Agamben with critical theory

From his first books, and especially in *Infancy and History*, Agamben's philosophy can be seen to embrace and radicalize Walter Benjamin's; more generally, it endorses the Frankfurt School's paradigmatic critique of modern instrumental reason (see esp. Adorno and Horkheimer 1997) while at the same time extracting, and fully identifying with, the messianic/utopian 'spark' which fuelled that critique. In this respect, Agamben inherited the original and long-lasting inspiration of the 'Frankfurt School' type of critical theory, especially if we consider the centrality, in both, of the devastating dissection and rejection of the alienating character of Western rationality from time immemorial. Yet, while it would be difficult to deny the actuality of such a critique, what we should nevertheless ask with regard to the seemingly hopeless scenario that emerges from Agamben's chastising of modern reason is: from what standpoint is this critique launched? We believe it is crucial to highlight how, in both Agamben and tradition of critical theory, the world appears alienated owing to the presence of a non- or dis-alienated element positioned externally with respect to the criticized object. What determines the damning appreciation

of Western reason is, ultimately, a utopian or messianic 'vanishing point' that, as such, works as the (more or less secret) cause of such appreciation.[5] Although in Agamben, unlike in Adorno and Benjamin, utopia acquires a concretely substantial determination, it is characterized by two overarching features that also typify the stance of the Frankfurt School: first, its non-alienated character; second, its material/phenomenological dimension as relating to sensual experience. For early critical theory as well as for Agamben, the totalitarian dimension of Western thought, in its instrumental 'iron cage', can be opposed only by rescuing an objective kernel intended as 'the experience of something that cannot be dissolved in consciousness' (Adorno 1993: 86). Although Adorno considered himself a dialectician, embracing a negative dialectic formulated on the theme of the persistent sense of contradiction and non-identity, he failed to acknowledge the extent to which the critical character of his dialectical edifice hinged on the external reference to a non-dialecticizable utopian goal – regardless of how 'impossible' such utopia was meant to be. In Adorno, the utopian anchoring point is located in a never-to-be-reached messianic futurity where reconciliation, and thus the abolition of alienation, coincides with a somewhat 'enhanced', wholly different type of identity which, however, cannot be qualified any further bar the risk of falling into the trap of identity thinking (see Adorno 1973: 149). However blurred, nonspecific and strictly unrepresentable, Adorno's reference to a non-identitarian vanishing point functions as the disavowed engine of the critical task (the critique of instrumental rationality) that fuels most of his writing, while also being of paramount importance to the entire ethico-political project of critical theory. In other words, here reconciliation is not the end result of the work of dialectical mediation (as one could, wrongly, say of Hegel's dialectic), but rather it stands as its origin and hidden presupposition. Furthermore, the cause of Adorno's negative dialectic is ensconced in a notion of experience that belongs either within the realm of art, or in the concrete yet deeply suspicious (for a dialectician) experience of bodily pleasure.

Our claim here is that Agamben radicalizes the two basic philosophical coordinates of Adorno's thought, namely a negative dialectic fiercely critical of instrumental rationality's alienating/exclusionary logic, and a utopian/messianic moment where the subject coalesces with the radical otherness of the object. As anticipated, the critical logic implicit in the opposition of these two terms reverberates throughout most of critical theory, down to its postmodern variation, 'Cultural Studies'. In radicalizing Adorno's binary opposition, Agamben *explicitly* accords reconciliation a central place in his thought, endorsing it as the liberating dimension where alienated rationality

[5]This point is elaborated in *Critical Theory and Film* (Vighi 2012: 8–18).

meets its presupposition in a non-alienated form-of-life finally freed from all ends. The manner in which Agamben updates the Frankfurt School is therefore symptomatic of an epistemological shift which, however, does not challenge the ontological foundations of such thought: while keeping faith with the two above-mentioned coordinates, Agamben rejects Adorno's key reference to an objective otherness beyond the grasp of reason by recasting such otherness as reason's own mimetic, and *perfectly viable*, presupposition. To exemplify Agamben's understanding of the rapport between reason and messianic utopia, we shall now examine some revealing passages from his arguably most explicitly anti-dialectical book, *Infancy and History*. From there, we develop the argument in connection with Agamben's messianism as expounded in more recent works.

The *aporia* of experience

In *Infancy and History* Agamben replicates the pessimism of the Frankfurt School by claiming that instrumental rationality has become so pervasive that no experience is left for the modern subject. Updating Benjamin's denunciation of the 'poverty of experience' in modern times (Benjamin 1999: 731–6), Agamben claims that one of the sure signs of our malaise is the *destruction* of experience. In a passage that could easily have been penned by Adorno or Benjamin, he states that 'modern man's average day contains virtually nothing that can still be translated into experience. … Modern man makes his way home in the evening wearied by a jumble of events, but however entertaining or tedious, unusual or commonplace, harrowing or pleasurable they are, none of them will have become experience' (2007: 15–16). But what, exactly, does *experience* consist of?

We should immediately concede that, in itself, the historicized notion of the 'loss of experience' belongs in the same critical category as the Lacanian notion of the 'loss of *jouissance*'. There is definitely a crucial historicist turn in late Lacan's theory of enjoyment. As we have claimed, by introducing the four discourses, in *Seminar XVI and XVII* (1969–71), Lacan pushed for the historicization of *jouissance* in a clear effort to denounce the deleterious effects of the social link where capitalism is nestled. For Lacan, the specific ruse of capitalism, within the wider ruse of what he named the University discourse of modernity, consists in making the constitutive negativity of *jouissance* – its status as, literally, entropic waste – *less and less available* by valorizing it via the commodity form. Just like Lacan's *jouissance*, the 'experience' defended by Agamben has to do with the paradoxical *contraction* of empirical experience into a dimension qualified by its impervious

recalcitrance to any systematized knowledge. Although modern life is filled with concrete experiences, what instrumental rationality has progressively eroded is experience as the encounter with the basic *inoperativity* of life itself. In *Means without Ends*, for instance, Agamben (2000: 140) refers to such inoperative condition as *argos* ('being without work'), saying that it belongs to humankind as a 'pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust'. Thus conceived, experiences can only occur in places that are not (yet) colonized by the gargantuan, hyper-reflexive knowledge-apparatuses of modernity, and that for this reason allow the foundational negativity of the social link to transpire. If we think of Benjamin, here the strongest influence on Agamben, it easy to see how his *Passagen-werk* (*Arcades Project*) and *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way Street)* are crammed with such encounters, be they physical, real, or imaginary.

Precisely because of its relationship with lack, which makes it intrinsically aporetic, experience in Agamben can be conveniently defined by evoking what it stands against, namely the advent of modern science. Just like with Lacan's 'discourse of the University', which refers to the historical affirmation of scientific objectivity, in Agamben (2007: 22) the triumph of modern science implies that *knowledge and experience merge*, becoming inseparable. More precisely, with modernity knowledge begins to absorb and neutralize the inherently aporetic dimension of every true experience in order to turn it into a countable entity. Agamben situates this paradigm shift as early as within Neoplatonic mysticism, and particularly in the introduction of astrology as the 'narrative' that conjoins the Aristotelian celestial spheres of pure 'intelligences' with earthly, corruptible experiences. Once this mediation is achieved, science and experience begin working together under the aegis of consciousness (the Cartesian *cogito*), which eventually dismisses astrology as superstition (though 'the astrological revival among Renaissance intellectuals is the most striking symptom of … the kinship between astrology, mysticism and science', 24). When all experiences become visible, legible and exchangeable, then, we can rest assured that we have terminated any relation with truth, insofar as truth (intended as Lacan's *mi-dire*, half-saying) is inseparable from that 'surplus of sense qua lack' originally available, for example, to the child, who in his/her relation with the world is still free from the imperative of equivalences. The point to notice here is Agamben's contrasting of two distinct dimensions: the negative/alienated domain of 'scientific modernity', characterized by modern rationality's invasive appropriation of experience, and the realm of experience itself as retaining a somewhat unadulterated indeterminacy, which Agamben will later capture with such terms as the previously mentioned potentiality (*potenza*) and inoperativeness (*inoperosità*). It is even more crucial to point out how these two dimensions are conceived by Agamben in non-dialectical

terms, since they do not mediate each other but retain autonomous value and legitimacy.

A clear exemplification of Agamben's un-dialectical dualism comes from his understanding of desire. For him, desire is a distortion that results, historically, from the removal of imagination from experience. As such, it does not partake in the ontological constitution of the human being, as psychoanalysis claims, but emerges through a paradigm shift. Up until the emergence of the *cogito*, experience had as its object 'a pure imaging separate from the body'; when knowledge begins to absorb and destroy experience, however, 'the status of desire changes radically; it becomes essentially insatiable' (29). Perversion is what ensues, as in Sade's universe. What is striking here is the contrasting of a creative disposition that finds satisfaction in the imaginary, and an unbalanced desire tied to its object and destined to endless frustration, with perversion as the sole outcome. As he will fully articulate in a later work (see Agamben 1993: 124–30), desire for Agamben needs to be redeemed from its modern features, namely knowledge and possession. It is the birth of scientific rationality which, by subsuming under its laws the until then autonomous character of experience, at the same time opens up the abyssal dimension of desire.[6] Within this context, Agamben (2007: 32–3) laments the loss of the medieval *quest*, intended as 'what constitutes the matter of human experience as an aporia, literally as the absence of a road [*a-poria*]'.

One can see how Agamben's historical pessimism is based on a dualism between the scientific experiment and what is by definition an aimless quest populated with experiences. It is in order to uphold this dualism that Agamben, following Deleuze, finds in Kant's first *Critique* the last attempt within Western metaphysics to render experience *in its pure form*, i.e. 'without its contradictions being hidden' (37). The division of the Kantian 'I' between its transcendental and empirical side works, according to Agamben, as a guarantee that experience is preserved as separate from the sphere of knowledge. With this notion of experience in mind, Agamben rejects Hegel's post-Kantian dialectic as *the* attempt to reduce experience to 'a basic characteristic of consciousness'. With Hegel, experience is categorically expunged, since dialectical totality turns the intrinsic negativity of experience into the negativity of knowledge itself in the endless process of

[6]Significantly, Agamben (2007: 46–7) sees the discovery of the unconscious in a similar way as the birth of desire, i.e. as 'a symptom of a malaise' confirming the historical expropriation of experience. He therefore historicizes the unconscious, positing it as an agency that does not preside over the construction and dissolution of meaning but is instead a symptom of Western rationality's unstoppable decline. The birth of the unconscious is positioned on the same level as the birth of modern poetry, which, starting with Baudelaire, 'is seen to be founded not on new experience, but on an unprecedented lack of experience'.

its becoming. As a consequence, 'experience is now definitely something one can only undergo but never have' (38). Rather than endorsing this dialectical understanding of negativity, Agamben recoils from it in the name of none other than Marxism:

> Thus, a critique of the dialectic is one of the most urgent tasks today for a Marxian exegesis truly freed from Hegelianism, if it is true – and it *is* true – that it is contradictory to proclaim the abolition of the Hegelian subject (consciousness) while retaining its essential structure and content through the dialectic. (39)

Partly in agreement with Adorno's reasoning behind his rejection of Hegel, Agamben's reading of the dialectic is substantiated by the reference to a specific configuration of alterity (qua experience) that, in its objective primacy or preponderance, supposedly *precedes* the spiral of dialectical mediations, proves impervious to it, and is eventually recast as the positive 'matter' of ontology itself. What both Adorno and Agamben reject is the possibility that the 'indigestible remainder', the intractable material surplus and 'nemesis' of any knowledge, *is produced by the dialectic* (by the dialectical nature of any cognition) rather than preceding it. On a different level, Agamben is of course also deeply suspicious of Adorno's dialectical method, as he deems it complicit with the Hegelian one. In this respect, he sides with Benjamin's famous mordacious definition of the dialectician as the one who has 'the wind of world history in his sails' (Benjamin 2002: 473). He thereby endorses the Benjaminian topos of the 'dialectic at a standstill', which vies for the necessity to inscribe a break in the supposedly inexorable progress of dialectical materialism. For Benjamin, just like for Agamben, if there is a task for humankind it is to awaken from the notion of 'inevitable (dialectical) progress'. While this task is absolutely relevant for a critique of contemporary capitalism, our point here is a different one. We focus rather on how Agamben fundamentally shares Adorno's (and, of course, Benjamin's) materialism by positing a dimension in the object that, as it were, subtracts from the obligation to turn into an object of cognition. Like Adorno, he rejects Hegel precisely because he reads him as the philosopher who eventually mortified the object in order to subsume all experience under subjective reason. For Agamben, this objective dimension that exceeds and resists identification is not only impervious to the dialectic, but it must be safeguarded as a 'mimetic' threshold of indistinction which belies the separation of subject and object at the heart of the Western tradition. What we want to emphasize, then, is the un-dialectical cause of Agamben's immanent messianism, which is what goes under the name of 'experience'.

Having clarified his understanding of the expropriation and destruction of experience that characterizes modern alienation, Agamben then moves on to qualify the non-alienated core of experience. He does so by linking the latter to language, though understood – via Dilthey, Bergson and especially Husserl's *Lectures on Internal Time Consciousness* – as something for which *we have no name*. The term he fittingly uses to circumscribe the nameless dimension of experience is *infancy*, understood literally as the 'inability to speak'. While infancy will be replaced in later works by a more generic and perhaps accurate term like potentiality, it is particularly useful to us since it brings into contention, by way of a parallel, the inconsistent, intimately divided aspect of language which lies at the heart of Lacan's structuralism. In fact, we argue that with his concept of infancy Agamben comes very close to sharing Lacan's dialectic of the unconscious as hidden, disavowed presupposition of conscious signification. However, a close reading of Agamben's text confirms the un-dialectical dualism of his thought, which will become more and more explicit and pervasive in later works.

The form-of-language

Drawing on diverse and authoritative sources within the so-called 'linguistic turn' (especially Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Emile Benveniste, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Claude Milner), as well as on representatives of post-romantic philosophy of language (Georg Hamann and Wilhelm von Humboldt), in *Infancy and History* as well as in later works Agamben aims to unravel, from within language, a dimension that is other to language – that is to say, that testifies to a potentiality which is contrastively inscribed within speech. What emerges is a tension between the following two themes: first, the conception of language as dialectically mediated by its own intrinsic inconsistency; secondly, the deep-seated conviction that such inconsistency must be thought of and preserved as the un-actualized potentiality of the pre-subjective 'form-of-language' available to infancy. Eventually, the primacy accorded to the second theme (the potentiality of the form-of-language) turns what seemed an instance of dialectical mediation into the affirmation of the simple opposition of the two terms at stake: infancy and language. In truth, it is easy to see how dialectical mediation is never on the cards for Agamben, since he thinks infancy not only as the hidden presupposition of language, but most crucially as its origin, the stadium that precedes speech, containing it within itself. Lacanian psychoanalysis, on the other hand, asserts something radically different, namely that the unconscious

qua presupposition of conscious speech can only be thought of as an *effect* of the subject's entrance in language. When Agamben claims that the limit of language should not be conceived of as external but as an internal one, we should not mistake this limit for Lacan's unconscious.

Let us consider Agamben's following statement: 'If every thought can be classified according to the way in which it articulates the question of the limits of language, the concept of infancy is then an attempt to think through these limits in a direction other than that of the vulgarly ineffable' (2007: 4). What Agamben would seem to be hinting at here is that through infancy we have a chance to recover the linkage between language and the unconscious, which gets lost once we accept the epistemological reference to an ineffable limit outside language. Against what we presuppose to be *unsayable*, language needs to be conceived in connection with its own *sayability*:

> The ineffable, the un-said, are in fact categories which belong exclusively to human language; far from indicating a limit of language, they express its invincible power of presupposition, the unsayable being precisely what language must presuppose in order to signify. The concept of infancy, on the contrary, is accessible only to a thought which has been purified, in the words of Benjamin writing to Buber, 'by eliminating the unsayable from language'. The singularity which language must signify is not something ineffable but something superlatively sayable: the *thing* of language. (4)

This 'thing of language' would, again, appear to bear some resemblance to Lacan's unconscious, insofar as the latter speaks through us, overwhelming us precisely *as language*. While the experiment with signifiers in a context where 'the unsayable is eliminated' is what takes place in infancy, it is also a crucial feature of any creative project that starts from the cathectic power of language, for only from an '*experimentum linguae*' can we derive a template for a creative urge that is founded upon, and legitimated by, the rift – the negative core – between language and its underside. Indeed, the void, as Agamben underscores it, is at the heart of any creative experience in language:

> To carry out the *experimentum linguae* … is to venture into a perfectly empty dimension … in which one can encounter only the pure exteriority of language. … Every thinker has probably had to undertake this experience at least once; it is even possible that what we call thought is purely and simply this *experimentum*. (Agamben 2007: 6)

What strikes us in this powerful passage is the conflation of the 'empty dimension' within reach of subjectivity and the 'pure exteriority of language';

such overlap suggests that language (and thought with it) can become truly transformative only on condition that it first experiences the 'shock' of its pure exteriority, that is to say its absolute self-referentiality, which is precisely what the signifier expresses in Lacan. What is asserted here is the necessity of an emptying or subtractive operation whereby language encounters its zero degree qua pure nomination, and therefore pure potentiality. It is the same operation that we find, for instance, in Agamben's critique of 'gesture', which is also reduced to a pure praxis untied from any pre-existing determination, an 'absolute gesturality' which intersects our lack of ontological foundations. Insofar as it is 'the process of making a means visible as such' (2000: 58), a gesture is unadulterated, unmediated mediality, deprived of any content, as in the performance of the porn star or in advertising (93–4). For Agamben, the possibility of truth materializes when all contents are finally evacuated, since to identify an object via a specific content is (as already in Adorno) the source of all evils. It is therefore on the plane of such 'hollowing out' or contraction to sheer presence that Agamben situates the only possibility of salvation. Here we have a chance to grasp the kernel of Agamben's thought inasmuch as it is articulated around a suspensive vitalism asserting the ontological primacy of (linguistic) potentiality over its actualization. Perhaps more fundamentally than with other categories of Agamben's work, language is theorized at the level of a 'threshold of indistinction', which is where it also operates as a political and philosophical category.

Agamben reaches this threshold when he states that experience 'cannot merely be something which chronologically precedes language and which, at a certain point, ceases to exist in order to spill into speech. It is not a paradise which, at a certain moment, we leave for ever in order to speak; rather, it coexists in its origins with language' (55). Insofar as language is an origin, Agamben is right to connect it with a transcendental function, whereby it 'constitutes the *a priori* limit and structure of all historical knowledge' (57). However, he invariably places such original moment outside symbolization, as well as outside the subject, rather than as its *constitutive* founding feature: '*In terms of human infancy, experience is the simple difference between the human and the linguistic. The individual as not already speaking, as having been and still being an infant – this is experience*' (58). For Agamben, the status of infancy, then, corresponds to 'a limitless phonetic arsenal' which is (wrongly) sacrificed in order for the child to achieve 'citizenship in the community of a single tongue' (Heller-Roazen 2005: ii). From a Lacanian viewpoint, however, what language forces us to sacrifice is the Real of enjoyment qua mythical – i.e. inexistent – plenitude. The individual becomes an individual through language and the 'discourse' that springs from it, which is by definition alienating. Another way of putting this is by saying that language, like the individual borne out of infancy, is always *in crisis*, constantly

clashing with the ontological self-division from which it arises. The paradox voiced by Lacan is that this clash is both constitutive of language and deeply symptomatic of its semantic inconsistency.

The origin is therefore none other than the signifier, which, as a 'representative of representation' (Freud's *Vorstellungrepresentanz*), brings into discourse (radically undermining it) the emptiness from which it arises. It is this dialectical passage that, as we have seen, allows Lacan to develop his theory of the master-signifier as the 'meaningless' signifier that nevertheless quilts the signifying chain. What we should highlight is that, in Lacan, the surplus of sense that qualifies experience/*jouissance* in its excessive and simultaneously subtractive dimension is ultimately *inerasable*, since it is inseparable from (i.e. dialectically entangled with) any socio-symbolic order, no matter how pervasively hegemonized by instrumental rationality. Agamben, on the contrary, retains the un-dialectical dualism between the Symbolic and the Real, which he conceptualizes as *nous* and the 'anarchic historicity of life'.

In its dualistic characterization, then, Agamben's 'infancy' is a notion that, defined as pure *form* (exteriority) without contents, stands autonomously as the noncontradictory and unmediated concretion of a zone of indistinction that qualifies the coalescing of subject and the object; as such, it works as a yardstick to measure the progressive abstraction of life. Like experience, it is by definition inoperative, in the same sense given by Georges Bataille to the word *désouvrement* and as also developed by Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) and Roberto Esposito (2010) in conjunction with their reflections on the meaning of community: something that rejects the utilitarian aims of modern society and escapes re-absorption by a dialectic of historical progress.

From our Lacanian perspective, such formulation of experience as the original form-of-life ravaged by the identificatory practices of humanity is inevitably at risk of turning into a retroactive construction borne out of the painful awareness of the inescapability of human alienation. This is not at all meant to detract from Agamben's denunciation of the progressive destruction of experience that accompanies the modern era. Our point, rather, is that the modern contraction of experience is an all-too-obvious symptom of the specific malaise called capitalism, which today – to put it in Hegelian terms – is reaching its Notion (i.e. its structural crisis). It is precisely as the increasingly neutralized and seemingly unavailable *remainder* of our socio-symbolic order that experience (qua *jouissance*) should be conceptualized. As such, it stands for the dialectical *product* of the intervention of language rather than its original or preceding presupposition (infancy). If it is true that there is experience, and that it has been expropriated by the type of instrumental rationality that inheres in capitalism, one should not stop conceiving it as the result of dialectical mediation, since it is the latter conception that leads

us to a politically pursuable critique of capitalism. From a Lacanian angle, 'expropriation of experience' means that, today, we are less and less likely to encounter the disturbing residue of the process of mediation effected by language. However, as Lacan demonstrated with his discourse theory, this does not mean that the residue is once and for all lost, i.e. liquidated. Quite on the contrary, the surplus of the capitalist social link might have become increasingly difficult to experience or locate but it exists, emphatically even, as an ever-growing condition of terrifying exclusion that now threatens to engulf us all, capitalism as a mode of production included. While Agamben is well aware of this danger, by way of a rather extraordinary theoretical leap he turns the symptom into the very content of his messianism or realized utopia – perhaps the clearest proof of his dismissal of dialectical materialism.

Let us briefly remind ourselves of how Lacan's dialectic conceives the status of surplus within capitalist dynamics. While on the one hand the capitalist remainder is surplus-value (the specific surplus produced by and central to the capitalist social link), at the same time what is *effectively* generated by capitalism – as today's crisis would seem to confirm – is (not just unemployment, but) a condition of radical exclusion which threatens the very foundations of society as we know it. Ultimately, the disturbing 'lost object' of the capitalist social link emerges as the radically displaced humanity brought about by the failed connection between the ever-expanding capitalist drive and the ever-diminishing realization of surplus-value, which is the elementary cause of today's crisis. Here we should reflect on Agamben's position in relation to two interconnected points. First, following the typical pattern of critical theory, he subordinates the analysis of capitalism as a specific social link to the analysis of 'instrumental rationality' and its perverted logic of sovereignty supplemented by radical exclusion; then, he forsakes dialectical mediation in order to posit the primacy of a form-of-life (infancy, potentiality, indistinction, etc.) considered as always-already operative within a given socio-symbolic order rather than as a remainder *engendered* or 'dropped' by it. In relation to what we have argued apropos language, we can see how, despite his awareness of the dependence of experience on language,[7] Agamben nevertheless considers such dependence as a negative occurrence that can be undone via the reactivation of a supposedly original condition of experience (infancy) as freed from the compulsion to 'identify and exclude'.[8]

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[7]'Subjectivity is nothing other than the speaker's capacity to posit him or herself as an *ego*, and cannot in any way be defined through some wordless sense of being oneself, nor by deferral to some ineffable psychic experience of the *ego*, but only through a linguistic *I* transcending any possible experience' (Agamben 2007: 52).

[8]In this respect, it is not surprising that Agamben does not share Adorno's well-known reproach to Benjamin concerning the latter's alleged neglect of dialectical mediation (see Agamben 2007: 117–37).

Messianism revealed

Agamben's recourse to infancy to designate a condition of openness to the ontological 'indifference' of language is clearly meant to antagonize the intrinsically repressive 'identify-and-exclude' essence of Western rationality; at the same time, it prefigures the coming redemption from language's compulsion to identify. For Agamben, the only hope we have to counteract the catastrophic progress of Western civilization, which is rooted in the intrinsically uprooting misuse of language, has to do with bringing alienation to its redemptive *completion*, i.e. (again, in Nietzschean terms) to 'the state of fully realized nihilism':

> Even more than economic necessities and technological development, what drives the nations of the Earth toward a single common destiny is the alienation of linguistic being, the uprooting of all peoples from their vital dwelling in language. But exactly for this reason, the age in which we live is also that in which for the first time it becomes possible for human beings to experience their own linguistic essence – to experience, that is, not some language content or some true proposition, but language *itself*, as well as the very fact of speaking. Contemporary politics is precisely this devastating experimentum linguae that disarticulates and empties, all over the planet, traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities. Only those who will be able to carry it to completion … will become the first citizens of a community with neither presupposition nor a state. (Agamben 2000: 84–5)

This contraction to pure potentiality that, supposedly, the alienated world is about to reach and that must be endured as such, is arguably the central theme within Agamben's political philosophy. Here is a revealing passage from the 'Postface' to the 2001 Italian edition of *The Coming Community*:

> The present time, which is the time that comes after the last day, a time in which nothing can happen because *the new* is always ongoing, achieving its full maturity, is the only true *pleroma* of times. What is true in such a time – in our time – is that, to a certain point, *everyone* – all the peoples and all the humans on earth – is recovering the position of a *remnant*. This implies, to those who look closely, that an unprecedented generalization of the messianic condition, … – the absence of work, the whatever singularity, the *bloom* – is becoming a reality.[9]

[9]The 'Postface' is available online here: http://www.notesforthecomingcommunity.blogspot.com/2008/04/tiqqun-de-la-noche.html.

As anticipated, the key to Agamben's *forma mentis* lies in grasping this unheard of overlap between unreserved alienation, culminating with a generalized condition of exclusion, and messianic redemption, whereby our community is already 'morphing' into a new community that will abolish all references to the violent double-bind inclusion/exclusion. The striking difference with what Lacanian psychoanalysis stands for lies in the *autonomy* that Agamben (and biopolitics in general) accords both to politics in its negative aspect – since modern politics for him can only be understood as a total form of barbarism,[10] to the extent that its model is the concentration camp (see Agamben 1998: 166) – and to the utopian state of redemption as the condition of being finally freed from the identificatory and exclusionary (i.e. repressive) compulsions that typifies the development of Western societies. Ultimately, Agamben envisions a community liberated from repression and characterized by *indistinction* as a threshold of indifference between the two main philosophical categories of Western thought: 'Man is not a duality of spirit and body, nature and politics, life and *logos*, but is instead resolutely situated at the point of their indistinction' (Agamben 1998: 88).

It is therefore evident that Agamben's messianism implies the absolute transparency of Being as a state of indistinct potentiality. Redemption redeems from human alienation, as eminently represented in the (Lacanian) dichotomy between signifier and signified. Messianic fulfilment is predicated upon the 'universal language' about which Walter Benjamin wrote in his essay 'On Language as Such and the Language of Men', namely a language *not* anchored in the unsayable. In Agamben's words:

> It is the language that, having eliminated all of its presuppositions and names and no longer having anything to say, now simply speaks. In the perfect transparency of language in which there is no more distinction between the level of names and the level of signifying speech, between what is meant and what is said, it truly seems that languages – and with them all human culture – reach their messianic ends. (Agamben 1999c: 60)

The unbridgeable rift between psychoanalysis and biopolitics is here foregrounded with particular clarity, exemplifying the hiatus between a dialectic construed on negative ontology and a dualistic vision which is

[10]Agamben certainly endorses, and indeed derives a politics from, Benjamin's famous statement that 'there is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (Benjamin 1968: 256).

both overcome and *preserved* in Agamben's messianic 'utopianism'.[11] For what psychoanalysis cannot endorse is the idea that the 'knot' of alienation (brought about by the 'swipe' of symbolic castration) can be untied and at the same time elevated into a condition of 'actually realized' transparency between signifier and signified, thus redeeming history's repressive exclusionary logic. The whole point of Lacan's dialectic is that human alienation, which arises with the child's acquisition of language and the division it brings, can only be undone in psychosis, i.e. in the condition whereby the above alienation is foreclosed, and consequently the subject believes to be fully and unproblematically inserted in a universe of sense. In Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis, the hypothesis of a non-repressive, post-alienated community is simply untenable since, strictly speaking, it would materialize as a community of psychotics. This is what Lacan's 'père ou pire' (the father or worse) means: either one accepts the alienating condition brought about by the repressive dynamics of symbolic castration, or one ends up in the proverbial frying pan (psychosis),[12] where we are indeed liberated from repression but only by becoming traumatically disconnected through the illusion of a complete and unfailing knowledge. This emphasizes at once the tragic and liberating kernel of Lacanian psychoanalysis: if the psychotic moment (*pire*) frees us from a given socio-symbolic condition, it cannot be sustained by the non-pathological subject, thus necessitating the intervention of language to reconfigure the socio-symbolic order. Put differently, there is no place for utopian fantasies in Lacan's theoretical edifice. In fact, Lacan can be seen to denounce the complicity of utopian fantasies of a non-repressive condition and the perpetuation of the specific repression pertaining to the status quo. This point comes to the fore very explicitly in a profoundly Hegelian passage of Lacan's early essay 'The Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual' (1938). Here Lacan (2001: 60–1) defines utopianism as a form of neurotic impotence that makes manifest the neurotic's inability to recognize his own activity in the object of his criticism – much like Hegel's concept of the 'beautiful soul'. In other words, the condemnation of the status quo from a utopian (un-dialectical) point of view hides an unacknowledged complicity with the status quo itself.

The central impulse of Agamben's thought is to circumscribe a potentiality that must remain unexpressed beyond passivity, since it cannot even be

[11]The debate around the legitimacy of the use of the term utopia to describe Agamben's messianism has recently been summarized and critically assessed by Carlo Salzani (2012).

[12]See Lacan's *Seminar XIX* (1971–71), entitled … *ou pire* (… or worse) and so far published only in French. The theme of the decline of the paternal metaphor is, in any case, central to all of Lacan's production, from his first *Écrit* through to his 1950s accounts of the pathogenesis of psychosis in siblings rivalries, and his post-1968 seminars.

thought as passive.[13] Once again, to conclude, we should go back to the theoretical roots of such a position, namely its un-dialectical dualism: in its alienated character, history develops *independently* of its messianic 'nemesis'. For this reason, the overlap between the two (from alienated history to redeemed historicity) can only be conceived of – to use Žižek's polemical words – as 'some magical intervention' (Žižek 2007b). What should be questioned, then, is the autonomous character of Agamben's conception of that 'sovereign decision on the exception' (1998: 14) that alienates human beings and their history. The only way to explain Agamben's apocalyptic rejection of the totality of Western history as built on the alienating intervention of sovereignty lies in emphasizing the ontological character of his 'suspensive' theological vitalism.

Agamben's ontology effectively conflates biopolitical vitalism and theological indifference – it begins with the first (in order to denounce sovereignty) and it ends with the second (in order to 'immanently transcend' sovereignty).[14] Following Foucault, Agamben posits biological life as an immanently given threshold of indistinction, intersected and distorted by the political; eventually, this original threshold is recast, this time *contra* Foucault, as a state of indifference, designating simultaneously indeterminacy and stasis. Furthermore, while the focus is placed on the 'miraculous' passage from alienated sovereignty to redemption, little is said about the 'original sin', namely the question of *how* sovereignty actually imposes itself onto 'life as such'. Since no dialectical reasoning is called upon to account for this initial passage, the necessity of redemption is equally left unaccounted. It will just happen. Agamben, in fact, tends to start from the archaeological ascertainment that man's use of reason is by definition violent in imposing sovereignty on life.

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[13]See, for example, Agamben's reading of Herman Melville's story 'Bartleby the Scrivener', where Bartleby's famous 'I would prefer not' is interpreted as the 'strongest objection against the principle of sovereignty' precisely because he 'resists every possibility of deciding between potentiality and the potentiality not to' (1998: 33). On passivity in Agamben see Franchi (2004) and Wall (1999).

[14]In his recent *The Highest Poverty*, Agamben provides a concrete example of his understanding of a form-of-life freed from sovereignty. There he develops an archaeology of monastic life as comprehensible against the liturgical paradigm of the Church. However, he argues that with the spiritual movements of the twelfth and thirteenth century, and particularly with Franciscanism, 'the tension between *forma vitae* and *officium* ceases to be, not because life is absorbed by liturgy, but, on the contrary, because life and office reach their utmost disjunction' (Agamben 2011: 146, my translation). Agamben's point is that with the Franciscan order we witness the birth of a form-of-life that is totally extraneous to the law. Without a doubt, the emphasis on the specific communitarian dimension of the Franciscan form-of-life is appealing, especially when considered from the point of view of the crisis of capitalism. However, I would contend that the relation between the official liturgical order of the Church and Franciscanism, although not one explicitly based on the inclusion/exclusion paradigm, should be read dialectically.

Ultimately, his politically dubious account of the emergence of messianic redemption out of the hyper-alienation of contemporary history is to be read in the light of the initial assumption that biological life is corrupted by human reason.

Whether asserted in an affirmative or in a negative mode, the biopolitical concern with 'life' as both indeterminate and disengaged from the instrumentality of logos is fiercely un-dialectical, in the precise sense that it is postulated in direct opposition to logos rather than as its inherent condition of existence. For this reason the *trait d'union* of all of Agamben's thought is the critique of the spurious combination of life and logos – the 'anthropological machine' (Agamben 2004: 33–8) of modern history – as in the following passage from *The Open*:

> In our culture, man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living being and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element. We must learn instead to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements, and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation. (16)

For Agamben, the more our culture affirms the conjunction of life and *logos*, with the latter defining the meaning of the former, the more humanity ends up producing barbarous political divisions that relegate man to the status of hopeless animal, of *zoē* – the condition of *homo sacer*. Agamben (2004: 92) insists that, faced with the catastrophic outcome of Western civilization, the risk to be taken coincides with the messianic option: to identify 'the central emptiness, the hiatus that – within man – separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness'. The aim is to recapture the human potential to be 'open to the not-open' – to the threshold of stunned indistinction that 'render[s] inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man'. Within this vision, the goal is 'no longer to seek new – more effective or more authentic – articulations' of what in Lacanian parlance are the symbolic-imaginary dimension and the Real of *jouissance*, but to leave behind once and for all an understanding of human life based on those articulations and opt for 'the suspension of suspension' (92). While Lacanian psychoanalysis shares Agamben's thesis concerning the gap between human and animal, the name it gives this gap is death-drive – a term in itself sufficient to indicate that no messianic redemption can be theorized on the negativity it materializes. Precisely because of the dialectical constitution of Lacan's negative ontology, the abyssal rupture or jarring embodied by the drive can only be posited as a radical de-substantiation which is necessary for the re-articulation – no matter

how intrinsically unstable – of symbolic signification. Our final point is that this dialectical passage needs to be appropriated and politicized by what is left of critical theory, or we will be left with critiques of today's capitalist crisis predicated upon profoundly ineffective visions of a non-repressive social utopia which, ultimately, strengthen the illusion of the invincibility of the current status quo.

Epilogue: Nothing to be liberated

New ages do not begin all of a sudden, as Bertolt Brecht (1968: 856) slyly remarked, for the new meat is always consumed first with old forks. In this book, we have probably done our fair share to confirm this truism. So rather than offering conclusions we do not have, we would like to highlight six aspects that are characteristic of our approach in this book and which we intend to develop further in our next joint venture.

1. To start with, we do not criticize the illogical, irrational and hopelessly contradictory nature of capitalism as a mode of social reproduction. The object of our critique is its logic, rationality and apparent consistency. This approach rests on the shared conviction that the time of the partial critique of this splendidly lethal form of social reproduction is up. What we experience today is no longer a crisis of one particular model of capital accumulation or of 'deregulated capitalism' as 'the reigning ideology' of our times (Klein 2014: 18), nor is it a crisis of capitalism in the traditional Marxist sense of an economic system skewed by class domination, market anarchy, endemic over-accumulation and underconsumption – far from it. What we have seen over the past three decades is the first global stage in the historical disintegration of the generative matrix of modern society as such, i.e. the feedback loop of the self-valorization of value itself. In other words, we are witnessing a crisis of *capital in general*, independently of its particular historical and cultural configurations, which was the subject of Marx's critique of the political economy in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. There is irony in the fact that today, where Marx's critique is for the first time historically relevant, it is no longer connected to a significant political movement.

2. If the historical time for the partial critique of capitalism is up, the same goes for inherent transgression as the most popular expression of political dissent. Both have lost their progressive potential once and for all. While Slavoj Žižek does not offer a new critique of the political economy, his work, unlike any other, has restored our awareness of the nature and limitations of inherent transgression as a mode of resistance that leaves intact the very thing it claims to overcome. In the wake of the collapse of the investment bank

Lehman Brothers in September 2008, Žižek made a memorable intervention in the heated debate about the looming banking bailouts:

> If we feel blackmailed by the bailout plans to save the banks, we should stop for a moment to recognise that this blackmail is downright successful. Thus, we should not succumb to the popular temptation and let our anger run wild. Instead, we should turn our wrath into cold resolve and ask what kind of society we live in where such blackmail is possible. (Žižek 2008b: 64)

The topicality of Žižek's critique of hysterical anti-capitalism is undiminished today. It is also for this reason that the object of our critique in this book is not the obscenities of finance capitalism or the fallacies of the political elites, but the economy of capital valorization as such.

3. If we do not aim to expose the *Seventeen Contradictions of Capitalism* (Harvey 2014), we do not focus either on the 'capital surplus absorption problem' which has preoccupied much twentieth century and contemporary Keynesian Marxism (see e.g. Bellamy Foster and McChesney 2012: loc 836; Harvey 2011: 26, 45; Baran and Sweezy 1966). To be sure, the capital valorization economy is stricken with an ever-growing absorption problem – the problem that surpluses generated in the form of money profit cannot be absorbed productively by the economy of capital valorization. This is a real dilemma with disastrous consequences as we have shown in this book, but it is not the key underlying problem of the historical crisis of capitalism we are facing today. Rather than by an absorption problem, the past half-century has been defined by an irreversible surplus-value *creation* problem, which is the root cause of the historic predicament in which we are caught. Globalization, deregulation and financialization, the feverish simulation of growth without value-substance, have been the ubiquitous symptoms of the declining dynamic of capital valorization.

More often than not, classical critical theory could not shed the widely held assumption that capitalism creates an affluent society as it permanently revolutionizes the forces of production. Before the 1970s, it seemed inconceivable in the West that one day we might be confronted not only with the dehumanizing implications of a 'too-much', but also and more importantly with the fatal consequences of a lack of surplus-value, i.e. that the capital valorization economy would no longer be able to reproduce the productive forces required to maintain the basic coordinates of social life. We will have to rid ourselves of the belief that capitalism creates affluence. This misconception confuses the development of a limited number of countries after the Second World War with the entire history of capitalism as a social formation. While capital is going to continue to be

accumulated for quite some time, with new forms of fictitious capital being created and eagerly embraced as profit-generating 'financial instruments', it will increasingly suffer a lack of valorization. The shortage of new surplus-value will eventually undermine the accumulation of capital to a degree that the reproduction of society at large becomes a practical impossibility ('unaffordable') at all levels – locally, nationally and globally.

4. Even though we argue that it is the compulsive historical development of the productive forces that ultimately seals the fate of the capitalist system as a social formation, we do not peddle some variant of technological determinism. To be sure, the notion that modern productive forces have a key defining impact on the economic and social prospects of contemporary societies, to the point that they possess the capacity to bring the house down, is today a basic tenet of political thought of any colour. When, for example, during the recent Google debate about the right of individuals to be forgotten, Germany's social-democratic economics minister, Sigmar Gabriel, pointed out that the European Court of Justice ruling against the internet giant was an eye-opener that forcefully demonstrated how the new 'information capitalism puts the entire market-economic order in question' (Gabriel 2014), he was expressing a widely shared discontent with the pervasive influence of modern technologies.

However, such sentiment tends to overlook the historical fact that the development of the productive forces is not some natural or technologically neutral process. Rather, the character, extent and direction of this development are determined by the capitalist mode of production itself. It is the capitalist nature of the productive forces, i.e. the fact that they are firmly embedded in the socio-pathological dynamic of capital valorization, which turns their development into the uncanny process whereby the very mode of production that has nurtured them in the first place is brought to its knees. The deterministic conviction that, under the conditions of a freewheeling market economy, everything that can be developed technologically would ultimately be developed is historically unfounded. By the same token, we have no reason to assume that the development of modern productive forces would quasi-automatically usher in a collaborative economic system beyond capitalism. This delineates by implication also the area of disagreement with Jeremy Rifkin (1995, 2011 and 2014), whose empirically rich and illuminating accounts of the third industrial revolution and the end of work-society fail to consider the self-referential expansion of abstract wealth as the formative matrix and developmental driver of modern society. As a result of this, he anticipates that the 'extreme productivity' of new technologies, such as the Internet of Things, would lead us 'ever faster toward an era of nearly free goods and services and, with it, the shrinking of capitalism in the next half century and the rise of a Collaborative Commons as the dominant model for organizing economic life' (Rifkin 2014: 16).

5. It is hard to overemphasize the need to shed the romanticizing expectation that the global economic crisis might free some hitherto restricted substance, such as 'life' or 'labour', for our comforting utopias of a self-transparent life in truth and plenitude. While there is much to be commended about Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's large-scale attempt to rearticulate a meaningful notion of emancipatory politics (2001, 2004 and 2009), their bio-political, post-workerist vision of political emancipation is, simply put, barking up the wrong tree, underestimating the novelty and depth of the historical rupture we are confronted with today. There is no un-alienated social substance waiting to be liberated. 'Life' and 'labour' are historical *real abstractions* (Sohn-Rethel 1970) of the capitalist matrix itself. Condensing complex historical experiences and practices into distinct abstractions, they are an integral part of a whole array of *collective singulars* that began to solidify towards the end of the eighteenth century (see Koselleck 1979). As categories of the historical matrix that constitutes capitalism as a transcendental, negative totality, they will be washed away 'like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea', as Foucault (1970: 387) so poignantly put it. They cannot be reclaimed as emancipatory signifiers. We have to replace them with new signifiers that can only emerge and need to be seized from the struggles of the twenty-first century.

6. We claim that social antagonism and alienation are irreducible aspects of our social being, providing the only true bridge between subject and object. Furthermore, we argue that the ontological weight of such antagonism is what the crisis of contemporary capitalism has intercepted. In the film noir *So Dark the Night* (Joseph H. Lewis 1946), a world-famous Parisian detective is called upon to resolve a string of mysterious assassinations triggered by the killing of the very girl he had fallen in love with during a rare holiday. After scrupulous investigations, the resolute detective realizes, to his dismay, that the killer was none other than himself – a classic case of split personality. The shock, however, is genuine, for the detective encounters himself not only as 'other' (a criminal), but more precisely as 'lacking to himself', an agency *not* supported by any social substance or fantasy. The workaholic sleuth in *So Dark the Night* provides a perfect image for the irredeemable antagonism captured by the ontological meaning of the word *crisis*. At one point he is described as follows: 'He would go without sleep endlessly, day after day, when he's engaged in a chase. He is the most relentless machine I have ever known. His mind is so single-track at times he even seems stupid and sluggish.' What better definition of the self-destructive capitalist drive in our time of crisis? Indeed, the *noir* universe captures with precision the ontological dimension of crisis brought about by the current crisis. Ours is a dark night where the objective evidence of a calamitous crisis overlaps with a subjectivity driven by the proto-psychotic anxiety it ironically attempts to escape. Yet, inevitably, the

capitalist fantasy is getting slowly but surely weaker, and so are the threads of the social fabric it stubbornly continues to weave. Our wager is that only the critical awareness of the abyssal rupture opened up by today's predicament can lead us to fantasize anew – to think, that is, about radically different and more desirable forms of human alienation where the ferocity of crisis is kept in check, while its ontological roots are not severed from consciousness.

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