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## **The Discrete Charm of Bureaucracy.**

A Lacanian Theory of the Bureaucratic Mechanism

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## Introduction

In modern politics, bureaucracy plays the role of the proverbial necessary evil. You cannot have democracy and rule of law without it; yet, its mere presence and growing importance is perceived as a menace to genuine democracy. Bureaucracy is thus the *pharmakon* of democracy: its remedy, but also its poison, depending merely on the dosage.

This paradoxical nature of bureaucracy has been with us since its classical Weberian definition. On the one hand, Weber argues, the benefic, rationalizing effects of bureaucracy make it a necessary agency for the modern state: "The great modern state is absolutely dependent upon a bureaucratic basis. The more complicated and specialized modern culture becomes, the more its external supporting apparatus demands the personally detached and strictly 'objective' expert".<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, this ingenious tool for the rationalization and efficientization of social life always bears the risk of getting out of our hands, becoming autonomous and indestructible: "Where the bureaucratization of administration has been completely carried through, a form of power relation is established that is practically unshatterable".<sup>2</sup> Weber sums up this paradox with the following admission: "Democracy as such is opposed to the rule of bureaucracy, in spite and perhaps because of its unavoidable yet unintended promotion of bureaucratization".<sup>3</sup>

Unavoidable, yet unintended: armies of social, political and legal scholars have tried, following Weber, to untangle this paradox by separating the good side of bureaucracy (the unavoidable) from the bad one (the unintended). A recurrent kind of approach to

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<sup>1</sup> H. H. Gerth, C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1958, pp. 211, 216.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

bureaucracy became the rule, in which the pair of questions –how much bureaucracy is required for democracy? and –how much bureaucracy is just too much? all tried to locate that magical point in which variations in quantity determine changes in quality. But in spite of its noble efforts, this search for the golden measure and its oscillation between the two sides of the bureaucratic phenomenon failed to explain precisely that critical point around which they were floating and which they were thus trying to exorcise: that original paradox of bureaucracy, its rational and irrational nature.

This is the original paradox that the present research attempted to problematize. In so doing, I tried to go around this classical Weberian account of bureaucracy and its contemporary offsprings, in order to throw thus a different light on the problem that these theories left in place. By means of the philosophical triad Hegel, Marx and Lacan, the Weberian paradox is thus approached, as it were, from its two external sides: from the side of its assumptions and presuppositions, and from the side of its necessary consequences. What exactly does it mean that bureaucracy is the rationalizer of the modern society, and what exactly does this entail?

The first chapter is concerned with the first major articulation of the decisive role that bureaucracy plays in the modern state: Hegel's theory of the state. In the *Philosophy of Right*, the civil service is defined as the universal class, in charge with the harmonization of the social edifice and with the mediation between the particularism of the civil society and the universalism of the state. The crucial role played by this universal class of knowledge bears some notable consequences on its designated system of checks and balances: on its upper side, the monarch is reduced to a pure signifying function, whose task is to accompany the network of expert decisions with his formal –I will? On the lower side, the civil service's attempt to unify and universalize the particularist dispersion of civil society does not prevent the appearance of certain social contradictions – contradictions which seem to jeopardize Hegel's design of the rational state. The concluding part of the chapter revolves around a comparative reading of Hegel's account of the civil service and the critique that Marx formulates in his 1843 manuscripts. The results of this comparative reading are summed up in the final part of the chapter, in which the hidden similarities, familiarities but also oppositions between Hegel's notion of universal class (the civil service) and Marx's (the proletariat) are brought into daylight.

The second chapter is structured on an opposition between two Marxist currents of thought: traditional Marxism, which defines capitalism as class domination and sees its fundamental contradiction as lying between the spheres of production and distribution; and critical Marxism, which defines capitalism as a domination of abstract social structures and locates its fundamental contradiction in the social and yet objective dynamics of value. The advantage, from the standpoint of a possible theory of bureaucracy, of traditional Marxism is undeniable: this trend of thought actually places bureaucracy at the very intersection between production and distribution, thus as a social mediator – similar, in this respect, to Hegel's civil service – between the unruly sphere of economic production and the socially and politically conscious sphere of just distribution. But the failures of traditional Marxism – perceivable both from the historical point of view of 'really existing socialism' and from the theoretical point of view of critical Marxism – force us to abandon also its theory of bureaucracy. The hypothesis of a critical Marxist theory of bureaucracy is formulated in the final pages of this second chapter: if capitalism is understood as the domination of an abstract social structure, articulated by the dynamics of value, bureaucracy could be defined as the operator in charge with this conversion of a peculiar historical constellation into an objective and necessary logic, and with the translation of this particular mode of production into a natural human condition. However, in order for this hypothesis to be properly articulated, a few more concepts are required.

The third chapter is meant to provide these concepts, by borrowing them from the theory of Jacques Lacan. The chapter mimics an evolution from elementary concepts to articulated theoretical structures: from the 'atomistic' concepts of signifier, subject, object *a*, to the dual relations between them (alienation, separation, cogito, superego), up to, finally, the social structures that they define, and which are formalized by Lacan in his theory of the four discourses: the discourse of the master, of the university, of the hysterical and of the psychoanalyst. Out of these four discourses, the university one will prove particularly decisive for our theory, since it seems to describe, in a crystallized, mathematical way, the modern social structure implied by the bureaucratic mechanism.

All these elements (the Hegelian theory of the state, Marx's labor theory of value and Lacan's theory of the four discourses) will be put together in the final, fourth chapter. The opening pages of the chapter revolve around the discussion of the political relevance of Lacan's theory: contrary to what one might expect from a theory elaborated in a

psychoanalytical milieu and whose main concern is a therapeutical one, the theory of Lacan is always already dealing with social and political structures. As a proof, the proliferation of contemporary versions of political Lacanianism, which cover all the political spectrum, ranging from right, liberal, and up to left Lacanians. After a comparative analysis of these trends, the chapter will attempt to re-read the Hegelian architectonic of the state and Marx's labor theory of value through the lenses of Lacan's theory of discourse. From this perspective, the three elements from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* that were emphasized in the first chapter (the crucial role of the civil service, the signifying function of monarchy, the dynamics of civil society) come to be articulated here in a purely dialectical way: firstly, the growing importance and centrality that the civil service comes to acquire in Hegel mark the passage from a social structure organized on the model of the master's discourse to one organized on the model of the university discourse. Just like in Lacan's theory, the master's discourse, in order to endure and reproduce itself, has to become invisible and to be suppressed and conserved in the discourse of the university. But this also means that the social contradictions that this structure generates (and which are revealed in the second moment of this dialectical move) prove to be, in the third and final moment, not the stumbling block of this social structure (as they were for the master's discourse) but its very moving principle. Thus, the civil service, as the objective and universal knowledge ruling over the civil society and as the core of the rational state, manages to succeed in both (or, rather, over both) of its designated checks and balances: it saves the face of the monarch, which it reduces to a mere signature, and it sees that the contradictions at the level of civil society are positively invested and peacefully reproduced, since generated only by the fair principles of abstract right. This dynamic is, as it were, reproduced in a nutshell in Marx's labor theory of value. This is, after all, a theory meant to describe the way in which the fair observance of formal principles and of objective, impartial knowledge manages to reproduce and integrate the surplus of value. The gradual autonomization of the universal and expert knowledge belonging to the bureaucracy is, here, translated in the structuring role that the means of production and the social division of labor, as both representing the materialized knowledge of the capitalist, come to acquire in the process of production. As for the subject's inscription in this mechanism, it follows the fair rules of the bureaucratic inscription: in the same way in which, in the basic operation of bureaucracy, a particular signifier represents the subject for another, general signifier, in a similar way, in the process of production, the free subject is free to alienate himself in the signifying process of

production in which the exchange value of his labor-power is represented for the use value it holds for the capitalist. And in the same way in which, in Lacan's inscription of the subject between two signifiers, a certain remainder is produced – the object *a*, the *plus de jouir* –, in a similar way, in the fair process of representation taking place in the capitalist mode of production, a certain surplus is generated – surplus-value – which can, now, contrary to what happened in the master's discourse, rejoin the master and be fairly appropriated by him.

So, if we were to try to formulate our argument in its most compressed form, it would go like this: the law of value, as the core of the capitalist dynamic, imposes and naturalizes, or rather imposes as natural, a bureaucratic-like process, both in the sense that it translates the social interaction as a process of representation by the signifiers, and in the sense of the dominating role it ascribes to the objective and objectified general social knowledge. And this dynamic is best rendered by means of the Lacanian discourse of the university.

Bureaucracy, or, at least, a certain bureaucratic mechanism, comes thus to be situated at the very core of the capitalist logic. The wonderful capitalist mechanism which consists in converting a specific historical contingency in an objective and necessary logic requires, we argued, a particular agency whose task is precisely this continued transubstantiation of injustice into fairness, and which is ensured by inscribing the free subject – or, rather, the subject's freedom – in a necessary process of representation by a signifier, for another signifier. But the place and function that bureaucracy thus comes to occupy has to do precisely with what, for the Weberian tradition, became the conundrum of the slippery quantitative-qualitative oscillation between the rationality and irrationality of bureaucracy. This paradox is now illuminated, and the problem is solved by positing it as the very solution: bureaucracy is the institutional, almost transcendental, rationalizer of the structural irrationality of capitalism.

The 'Conclusion' of the thesis is meant to recapitulate its final developments and also articulate some delimitations between this theory of bureaucracy and others. For one thing, the arguments proposed here should be differentiated from the usual, romantic critique of bureaucracy, that critique which opposes to the abstraction, mediation and reification of bureaucracy the values of spontaneity, creativity and immediacy. Our developments have tried to show how this kind of critique, far from endangering the smooth functioning of the bureaucratic mechanism, is already taken into account by it, and how the excess and

remainder of creativity, immediacy and spontaneity is not the opposite of the bureaucratic sphere, but, on the contrary, the element on whose perpetual generation, inclusion and reproduction the whole bureaucratic mechanism is based.

This theory of bureaucracy is also different from the usual view according to which the bureaucratic domain of activity is a clearly circumscribed one, dealing only with the application of the decisions taken elsewhere and with the administration of details, while the grand design of policies belongs to the proper sphere of the elected politicians. Starting from this interpretation, there is only one step towards formulating the critique of the bureaucratic usurpation, in which the mechanical application of decisions seems to gain more importance than the decisions themselves (and even affects and alters those decisions), while the appointed officials have the upper hand over the elected representatives of the people. The interpretation elaborated throughout the thesis started from the assumption that, before circumscribing the bureaucracy to such a delimited sphere of activity, there is a more original function which is taken in charge by bureaucracy, which regards the primordial social inscription of the free subject, and the consequent distribution of his separate spheres of social activity (politics, economy, law, nature, public, private). Thus, far from being a particular domain of activity in the political and social realm, bureaucracy is the point from which the different domains of activity are established and distributed, united and kept apart at the same time.

Finally, the conclusion also provides an answer to the possible objection brought from the standpoint of the recent neoliberal turn of capitalism: how can one hold the thesis of the essential complicity between bureaucracy and capitalism, when today's capitalism has on the path of its growing efficiency only one designated enemy: the bureaucracy. A closer look at this contemporary development proves, however, that the critique of bureaucracy is here accompanied also by a critique on the labor theory of value, and by its attempted substitution with more immediate, quite pre-capitalist, ways of generating plus-value. Thus, far from putting into doubt our main thesis, this neoliberal trend only further proves the essential link between bureaucracy and the capitalist law of value: they rise and fall always together.

A few words about the title of the thesis: *The Discrete Charm of Bureaucracy*. This paraphrase of the title of Buñuel's film is meant to allude to the new articulation of the classical Weberian account of bureaucracy that this dissertation proposes. The Weberian



evolutionary narrative, in which the good old charismatic leader is simply replaced by the army of expert officials, is subjected here to a more dialectical treatment, in line with Lacan's theory in which the university discourse does not simply evacuate the master's discourse, but suppresses and conserves it, reproduces it by making it invisible. Thus, the subjective charisma of the leader is, here, rendered discrete, turned into the objective charm of bureaucracy. As for the substitution of 'bourgeoisie' with 'bureaucracy', we merely replaced the former with its own political schematism.

## Chapter 1.

### Bureaucracy from Hegel to Marx

“My hobby is building the socialist society” (Nicolae Ceausescu). For quite a long period of our recent history, this confession was regarded as the standard statement of the common revolutionary. Being a revolutionary was supposed to mean, precisely, being concerned in one’s most particular activities and interests (even one’s “hobbies”) with the universal emancipation and well-being of the whole society. However, through one of those unexpected twists or ironies of history, the very same “revolutionary” sentence would nowadays be regarded as the official self-definition of the state bureaucrat. Is this radical reversal of meaning, who generates the speculative identity of these two contraries (the revolutionary and the bureaucrat) just a matter of historical coincidence, a simple external and conjectural identity? It is my contention that things go much more in depth: this “simple coincidence” can, in fact, be traced back to its historical and theoretical origin, which is the Hegelian conception of bureaucracy and Marx’s critical analysis of it.

In the first part of this chapter I will try to lay down the basic elements of the Hegelian account of bureaucracy, as it derives from the *Philosophy of Right*, following in the same time its Marxian evaluation in the *Critique of Hegel’s -Philosophy of Right*. In the second part, I will discuss the Hegelian statements regarding the role of the king and the nature of monarchy, again together with their Marxian critique. Both these sections are intended to gather some elements that will become fruitful in the second part of my dissertation: the identity between spiritualism and formalism as a constitutive trait of bureaucracy (the first part), and the reshuffling of the classical opposition between decision and application (the second part). These two sections are also supposed to provide the background against which the utility of my interpretative hypothesis – one based on the Lacanian (or radical Saussurean) opposition between signifier and signified, and which will be developed in the

second part of my dissertation ó can be evaluated<sup>1</sup>. Finally, the third part is designed as a bridge towards the discussion of the Marxian account of bureaucracy. By enumerating the immediate similarities and differences between Hegel's universal class (the bureaucracy) and Marx's (the proletariat), this final part should be, in the same time, a way to recapitulate the path just walked, and to open it up further for its discussion in the Marxian context.

### *1.1. Spiritualism as formalism*

In August 2007 the Chinese government promulgated the Order no. 5, a law that would implement "the management measures for the reincarnation of living Buddhas". This important move to institutionalize management on reincarnation basically prohibits Buddhist monks from returning from the dead without government permission<sup>2</sup>.

Perhaps the Chinese authorities didn't get very well the meaning of religion, but they certainly got perfectly the role of bureaucracy. So, instead of dismissing this example as a quite obvious trick masking some hidden political intentions, I think the Order no. 5 can be regarded as a good (albeit extreme) illustration of the nature and mission of the state bureaucracy as defined in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.

Before diving into Hegel's description of bureaucracy, I think a few remarks concerning the general outlook and significance of the *Philosophy of Right* will not prove completely irrelevant. This book has always been a source of debates in the history of its reception. On the one hand, there are those who read in it the ultimate proof of Hegel's extreme

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<sup>1</sup> The Lacanian theory of bureaucracy which I intend to verify in my thesis is not a ready-made theory, an already existing theory which is just waiting to be grasped and applied properly to the research material. On the contrary, it is a theory that is paradoxically being constructed through its very process of verification. To put it in other words: the critical reconstruction (notice that I didn't say the magical words of Honneth: *normative* reconstruction) that I attempt in the first part of my dissertation is not just a spectacular wrestling match – that is, an already decided one – between the Lacanian theory and its immediate philosophical proxies. It is literally a *re*-construction: the construction of a theory in its actual process of repetition, that is, of application and verification. Hence, each chapter will have to provide a set of elemental truths, which will later become the basic theorems of the Lacanian theory of bureaucracy, that is of that theory whose concrete actualizations they were supposed to be in the first place. In a sense, nothing but the good old hermeneutical circle.

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "How China Got Religion", *New York Times*, 11 oct. 2007.

conservatism, his reluctance towards democracy and modernity, and his sympathy for absolute monarchy, the system of estates, a strong and moralizing state and other presumably dead political monsters. "It follows from his metaphysics that true liberty consists in obedience to an arbitrary authority, that free speech is an evil, that absolute monarchy is good, that the Prussian state was the best existing at the time when he wrote, that war is good, and that an international organization for the peaceful settlement of disputes would be a misfortune." What he admired were "order, system, regulation and intensity of governmental control"<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, there are the more moderate readers, who, even if they agree with Russell's interpretation, tend to oppose this "evil" Hegel to a good one which expressed himself in his early writings. Hence, according to this quite common reading, there is a major shift from the young and radical Hegel of the Jena period, to the conservative and authoritarian one of the Berlin period.

And, on still another hand, there are those readers (such as Avineri) who don't see any discontinuity at all in the political attitude between the young Hegel and the old Hegel: from one end to the other, Hegel remained the same radical and critical interpret of the political realities of his time, and the same democratic commitments underlined his writings, whether we are referring to *The Phenomenology of Mind* or to the *Philosophy of Right*.

Furthermore, as a subdivision of this third school of interpretation, there are those "like Axel Honneth" who not only see Hegel as a continuous democrat, but even more consider his *Philosophy of Right* as an extremely relevant book for our time and as a source of inspiration for a much needed alternative to the main currents of today's political philosophy: in today's context dominated by the Kantian (hence, from a Hegelian perspective, purely formalistic) approach to political philosophy, Hegel's attempt to contextualize the principles of justice and to integrate the spheres of right and morality into the more fundamental one called ethic, is extremely attractive<sup>4</sup>. In order to counterbalance

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<sup>3</sup> Bertrand Russell, quoted in Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, Cambridge University Press, 2003 [first edition 1972], p. 239.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Axel Honneth, *Les pathologies de la liberté. Une réactualisation de la philosophie du droit de Hegel*, La Découverte, Paris, 2008, pp. 23, 29.

or, at least, establish some limits to the contemporary process in which the domains of auto-realization (right and morality) become self-sufficient, while the autonomization of civil society engenders pathological forms of what Honneth calls indeterminacy, the sphere of ethnicity, whose origin and expression is the state, and whose ultimate theoretician is Hegel, is precisely the much needed *pharmakon*.

For better or for worse ó that is: as long as we read it as a descriptive account, and not as a normative approach ó I tend to agree with Honneth's diagnostic<sup>5</sup>. I shall start then the discussion of bureaucracy in Hegel with what seems to be a blatant rejection of the thesis of Hegel's continuity. In a manuscript from 1796, which came to be called "The First Program of a System of German Idealism", Hegel says:

"í just as there is no idea of a machine, so there is no idea of the state; for the state is something mechanical. Only that which is an object of freedom may be called an idea. We must therefore transcend the state! For every state is bound to treat men as cogs in a machine. And this is precisely what ought not to be; hence, the state must cease to be"<sup>6</sup>.

How can we reconcile in a non-schizoid manner this radical anarchistic statement of the young Hegel with his later views on the subject of the state as the universal spirit incarnated? The usual strategy in cases like this is to pretend that it is not the theory that has changed, but the facts. And since philosophy is "its own time apprehended in thoughts", it is quite natural that a reconfiguration of the objective context leads to a reconfiguration of its apprehension in philosophy. Hence, according to this view (supported also by Avineri), the Prussian state in 1796 was pretty much like a machine who treated men accordingly, that is, like cogs in a machine. While thirty years later, the Prussian state appeared completely changed, not anymore as an impossible "idea of a machine", but rather as a "machine of an idea", that is, as the concrete manifestation and structuring of the objective spirit. I am not interested in the objective truth of this interpretation ó what interests me is the different idea of the state that comes out through this reconfiguration. Basically, what in 1796 was regarded as the

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<sup>5</sup> I will express later, when I will discuss the question of civil society in Hegel and Marx, my personal objections to this hypothesis.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Avineri, p. 11.

mortifying power of the state, in the *Philosophy of Right* will be identified in the nature and effects of the civil society. While in 1796 the state was viewed as the main source of danger, in 1821 the state became the best remedy to this danger, whose source was now identified in the civil society. In less than 30 years, the state ceased to be a machine, and became an incarnated spirit. The spirit of this previously spiritless entity is the bureaucracy.

This historical transition from the 1796 view of the state as blind mechanism to the 1821 view of the state as spirit incarnated is somehow recuperated in the *Philosophy of Right*, as the dialectical transition from abstract right and morality, through the civil society, to the state as sphere of ethicity. I will briefly sketch this dialectic process.

Right is freedom as idea (§ 29). As such, its subject is the pure will. But the pure will, and the abstract subject it presupposes, is nothing but solitude and absolute negation (§ 6). Hence, it is fundamentally unstable and can spontaneously convert into its opposite: pure will because of its lack of determinacy becomes caprice, which instead of being will in its truth, is rather will in its contradiction (§ 15). As a possible way out of this deadlock, the pure will finds its first determination in property. Different wills with different properties mutually agree in contracts. However, this first reconciliation is still profoundly unstable: the particular still manifests itself only in its opposition to the universal – hence, the truth of the contract is the wrong: by contract the parties still retain their particular wills; contract therefore is not yet beyond the stage of arbitrariness, with the result that it remains at the mercy of wrong (addition to § 81).

Morality comes out as a further attempt to reconcile the particular will with the universal duty, by providing the abstract will with its necessary object and determination: to will the good. However, the two elements which morality tries to reconcile still manifest themselves as opposed; morality is experienced as nothing but a bitter, unending, struggle against self-satisfaction (§ 124). Morality not only manifests itself as opposed to the individual will, but actually can be regarded as a justification for arbitrariness: simply to will the good and to have a good intention in acting is more like evil than good, because the good willed is only this abstract form of good and therefore to make it concrete devolves on the arbitrary Will of

the subject. (footnote to § 140)<sup>7</sup>. All of these deadlocks can be read in the formalistic nature of Kant's categorical imperative – which represents the real target of Hegel's comments on morality: Kant's formulation –contains no principle beyond abstract identity and the –absence of contradiction– (§ 135). Hence, virtually any maxim verifies the Kantian test of universalizability, provided that it is not self-contradictory<sup>8</sup>.

Both abstract right and morality suffer from what Honneth calls –indeterminacy–, or, to use Hegel's expression, –the good in the abstract [right] and conscience [that is, morality] is defective in lacking its opposite– (addition to § 141). The sphere of the ethical life is the remedy to all this: on the one hand, it transforms the abstract right into positive law, thus providing it –not only the form proper to its universality, but also its determinacy– (§ 211). On the other hand, it provides the moral self-consciousness of the good with its content and substance, which is incorporated in the public institutions. Thus, the ethical laws and institutions –are not something alien to the subject. On the contrary, his spirit bears witness to them as to its own essence, the essence in which he has a feeling of his selfhood, and in which he lives as in his own element– (§ 147).

Hegel's enthusiasm toward the sphere of the ethical life goes even further: –to these powers [the ethical powers that regulate the life of the particular subjects] individuals are related as accidents to substance–. Whether the individual exists or not is all one to the objective ethical order. It alone is permanent and is the power regulating the life of individuals– (§ 145 and the addition). Marx's main critique to the *Philosophy of Right* seems, in this particular passage and in others similar, quite pertinent: –Hegel at all times makes the Idea the subject and makes the proper and actual subject the predicate–. But if the Idea is made subject, then the real subjects – civil society, family, circumstances etc. – become unreal– (*A Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*). However, before jumping to the (wrong) conclusion that

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<sup>7</sup> The phenomenological misadventures of the abstract morality approach are identified, by Hegel, in the figures of the 'unhappy consciousness' (at the level of self-consciousness) and of the 'beautiful soul' (at the level of spirit) in his *Phenomenology of Mind*.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, even the free-rider position is susceptible of universalization, as we can see in the following: "«We won't lose. We've got more men, more money and more material. There are ten million men in uniform who could replace me. Some people are getting killed and a lot more are making money and having fun. Let somebody else get killed». «But suppose everybody on our side felt that way». «Then I'd certainly be a damned fool to feel any other way. Wouldn't I?»" (Joseph Heller, *Catch 22*, Vintage Books, London, 1994, p. 119).

Marx's solution would be the re-appropriation by the real subject (the civil society) of its alienated substance, which has become independent in the idea of the state, we should focus a little bit our attention on this extremely versatile concept of 'civil society'.

The ethical sphere splits, in Hegel's account, in three parts: the family, the civil society and the state. Out of this three components, the civil society is the one who constitutes the analogon of the abstract right and morality in the higher sphere of the ethical life. Civil society basically reproduces their abstraction and the consequent dispersion of society into a bad infinity of private interests. "Civil society is the stage of difference which intervenes between the family and the state. If the state is represented as a unity of different persons, as a unity which is only a partnership, then what is really meant is only civil society." (addition to § 182). Hegel's critique of the civil society is, at the same time, his critique of the contractarian account of the state, his rejection of the idea that the state is nothing but the result of a previous (historical or mythical) common agreement expressed by all the members of the society. The contractarian's mistake is that they take the end for the beginning and vice-versa: in fact, "the state as such is not so much the result as the beginning. It is within the state that the family is first developed into civil society, and it is the Idea of the state itself which disrupts itself into these two moments." (§ 256) Hence, there can be no historical or logical transition from civil society to the state, the latter cannot be founded on the basis of the former, simply because in the realm of the civil society the "ethical life is split into its extremes and lost." Reality here is externality, the decomposing of the concept, the self-subsistence of its moments which have now won their freedom and their determinate existence" (addition to § 184).

Left on its own, civil society, with its system of needs and its expanding market, can only endanger the organic unity of the state. On the one hand, there is then a coincidence in the way both Hegel and Marx viewed civil society: for both of them, civil society is nothing but economy<sup>9</sup>. However, on the other hand, the effects of the economical nature of the civil society are completely opposed in Hegel and Marx: for Hegel, the system of needs implies a chaotic movement of dispersion, an expanding sphere of mutually irreconcilable private interests; as such, this sphere has to be constantly tempered from both of its sides, namely

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<sup>9</sup> "What Hegel would later call 'civil society' is nothing else than the market mechanism", Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, p. 12.



the family and the state; for Marx, the danger of a self-sufficient and autonomous civil society lies not in generating a chaotic movement of dispersion, but on the contrary, in producing an implacable and quite coherent process – even if it is a process without a subject. This is one of the reasons why, for Marx, the alternative to the Hegelian relation between the idea of the state (as subject) and the civil society and concrete individuals (as simple predicates) cannot consist in its simple reversal<sup>10</sup>.

Before being tempered from its neighboring spheres (the family and the state), civil society has, for Hegel, two internal limits, two agencies that are bound to keep in check its dispersing power: the police and the corporation. However, both these instances lack the ability to impose a strong and essential unity between particularity and universality. For what concerns the police and the public authority, the unification it provides is only relative: it is restricted to the sphere of contingencies and remains an external organization (cf. § 231). It also irremediably implies a separation between the controller and the controlled<sup>11</sup>. As for the Corporation, the relative unity which it imposes on the civil society is restricted to the purpose involved in its particular business. Hence, even though it acts as a second family for its members, and ensures a substantial unity among them, the Corporation lacks a universal scope. Neither the police, nor the Corporation are able to sustain by themselves the universal idea and the reconciliation of particular interests. The end of the Corporation is restricted

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<sup>10</sup> The other reason – which explains also why, until recently, the concept of ‘civil society’ was not a very beloved one on the ‘left’ – is that “this conceptual portmanteau, which indiscriminately lumps together everything from households and voluntary associations to the economic system of capitalism, confuses and disguises as much as it reveals...the danger lies in the fact that the totalizing logic and the coercive power of capitalism become invisible, when the whole social system of capitalism is reduced to one set of institutions and relations among many others, on a conceptual par with households or voluntary associations. Such a reduction is, indeed, the principal distinctive feature of ‘civil society’ in its new incarnation. Its effects is to conceptualize away the problem of capitalism, by disaggregating society into fragments, with no over-arching power structure, no totalizing unity, no systemic coercions – in other words, no capitalist system” (Ellen Meiksins Wood, “Uses and abuses of civil society”, *Socialist Register*, 1990, p. 65). From this perspective, Axel Honneth’s recent plea for a return to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* is profoundly symptomatic for the current state of the ‘left’: in the general shift from ‘redistribution’ to ‘recognition’, not only is capitalism out of the question, but even its friendly cover under the codename of ‘civil society’ is evacuated from the discussion. It seems that for Honneth the real political problems of our time are the abstract right and morality and the pathological indeterminacy they engender, and not their concrete manifestation under the guise of civil society.

<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, Silvio Berlusconi’s recent proposal, according to which each beautiful woman and, more generally, each possible source of illegal temptation should have its own integrated policeman, could then be regarded as a welcomed attempt to remedy this fatal non-coincidence between the controller and the controlled.

and finite, while the public authority is an external organization involving a separation and a merely relative identity of controller and controlled. The end of the former and the externality and relative identity of the latter find their truth in the absolutely universal end and its absolute actuality. Hence, the sphere of civil society passes over into the state. (§ 256).

The only agency capable to contain the disrupting power of the civil society and to infuse the universal spirit of the state is the bureaucracy, or, as Hegel calls it, the sphere of the civil servants. They are the only ones able to engender that impossible "ghost in the machine", that is, to transubstantiate what otherwise would be only a blind social structure or a simple contractual assembly of men, into an incarnated spirit.

From this perspective, the topic of the civil service in Hegel presents a crucial aspect. One of the most spread idea among various generations of Hegel scholars claims that there is a huge difference between, on the one hand, Hegel's method, which, because of its dialectical, vivid, and flexible nature, is to be saved, and, on the other hand, Hegel's system, which, as an all-encompassing, totalitarian and suffocating theory, is definitely to be discarded<sup>12</sup>. Considered against this absolutely non-Hegelian opposition between method and system, the Hegelian account of the civil service appears as a direct manifestation of his method at the level of his system: as the mediator between civil society and state, the civil service is a concrete embodiment of dialectical thought inscribed at the heart of his political system. Here, the dialectical method is not just a way to pass from one instance of the system to another. As a sort of *dialectique à l'arrêt*, or institutionalized dialectic, the Hegelian civil service is one of the clearest proofs of the impossibility to dissociate his method from his system.

At first sight, Hegel's view on the nature and role of the civil service appear to have changed radically from his earlier writings to the *Philosophy of Right*. In his discussion of the *German Constitution* (1799-1802), for example, Hegel seems to play the role of a passionate advocate of the spontaneity of civil society and to condemn any attempt from the state to

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<sup>12</sup> For a reconstruction of the Marxian critique of this, initially, left Hegelian way of reading Hegel, see Stathis Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution. From Kant to Marx*, Verso, London & New York, 2003, pp. 246 sqq.

interfere pedantically in its way of life<sup>13</sup>. While in his later essay on the *Proceedings of the Estates Assembly in the Kingdom of Württemberg* (1817), Hegel goes so far as to oppose the people and its ruler, which are united in their will and feelings, to the particular class of scribes, which developed a habit of defending only its particular privileges and monopoly, thereby annihilating the realization of the principles of the rational right and of the general wellbeing<sup>14</sup>. So, how do we pass from this negative view on the class of scribes to their consecration, in the *Philosophy of Right*, as the genuine universal class of civil servants? Could it be that Hegel changed his mind so radically? Or should we suspect that this reinterpretation of the role of civil servants and the state is just a way, for Hegel, to accommodate himself with the public authorities of his time? I tend to think that none of these hypothesis is right, and that the account of the civil service in the *Philosophy of Right* is not so much a way of abandoning his previous doubts, but rather a way of institutionalizing them. For two reasons. First of all, the *Philosophy of Right* confirms the previous analysis of the *German Constitution* in the idea that the vital force of the state resides in the civil society and its corporations. From this perspective, the role of the civil service is not to obstruct the free activity of the members of the civil society, but rather to provide the institutional framework that can act as the condition of possibility of this free activity. And even though the goal of the civil service is to guarantee the realization of, one could say, a holistic political vision, namely one in which the entire ethical sphere, and not so much the particular individual, is the proper subject of freedom and self-determination, this conception is also pantheistic in the sense that the general good has to be effective in each of its social atoms<sup>15</sup>.

The second reason has to do with the way in which the civil service relates to the sphere of the civil society. In order to illustrate this point, a confrontation with the Weberian model of

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Scritti storici e politici*, Laterza, Roma & Bari, 1977, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 202-203. Hegel is deploying here a critique of the particular class of scribes which in fact sounds very similar to the critique that Marx addressed in 1843 to his own view of the civil service.

<sup>15</sup> Far from being a totalitarian imposition of an idea of the general good in the detriment of the particular individual, Hegel's view on the relation between the state and the civil society is so refined and balanced that recent interpreters even drew the 'liberalizing' conclusion that, in general, Hegel's disagreement with the proponents of the individual freedoms (briefly: the social contractarians) is not so much political, but merely philosophical – see Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory. Actualizing Freedom*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge & London, 2000, especially pp. 204-224.

bureaucracy is needed. As it has been often noticed, Weber's later model of the bureaucracy, which became the classical one, is very similar in certain aspects to the Hegelian one<sup>16</sup>. However, there are three little differences between these two ideal models, small differences that can account nevertheless for the major dissimilarities between Hegel's idea of the state and Weber's. These differences regard the criterion for recruitment (for Hegel, it is knowledge; for Weber, it is expertise); the type of stratification (universal class vs. commercial classes and status groups) and the mode of activity (subsumption vs. technical application of expertise)<sup>17</sup>. Basically, the first two can be derived as consequences from the last one, which is the most important one. According to C. K. Y. Shaw, Hegel's idea that the mode of activity of bureaucracy is subsumption has the effect of blurring two strong theoretical distinctions developed by the modern political theory: the one between politics and administration, and the one between *techne* and *phronesis*. If subsumption defines the activity of the bureaucracy, than this presumably technocratic and administrative class cannot be adequately described anymore in this usual way. "Subsumption, like concretization or "thinking the case together with the law", is a dialectical process in which the universal and the particular encounter each other and become related by means of human deliberation. It requires a hermeneutics of the concrete, an ability to absorb sufficient contextual knowledge and relevant legal norms. It is a standard case of hermeneutic circle"<sup>18</sup>. If this is the case, than the activity of the civil servants cannot be interpreted either as mere *techne*, but is much more closer to the Aristotelian *phronesis*: this is why the criterion for recruitment cannot be simply expertise, but knowledge, not a predetermined set of data that can encompass any situation given, but a much more hermeneutical and mobile pre-understanding of the nature of the law and state. In a similar vein, their work is not just administration: it doesn't consist in a vertical approach, which applies to the particular situation universal and transcendental laws. The idea of *phronesis* implies a much more contextual practice of the law, and refers to an encounter between law and practice that takes place exclusively in the domain of the immanence.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, p. 160.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Carl K. Y. Shaw, "Hegel's Theory of Modern Bureaucracy", *American Political Science Review*, June 1992, pp. 381-389.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.

Now let's have a look at the internal organization of this universal class. Since, as we will see below, in the final section, according to Hegel, the members of each class share not only a common social position, but also a common way of life and consciousness, a significant and quite substantial shift occurs in the passage from family to civil society and from here to the sphere of the state. While the family is the medium of particular altruism, and the civil society the one of universal egoism, the state, through the activity of the civil servants, brings about their fortunate synthesis in the form of universal altruism. However, in a rather significant manner, which we will analyze later, this substantial content and mission of the universal class can be accounted for purely on the basis of its formal organization and structuring principles.

The first principle of organization is the division of labor: the business of the civil servants has to be divided into several branches, which encompass different kinds of activity. However, it is very important that this division remains only an internal one, and that the output of the bureaucratic activity doesn't become, because of it, self-contradictory, non-efficient or simply redundant: hence, "the operations of these various departments shall converge again when they are directed on civil life from above, in the same way as they converge into a general supervision in the supreme executive" (§ 290). Furthermore, the office of each civil servant is separated from its incumbent. The criteria of admission have to be such as to make sure that, in principle, everybody can "get the job" "The objective factor in their appointment is knowledge and proof of ability. Such proof guarantees that the state will get what it requires; and since it is the sole condition of appointment, it also guarantees to every citizen the chance of joining the class of civil servants." (§ 291) Because talent is the criterion for recruitment, the bureaucracy is the necessary political structure for an egalitarian society – obviously, not because talent is, like the good sense for Descartes, the "most equally distributed thing in the world", but because talent doesn't depend on class and social stratification.

Then, there are several organizational settings that are supposed to make sure that the civil servant will follow not his particular interest or the interests of his class, but the universal interest of the state. First, there is the salary that each bureaucrat receives from the state and which is supposed to keep him away from any possible temptation. Besides this financial settlement, there is a more "mystical" aspect in the condition of the bureaucrat: it is not just the salary that makes it so that the civil servants find their satisfaction only in their "dutiful

discharge of their public functionsö (§ 294). If that would be all, the relationship between the bureaucrat and his duty would still be an external one. In order for the bureaucrat to öconcentrate his main interests (not only his particular interests but his mental interests also) on his relation to his workö, there has to be a strong union between him as a particular individual and his universal duty, some sort of identification. Obviously, it is the bureaucrat's knowledge of the nature and interests of the state that enforces this unity. But this knowledge, in order to be effective, seems to require a large amount of affective investment. It is a passionate knowledge, which is also why the simple Weberian technical expertise is not enough. In order to ensure this fervent understanding, education is of vital importance: öSuch an education is a mental counterpoise to the mechanical and semi-mechanical activity involved in theí matters connected with administrationö (§ 296). In other words, what transforms the mechanical activity into a passionately assumed duty is, a little bit paradoxically, knowledge and education. On the other hand, the fact that the substance of the bureaucratic activity is knowledge represents another element for supporting its universal scope. Or, more precisely, it is not only the content of this knowledge (the universal interest of the state), but even the form (knowledge as such) that stands for the universal intentionality of this class: that is, the simple fact that its objective is not nature, nor artifact, but pure knowledge.

However, according to Hegel, the fixed salary, the division of labor, the knowledge and the education are, by themselves, not enough to guaranty that the class of the civil servants will not become a state in the state, and starts to follow only its particular class interest. Hence, further provisions have to be stipulated in order to block the degradation of the universal class into a private clique. The first one is internal hierarchy: the direct accountability of each civil servant and his subordination to the higher ranks of bureaucracy will make sure that neither his personal interest, nor the interest of his class won't win the battle against the universal mission entrusted to his office. The second one is the constant checking from above and below: that is, not only the supreme authority of the King, but also the authority given to the Corporations of the civil society. In the same way in which the bureaucracy is supposed to control and temper the disrupting power of the civil society, civil society has the duty to make sure that the bureaucracy doesn't start acting as a private Corporation. That is why, as Hegel concludes, these associations that take place at the level of the civil society are at the same time a menace against the organic unity of the state, and still the öproper strength of the stateö (§ 290). Finally, the third proviso is, oddly, the size of the state: öThe

size of the state is an important factor<sup>1</sup>, since it diminishes the stress of family and other personal ties, and also makes less potent and so less keen such passions as hatred, revenge etc. In those who are busy with the important questions arising in a great state, these subjective interests automatically disappear, and the habit is generated of adopting universal interests, points of view, and activities<sup>2</sup>. (§ 294) From all these three provisos, this last one was perhaps the most constantly contradicted by history. However, since this principle seems to be the consequence of the other two, its refutation jeopardizes also their validity. In fact, the idea that the bigger the state, the more reliable its bureaucracy, is based on the presumptions that a greater complexity in the organization of the civil service, a higher pressure exercised from below by a more powerful civil society, and a bigger distance between the bureaucrat's personal interest and his universal duty have nothing but benefic effects on the functioning of the civil service. But since this conclusion seems to be false, its premises must be untrue also.

In his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*<sup>3</sup> Marx dedicated a lot of attention to the topic of bureaucracy – quite strange from someone who is supposed to believe that bureaucracy is a simple element of the not-so-important superstructure. The basic method that he uses in criticizing the theory of the civil servants as universal class consists in taking the Hegelian account at face value and deploying all the dialectical consequences that derive from it. Firstly, the idea that bureaucracy is to provide the reconciliation between state and civil society represents only an imaginary mediation: hence, bureaucracy doesn't stand for the acquired unity of state and civil society, but rather consecrates their 'legal and fixed opposition'. The universal class is not the materialized unity of the state, but rather its incorporated contradictions. Secondly, the opposition between Corporation and bureaucracy, which for Hegel is destined to ensure their mutual checking and their proper balance, engenders, for Marx, a process through which these entities exchange natures with one another: 'The Corporations are the materialism of the bureaucracy, and the bureaucracy is the spiritualism of the Corporations. The Corporation is the bureaucracy of civil society, and the bureaucracy is the Corporation of the state'. However, because of this mutual transubstantiation of one into the other, the presumed conflict between these two entities turns out to be rather a mutual complicity: 'As soon as the corporation mind is attacked so too is the mind of the bureaucracy; and whereas the bureaucracy earlier fought the existence of the Corporations in order to create room for its own existence, now it seeks vigorously to sustain the existence of the Corporations in order to save the Corporation mind, which is its

own mindö. Hence, the mutual balance in which these opposed entities are supposed to keep one another, based on their spontaneous antipathy for one another, is simply not going to last. The profit they can reach by joining their forces is just bigger than the one they might get by constantly fighting one another. However, the relationship between Corporations and bureaucracy is not at all symmetric: since the Corporation is only an incomplete bureaucracy at the level of the civil society, while bureaucracy is the completed Corporation at the level of the state, the latter has the upper hand. All in all, it seems that, by definition, bureaucracy is bound to become a particular, closed society within the stateö, more powerful than all the other groups, classes and associations that take place at the level of the civil society.

Before analyzing the other objections formulated by Marx in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, it is worth focusing a little bit our attention on this question concerning the relationship between the state bureaucracy and the dominant interests of the capitalist class. In her *Bureaucracy and Democracy. A political dilemma*, Eva Etzioni-Halevi addresses two objections to the Marxian account of bureaucracy: first, it seems that Marx, obviously because of his presumed economicist views, understood bureaucracy only as serving the interests of the capitalist ruling class, thus failing to see that bureaucracy can become an independent and closed society in the mechanism of the state. Hence, political theory had to wait for the works of Gaetano Mosca in order to discover this terrible truth<sup>19</sup>. The second objection formulated by Etzioni-Halevi, is, quite oddly considering the first one, that there is a certain incompatibility between two different views that Marx held in regards to bureaucracy: the idea that bureaucracy is a closed corporation which pursues only its personal interests; and the idea that the state officials are nothing but servants of the ruling capitalist class<sup>20</sup>.

The least one can say about these two objections is that the incompatibility they pretend to uncover is, first of all, their own one. For what concerns the first objection, we should recall that the idea that bureaucracy can act like a private corporation pursuing its class interests was, in fact, Marx's main critique towards the Hegelian account of bureaucracy. Hence, it cannot be absent from Marx's writings. Furthermore, before being discovered by Gaetano

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<sup>19</sup> Eva Etzioni-Halevi, *Bureaucracy and Democracy. A Political Dilemma*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley, 1985, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.



Mosca, and even before being pre-discovered by Marx, this possibility was, as we saw, already present in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. All the organizational devices and the whole system of checks and balance were designed by Hegel in order to prevent this thing from happening.

As for the second objection, the picture is again a little bit more complex than what Etzioni-Halevi perceives it to be. First, there is a question of time: Etzioni-Halevi claims that Marx proposed, in his youth, the interpretation of bureaucracy as an independent class; while only later he changed his mind and conceived of bureaucracy as a simple tool for the interests of capital. However, in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels proclaim that "the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie". While in *The Civil War in France* (1871), Marx speaks about the public functions as being "the private property of the tools of the Central Government". So, unless time runs backward, Eva Etzioni-Halevi is wrong.

As for the incompatibility between these two views, the critique seems to be more accurate. But even in this case, the picture has to be supplemented with a third element, which might provide a sort of compatibility between these two opposite views. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx offers an analysis of the French coup d'état of 1851 in these terms: "the bourgeoisie confessed that its own interest requires its deliverance from the peril of its own self-government; that to establish peace and quiet in the country its bourgeois parliament must first of all be laid to rest; that *its political power must be broken in order to preserve its social power intact; that the individual bourgeois can only continue to exploit the other classes and remain in undisturbed enjoyment of property, family, religion and order on condition that his class is condemned to political insignificance along with the other classes*"<sup>21</sup>. What we get in this hypothesis is which is the basis for the usual Marxist interpretation of fascism as a counter-revolution of capital against labor is a much more dialectical relationship between the state bureaucracy and the interests of the ruling capitalist class: the two opposite and irreconcilable theories that Etzioni-Halevi detects in the Marxian

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<sup>21</sup> As a possible fourth way of describing the relation between bureaucracy and dominant classes, Engels wrote in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, the following: "By way of exception, however, periods occur in which the warring classes balance each other so nearly that the state power, as ostensible mediator, acquires, for the moment, a certain degree of independence of both" (quoted by Ralph Milliband, *Marxism and Politics*, London, Merlin Press, 2004 [first edition Oxford University Press, 1977], p. 90).

corpus, seem here to paradoxically lay on one another. That is, in order to pursue its private economical interest, the bourgeoisie willingly abandons its political power and allows the state apparatus to work independently. Or, to put it the other way around, precisely by acting as a particular and independent society in the mechanism of the state, the bureaucracy ensures the accomplishment of the interests of the capitalist ruling class.

Now, if this is how things are, and if bureaucracy serves the interests of capital even when it follows its own private interests, what is Marx's evaluation of the barriers that Hegel raises in order to block this thing from happening? One by one, the principles of hierarchy, objective criteria for admission, knowledge, education, public salary and size of the state are dismissed by Marx.

Instead of turning bureaucracy into a more reliable institution, its hierarchical organization can only, according to Marx, strengthen its blind domination and its sectarian nature: 'The general spirit of the bureaucracy is the secret, the mystery'<sup>22</sup>, preserved inwardly by means of the hierarchy and externally as a closed corporation. Accordingly authority is the principle of its knowledge and being, and the deification of authority is its mentality. At the very heart of the bureaucracy its spiritualism turns into a crass materialism, the materialism of passive obedience. Even more, instead of preventing the misuses of their personal power by the individual bureaucrats, hierarchy can act as an incitement towards such things: 'the hierarchy punishes the civil servant to the extent that he sins against the hierarchy or commits a sin in excess of the hierarchy; but it takes him under its protection when the hierarchy sins through him'.

The same thing holds true for the principle of equal admission: the fact that the criteria for recruitment are objective and open to all does not imply that the difference in power and privilege between civil society and bureaucracy simply disappears. The fact that 'each [individual] has the possibility of gaining the privilege of another sphere proves only that his own sphere is not the actuality of this privilege. The identity which Hegel has constructed

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<sup>22</sup> The appearance of the theme of the secret and mystery in the discussion of a class which is supposed to be class of public knowledge is not accidental. One could say that Marx is forcing Hegel here to address his own Kantian debt. As the inheritors of the Kantian (public) philosophers, Hegel's civil servants, as 'specialists of the universal', inherit also the paradoxical statute that Kant reserved to philosophers in his *Project for Perpetual Peace*, namely, that of being the secret clause of publicity.

between civil society and the state is the identity of two hostile armies in which each soldier has the 'chance' to become through desertion a member of the other hostile army.

As for knowledge as the basis of acceptance into the ranks of the civil service, this principle is, according to Marx, simply contradictory to the very idea of the public service: since knowledge of the matters of the state has to be shared by every citizen, the adoption of this principle would imply that all citizens are to become bureaucrats. But the lack of validity of this principle does not imply its lack of a certain efficiency: in fact, the examinations are nothing other than a Masonic rite, nothing but the bureaucratic baptism of knowledge, the official recognition of the transubstantiation of profane into holy knowledge.

For what concerns education, Marx's critique detects, again, the proclamation of an imaginary unity meant to hide the consecration of an opposition. The idea that, through education, the civil servant is able to transcend the conflict between his personality and the mechanical aspect of his activity is rather a tacit admission of Hegel's impossibility to fill in this gap.

Finally, the hypotheses that the public salary and the size of the state can prevent the autonomization of the bureaucracy are also quickly dismissed by Marx. The first one, by pointing at the odd fact that Hegel is able to develop the wage of the civil servant out of the very concept of the state. The second one, in an empirical way, by pointing at the size of Russia and at the deplorable state of its bureaucratic class.

All in all, Marx notices the strange fact that Hegel, in his account of bureaucracy, develops only the organizational traits of this entity and its locus in the mechanism of the state. His approach is merely formal, and no real content fills this empty structure. However, this apparent omission is not an error, but on the contrary, quite an appropriate view on this topic. In fact, bureaucracy is nothing but the formalism of a content which lies outside the bureaucracy itself. Its spiritualism is nothing but formalism. Hence, one could say that in the same way in which bureaucracy is, for Hegel, the only agency capable to invent a ghost in the machine of the state, and to infuse a spirit in this otherwise spiritless mechanism, in itself, and in an opposite manner, bureaucracy is rather the very machine in the ghost, the formal mechanism in the very heart of this animated spirit which is the state.

The basic problem that Marx detects in the Hegelian idea of bureaucracy regards, in fact, its illusory or pseudo-universality. The true universality cannot be fixed in the form of a particular class. In a true state it is not a question of the possibility of every citizen to dedicate himself to the universal in the form of a particular class, but of the capability of the universal class to be really universal, i.e. to be the class of every citizen.

There are two problems with the Marxian critique of the Hegelian bureaucracy. Firstly, if we read Marx's later account of the "good" bureaucracy in *The Civil War in France*, we discover that its traits are not that different from the ones proposed by Hegel. In fact, virtually all the provisos by means of which Hegel tried to insure the proper functioning of the bureaucracy, provisos that were one by one dismissed by Marx in his book from 1843, are somehow revived in his writings from 1871: the members of the Central Government of the Paris Commune are to be chosen by universal suffrage, and held responsible and revocable at all times; and they will all receive a public wage. So, the major difference is that instead of the recruitment by means of examination and on the basis of knowledge, we get a recruitment through universal suffrage. But if this principle is destined to ensure a higher accountability of the members of the public service, then it is superfluous, since this accountability is already ensured by the fact that they are constantly revocable and permanently checked from below – a proviso that was already present in Hegel. If, instead, this principle is destined to ensure a higher degree of competence, then it seems that the examinations and the recruitment on the basis of knowledge (that is, Hegel's provisos) might do a better job than universal suffrage. Not even the centralistic and pyramidal nature of the Hegelian state is to be abolished: "The few but important functions which would still remain for a central government were not to be suppressed, as has been intentionally misstated". All in all, it seems that the famous Leninist "democratic centralism" was not at all his own invention.

Secondly, if the cause of the illusory and pseudo-universal nature of Hegel's bureaucracy consists in the fact that it is materialized in a particular class, then the same thing holds true for the Marxian proletariat. The only way of solving this problem seems to be by actually changing the usual meaning of the "universal". This is the way in which several contemporary French theorists tried to solve this deadlock: the reason for which the proletariat is a universal class, while bureaucracy is not, is because of his peculiar position in the structure of the state. Namely, a position that can be described paradoxically as one of "immanent exception" (to use Alain Badiou's expression): as being present without being

represented, or being included as excluded. Hence, if the proletariat is the universal class, this will imply that the universal is not what it usually thought to be, namely an all-encompassing dimension, or an extremely general aspect common to all; but, on the contrary, the very disruption of the social stratum, the very ‘supernumerary’ (Badiou again) element unaccounted in all situation in which it is nevertheless present. The obvious problem with this solution is, apart from the romantic view that underlies it, its circular nature: in order to explain the universal dimension of the proletariat, it seems that the solution consists in taking the Marxian definition of the proletariat (‘the dissolution of all estates’), kicking out the proletariat, and then sticking on it the label ‘universal’. No wonder then that, after constructing the universal in this way, the proletariat seems to be, quite surprisingly, its most proper operator. The proletariat characterization as ‘immanent exception’ seems to describe, even before its position in the social structure, its locus in this very definition of the universal<sup>23</sup>.

## 1.2. *Monarchy as zoology*

Going back to Hegel’s theory of the state, the immediate question that raises is why does this extremely complex social system need, at his head, a monarch? Since the coherence, equilibrium and universality of the structure of the state have already been ensured by the activity of the civil servants and by their mutual checking together with the Corporations of the civil society, why does it need a king? Since the state has already acquired an animated subjectivity, provided by its organic unity, why does it need the monarchical supplement?

Usually, Hegel’s plea for the monarchical constitution of the state is perceived by its interpreters as one of the least commendable aspects of the *Philosophy of Right*. Most of the readers see in the Hegelian account of monarchy a pre-configuration of the Schmittian concept of sovereignty. Since the monarch is the ultimate source of decision and, furthermore, since, according to Hegel, the state becomes actual only in war, what we have here is nothing but Carl Schmitt’s theory according to which sovereignty is the power to

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<sup>23</sup> I will deal more extensively with this topic in chapter 4.

decide over the exception, while the main concepts of the political are those of friend and enemy.

The usual way to dismiss this interpretation is by explaining Hegel's account of the monarchy as a sort of compromise that he had to draw with his epoch and with the political authorities that populated it. According to this theory, the historical context can also explain the reason for the major shift in Hegel's theory of the monarch, from his rather "anarchistic" statements that can be found in his early writings to the very conservative view on the subject expressed in the *Philosophy of Right*. As for the latter, the reader should be intelligent enough to be able to separate between the "liberal" provisos that Hegel formulates with regards to the institution of monarchy (which provisos are to be taken seriously, as the genuine views of Hegel) and the conservative statements that he makes in the same book (and which are to be dismissed as simple concessions that Hegel had to make to its own epoch). The problem with this way of interpretation is that it is, in the same time, too external and too internal. It seems to immediately link what is only external (the historical conjecture) to what is only internal (the non-expressed intentions of the author). What gets skipped in this way is nothing but the text that this theory was supposed to explain in the first place.

Shlomo Avineri tried to provide a third possible interpretation by underlining the fact that, for Hegel, the power of the king is only "a symbol for the modern political idea of subjectivity and self-determination" – a mere symbol of the unity of the state. Furthermore, since the king has only to dot the *i* and to accompany the decisions taken by the executive with a formal "I will", he is "both essential – without him the *i*s go undotted – but also ultimately trivial"<sup>24</sup>. However, even if this explanation is sufficient in order to tranquilize the readers and avoid the menacing appearance of the Schmittian sovereign in the Hegelian corpus, it still doesn't provide a reason as to the necessity of this monarchical moment in the system of the state.

In order to attempt an elucidation of this mystery, let us start by looking at the Hegelian account of monarchy. The Crown represents the point in which the different powers in the state "are bound into an individual unity which is thus at once the apex and basis of the

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<sup>24</sup> Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, pp. 187-188.

wholeö (§ 273). The monarch is, then, at the same time the most individual thing and the most universal thing in the structure of the state. Somehow, the pure will that was abandoned by Hegel at the level of the abstract right, reappears at the ultimate heights of the state, with all its characteristics: öSovereigntyí comes into existence only as subjectivity sure of itself, as the willø abstract and to that extent ungrounded self-determination in which the finality of decision is rootedö (§ 279). Since this last agency of decision cannot be grounded or deduced from anything else other than itself, it is quite natural that Hegelø monarchy must be a hereditary one. Against the predictable objection according to which this conception of monarchy would entrust the ultimate powers in the state to personal caprice, or biological chance, Hegel replies that öin a completely organized state, [the monarchy] is only a question of the culminating point of formal decisioní [The monarch] has only to say ÷yesø and dot the ÷iø because the throne should be such that the significant thing in its holder is not his particular make-upí In a well-organized monarchy, the objective aspect belongs to law alone, and the monarchø part is merely to set to the law the subjective ÷I willøö (addition to § 279). True, the concrete effects of this ungrounded and abstract will are thus simply symbolic; however, according to Hegel, öthis ÷I willø constitutes the great difference between the ancient world and the modernö (§ 279).

Considering all these, it is still difficult to see the need for the monarch. Yes, the monarch is the point in which the powers in the state converge into a unique decision; however, these powers were supposed to converge even without the help of the monarch. Even more, in the case in which there appears to be a conflict or contradiction between the different powers in the state, and a king seems to be actually needed in order to mediate between them, the king suddenly becomes excessive, his power stops being a simply symbolic one and the danger of despotism lurks at the horizon. In the end, the only meaning of the monarch seems to be to provide the already acquired subjectivity of the state with an equivalent subject in flesh and blood. And, paradoxically, the only way to do this is to accompany the majestic structure of the state, which was philosophically derived from the concept of the state, with a particular individual, whose ÷appointmentø is based on nothing but the blind chance of the hereditary line.

Obviously Marx was one among the firsts to be outraged by this curious development. But, interestingly enough, his comments in the *Critique of Hegelø Philosophy of Right* only repeat (in a more mocking manner) Hegelø own statements. öThe only positive result of

[Hegel's account of the Crown] is that in the state the monarch is the moment of individual will, of ungrounded self-determination, of caprice or arbitrariness. Actually, Hegel would agree with all of this. "The *body* of the monarch determines his dignity. Thus at the highest point of the state bare *Physis* rather than reason would be the determining factor". Provided that we agree on the meaning of the "determining factor" Hegel would agree also with this. Furthermore, argues Marx, the transubstantiation of the idea of the state into a particular person is a magical process, deprived of any mediation: "it is the pure Idea which embodies itself as one individual". That can also be accepted by Hegel. And finally, because of the double contingency that is the basis of monarchy (the contingency of the will, caprice, and the contingency of nature, birth), the king's will lacks any particular object or determinate end. And that is also probably true, from a Hegelian point of view.

In my opinion, the blatant tension between the two aspects of the Crown, its being at the same time redundant and necessary, almighty and powerless, is just too striking to be only the result of a misjudgment or inadvertence produced by Hegel. It is unfortunate that Marx focused his critiques on each of these aspects, accusing the Hegelian monarch of being at the same time despotic and superfluous, without paying too much attention to the dialectical relation between the two sides. Accordingly, I am tempted to embrace a different interpretation, which was relatively recently proposed by Slavoj Žižek<sup>25</sup>. The basic and provocative idea advanced by Žižek is that the Hegelian monarch, with all his biological contingency and subjective caprice, does not stand for the despotic moment of the political system, but on the contrary, for the "non-closure of the Social" that usually characterizes the democratic societies. Žižek relies here on Claude Lefort's political theory: according to the latter, what distinguishes modern democracies from the authoritarian states is the general conviction and the consequent political mechanisms that ensure that the locus of power remains empty. That is, while in "pre-democratic societies there is always a legitimate pretender to the place of Power, somebody who is fully entitled to occupy it," within the democratic horizon *everyone* who occupies the locus of power is by definition a usurper<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, Verso, London – New York, 2002 [first edition 1991], pp. 267-270.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.



From this perspective, the Hegelian monarch can be paradoxically interpreted as the ultimate guarantor of the preservation of this empty place of power. How so?

“He is an empty, formal agency whose task is simply to prevent the current performer of Power (the executive) from ‘gluing’ on to the locus of Power – that is, from identifying immediately with it. The ‘monarch’ is nothing but a positivization, a materialization of the *distance* separating the locus of Power from those who exert it. It is for this reason – because his function is purely negative – that the question of ‘who should reign’ could be, even *must* be, left to the contingency of biological lineage – only thus is the *utter insignificance* of the positivity of the monarch effectively asserted.”<sup>27</sup>

It is quite interesting that, in order to argue for this thesis, Žižek has preferred taking a detour through the theory of Claude Lefort, while a more immediate route was available, a possible direction that was already opened by the Lacanian psychoanalysis (which is usually his main point of departure). I will try to briefly sketch this interpretative hypothesis that I will discuss more extensively in the following chapters. If one is to take for real the Hegelian idea concerning the subjectivity of the state, then the four *mathèmes* by means of which Jacques Lacan designated the general subjective structure should also apply to the Hegelian state. Accordingly, we could associate the S2 (the signifier of knowledge) with the Hegelian sphere of the civil servants (that is, the sphere of knowledge); similarly, we could identify the Lacanian empty subject of the signifier (\$) with the Hegelian private individual of the civil society, subject to the state and to his own pathological indeterminacy. But then, in order for the S2 to balance \$, that is, in order to have the mutual balance between bureaucracy and civil society and, thus, the organic unity of the state to be ensured, the other two elements of its subjective structure (S1, the master signifier, and *objet a*, the insignificant remainder, the pure trash) have to be also in a relation of equivalence. Consequently, if the subjective sanity of the state is to be preserved, it is not sufficient for S2 and \$, the bureaucracy and the civil society, to stay in a mutual balance. Somehow, if these four elements are to form a balanced proportion, it is of vital importance that the S1 must also resemble *the objet a*. To put it in plain words, the sovereign must definitely be some

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

kind of civilized monkey. If, for Hegel, bureaucracy is, as Stathis Kouvelakis rightly pointed out, “the state’s theological supplement”<sup>28</sup>, one should add that, under these circumstances, the king becomes a sort of biological supplement of the political order. Or, to put it otherwise: Kantorowicz’s famous thesis, regarding the king’s two bodies, is undergoing here a significant shift, whereby the glorious body of the monarch is detached from its person and embodied by the civil service, thereby unveiling the king’s biological nakedness<sup>29</sup>.

If this is how things stand, then this entails some crucial consequences for what concerns the relationship between (sovereign) decision and (bureaucratic) application. More precisely, what we are dealing with here is not just a simple shift in importance from the former to the latter and a simple reversal of this hierarchic opposition. What we are dealing with is rather a shift in the very nature of the two elements: somehow, paradoxically, the sovereign decision becomes a sub-specie of its own effects – that is, of the bureaucratic application. The decision consists in nothing but applying the monarch’s signature to its bureaucratic application. Hence, if we are to conceive of bureaucracy in terms of the Lacanian signifier (as we will try in the second part of the dissertation), then, from this perspective, the sovereign instance is not somewhere above the network of signifiers that defines the executive power, but is inscribed in its core, precisely as the empty signifier (the monarch’s signature, the dots on the *i*ø) in the middle of the realm of the signifiers of knowledge.

### 1.3. *Universal class*

“Les révolutions peuvent après tout être prêchés d’une voix douce” (Giscard d’Estaing)<sup>30</sup>. Indeed, the role of the Hegelian bureaucracy seems to be precisely to accomplish such a sweet and quiet permanent revolution, to transcend its particular position and interests and replace them with the universal, and to infuse this universal spirit in the otherwise rigid

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<sup>28</sup> Stathis Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, p. 294.

<sup>29</sup> More about this relation between glory and bureaucracy, following the developments made by Pierre Legendre (*Jouer du pouvoir. Traité de la bureaucratie patriote*) and, more recently, Giorgio Agamben (*Il regno e la gloria*), in the following chapters.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in P. Bourdieu, L. Boltanski, *La production de l’idéologie dominante*, Demopolis, Paris, 2008, p. 37.

mechanism of the state. Thanks to his account of the civil service, which seems to be the crucial element of the ‘German theory of the French revolution’, Hegel can present the state as the solution to the riddle of history: it makes the achievements of the revolution its own even while managing to avoid the revolution itself and make it impossible in the future<sup>31</sup>. Hence, if we are to get back to the point from which we started, it is perhaps useful to enumerate the similarities and differences between the two universal classes, that is the Hegelian state bureaucracy (which can be seen as a sort of sweet revolution) and Marx’s revolutionary proletariat (which, somehow symmetrically, always materialized itself in a sort of bitter bureaucracy).

In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel says:

‘The class of civil servants is universal in character and so has the universal explicitly as its ground and as the aim of its activity’ (§ 250). ‘What the service of the state really requires is that men shall forgo the selfish and capricious satisfaction of their subjective ends; by this very sacrifice, they acquire the right to find their satisfaction in, but only in, the dutiful discharge of their public functions. In this fact, there lies the link between universal and particular interests which constitutes both the concept of the state and its inner stability’ (§ 294).

Marx’s presentation of the proletariat as a universal class reads, instead, in his *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, the following:

‘... a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong*, but *wrong generally*, is perpetuated against it’ ... a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the

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<sup>31</sup> Stathis Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, p. 42.

*complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete re-winning of man.* This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the *proletariat*.

The immediate similarities are the following: while for Hegel the class of the civil servants (what we now call the 'bureaucracy') is the only universal class, for Marx this status is reserved exclusively to the proletariat. The manner in which both of them justify this claim is also similar: it is based on the fact that in the particular activities, interests or position of the members of these classes, the universal as such is at stake.

Thus being said, it is important to draw also the differences and the significant shifts that occur in the passage from bureaucracy as universal class to proletariat as universal class. First of all, the meaning of the 'class' changes completely. More precisely, the thing for which it stands is diametrically opposed in Hegel and Marx. For Hegel, classes are an attempt to synthesize and remedy the inevitable and constitutive dispersion of society into an unaccountable and uncontrollable dispersion of private interests and conditions. As such, 'class' is for Hegel a dialectical notion: on the one hand, it stands for Hegel's acceptance of the irremediable plural nature of civil society; on the other hand, it represents Hegel's attempt to impose a limit to this multiplicity and dispersion, his way of preventing the degradation of this multiplicity into a 'bad infinity'. 'Belonging to a class links a person to a universal and hence classes are a mediator between man's purely individual existence and the wider context of his life'<sup>32</sup>. For Marx, this dialectical nature of the 'class' seems to be lost or, at least, the synthesizing function is no longer sufficient. As such, in Marx's view, classes stand only for the division of society and labor; hence, they have to be eventually abolished. Of course, the picture in the end is more complex: Marx's position would be to eliminate the 'imposed' divisions in order to free the real, human diversity, which can manifest itself only in a classless society. However, from this perspective, and because of his more generous account of social and economic pluralism, the extremely 'conservative' Hegel proves to be surprisingly more 'liberal' than Marx: liberal in the quite classical sense that human diversity is paralleled and rendered possible by the economic diversity.

Secondly, there is another dialectical aspect of the class which seems to get lost in the passage from Hegel to Marx. For Hegel, belonging to a class doesn't imply sharing only a

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<sup>32</sup> Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, p.155.

common position in the structure of the state. On the contrary, classes, in the Hegelian sense, imply also a common way of consciousness. The link between the members of the same class is not only external and conjectural (their common position in the state mechanism), but also internal, substantial (their common class consciousness and way of life). If this is true, then Hegel's class is still the classical estate, which is based on the substantial link between private and public life. This coincidence between external position and internal consciousness, and the quite organic unity of the class, are lost in Marx. In spite of Marx's vacillations (and in spite of Georg Lukacs's later attempt to re-hegelianize the Marxist meaning of the class and re-synthesize the objective role of the proletariat with its class consciousness in his *History and Class Consciousness*<sup>33</sup>), the Marxian use of the term 'class' implies only the sharing of a common position in the structure of the state and in the relations of production<sup>34</sup>. Hence, on the one hand, it is quite true that Marx's account of class, which doesn't presuppose any substantial community of feeling or consciousness, is much more modern than Hegel's, which, as we already saw, is still indebted to the meaning of the classical estates; however, in spite of its obvious progress, Marx's contribution seems to play against his own interest: if a priori there is no common consciousness shared by the members of the same class, then, for what concerns the proletarians as members of a universal and revolutionary class, there will always remain a tension, or at least a non-coincidence, between their *immediate* interests as they (mis)perceive them, and their *real* interests. More importantly, their real interest – the universal emancipation of the whole society – and their class consciousness have to be constantly injected from above. Hence, the Leninist party of 'professional revolutionaries', which plays precisely the role of the externalized consciousness of the proletariat, becomes a structural necessity. In order to accomplish its Hegelian nature and task as universal class, the Marxian proletariat is in dire need of the party bureaucrat. If this is true, then the unfortunate historical performance of the really existing socialisms and their bureaucratization of the communist revolution was not just an external accident. In spite of Marx's hesitations on this subject, there seems to be a necessary and quite logical link between his statement in the *Civil War in France* ('The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes'), to Lenin's declaration of 1902 ('The working class, exclusively by its own

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<sup>33</sup> Georg Lukacs, *Histoire et conscience de classe*, Minuit, Paris, 1960, especially pp. 67-107.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. also Gaspar Miklos Tamas, "Telling the Truth about Class", *Socialist Register*, 2006.

effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness<sup>35</sup>) and up to Stalin, who thought that 'the transition from socialism to communism is *their* work [the work of the 'directing agencies' of the Soviet state]; communism will be introduced as an administrative measure'<sup>36</sup>.

Thirdly, if one can speak of a dangerous absence of the Hegelian bureaucratic consciousness from Marx's proletariat (an absence which history had to remedy as best as it could), one also has to point towards a symmetrical absence from Hegel's account of the modern state and of its classes as it is deployed in the *Philosophy of Right*. From Hegel's inventory of the classes of the state we find out that there are only three classes: a) the substantial or immediate class – the agricultural one; b) the reflecting or formal class – the business one; c) the universal class – the class of the civil servants (cf. § 202 of the *Philosophy of Right*). The one class which is strangely absent from this list is obviously the working class, who cannot be identified with any of the three official classes. The immediate reply to this evident omission would be that, at the time Hegel wrote his *Philosophy of Right*, the industrial revolution did not reach its ultimate consequences and its epochal flourishing, hence perhaps the proletariat was simply not a very significant class in the social aggregate. However, this possible answer would be false; in fact, Hegel dealt explicitly and quite extensively with the working class and its social condition in his early writings (*Realphilosophie I* and *Schriften zur Politik*). Judging by his remarks developed in these texts, we can see that he was quite aware of the major social and political significance of the working class, and that he was not at all naïve when considering the 'benefits' and 'welfare' brought to this class by the industrial revolution. In fact, it is precisely the conclusion that he reaches in his early writings as to the condition of irremediable poverty and misery of the working class, that can account for its bizarre absence from the *Philosophy of Right*. It is his open confession as to the fact that there are no structural and theoretical solutions to the worsening condition of the

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted by Ralph Milliband, *Marxism and Politics*, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism. A critical analysis*, London, Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1958, p. 167. Of course, one of the most recurrent questions that have been asked on the 'left' was the one regarding the precise location of this terrible moment, starting from which the socialist experiment turned into a bureaucratic reality. Was it Stalin who messed things up? Was it Lenin? Or maybe already the old, 'economist' Marx? Or even the young, idealist Marx? As one can easily see, I am tempted to place this bureaucratic shift already in Marx, maybe not so much as an articulated political program, but rather as an omission in his political theory that had to be filled by his followers. An opposite interpretation from this one was advanced by Leon Trotsky, notably in *The History of the Russian Revolution*.

working class, imposed on it by the growing division of labor and by the ever extending industrial revolution, which can explain the exclusion of the proletariat from the later, and much more majestic, reconstruction of the state in the *Philosophy of Right*<sup>37</sup>. But if this is the case, then Marx's opening remarks from the passage quoted above are nothing else than Hegel's initially confessed but later repressed conclusions as to the working class: that "class of civil society which is not a class of civil society", and that "estate which is the dissolution of all estates"<sup>38</sup> is not so much Marx's original view of the proletariat, but rather Hegel's. The only thing that Marx does here is to openly express the logical (but tacit) consequence of the Hegelian reconstruction of the state. Hegel's theory of the state, as deployed in the *Philosophy of Right*, would then be, at least from one perspective, a great solution to a denied problem. Or, to put it better, the smooth reconstruction of the state in the *Philosophy of Right* is only possible by hiding the problem (or one of the problems) that actually demanded that solution. But then, to put it in a more Lacanian vein, in the same way the Leninist party is nothing but the return into Marxism of its Hegelian repressed, Marx's proletariat and its revolutionary vocation would be nothing but the return into late Hegel of its youthful repressed. And, as Lacanians use to say, "le refoulement et le retour du refoulé sont une seule et même chose"<sup>39</sup>.

Overall, in the passage from Hegel's civil servants to Marx's proletariat, it seems that while history proceeded, at least at first glance, through an external continuity or analogy, illustrated here by the terminological coincidence ("universal classes"), significant shifts

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<sup>37</sup> Shlomo Avineri points to the same explanation, cf. *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, pp. 109, 154.

<sup>38</sup> For what concerns the proletariat as the dissolution of all estates, Giorgio Agamben's etymological reconstruction of the term 'class' in his *Il tempo che resta. Un commento alla "Lettera ai Romani"* (Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2000), could prove helpful, but also a little bit too helpful. By tracing back the origin of the term Klasse through Luther up to saint Paul's Klesis, which means 'vocation as revocation', Agamben proves that the term 'class' as such implies the dissolution of the old estates and the breaking apart of the substantial link between private and public life on which the estates were founded (*Il tempo che resta*, pp. 33-38). But if this is the case, then it is not the proletariat who first accomplishes the dissolution of the old estates, but the bourgeoisie (a thesis that will be explicitly posed by Marx and Engels five years later, in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*). And, again, if this is the case, then there is no necessary link or identity between being the "dissolution of society as a particular estate" (which is the nature of the bourgeoisie) and being "a sphere which cannot emancipate itself without... emancipating all other spheres of society" (which is supposed to be the proletariat). To put it briefly, the *modern* aspect of the class is necessary but not sufficient for its *revolutionary* aspect.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre III: Les psychoses* (1955-1956), Association Freudienne Internationale, p. 144.

occurred beneath this peaceful surface, shifts and dislocations which involved major changes in the meaning of one and the same expression. However, these shifts did not happen in a casual and non-causal way, but they were instead the consequence of the deadlocks and tensed equilibrium of their initial configuration. Hence, their development is not a matter of historical and external coincidence, nor of a substantial identity, but rather of a quite Hegelian and dialectic development, which history seems to have attentively followed in its passage from Hegel's civil servant, through Marx's revolutionary proletariat, up to the concrete manifestation of the "professional revolutionary" (as Lenin described the party nomenclature) which incarnated itself in the really existing socialism's bureaucracy.

However, once we move our discussion into the Marxian field, the external identity between the two universal classes that we just analyzed turns up into an internal opposition. Let's put it differently: in a recent attempt to solve a recurrent problem in the Marxist doctrine, Alain Badiou proposed a conceptual distinction between working class and proletariat. This distinction, which was absent from Marx's writings, is, of course, rather a way to formalize and to stabilize the problem, than to actually solve it. What it underlines is the unsurpassable fracture between the proletariat as a simple social class (which will be called "working class"), and the politicized working class endowed with a revolutionary conscience and a universal mission (which deserves the more noble label "proletariat"), that is, between the proletariat "in itself" and the proletariat "for itself". Now, according to our previous developments, what stands between these two occurrences of the proletariat is nothing but the bureaucracy, that is the professional revolutionaries who are supposed to awaken the latent working class to its emancipatory mission. It is in this sense that the external identity between bureaucracy and proletariat becomes, in the Marxist context, an internal opposition of the latter: bureaucracy is nothing but the non-identity with itself of the proletariat, the distance between its social referent and its political potential, or the space between the working class as a social reality and the proletariat as a philosophical notion or political operator. Or, to put it in an even more obscure way, one could say that bureaucracy is a kind of Derridean condition of (im)possibility of the Marxist proletariat: it is the only way for the proletariat to realize its potential, and the very unsurpassable obstacle on this path<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> If we take a closer look, the picture gets a bit more blurry. The external aspect of bureaucracy, as the operator of the peaceful, administrated revolution and as the mediator between the working class in itself and the proletariat for itself, was made possible only by a permanent, violent internal revolution of this



If this is how things stand, then the problem of bureaucracy in Marx should not be looked for where it usually is. Generally, the academic approaches to the question of bureaucracy always end up being surprised by the fact that, although the Marxist conception of bureaucracy is regarded as one of the most important accounts on the matter, Marx and a lot of Marxists afterwards did not have a very articulated view on the subject of the state and its governing structures and, even more, was inclined to dismiss this topic as being of secondary importance, in comparison to the real issues of the basic antagonism between the relations of production and the forces of production. Usually, the cynical answer to this possible incoherence is that, for what concerns the question of the bureaucracy, the Marxist practice and concrete performance is rich enough to fill the void left at the theoretical level. However, according to what we previously stated, the question of bureaucracy in Marx is not at all to be located on the axis economical base and superstructure. Before being thus discussed as a mere department of the superstructure and, hence, being dismissed as a simple epiphenomenon of the economical base, the presence of the Marxian bureaucracy should be identified in a completely different domain of investigation, that is, on the axis of the process of becoming a subject of the proletariat. From this perspective, what becomes crucially important for the question of bureaucracy in Marx are the shifts that appear in the passages from lumpenproletariat to proletariat, from working class to working class party, and from the intermediary phase of the dictatorship of the proletariat to the final stage of the classless society. In the next subchapter, I will try to follow these problems in the works of Marx and of his immediate inheritors, up to the Second International. The leading hypothesis is that, behind the immediate opposition that split the socialist camp between the revisionists Kautsky and Bernstein and the voluntarist Bolsheviks, there lies a strong convergence of their views concerning this problem of the proletarian bureaucracy.

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revolutionizing class. Hence, it is quite significant that, firstly, the bureaucracy was the only common target of both the dissatisfaction from below and of the system's self-criticism from above (an overlapping traced even at the level of jokes by Ben Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle. A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2008, pp. 79 sqq); and secondly, it is even more significant the fact that, in spite of the ever recurrent accusations of 'bureaucratic socialism', the socialist bureaucracy was, at least in the first decades of the really existing socialism, permanently subjected to a "carnavalesque self-destructive dynamic", and that the "stabilization of the *nomenklatura* into a new class is incompatible with true Stalinist totalitarianism" (cf. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Verso, London & New York, 2008, pp. 252, 259).



## Chapter 2.

### Bureaucracy from Marx to Lacan

This chapter continues and deviates at the same time from the developments pursued in the previous chapter. It starts from a distinction in the history of Marxism between two trends: traditional Marxism and critical Marxism. After presenting the conceptual differences between these two trends and their representative figures, it first reconstructs the theory of bureaucracy of traditional Marxism, a theory which confirms and further develops the results of our inquiries presented in the previous chapter. The discussion of Marx's labour theory of value follows then as an introduction to the basic conceptual outline of critical Marxism. In the end, for objective reasons, the attempt to build a theory of bureaucracy on the basis of critical Marxism appears as both necessary and impossible: thus, critical Marxism will have to be supplemented with a theory of bureaucracy forged by means of imported, namely Lacanian, tools.

#### 2.1. *Traditional Marxism and Critical Marxism*

There are almost as many Marxisms as there are Marxists. Perhaps due to its immediate proximity to praxis and its subsumption to a certain kind of practical constraint, the Marxist field has witnessed, ever since its appearance, a constant tendency to divorce and internal fragmentation. After the collapse of what has been called 'official Marxism' (the (in)famous DIAMAT), this tendency has only intensified, and heterodoxy remained the only kind of possible orthodoxy and fidelity to this particular discursivity: the *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism* enumerates more than a dozen schools of contemporary Marxism, and all this in an epoch in which Marxism is usually proclaimed dead<sup>1</sup>. In what follows, I

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Bidet, Stathis Kouvelakis (ed.), *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, Brill, Leiden & Boston, 2008.

will attempt to contain this unstoppable thrust to division and fragmentation in the only possible way, that is, by proposing a new dividing line which cuts the Marxist field into two major blocks: a traditional Marxism and a critical Marxism<sup>2</sup>.

What I call traditional Marxism is not so much a Marxist tradition (or, even less, *the* Marxist tradition), but rather a particular constellation of Marxist concepts and theories that, because of their specific content and nature – which can be moralist, naturalist, idealist and materialist at the same time –, are more predisposed to become a tradition, that is, to be objectified in a rigid body of knowledge. If one was to oversimplify matters, one could say that the basic opposition between traditional Marxism and critical Marxism is one between a critique of capitalism as exploitation and a critique of capitalism as alienation. But this picture gets extremely blurry once we take into account the different sources of these two lines of thought: contrary to what we might expect, traditional Marxism (the one focused on exploitation) derives rather from the early writings of Marx, mainly the *1844 Manuscripts*, which are usually read as the classical account of capitalism as alienation (and also as the main expression of Marx's early humanism); while critical Marxism instead takes its starting point in the later works of Marx, namely *Capital* and *Grundrisse*, which, of course, are normally read as the classical account of capitalism as exploitation. Thus, since the description of traditional and critical Marxism in terms of exploitation and alienation leads directly into open paradoxes, we will try a different route.

Traditional Marxism is, above all, a transhistorical conception of labor. Labor is understood here in a naturalist (and also humanist) way as a productive and goal-directed interaction between man and nature, a fruitful encounter between an active subject and a passive object. This kind of labor, which seems to pertain metaphysically to human nature as such and thus transcend historical time, stays the same in all epochs and in all modes of production. In capitalism, this human and, at the same time, natural labor is only encapsulated in a different – capitalist – frame of production. Its technical enhancement does not break with its essentially human nature: it is rather its continuation, intensification and development. This human-natural-technical labor is, according to traditional Marxism, the genuine core which is only concealed and perverted by its external, capitalist, framework. And it is also the

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<sup>2</sup> In this section (2.1) I rely heavily on Moishe Postone's pathbreaking work *Time, Labor, and Social Domination. A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

standpoint from which the capitalist society and mode of production can be criticized. Capitalism is thus understood as a set of extrinsic factors (private ownership of the means of production, the rules of valorization dictated by the market economy) impinging on this eternal process of production. There are, in fact, a series of immediate oppositions (immediate, in as much as they are non dialectical) which structure the basic thought of traditional Marxism. The first one is the humanist and moralist one between, on the one hand, the spontaneous, subjective, and conscious labor and, on the other hand, the non-conscious, automatic, blind conditions of production. The second one is the opposition between universal and particular: according to this perspective, the opposition between the proletariat and the capitalists is an opposition between universal and particularistic interests: the social and potentially universal wealth produced by the workers is, because of the external frame of production, appropriated by the capitalists for their particular ends. Thirdly, traditional Marxism plays on the opposition between the mediated social relations, which are criticized as impinging on the mode of production, and the direct, unmediated social relations that could be established once the mode of production would be set free from its capitalist framework. Fourthly, there is the opposition between adequacy and inadequacy: traditional Marxism is a critique of the capitalist relations as inadequate to their industrial mode of production, from the standpoint of a socialist and more adequate way of administrating it.

In short, traditional Marxism is a critique of capitalist exploitation from the standpoint of labor. As such, traditional Marxism shares with the classical political economy the praising of productive labor and the critique of the unproductive, yet dominant classes from the standpoint of the productive, yet dominated ones: the aristocracy, for classical political economy; the bourgeoisie, for traditional Marxism. The basic hermeneutical move of traditional Marxism consists in demystification: the task of the critique is to remove the appearances and to unveil the hidden essence, to strip the form in order to set free the hidden content: this is at the same time a theoretical strategy (the demystification of the exploiting framework of capitalism is already the uncovering of its socialist core, the mode of production) and a practical, political one (in order to reach socialism, one has only to remove the capitalist relations of production and set free the genuine, socialist, industrial mode of production). What traditional Marxism also shares with classical political economy is an optimistic view of history which somehow conceives it as an evolution and progress from artificial to natural, or as a history-becoming-nature: since the industrial mode of production

is conceived by both traditional Marxism and classical political economy as natural and eternal, the pre-capitalist history is, in one way or another, subsumed under its capitalist conclusion. Marx's famous statement according to which 'human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape'<sup>3</sup> is interpreted here in the sense that, under the capitalist mode of production, the same eternal mode of production becomes finally visible and readable, because it is no longer obscured by an inadequate framework (the religious, social or political modes of regulation and appropriation specific to antiquity and feudalism being replaced by the open economic interest). Of course, in this whole schema, for traditional Marxism there is a difference of epochs: it is not under capitalism that the industrial mode of production reaches into its own, but under socialism. Yet, the general approach seems to be the same.

The fundamental capitalist contradiction is, for traditional Marxism, the one between production and distribution<sup>4</sup>. This presumable inherent capitalist contradiction is, in fact, not so inherent and not that capitalist after all: hence, not quite dialectical. Not both of the terms of the contradiction are specific to capitalism. One, the distribution, definitely is; but production is not: it is at the same time pre-capitalist, in as much as it is transhistoric and eternal; and postcapitalist, in as much as it is already socialist. Hence the contradiction between production and distribution is a contradiction between the capitalist framework and the non-capitalist force that it tries to contain but that it nevertheless set in motion. If this is how things stand, then the 'dynamic contradictions' which structure the view of traditional Marxism are rather static and non-dialectical: firstly, the opposition between the relations of production (private property and global free market) which are seen as hallmarks of capitalism, and the industrial mode of production which is seen as the basis of a future socialist society. Secondly, the opposition that defines the nature of the capitalist domination, which is seen as a class domination that remains external to the process of

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin, 1973, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> Which is, again, an aspect that traditional Marxism shares with (at least a variant of) classical political economy: 'The laws and conditions of the production of wealth partake of the character of physical truths... It is not so with the distribution of wealth. That is a matter of human institutions solely' (John Stuart Mill, quoted by Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 832). This conception is criticized by Marx as 'highly absurd': 'the laws and conditions of the production of wealth and the laws of the distribution of wealth are the same laws under different forms, and both change, undergo the same historic process... These modes of distribution are the relations of production themselves, but *sub specie distributionis*' (ibid.)

production and in which the capitalist class which appropriates for its particular use the social product engendered by the proletariat will be eventually eliminated by the gravediggers to which it actually gave birth. It is important to stress this two-sided issue: traditional Marxism is constitutively oscillating between an objectivist conception of history, whereby the evolution to socialism is inevitably set in motion by the very nature of the capitalist mode of production (history is on our side); and a subjectivist, voluntaristic view according to which this whole evolution depends on the proletariat's coming to terms with its historical task and its self-consciousness as a universal class. (I will come back to this issue in 2.2).

Traditional Marxism's conception of socialism faithfully derives from these premises: since industrial production, once historically constituted, is independent of capitalism, and, even more, it is just denaturalized by its capitalist framework, the transition from capitalism to socialism is seen as a transformation of the mode of distribution (private property, the market), but not of production. On the contrary, it is this very mode of industrial production the one who provides both the resource of critique of capitalism and the already existing promise of socialism. Socialism will thus be conceived as a new mode of politically administering the same industrial mode of production. This new political regulation of the mode of production will ensure that the distribution of wealth is not only more just, but more adequate to the industrial mode of production. Socialism is thus not the abolition of work and of the liberation of the proletariat from its working condition, but rather the liberation of work and the self-realization of the proletariat: once labor will not be hindered anymore by the capitalist relations, it will structure social life more openly and the proletariat will become truly the universal class in the sense that everyone will become a proletarian. In as much as this move consists in the removal of false appearances and inadequate forms (the capitalist frame of production) and their replacement with the genuine essence and hidden content (the industrial mode of production, the liberation of work), socialism is nothing but the practical demystification of capitalism, just as Marxism is its theoretical demystification.

It is easy to imagine what was the historical deadlock of traditional Marxism: it was, simultaneously, the appearance, in the East, of really existing socialism, and, in the West, of advanced capitalism or welfare state, with a high degree of state intervention. Although in a different measure, both these political systems posed the same problem for traditional Marxism: in as much as these were systems in which the blind mechanism of distribution

realized by the market was replaced by the conscious mediation of political administration, these regimes could not be defined anymore as capitalist, but as socialist. Yet, from all the other perspectives, they weren't. Thus, the existence of state socialisms questioned the basic premise of traditional Marxism and its focus on the contradiction between industrial production and market distribution. Even more, it showed that the seemingly necessary link between socialist economy and political freedom is an extremely contingent one. This was enough for many traditional Marxists (and even more non-Marxists) to proclaim Marxism as such indistinguishable from Stalinism, totalitarianism and, as such, extremely dangerous.

But this whole historical evolution didn't affect the presuppositions of critical Marxism. A simple restructuring of distribution, whereby the blind mechanism of the market is replaced by the conscious regulation of the political apparatus could not affect, either by confirming or infirming, the basic presuppositions of critical Marxism, since for this line of thought the fundamental contradiction of capitalism is not to be placed in the tension between production and distribution. This contradiction is rather inherent to production as such, and pertains to the very form of value which structures the capitalist mode of production. While traditional Marxism understands the capitalist mode of production as being, roughly, just a technical enhancement – hence morally and politically neutral – of the innate human creativity and productivity, critical Marxism considers the value form governing production as providing the specific trait of capitalism. For critical Marxism, the nature of production, work and growth in capitalism are not technically, but socially constituted. Hence, they are far from being politically neutral.

But if the starting point of critical Marxism is the mode of production, its area of analysis and critique is not at all restricted to production. There is a clear difference of scope and emphasis between traditional Marxism's and critical Marxism's assessment of production. Traditional Marxism treats the mode of production with unrestrained humanist generosity, defining it as the hidden reservoir of human creativity; while, at the same time, it clearly separates this sphere of production from the domain of distribution, from which it somehow, miraculously manages to remain uncontaminated: in order to set free the human potential contained in production, one only has to remove the inadequate form of distribution. On the other hand, critical Marxism understands the mode of production not as natural and eternal, but as being historically specific, capitalist by definition. However, this clear conceptual delimitation – the contemporary mode of production as a historically determined one –



doesn't allow for the traditional plain division between production and distribution: on the contrary, the mode of production structured by the value form permeates into all other social spheres, amongst which distribution is in the first place. But this aspect radically changes the nature of capitalist domination. It is no longer, as it was the case for traditional Marxism, a class domination, an opposition between a dominated, universal(istic) class and a dominating, particular(istic) one. Rather, this domination has an abstract form. It is the domination of people by abstract social structures that people themselves constitute. Hence, critical Marxism is not (only) a critique of exploitation, social inequality, unjust appropriation of wealth and so on; and is not primarily concerned with the denunciation of private property and the market. It is, much more radically, a critique of an abstract form of domination that pertains to the social relations of capitalism and which has its origin in a determinate, structured form of practice: the value form of labor. This is not just a theory about social wealth being produced by the vast majority and unjustly appropriated by an unseen minority; traditional Marxism's propensity to identify the social product generated in capitalism with social wealth as such, and the correlative idea that labor is the sole resource of wealth<sup>5</sup>, which it just happens to be poorly and unethically distributed in capitalism, are contradicted by critical Marxism's assessment of a fundamental opposition between value and wealth, between the value form of the social product generated in capitalism and the effective, material wealth that could be generated in a different mode of production. (I will come back to the issue of value in 2.3).

In essence, while traditional Marxism is a critique of the capitalist relations of production from the standpoint of the industrial mode of production, critical Marxism is a critique of labor-mediated social relations from the standpoint of the historically emergent possibility of other social and political mediations. Hence, critical Marxism is not a critique of mediation from the standpoint of immediacy, but a critical theory of social mediation. This different starting point implies also a different method of inquiry for these two strands of Marxist thought. As we have already seen, the basic approach of traditional Marxism consists in demystification: false appearances are denounced for concealing a genuine essence,

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<sup>5</sup> This 'labourist' thesis was, after all, clearly rejected by Marx himself in his critique of the social-democratic program of the Lassalleian current: 'Labour is *not the source of all wealth*', as the first sentence of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* clearly states. (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>)

inadequate forms are to be removed in order to set free the hidden content, and capitalism is to be demystified as already containing in its vault, or rather in its engine room, socialism. For critical Marxism, the hermeneutical effort does not consist in neutralizing the false illusions on the surface of capitalism in order to get to the hidden truth, but rather in recognizing the necessary and constitutive nature of these illusions. Thus, the impersonal and abstract social forms that define capitalist modernity do not simply veil the real social relations among people: they *are* the real relations of capitalist society, those that define and structure its trajectory and its form of production.

This implies a radically different assessment of Marx's theory of fetishism in the critical Marxism's camp. Traditional Marxism usually understood Marx's definition of fetishism (‘the social characteristics of men's own labour are perceived as ‘objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves’<sup>6</sup>) as a blunt enjoinder to demystification: one has only to remove the false appearance of fetishism and conceive what appears to be objective relations between commodities as social relations between producers. Critical Marxism's move is, however, more faithful to Marx's attempt (and, incidentally, to the psychoanalytical definition of the fetish as a ‘necessary, constitutive lie’): the commodity-determined social relations are necessarily expressed in a fetishized form. These quasi-objective, impersonal social forms do not simply disguise the real social relations of capitalism, that is, its class relations; rather, these abstract structures *are* those ‘real’ relations. Remember how Althusser, in a blatant strike of traditional Marxism, famously advised the readers of *Capital* to skip the whole chapter on the ‘Fetishism of the commodity and its secret’ as being far too Hegelian and irreparably idealistic. Now, for critical Marxism, this chapter, and Marx's relation to Hegel overall, take a whole new meaning: Marx is not to be conceived as a materialist, anthropological inversion of Hegel's idealism, but rather as its materialist justification. At one point in his ‘Introduction’ to *Grundrisse*<sup>7</sup>, Marx tackles the usual dilemma regarding the appropriate method to be followed: should the inquiry start from the most abstract principles and then trickle down to the most concrete determinations? Or should it proceed in the opposite direction, rising from the concrete to the ultimate abstractions? Paradoxically, Marx's answer is: yes, please. And this openly paradoxical

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *The Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, Penguin, 1990, pp. 164-165.

<sup>7</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 100-108.

nature of the method of inquiry is justified by the dialectical nature of its object: in some way, what is the most effective and concrete in the field of study is its very abstract structure. Thus, what is true in Hegel's dialectic is precisely its idealist character: it should be read as an expression of a mode of social domination constituted by structures which, because they are alienated, acquire a quasi-independent existence vis-à-vis individuals. Hence, if, for critical Marxism, Marx is still to be interpreted as a materialist, we are nevertheless miles away from the sort of vulgar materialism very often present in traditional Marxism: here, the *Materie* in Marx's 'materialist' critique is social – the forms of social relations<sup>8</sup>. So, then, back to our issue: while traditional Marxism operates with a series of unmediated oppositions, in which one of the terms is demystified as oppressing and concealing the other, genuine one, critical Marxism's approach is different: it doesn't just attempt to reverse these hierarchic oppositions, but to explain them historically. Thus, instead of criticizing the abstract and alienating capitalist form, the extrinsic relations of production which block the self-realisation of the creativity of society, critical Marxism understands this very opposition (ultimately reducible to a metaphysical opposition between society vs. state, natural vs. artificial, spontaneity vs. control etc.) as constituted by and constitutive for the capitalist mode of production.

Starting from such a different reading of Marx's basic texts, critical Marxism's view on socialism could only radically differ from traditional Marxism's view on this topic. Since the fundamental contradiction of capitalism is no longer the one between production and distribution, nor is its form of domination the class one, socialism cannot be defined either as conscious distribution replacing the automatic mechanism of the market (on the 'objectivist' side), or as the self-realisation of the proletariat and as the affirmation of the labour values (on the 'subjectivist, voluntarist' side). On the contrary, socialism can only denote the possible abolition of labour, or, more precisely, the eradication of the almighty law of value and, consequently, the withering away of the proletariat. Unlike traditional Marxism, this view of socialism is totally unaffected by the historical misadventures of the welfare state and really existing socialisms: even though both these political systems tried to actively and consciously administer the distribution, they both accepted the law of value governing production as unquestionable and transhistorical. However, one could say that, in as much as

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<sup>8</sup> Postone, *Time, Labour, and Social Domination*, p. 171.

critical Marxism is untouched by this historical test of validity that strongly affected traditional Marxism, it runs nevertheless a different, opposite, in so far as structural, risk: since its focus is no longer on the critique of a concrete class domination, but on the critique of an abstract domination which seems to pertain to modernity as such, one could say that its endeavour to radicalise the issue of capitalism overhauls its own capacities, since it can easily turn into an unending, poetic and aestheticizing critique of abstraction. (I will come back to this issue in 2.4.)

The table below recapitulates the major points of divergence between traditional Marxism and critical Marxism.

| Traditional Marxism   | Critical Marxism  |
|---|---|
| Critique of exploitation  | Critique of modernity   |
| Capitalism as Private property of means of production, market mechanism                                 | Historical specific form of social interdependence with an impersonal and seemingly objective character |
| Concrete class domination   | Impersonal structural constraints and imperatives   |
| Transhistorical notion of labor   | Historical notion of labor  |
| Critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labor   | Critique of labor in capitalism   |
| Basic contradiction between the sphere of capitalism (private property, market) and the sphere of labor | Continuity  |
| Demystification   | Historicization   |

Until now, this development has been highly abstract and schematic. Now it is time to try to fill in the conceptual structure with concrete names. What, until now, I have called -traditional Marxismø and -critical Marxismø are, of course, rather -ideal typesø as such, it is virtually impossible to find, in the history of Marxism, theorists who could fit in perfectly in one of these two categories. If we are to assign names to these two kinds of Marxism, it will be more in terms of a predominant tendency, or conceptual apparatus, of a certain thinker,

than in terms of clear cut cases of representatives of these two theories. For what concerns critical Marxism, the authors that came closest to articulating such a Marxist view are the young Lukacs of *History and Class Consciousness*, the first generation of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer and Pollock), Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Guy Debord and, closer to our time, Moishe Postone and G. M. Tamas. The undisputable differences ó in terms of theory, but even in terms of style ó between these authors attests to critical Marxism's constitutive impossibility to institutionalize itself in a determinate tradition of thought.

On the side of traditional Marxism, we encounter an opposite phenomenon: this trend of thought has been so linked to a certain institutionalized Marxism, that the names of the particular authors who articulated such views almost vanished into oblivion, along with those institutions. Thus, traditional Marxism is first of all the Marxism of the Second, Third and Fourth Internationals, that is, the social-democrat, the Stalinist and the Trotskyist one. Among the few authors belonging to this trend of thought ó that is, traditional Marxism ó but whose names were saved (not incidentally, for theoretical reasons not related to Marxism: namely, existentialism, respectively phenomenology) are the humanist Marxists Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>9</sup>. Closer to our times, we have instead perhaps the most famous and most articulate contemporary version of traditional Marxism: G. A. Cohen. The whole focus on the fundamental contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production, the humanist conception implied in the definition of the working class, the transhistorical view on history (with its constitutive focus on 'functional explanations') and, overall, the deliberate anti-dialectical method of inquiry make Cohen's

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<sup>9</sup> 'A spectre is haunting the revolutionary imaginary: it is the phantasm of production': thus begins (and, consistently, thus continues) Jean Baudrillard's famous break with Marxism – *Le miroir de la production*, Galilée, Paris, 1985, p. 9. It is remarkable how the 'French poststructuralists' (the constitutive vagueness of the term plays here on our side: thus, we save from it Althusser and Lacan, and include instead Baudrillard), engaged as they were in a national struggle for symbolic capital, managed to constantly reduce Marxism to a classical version of traditional Marxism and, in order to make place for their conceptual innovations, managed to find in Marx only Sartre and his humanism (the productivist specter standing here for an avatar of the humanist's fascination with human creativity). This non-encounter will have its happy ending later, after the end of Cold War and the withering away of the Sartrian model of political engagement, when, in another famous book (*Spectres of Marx*), Derrida would eventually come to terms with Marx: finally, thanks to the 'hauntology' of the specter and the promise of a 'messianism without Messiah', there was also Derrida to be found in Marx, and not just Sartre. As a sort of Derridianism without Derrida, perhaps there was something to be saved in Marx after all... Inasmuch as it is theoretically remarkable, the poststructuralists' political contribution is, from a Marxist point of view, roughly identifiable with the anti-totalitarian vein à la Hannah Arendt and Karl Popper (see, for an argument in this sense, Boris Groys, *Le postscriptum du communisme*, Libella-Maren Sell, Paris, 2008, pp. 96-109) and, in spite of its early anarchist appearance, fits perfectly into the centrist effort of legitimization of the status quo.

major work, *Karl Marx's Theory of History. A Defence*<sup>10</sup> the contemporary bible of traditional Marxism. However, this diagnostic could be extended: because of its irreducible methodological individualism, with its correlative focus on an ahistorical and eternal human nature (which is, in fact, just the typical Robinsonade of classical political economy<sup>11</sup>) and the distributive justice touch (which, not incidentally, completely obliterates production and understands the political antagonism as a complex game of decision-taking involving rational atomistic agents in the field of the market — which is, again, a defining fiction of classical political economy), virtually all analytical Marxism can be discarded as traditional Marxism<sup>12</sup>. Besides these cases, there are only complicated ones. Even a Marxism as sophisticated as that of David Harvey's major work<sup>13</sup> relapses, sometimes, into traditional Marxism. I would even risk saying that his undoubtedly original

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<sup>10</sup> G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History. A Defence*, Oxford University Press, 1978.

<sup>11</sup> "The individual and isolated hunter and fisherman, with whom Smith and Ricardo begin, belongs among the unimaginative conceits of the eighteenth-century Robinsonades, which in no way express merely a reaction against over-sophistication and a return to a misunderstood natural life... This is the semblance, the merely aesthetical semblance, of the Robinsonades, great and small. It is, rather, the anticipation of 'civil society', in preparation since the sixteenth century and making giant strides towards maturity in the eighteenth... [In this fantasy,] 'this eighteenth century individual' [is seen] 'not as a historic result but as history's point of departure. As the Natural Individual appropriate to their [Smith and Ricardo's] notion of human nature, not arising historically, but posited by nature", Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 83. As a matter of fact, two-thirds of Alan Carling's article-manifesto in defense of Rational Choice Marxism revolves around a 'thought experiment' involving a Mr. Robinson and a Mrs. Friday (Alan Carling, 'Rational Choice Marxism', *New Left Review*, no. 184/1990, pp. 24-62).

<sup>12</sup> In her debate with Alan Carling and the 'Rational Choice Marxism' that he proposes, Ellen Meiksins-Wood draws this compelling summary of this school of thought: "If one were simply to list the principal features of the RCM model, the result would be something very like a caricature of Anglo-American liberalism as it has evolved since the seventeenth century: methodological individualism; 'analytic' method; ahistoricism (which is not necessarily incompatible with technological determinism or its functional equivalent and frequent corollary, a conception of history as the triumph of 'commercial society'); class conceived as income stratification; a preoccupation with market relations as distinct from production relations; an 'economic' model of human nature. This theoretical constellation could represent a rough sketch of the Anglophone liberal mind-set with its typical symbiosis of liberal ideology and British empiricism, in which a reductionist focus on human nature has been associated with a formalistic tradition of analytic philosophy... At the same time, there is another, at first glance opposing, tradition to which RCM has certain striking affinities—utopian socialism: a detachment of the ethical ideal of socialism from the historical conditions of its realization; a distributional theory of exploitation which locates the moment of injustice in the sphere of circulation and exchange; a 'one-sided' presentation of capitalism which abstracts the 'free' (if 'unfair') exchange between capital and labour from its 'presuppositions', thereby conjuring away the barriers between capitalism and socialism by implicitly constructing a continuum from capitalist to socialist 'freedom and equality'". (Ellen Meiksins-Wood, 'Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', *New Left Review*, 177/1989, p. 84).

<sup>13</sup> For example: "...the disjunction between production and distribution is one of the rocks upon which the continuous circulation of capital founders", David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1982, p. 442.

attempt to establish a geographical Marxism or Marxist geography, in which the spatial tribulations of the global process of capital accumulation are studied, can be seen as a flight from the dialectics of the value form (which are, first of all, time related). The Althusserian(s) effort is also an ambiguous one: in their attempt to fight with one hand both Hegel and Sartre, they often run the risk of throwing away the baby (dialectics) with the dirty water (humanism). Finally, the Italian *operaismo* is also, from our perspective, constitutively twisted: in as much as it takes its starting point in the famous chapter on the machines in *Grundrisse*<sup>14</sup>, its Marxism is as critical as it gets; however, in as much as it understands itself as a tool for the emancipation and self-realization of the proletarians (as its name indicates), it is not. The latest works of this current (mainly *Empire* and *Multitude*) make this classificatory effort even more difficult: here, the critique of capitalism is pushed to such radicalism that it is turning against itself and devouring its own basis, thus becoming, oddly enough, quite indistinguishable from an enthusiastic apology of capitalism.

## 2.2 Traditional Marxism's theory of bureaucracy

From the perspective of our goal here – the theory of bureaucracy – traditional Marxism presents an undeniable advantage: it is the fact that, for this trend of thought, bureaucracy is not just a central, crucial problem – it is rather *the* problem against which it stumbles again and again, and which sets it going repeatedly. On the one hand, since the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, as traditional Marxism understands it, is the one between production and distribution, it is quite natural that the solution to this contradiction should consist in a mediating body, situated between production and distribution, and which would ensure that the universal wealth generated by the former is not particularistically appropriated or blindly distributed through the latter. And this centralizing and administering body is the bureaucracy. Its two basic functions are, firstly, to consciously organize production through central planning, thus blocking the blind power of the market over it; and secondly, to consciously ensure the fair distribution of the social wealth, thus blocking the unjust appropriation of this product by the ruling classes. On the other hand, however, since traditional Marxism is, roughly, a critique of mediation from the standpoint of spontaneity,

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<sup>14</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 673-712.

this bureaucratic solution cannot but pass immediately for *the* problem itself. The intermediary called in to consciously administer the fair distribution of the social wealth generated in production, and which was supposed to vanish somehow in its commitment to its task, becomes nevertheless  $\phi$  for structural, not just conjectural reasons  $\phi$  a non-vanishing mediator, an autonomized and specialized social body. A parasite.

Thus being the case, it is no coincidence that traditional Marxism's analysis and critique of bureaucracy was consistently applied to the social and political realities of the so called  $\neg$ really existing socialism $\phi$  the practical, historical problem to be solved was none other than the solution proposed by its own theory. The topic of bureaucracy thus stands for a major split, in the traditional Marxist field, between lucid practitioners of Marxist politics and leftist, childish dreamers (in the language of the former)<sup>15</sup>, or between false Marxists who have betrayed the revolution as soon as they gained power and devoted, genuine revolutionaries who are marginalized and persecuted by them (in the language of the latter)<sup>16</sup>. However, this split, no matter how radical and violent it is  $\phi$  or precisely because of its acute nature  $\phi$  is fundamentally a split *interior* to the traditional Marxist field: these two extremes, the Stalinist and the Trotskyist one, are incessantly calling for each other, inevitably generating one another. Inasmuch as they share the same traditional Marxist premises, and differ only in the standpoint from which they apply their analysis  $\phi$  the  $\neg$ Thermidorian $\phi$  preservation of the revolutionary gains, for Stalin; or the  $\neg$ Jacobine $\phi$  preservation of the revolutionary impetus, for Trotsky  $\phi$  these two names constitute the transcendental doublet of traditional Marxism.

All the problems analysed in Chapter 1  $\phi$  the ones deriving from Hegel's theory of the State and Marx's 1843 interpretation of it  $\phi$  resurface here again. Basically, traditional Marxists share Hegel's view of the State, only change (some of) the terms: where the civil service was, for Hegel, the  $\neg$ ghost in the machine $\phi$  of the state, the mediator between the atomized, but dynamic sphere of civil society and the ethical sphere of the state, for traditional Marxists, the bureaucracy is the problematic, or miraculous  $\phi$  depending on the Stalinist or Trotskyist perspective  $\phi$  mediator between the spontaneist sphere of the working classes and

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<sup>15</sup> As the title of the famous Lenin book clearly suggests: *Left-wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (1920).

<sup>16</sup> As the title of the famous Trotsky book: *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936).



the universal sphere of the classless society. From the perspective of traditional Marxism, already Hegel's definition of the civil servant made it look like a first preannouncement of the theory of the revolutionary cadres: thus, far from being a mere "white collar" state employee, Hegel's civil servant, through his devotion to his universalizing task, becomes somehow imaterialized, and gains a sublime body: "the essence of the cadre", as Žižek put it in a mockingly Heideggerian way, "is to provide a cadre for the essence"<sup>17</sup>. (If there is a difference here, between the traditional Marxist view and the Hegelian view, it is one for the worse: where Hegel understood civil society as a historical product of bourgeois modernity, traditional Marxists tend to confer on the working class all the unhistorical traits belonging to the creative human nature which were present in the textbooks of classical political economy.) So, if we are to recall the two trends of traditional Marxism – the objectivist and the voluntarist one<sup>18</sup> – we can see how bureaucracy stands for the solution (or the problem) in both of them: on the one hand, if the history of capitalism is understood, objectively, as a contradiction between the relations of production and the forces of production, then bureaucracy stands for the solution to this problem (or for the very problem, according to the Trotskyist side), as the conscious social agent who can remove the fettering aspects of the old relations of production (private property and the market), and install new ones (nationalization) adapted to the forces of production: thus, bureaucracy is the subjectivist (i.e. conscious agent) solution to an objectivist problem. On the other hand, if the history of capitalism is understood from the subjectivist-voluntaristic perspective, as open class-struggle and progression of the working classes towards self-consciousness and self-realization, then bureaucracy is, again, the solution (or, again, the very problem, according to

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<sup>17</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Verso, London & New York, 2008, p. 230.

<sup>18</sup> These two trends, already present in Marx's writings, are not incompatible with one another, but do present however clear differences in emphasis. Thus, the 'objectivist' view, according to which the dynamic contradiction of capitalism is the one between the relations of production and the forces of production, allows a space for class struggle – but makes this phenomenon somehow superfluous, contingent, and nonessential. After all, the moving agent of history is the objective contradiction, and not the self-awakening of the proletariat. In the same way, the voluntarist interpretation, the one that explains the dynamic of history through the conscious activity of the proletariat and through open class-struggle, does allow for an explanation in terms of objective contradictions between the relations of production and the forces of production – it's just that this objective contradiction is no longer the essential aspect and the engine of history. This dual view on history, with its compatible and yet different alternatives, is what Laclau radicalized when he claimed that „the problem [in Marxism] is that if the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production is a contradiction without antagonism, class struggle, for its part, is an antagonism without contradiction" (Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, Verso, London & New York, 1990, p. 7).

the Trotskyist side), since it is nothing but the external mediator of the proletariat to itself, its avant-guard, its ready-made conscience: it is, thus, an objectivist (that is: external) solution to a subjectivist problem. Both these aspects are, after all, concentrated in the definition of the bureaucratic mission as 'central planning' which make bureaucracy the very 'Rational Choice Agent' incarnated: it is Rational, inasmuch as, through its planning activity, it solves the objective contradiction between the relations of production and the forces of production; it is a Choice, inasmuch as, through its centralizing activity, it pushes the proletariat to itself, towards selfconsciousness. (Incidentally, this also proves that there is another banner, besides traditional Marxism, under which both Stalin and Trotsky could be brought together: namely, analytic philosophy)<sup>19</sup>.

If this is how things stand, it is no coincidence that the classical work of the traditional Marxist theory of bureaucracy had to belong to a Trotskyist: Ernest Mandel's *Power and Money: A Marxist Theory of Bureaucracy*<sup>20</sup>. The very bombastic title of the book is suggestive enough: power and money, the state and the market, politics and distribution, or better: two aspects concerning solely the administration of distribution, and none involving the mode of production. The mode of production is ó faithfully following the premises of traditional Marxism ó good or natural as it is; the only problem concerns the proper way to politically and economically administer the results of production.

Writing immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Mandel's primary concern is, quite naturally given his Trotskyist convictions and our previous developments, to explain the evolution in Eastern Europe as a Stalinist betrayal of Marxism and thus to rescue Marxism from the dustbin of history. Bureaucracy is, here, the key: bureaucracy stands for Stalinism, for betrayal and, finally, for the historical failure of this project; and, at the same time, it is the ingredient whose absence guarantees the continued validity of the Marxian idea. Behind

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<sup>19</sup> In her debate with Alan Carling, Ellen Meiksins Wood already noticed how, for all their emphasis on individual choice, rational choice Marxists seem to obliterate this very phenomenon – the choice – by reducing the subject to a passive – because rational – relay of the objective demands of the situation. For all its voluntarism and its emphasis on the unleashed power of the proletariat, the Stalinist propaganda was also keen on explaining everything through the 'objective necessity of the situation'. Here was also a choice which was imposed on the subject, in his name, through its very rationality.

<sup>20</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Power and Money. A Marxist Theory of Bureaucracy*, Verso, London & New York, 1992.

Mandel's quick condemnations of bureaucracy ('a many faced monster'<sup>21</sup>, 'a parasitical, wasteful, treacherous, oppressive and materially privileged entity'<sup>22</sup>), there lie important problems. The first one of these is a problem that tormented the Trotskyist camp ever since its birth: is bureaucracy a new class or not?

Now, before analyzing Mandel's answer to this question, let us take a short detour through some of the relevant Marxist literature concerning this topic. There are several dimensions and quite a few questions which are involved in this issue: the class nature of bureaucracy. The issue stirs from two famous positions that Marx entertained on the topic of the state. The first one, from the *Communist Manifesto*, claims that the state is nothing but 'a committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie'. The second one is the thesis from the *18 Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, which seems to claim the opposite: namely, that sometimes, it is in the interests of the bourgeoisie to give up its political power and its hold of the state precisely in order to ensure its economic interests and power. In order to reconcile these two positions, a lot of ink has flown in the Marxist tradition. There are three correlated questions here: what is the relation between state and capitalism? What is the relation between state and bureaucracy? And what is the class nature of bureaucracy? If we look at the first question, we can clearly detect a sort of evolution in the history of Marxism. The first, classic thesis was formulated by Lenin, in *State and Revolution*: the State is the expression of the antagonism between classes and it is nothing but a mean, for the bourgeoisie, to dominate the working class. From this perspective, there is no autonomy of the State in relation to capitalism: it just provides another means (administrative and military) to the maintenance of the same goal<sup>23</sup>. The authority of this classic Marxist view on the state had to be considerable, if we take into account the fact that, in the 60s, when Althusser formulated the thesis that perhaps there is a 'relative autonomy' of the state and of the political, he had to provide long explanations to the propaganda section of the French Communist Party (of which he was, and remained, a member). However, once the first step

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (1917), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/index.htm>. Of course, the radical anti-statal views that Lenin expressed in this work written right before the October revolution were gradually changed afterwards.

was taken and some could argue that it had been taken already with Gramsci the 'relative autonomy' of the state became more and more absolute, and, in some cases (such as Laclau), the political emancipated itself to such an extent from the economic that once the brilliant solution came on stage, there was no longer any trace of the problem<sup>24</sup>. Somehow, that is, because of their very Marxist background, these theoretical developments could not go beyond conceding a 'relative autonomy' to the state and the political. Thus, the solution had to consist in a sort of admittance of the irreducible problem<sup>25</sup>. That doesn't mean elegant solutions have not been proposed: for example, Ralph Milliband's discussion of Marx and Engels's thesis according to which 'the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie' takes as its aim precisely the effort to reconcile this thesis (of the apparent non-autonomy of the state) with the opposite one from the *18 Brumaire*: 'if the notion of common affairs assumes the existence of particular ones; and the notion of the whole bourgeoisie implies the existence of separate elements which make up that whole. This being the case, there is an obvious need for an institution of the kind they refer to, namely the state; and the state cannot meet this need without enjoying a certain degree of autonomy. In other words, the notion of autonomy is embedded in the definition itself, is an intrinsic part of it'<sup>26</sup>. For his part, David Harvey has approached the issue in a different way, arguing that there are different degrees of autonomy of the state, which vary from one of its spheres to another: from the complete non-autonomy of the sector of the state apparatus which takes care of the (de)regulation of the financial activities and which, for structural reasons, has the reproduction of capital as its only task, to other, more autonomous

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<sup>24</sup> Here, the autonomy of the political turns into an inflation, whereby the economy disappears altogether and the political is no longer conceived "as a superstructure, but as having the status of an *ontology of the social*" (Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London & New York, 2001 [first edition: 1985], p. xiv).

<sup>25</sup> Fredric Jameson's explanation for his preference for the classical duet 'base – superstructure' goes on the same lines: "It is one thing to drop the matter altogether; and quite another to find a better and more satisfactory *substitute* for it... My own position has always been that everything changes when you grasp base-and-superstructure not as a full-fledged theory in its own right, but rather as the name for a problem, whose solution is always a unique, ad hoc invention", *Late Marxism. Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic*, Verso, London & New York, 2000, (first edition: 1990), pp. 45-46.

<sup>26</sup> Ralph Milliband, "Poulantzas and the Capitalist State", *New Left Review*, No. 82, nov-dec. 1973, p. 85. For a more detailed analysis, see also *Marxism and Politics*, Merlin Press, London, 2004 [first edition Oxford University Press, 1977], pp. 71-77.

spheres<sup>27</sup>. Finally, Bob Jessop's contemporary (and by now, classical) account holds on to the same dialectic between autonomy and non-autonomy of the state which solves the problem by insisting that there is a problem: 'The operational autonomy of the state is a further massive complicating factor... To the extent that it enables the state to pursue the interests of capital in general at the expense of particular capitals, it also enables it to damage the interests of capital in general'<sup>28</sup>. In spite of all differences, all these developments share a dialectical view of the relation between state and capital, in which the autonomy of the former is only relative, and the very domination of the latter must permit, for structural reasons, a sort of autonomy of the former. As Althusser put it, in his notorious 'abstract lyricism' and in the terms which he made famous ('determination in the last instance' of the economy, and 'overdetermination' of the superstructure):

'si jamais dans l'Histoire on ne voit ces instances que sont les superstructures s'écarter respectueusement quand elles ont fait leur oeuvre ou se dissiper comme son pur phénomène pour laisser s'avancer sur la route royale de la dialectique sa majesté Economie parce que les Temps seraient venus. Ni au premier, ni au dernier instant, l'heure solitaire de la dernière instance' ne sonne jamais<sup>29</sup>.

Now for traditional Marxists, this issue of the relation between the state and economy is not quite so complicated. One of the reasons for this is that traditional Marxism is, as we saw, mostly preoccupied with the nature of the state in the socialist regimes – naturally, given the proximity and urgency of the issue. But since socialism, as traditional Marxists understand it, is just the conscious and adequate administration of the same industrial mode of production, and involves merely the passage, as Engels famously put it, from the 'government of men' to the 'administration of things', the political nature of the state comes to be obliterated and replaced with pure administrative functions. The only difference is that, while in the capitalist regimes, the state officially claims to be situated above the economy

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<sup>27</sup> David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, pp. 322 sqq.

<sup>28</sup> Bob Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 41. Jessop's approach is compatible to that of Habermas from *Legitimation Crisis* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1975), inasmuch as, in both of them, the active but autonomous involvement of the state in the reproduction of capital tends to transform the economical contradictions into political problems of legitimation.

<sup>29</sup> Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx*, La Découverte, Paris, 2005 [first edition: Maspero, Paris, 1965], p. 113.

and the class conflict, in the ethereal sphere of politics and the general interest, in the socialist regimes, the state deliberately and openly takes in charge the economy and ensures the just distribution of the social product. Since its function becomes that of central planning the production and distribution, it is quite natural that the state comes to be identified, in traditional Marxism, with bureaucracy, and viceversa (more on this, below). But the ambiguities which disappear from the first two questions (regarding the relation between state and economy; and the relation between state and bureaucracy) resurface in the third question: what is the nature of bureaucracy? Is it a class or not?

When he launched this question in 1936, Trotsky's answer was a clear "yes and no"

"The attempt to represent the Soviet bureaucracy as a class of 'state capitalists' will obviously not withstand criticism. The bureaucracy has neither stocks nor bonds. It is recruited, supplemented and renewed in the manner of an administrative hierarchy, independently of any special property relations of its own. The individual bureaucrat cannot transmit to his heirs his rights in the exploitation of the state apparatus. The bureaucracy enjoys its privileges under the form of an abuse of power. It conceals its income; it pretends that as a special social group it does not even exist. Its appropriation of a vast share of the national income has the character of social parasitism. All this makes the position of the commanding Soviet stratum in the highest degree contradictory, equivocal and undignified, notwithstanding the completeness of its power and the smoke screen of flattery that conceals it."<sup>30</sup>

Writing in 1992, Mandel, even though he appears to push firmly on the "no" side of the answer, preserves the same original ambiguity: thus, was bureaucracy a class or not?

"The answer to this question is: not in the least! It is not the law of value, but the state (that is, the bureaucracy) which ultimately determines what proportion of the social product will be invested and what will be consumed! Yet it is not a pure centrally allocative economy, but a hybrid combination, in which the law of value [which is, as we can see, restricted to the market] operates but does not hold sway! Here we see the decisive reason why the bureaucracy did not become a ruling class!

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<sup>30</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, <http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/ch09.htm#ch09-2>.

For a new bureaucratic non-capitalist mode of production to emerge, the Soviet bureaucracy would have to have liberated itself once and for all from the influence of the law of value. However, this would have required not only the disappearance of relations of distribution based on exchange within the Soviet Union itself, but the total emancipation of the USSR from the world market, that is, the elimination of capitalism on a world scale.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, for Trotsky, the ambiguity as to the class nature of bureaucracy derives from this: even though, for what concerns its effects, bureaucracy can be determined as a specific and particular social entity, for what concerns its status and its selfconsciousness, bureaucracy is constitutively opaque. For Mandel, the ambiguity derives from other aspects: even though, again, from the standpoint of its concrete effects bureaucracy seems to act as a determinate class, for more complex and structural reasons, it is not. And these reasons pertain to the persistence of the law of value – which, incidentally, but significantly for what concerns traditional Marxism, Mandel limits to the sphere of the market and distribution, and does not involve the mode of production. Oddly enough, but again significant, the only way in which bureaucracy could become a genuine class would be through –not only the disappearance of relations of distribution based on exchange within the Soviet Union itself, but the total emancipation of the USSR from the world market, that is, the elimination of capitalism on a world scale: that is, the only way for a bureaucracy – the bureaucracy which is, let us recall, the main obstacle on the path to socialism – to become a new class is through the elimination of capitalism on the world scale and the global triumph of socialism. So, from one perspective, the main condition of impossibility of bureaucracy (capitalism and its law of value) is its main condition of possibility (since the disappearance of capitalism would lead to socialism which doesn't need bureaucracy). And yet, from another perspective, the main enemy of bureaucracy (genuine socialism) seems to be here its only chance, since it is only global socialism that would lead to the eradication of the law of value and to the birth of bureaucracy as a new class.

This is not just an accidental mistake from Mandel's part. On the contrary, it derives logically from the traditional Marxist framework: as a critique of mediation from the

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<sup>31</sup> Mandel, *Power and Money*, pp. 26-30.

standpoint of immediacy, this trend of thought eventually denounces any form of administration and decision through delegation and substitution as bureaucracy; and yet, even though bureaucracy seems thus to be everywhere in the social body, it is nowhere: this for the simple reason that its nature doesn't fit into any traditional definition of class (defined as property status and self-consciousness) that this way of thinking shares. This fact explains the consistent vagueness and oscillations that pertain to Mandel's efforts to identify the bureaucracy. Already for Trotsky, there was a problem as to the locus of bureaucracy between the party and the state:

“From the first days of the Soviet regime the counterweight to bureaucratism was the party. If the bureaucracy managed the state, still the party controlled the bureaucracy. Keenly vigilant lest inequality transcend the limits of what was necessary, the party was always in a state of open or disguised struggle with the bureaucracy. The historic role of Stalin's faction was to destroy this duplication, subjecting the party to its own officialdom and merging the latter in the officialdom of the state. Thus was created the present totalitarian regime. It was his doing the bureaucracy this not unimportant service that guaranteed Stalin's victory.”<sup>32</sup>

For Mandel instead, the locus of bureaucracy in the social sphere is much more oscillating: it is, at the same time, something determinate: “a new social layer appropriating administrative functions previously exercised by the masses themselves”<sup>33</sup>; or the party as such<sup>34</sup>; or the

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<sup>32</sup> Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, <http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/ch11.htm#ch11-2>. While the Stalinist model seems thus to consist in a synthesis between the party and the bureaucracy, the Chinese model seems to follow a different path: “‘As an organisation, the Party sits outside, and above the law,’ He Weifang, a law professor from Beijing, tells McGregor: ‘It should have a legal identity, in other words, a person to sue, but it is not even registered as an organisation. The Party exists outside the legal system altogether.’... The notion of the Party-state cannot do justice to the complexities of 20th-century Communism: there is always a gap between Party and state, and the Party functions as the state's shadowy double. Dissenters call for a new politics of distance from the state, but they don't recognise that the Party is this distance: it embodies a fundamental distrust of the state, its organs and mechanisms, as if they needed to be controlled, kept in check, at all times”. (Slavoj Žižek, ‘Can you give my son a job?’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 32, no. 20-21, October 2010). It is as if here, in the Chinese model, a synthesis is being enacted between the ‘thermidorian’ and the ‘jacobine’ sides of the revolutionary process: the bureaucracy takes care of the preservation and solidification of the revolutionary acquis, while the party haunts this stable juridical framework from beyond the law, as a non-invested revolutionary dynamis.

<sup>33</sup> Mandel, *Money and Power*, p. 6

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.



state: "The expression 'bureaucratic state' is meaningless: the state is 'bureaucratic' by definition"<sup>35</sup> which confirms, again, the traditional Marxist strain of denouncing, from the standpoint of immediacy, any mediation as bureaucratic.

If this is how things stand, it is quite understandable Mandel's continuous effort to explain away a structural necessity (given the traditional Marxist premises) as a historical contingency. First, there appears, clearly stated, the contingent nature of the bureaucratic path taken: "The Soviet Union was a post-capitalist society, frozen in a transition stage between capitalism and socialism. The bureaucracy, in its own way and with barbaric means, tried neither to build a socialist society nor to restore capitalism, but to defend and extend its own power and privileges"<sup>36</sup>. It is important to notice how, confronted with a bureaucratic phenomenon that seems to be spontaneously engendered by its very theoretical premises, the Trotskyist current, when trying to explain the negative effects of the bureaucratic phenomenon, employs only moralistic arguments which put all the emphasis on the particular character and intentions of the bureaucrats and do away with any structural Marxist interpretation: they're just bad people. Leaving aside the issue whether it just happens that bad people occupy the places where political decisions are taken, or whether the simple fact of occupying such power positions corrupts the character of these persons or an issue which Trotskyism solves by constantly shifting from structural to psychological explanations and back or there still remains the question as to why and how did we get to this? How did we get stuck with this stubborn, non-vanishing mediator which is the bureaucratic agent in the 'really existing socialism'? Mandel's answer is, again, extremely significant: "Paradoxically, it is not so much any basic weakness of the working class as its relative strength and *partial victories* which give rise to bureaucracies, insofar as these victories remain only partial and lead to partial defeats. Ultimately, then, the phenomena of bureaucratization express the unstable equilibrium of class forces"<sup>37</sup>. But how, then, do we explain the fact that an unstable equilibrium gave rise to a situation so stable that it seemed, for almost a century, to last forever? Here is Mandel's answer: "An incipient trend towards bureaucratization of working class mass organizations is indeed unavoidable, as are periodic

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

declines in mass activity. But periodic surges in the level of mass activity are equally unavoidable products of the inner contradictions of capitalism and the bourgeois society<sup>38</sup>. Let us review this in slow motion: the bureaucratization of the working class is, thus, unavoidable, and it is a sign of its very progress and development. Thus, bureaucracy is engendered naturally by the self-organization of the working class. And yet, because of the existing contradictions of capitalism which explode and lead, from time to time, to mass activity, this trend towards bureaucratization is, again from time to time, interrupted. In short, what saves the working class from its total bureaucratization is none other than capitalism. Even more: while the first trend, of the working class towards bureaucratization, seems to be continuous and inevitable, the second one, the sudden awakenings of the working class from its bureaucratic slumber, seem to occur only from time to time, in those magic moments in which the capitalist contradictions explode. Moreover, while the first trend (towards bureaucratization) is truly, as Mandel says, unavoidable, the second one (towards un-bureaucratization) is, contrary to what Mandel says, precisely because of bureaucracy's activity of smoothly administering the same mode of production and thus precluding the capitalist contradictions from exploding, definitely avoidable. This is, then, the way in which a contingent result of the bureaucratization of the socialist regimes appears now as a necessary effect; and this is the way in which traditional Marxism is constantly at odds with its own intention, constantly finding out that its premises lead to solutions that are the very problem and to problems which are to be deduced, from its theoretical premises, as the very solutions.

In spite of its theoretical flaws, Mandel's book is full of optimism of an optimism which is, after all, characteristic of the Trotskyist humanist belief in the ever renewing creative energy of the individual. For what concerns the future in Eastern Europe, Mandel assures us that of the restoration of capitalism is nowhere a foregone conclusion. The process follows a classical three-stage pattern. A first phase of general democratic euphoria is followed by one of reactionary counter-offensive, under conditions of profound political confusion and disorientation of the working class. But then, in a third phase, the workers, despite their lack of political clarity or objectives, start to defend their immediate material interests not only against the openly restorationist forces but also against the "democratic" governments which

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

themselves helped to elect”<sup>39</sup>. Twenty years after this prophecy, we can look back to this promising future and judge the insurmountable distance that separates it from what actually happened: Eastern Europe is, today, politically and intellectually, the global centre of reactionary politics, in which the only social forces that run the show are the extreme forms of neoconservatism and neoliberalism<sup>40</sup>. But Mandel’s optimism regards also his own theory: “Only the revolutionary Marxist interpretation [read: traditional Marxism] of the USSR and the Soviet bureaucracy emerges unscathed from the momentuous upheavals of the last few years”<sup>41</sup>. This is, somehow, true: true, inasmuch as what remains officially true in the traditional Marxist way of thinking is what was also considered officially true: that is, the classic presumptions and belief in the abstract individual that it inherits from classical political economy and which are confirmed and radicalized today in the reigning neoliberal and libertarian *pensée unique*.

This fundamental trust in the abstract individual and in the power of spontaneism is clearly discernible, repeatedly, in Mandel’s text: “In order to regain a level of consciousness and leadership adequate for the task of taking and directly exercising state power, the Soviet and East European working classes will have to go through a whole series of practical experiences in mass struggle. No propaganda or education can substitute for this, the only source of collective mass consciousness. Any attempt to make short-cuts in this long and painful process – for example, through new experiments in substitutionism – will only lead to fresh disasters”<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>40</sup> To paraphrase Marcuse, one could say that “everything is short term if compared with the final event of world communism” (*Soviet Marxism. A Critical Analysis*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1958), so maybe the current desperate state of things in Eastern Europe is still a part of the second, transitory and reactionary phase. But then again, isn’t traditional Marxism’s structural problem that of always getting stuck in this transitory period? The phenomenon of bureaucracy is only the institutional avatar of this historicist problem.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6. The same anarchist distrust of mediation is taken to the limits in the Trotskyist conception of the law: „Proletarian law, we are told, must find other generalizing concepts for itself, and indeed this search should constitute the task of the Marxist theory of law. At first sight this appears as a serious objection; yet it rests on a misunderstanding... [T]his is to proclaim the immortality of the legal form since it tries to wrench this form away from those definite historical conditions which enable its full fruition, and to declare it capable of constant renewal. The withering away of the categories (but not the injunctions) of bourgeois law does not signify their replacement by new categories of proletarian law... The withering away of the categories of bourgeois law will under these conditions signify the withering away of law in general, i.e. the

Of course, Mandel is aware that his radical critique of “substitutionism” and mediation places him in a very close position to the right-wing libertarians. This is why he takes pains to clearly demarcate his position from theirs: “As to the thesis that central planning –in and of itself– breeds bureaucracy, and that “Marxism socialism” therefore equals general and despotic power of bureaucracy – a thesis first formulated by Max Weber and picked up by Von Mises – no logical proof has ever been proposed in its support. It is in fact basically a tautology, provided one assumes that the only possible form of planning is planning from above, through a hugely expanded state. But this embodies a strong measure of elitist prejudice, in supposing that the mass of producers/citizens are unable consciously to coordinate (that is, plan) their preferences from below”<sup>43</sup>. This is a rebuttal that only confirms the neoliberal and marginalist interpretation: it basically accepts the rules of the game and the dilemma between coordination from above, coordination from below: its only argument, against the libertarians, is that the activities of coordination and centralization can be thought as immanent to the community, in brief, that a *community* of free rational choice actors can still be a community of *free rational choice actors*. Mandel’s critiques of the state and bureaucracy – the constant oscillation between the two is characteristic to traditional Marxism and, generally, to all the non-dialectical interpretations in terms of “totalitarianism” – are also similar to the marginalist ones: the despotism of the state, its unaccountability, the huge waste of production (the only difference being here that in USSR it is time labor that is wasted, and not products and means of production as in capitalism). Bureaucracy is also conservative, not flexible, not responsive to challenges<sup>44</sup>. These all constitute a diagnostic of the state that today would place Mandel in the front lines of the running list of the contemporary *tea party*.

Hopefully, Mandel’s conclusion comes to rebut all his previous analysis and to affirm: “Bureaucracy is synonymous not with organization, centralization and the exercise of authority per se, but with their usurpation [which is, as we saw, “unavoidable” from the perspective of his own theoretical premises] by special (and specialized) body of people,

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gradual disappearance of the juridical element in human relationships” (Evgeny Pashukanis, *The General Theory of Law and Marxism*, <http://marxists.org/archive/pashukanis/1924/law/index.htm>) A leading legal scholar after the October Revolution, Evgeny Pashukanis was later to be involved in the Bukharin affair and executed in 1937 as Trotskyist.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

divorced from the mass of society and professionally paid to carry out their functions”<sup>45</sup>. From a Lacanian perspective, for which the subject’s identity is constitutively established through substitution (*la métaphore paternelle*) and through the radical “extimacy” of the subject in relation to his representation in the signifier, this phantasm of the immanent representation and of the authentic, non-substitutionist way of coordination cannot but appear as paranoiac. And, in that, somehow totalitarian.

### 2.3 *Injustice as fairness. Marx’s labor theory of value*

For our present purpose, traditional Marxism’s theory had, as we said, one undeniable advantage: the fact that it revolves around the crucial topic of bureaucracy, an issue which it constantly reproduces both as solution and as problem. This is not the case with critical Marxism: in this case, the theory of bureaucracy is, at first sight, virtually inexistent, or even not needed. Hence, in order to articulate a critical Marxist theory of bureaucracy, we will thus have to immerse in uncharted waters, and bring to light something that has remained so far invisible in this theoretical framework. However, our thesis is that bureaucracy remains a vital topic even in critical Marxism. There is, however, a significant difference at work here: while traditional Marxism was concerned with bureaucracy as *entity*, and was questioning the statute and position of bureaucracy in the state apparatus (is bureaucracy a class? what is the relationship between state and bureaucracy?), critical Marxism problematizes (or should problematize) bureaucracy not as a subject, but as *process*, that is, as a constellation of functions, mechanisms and processes which can pertain, as such, to different state apparatuses and to different administrative levels.

The conceptual basis on which we are to build the critical Marxist theory of bureaucracy is the labor theory of value. It is no coincidence that this theory was somehow marginalized or even erased in traditional Marxism: it was either confined to the sphere of the market and distribution (and not industrial production – which was perceived, as we have said, as somehow natural), or eliminated altogether: this was done mostly in analytical Marxism, under the pretence that the labor theory of value is unable to explain the transformation of

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

values in prices and, thus, the concrete mechanism of the market. Leaving aside the fact that analytical Marxism's enthrallment with prices instead of value is extremely significant (and says a lot about their struggle for 'distributive justice' and fascination with 'liberty, equality, property and Bentham'<sup>46</sup>), the simple 'transformationist' problem (as the problem of the transformation of value into prices has been labeled) and which is an undeniable problem for Marxism) does not push, by itself, the labor theory of value into irrelevance. And that is because, as David Harvey noticed: 'Value is, in the first place, 'a definite social mode of existence of human activity' achieved under capitalist relations of production and exchange. Marx is not primarily concerned, therefore, with fashioning a theory of relative prices or even establishing fixed rules of distribution of the social product. He is more directly concerned with the question: how and why does labour under capitalism assume the form it does?'<sup>47</sup>. Thus, the relevance of the labor theory of value derives not from the fact that it is a theoretical tool for explaining the formation of prices (which is not) but from the fact that it attempts to explain the *social relations* prevailing under capitalism. In trying to construct a Marxist theory of bureaucracy, we are first of all concerned with this aspect of the labor theory of value: with its being a concentrated description of the social relations existing under capitalism.

Before attempting to reconstruct Marx's labor theory of value, there is one more aspect which should be emphasized. The moralizing trend of traditional Marxism was always visible in its habitude of describing the basic problem of capitalism as being one of exploitation and/or domination by the ruling class. There was always present here the danger of psychologizing the problem, and thus imputing it to the particular intentions or character of the members of the ruling class. Whether capitalism's contradiction was conceived as the objective contradiction between the 'particularizing' relations of production and the 'universal' in essence, industrial mode of production, or whether it was conceived as the subjective tension between the proletariat and the oppressive ruling class, the fundamental injustice of capitalism seem to be always related to its unfairness. But this is not the way in which Marx saw the problem. First of all, there is no danger of psychologization here: Marx rarely paid attention to the particular character or intentions of the capitalists. He consistently

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<sup>46</sup> Karl Marx, *The Capital*, vol. I, Penguin Books, 1990, p. 280.

<sup>47</sup> Harvey, *Limits to Capital*, p. 37.

conceived them as simple bearers (*Träger*) of the objective relations of production. Thus, a capitalist can be, as a person, the nicest guy and truly our epoch brought in the forelights an army of such noble capitalists, liberal communists as Žižek calls them, who mercilessly speculate in the morning and mercifully give to charity in the afternoon. However, from a Marxist point of view, what should matter in all these cases is not their particular nature and character, but the objective role that they play as bearers and representants of capital. Even more, for what concerns the unfair domination of capitalism, one should notice the unrestrained application of the principle of charity that Marx followed in his works. His starting point seems to be: let us assume that capitalism plays along the rules that it established, that there is no blatant corruption, no unashamed speculation, no violent accumulation through dispossession and so on. Let us assume that, from the perspective of its own rules of the game (liberty, equality, property and Bentham), capitalism is rigorously fair. What remains to be explained is the structural injustice that it generates under such fair and noble conditions.

The key to explain this paradox of injustice as fairness is the famous labor theory of value. In the rest of the present section (2.3), I will try to reconstruct this legendary theory, while in the following section, I will attempt to spell out the bureaucratic consequences or supplements that this theory presents or requires.

The category of value is, in fact, part of a conceptual constellation, made up of at least four different concepts, and which are introduced gradually by Marx in the first volume of *Capital*. Marx's method here seems to proceed almost in a phenomenological manner: unlike his approach in *Grundrisse*, which started from the abstract sphere of money and circulation and then reached the topic of capital, as the concrete basis on which these abstractions rise, *Capital* starts from the immediate appearance of capital and the world of commodities and only then derives from it the conceptual necessity of its underlying abstract presuppositions, money-form and circulation. The first two value-related concepts are introduced by means of the category of commodity. The commodity is split into use-value and exchange-value. Use-value is the material content of wealth and also the material bearer of exchange-value<sup>48</sup>. Now this way of defining use-value under no circumstance does it presume the

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<sup>48</sup> Marx, *Capital*., vol. I, p. 126.

naturality of use-value. Even though use-value regards that aspect of the commodity which responds to a need and is related to consumption, as Marx says in *Grundrisse*, 'production produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. Production creates the consumer. Production not only supplies a material for the need, but it also supplies a need for the material... Production thus not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object'<sup>49</sup>. Hence, if need is always involved in the use-value, it is also important to remember that this need is always already historically mediated, and hence the concept of 'use value' need not imply any silent naturalism. On the other side of the internal opposition of the commodity, exchange value is 'the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which use-values of one kind exchange for use values of another kind'<sup>50</sup>. This definition already poses a problem: how can one compare and measure two different use values, which are defined only by their quality, and have no quantitative dimension? Marx's solution consists in introducing a third element: in order to be able to compare two use-values, one has to presume the existence of a common element in both of them – and this element is their nature of being products of labour. But this positing of labour as the common substance of different commodities radically alters the nature of labour: in order to act as the common denominator between different commodities, this labour has to be stripped of all particularity and be conceived as pure, abstract labour. (This operation, however, is not just a thought experiment: it is not just the intellectual operation of 'abstracting' the particular goal and nature of the concrete labour; this intellectual operation actually corresponds to a real change in the nature of labour, to his actual becoming-abstract under the incidence of the general production of commodities. The relation between these two aspects – logical and historical, theoretical and practical – is, for Marx, an intricate one, and we will come back to it later). For the time being, we should only have in mind that this is the point in which value as such comes on stage: value, understood as 'socially necessary labour time' is that common factor in the exchange relation that we were looking for. The value of a commodity is, thus, defined as the labour time required to produce that use-value 'under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society'<sup>51</sup>. The

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<sup>49</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 92.

<sup>50</sup> Marx, *Capital.*, vol. I, p. 126.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.



difference between this Marxian definition of value and the one proposed by classical political economy is, apparently, minimal: already David Ricardo and his school defined value as labour-time. What Marx adds is a mere proviso: “socially necessary labour time. However, this small supplement comprises a world of difference: it is precisely the difference between a mode of production conceived as natural, as it was in the tradition of classical political economy, and a mode of production which is always conceived as the result of a certain historical conjuncture, with its particular standards of productivity, conditions of production, and social relations overall<sup>52</sup>.

Once this definition of value as “congealed labour-time” and “crystals of social substance”<sup>53</sup> is reached, Marx draws an inventory of the results of his inquiry so far: “Now we know the substance of value: it is labour. We know the *measure of its magnitude*. It is labour time. The form, which stamps value as exchange-value, remains to be analysed”<sup>54</sup>. Thus, we have so far, use-value, exchange-value and value; what we still need is, says Marx, the value-form. The first spontaneous reaction to this move would be: why? Why do we need this separate, fourth element, once we already possess the quantity and the quality, the “substance” and the “measure of magnitude” of value. The answer to this objection arises only once we follow Marx in his search for this value-form. What first appeared as an unjustified, almost idealist impulse to look for an abstract-form in the realm of commodities appears, on closer view, as a much more dialectical endeavour: what Marx is looking for is not just a common form of value that would stamp all commodities, but also, much more subrepticiously, for a commodity which, in itself, would constitute the form of value existing as such. Now this

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<sup>52</sup> Thus, Marx’s contribution to the critique of political economy seems to be a genuine operation of ‘deconstruction’, one that consists not in replacing the classical political economy view with a totally different theory, but in undermining this classical theory from inside and forcing it to face what it actually sees. As Althusser put it: “...ce que l’économie politique classique ne voit pas, ce n’est pas ce qu’elle ne voit pas, c’est ce qu’elle voit: ce n’est pas ce qui lui manque, c’est au contraire ce qui ne lui manque pas: ce n’est pas ce qu’elle rate, c’est au contraire ce qu’elle ne rate pas. La bévue, c’est alors de ne pas voir ce qu’on voit, la bévue porte non plus sur l’objet, mais sur la vue même. La bévue est une bévue qui concerne le voir: le ne pas voir est alors intérieur au voir, il est une forme du voir, donc dans un rapport nécessaire avec le voir...[N]ous n’avons plus affaire, dans ce constat du non-voir, ou de la bévue, à une lecture de l’économie classique sous la seule grille de la théorie de Marx, à une comparaison entre la théorie classique et la théorie marxiste, servant alors de mesure, - puisque nous ne comparons jamais que la théorie classique avec elle-même, son non-voir avec son voir”. (Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, *Lire le Capital*, vol. 1, Maspero, Paris, 1973, pp. 19-20) .

<sup>53</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, pp. 128, 130.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

move presents striking similarities with Lacan's developments on the chain of signifiers. A first similarity was already noticed by Kojin Karatani: 'In value form, the value of a commodity is expressed by the use-value of another commodity. In this case, use-value should be considered as a *signifier* rather than as just material function. It is a material form for value. Lacking this differentiation, classical economists could not distinguish goods (and their production) from commodities (and their production). Missing this distinction is equal to missing the distinction between production in the capitalist commodity economy and other kinds of social production'<sup>55</sup>. Besides this similarity between commodities as use-values and signifiers, there is a second aspect which approaches Lacan's developments on the chain of signifiers to Marx's description of the value-form: namely, in both cases, it is manifested the need for this common form to be incorporated immanently in the series of elements, in one privileged element – Lacan's master signifier, the signifier without signified, which stands, in the chain of signifiers, for the whole series as such; respectively, the money equivalent, in Marx's case, which stands, in the series of commodities, as a privileged element, as the element which makes possible the series and the circulation of elements. No wonder, then, that Marx's insistence on the immateriality of the value-form is, paradoxically, very resemblant to Lacan's emphasis on the materiality of the signifier: 'not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values' [Their] sublime objectivity as a value differs from [their] stiff and starchy existence as a body'<sup>56</sup>.

So, the value form of the commodity consists in its being an equivalent expression of congealed labour time. But this is not just an external and passive form. On the contrary, it has its efficiency, which leads to the fact that, once the commodity form becomes generalized, the specific content becomes secondary, and its form becomes primary, or, in other words, 'concrete labour becomes the form of manifestation of its opposite, abstract human labour' Tailoring is now seen as the tangible form of realization of abstract human

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<sup>55</sup> Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique. On Kant and Marx*, MIT, Cambridge & London, 2005, p. 197.

<sup>56</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, pp. 138-144. See Lacan's seminar on the purloined letter for his theory of the immateriality of the signifier: *Le Séminaire, livre II: Le moi dans les écrits de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse*, Seuil, Paris, 1978.

labour<sup>57</sup>. Moreover, this value-form produces its own ‘tangible’ expression on the market commodities in money.

We should stop now for a moment and consider Marx’s deduction of money. We will thus have to face what appears to be a significant change in the method employed: while the opening chapters of *Capital* seem to proceed phenomenologically, and the chapters following those on money seem to employ a dialectical and historicizing approach, the chapter on money appears to belong to a totally different species: as a purely logical deduction of the money form, it seems to act as a curious anhistorical and anhistoricist insertion and link between the phenomenological beginning and the later dialectical development. But this curious nature of the chapter on money is actually very relevant for Marx’s treatment of the sphere of abstraction: far from demystifying the sphere of abstraction and dumping it as false appearance (as traditional Marxism does), Marx treats it as a necessary element and efficient link between the immediate appearance of the surface (the world of commodities) and the ‘hidden abode of production’. Thus, at first sight, Marx’s consideration of money seems to bear all the characteristics of a logical and abstract deduction: from the simple form of barter to the developed sphere of circulation under capitalism, there seems to be ‘following Marx’s way of presentation’ a mere logical deduction. ‘The simple commodity form is the germ of the money form<sup>58</sup>’, says Marx. And furthermore: ‘Money necessarily crystallizes out of the process of exchange<sup>59</sup>’. Even the money form, that is, its concrete material, seems to be deduced logically by Marx: ‘Only a material whose every sample possesses the same uniform quality can be an adequate form of appearance of value, that is a material embodiment of abstract and therefore equal human labour.. On the other hand, since the difference between the magnitudes of value is purely quantitative, the money commodity must be capable of purely quantitative differentiation, it must therefore be divisible at will<sup>60</sup>’. The historical transformation of money from a

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<sup>57</sup> Marx, *Capital*., vol. I., p. 150.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184. And, again, below: “In its form of existence as coin, gold becomes completely divorced from the substance of its value. Relatively valueless objects, such as paper notes, can serve as coins in place of gold. This purely symbolic character of the currency is still somewhat disguised in the case of metal tokens. In paper money it stands out plainly. But we can see: everything depends on the first step”, *Ibid.*, pp. 223-224.

common commodity, to a privileged and rare commodity (gold and silver), and finally to a worthless commodity – the paper money – seems thus to derive necessarily from its very beginnings. The most common form of appearance that money bear today – the virtual money –, even though it was not present in Marx's time, fits perfectly well into this logical-historical development: from a worthless piece of matter (paper money), to no matter at all. (From this perspective, we could claim, in a Hegelian jargon, that the truth of money is finally revealed only today, in the money that the Federal Reserve, through 'quantitative easing' creates over night: the pure form of equivalence, without any equivalent). Again, the striking similarity to Lacan's description of the chain of signifiers is difficult to be missed: 'The money-form is merely the reflection upon a single commodity by the relations between all other commodities'<sup>61</sup>; in a parallel way, for Lacan, the master signifier is merely the reflection upon a single signifier of the whole chain of signifiers.

After this deduction of money and prices ('price is the money-name of the labour objectified in a commodity'<sup>62</sup>), Marx approaches the process of circulation. The process of circulation is different from the direct exchange between producers, in so far as 'it doesn't disappear from view once the use-values have changed places and changed hands'<sup>63</sup>. But there are two major kinds of circulation: the one, the simple circulation, describes the circuit: commodity-money-commodity (C-M-C). The second one is the one properly capitalist: money-commodity-money (M-C-M). It is at this point, with this second type of circulation, that the final element of the conceptual constellation of value is introduced: namely, plus-value. In order to understand it, let us stop, for a minute, on the differences between the two kinds of circulation: in the first case (C-M-C), there is a qualitative change between the two extremes, that is, the first and the second commodity; in the second case, the difference between the two extremes is only quantitative: the second M, (M'), being larger than the first, this being, after all, the whole purpose of this kind of circulation. Another difference between the two kinds of circulation is that, while the first one has its purpose which lies outside it, in the

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195. This doesn't mean that prices translate values faithfully: on the contrary, because prices also depend on the quantity of money in circulation, there always exists the possibility of an incongruity between the two.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208. In fact, according to Marx, one of the errors of classical political economists was 'the identification of the circulation of commodities with the direct exchange of products'. (*Ibid.*, p. 209).

consumption of the commodity acquired, the second one (M-C-M) is properly circular: 'the end and the beginning are the same, money or exchange-value, and this very fact makes the movement an endless one'<sup>64</sup>. And finally, a third difference between C-M-C and M-C-M is that, while in the former the monetary form 'does nothing but mediate the exchange of commodities, and it vanishes in the final result of the movement' in the latter, 'the money and the commodity function only as different modes of existence of value itself'. It thus becomes transformed into an automatic subject<sup>65</sup>. But this almighty nature displayed by value, in this second type of circulation, in which it is, at the same time, the beginning, the end and the engine of the whole transformation, engenders the illusion that value 'throws-off surplus value from itself' and thus valorizes itself independently. By virtue of being value, it has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself<sup>66</sup>. But how can we explain this self-generating capacity of value? Where does the surplus-value come from? In the answer to this question, Marx's labour theory of value finds its final articulation. There is a fundamental paradox involved here, which Marx is trying to solve: up until this point, Marx's analysis has consistently assumed that the principles of fair exchange and distribution ('liberty, equality, property and Bentham') are followed and applied in all the processes analysed so far. But, if so, if everything so far have been only equivalents exchanged for equivalents, where does the surplus come from? Marx's answer is clearly different from the traditional Marxist view and also from other interpretations of this surplus, namely, the marginalist explanation: it is not that the bourgeois principles of fair exchange are only illusory, and are not met in practice by the capitalist class; nor is it that the surplus derives from marginal speculation on the intensity of needs and scarcity of resources. Marx's elegant solution manages to explain this surplus by holding in place the fair principles of just distribution. The surplus-value appears not in spite of these, but thanks to them.

So what exactly is Marx's solution? The paradox to be solved is that, so far, it seems that 'capital cannot arise from circulation, and it is equally impossible for it to arise apart from circulation. It must have its origin both in circulation and not in circulation'. The transformation of money into capital has to be developed on the basis of the immanent laws

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

of the exchange of commodities, in such a way that the starting point is the exchange of equivalents. The money-owner must buy his commodities at their value, sell them at their value, and yet at the end of the process withdraw more value from circulation than he threw into it at the beginning<sup>67</sup>. The way in which Marx solves this paradox is not by dismissing it, but by holding firmly to it, and bringing back on the stage a category which seemed to have slipped in the background: use-value. We remember how the consumption of use-value falls normally outside the sphere of simple exchange: it is the final result of simple exchange which takes place outside of it. What the buyer does with the commodity he bought is his own private business. This principle is still observed in Marx's solution to the problem of the origin of plus-value: thus, the plus-value 'can originate only in the actual use-value of a commodity, i.e. in its consumption' In a commodity whose use value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value: labour power<sup>68</sup>. All the previous principles of fair exchange are still in place: the labourer exchanges equivalents for equivalent; in exchange for his labour-power, he gets from the capitalist the value of this labour-power; on the other side, once he purchased this labour-power, the capitalist has all the rights to use this commodity, to consume it by putting it to work ó knowing that the consumption of the commodity falls outside of the exchange process. However, 'the value of labour-power and the value which that labour-power valorizes in the labour-process are two entirely different magnitudes; and this difference is what the capitalist had in mind when he was purchasing the labour-power'<sup>69</sup>. And this difference is plus-value.

Now the reconstruction of the labour theory of value is completed and we can look back and evaluate the whole process: 'This whole course of events both takes place and does not take place in the sphere of circulation. It takes place through the mediation of circulation because it is conditioned by the purchase of the labour-power in the market; it does not take place in circulation because what happens there is only an introduction to the valorization process, which is entirely confined to the sphere of production'<sup>70</sup>. So, contrary to the traditional

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 268-269.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

Marxist view, the source of plus-value and of capitalist exploitation does not lie in distribution, nor in the contradiction between distribution and production: it lies in the structural link between these two spheres, in their mutual contamination.

Before spelling out the bureaucratic consequences or supplements that this labour theory of value presupposes, we should try to correct two possible misunderstandings: so far, we have always dismissed traditional Marxism for its view according to which the basic contradiction of capitalism lies in the tension between production and distribution; now we seem to assume that the source of plus-value and, consequently, of the capitalist antagonism is, again, the link between production and distribution. Behind the apparent proximity of the two views, there lies, however, a world of difference: for traditional Marxism, the relation between production and distribution is one of open contradiction; the two spheres practically belong to two different classes and to two different epochs. The sphere of production is the proper home of the working class, the domain of its unstoppable creativity, of its properly human expression, and, as such, the living promise of socialism. On the contrary, the sphere of distribution comprises everything that is opposed to this: it is the particular appropriation of this universal wealth and the capitalist fetters that impinge on this genuinely human expression. When we claim that the source of plus-value is the link between production and distribution, we imply however that what matters here is not the contradiction between these two spheres, but their mutual contamination: the plus-value derives from the absolutely unfair observance of the principles of distribution in production. This fact should also allow us to remove a second possible objection: when critical Marxism claims that the contradiction of capitalism should be placed in the mode of production, this idea can be misunderstood as claiming that, in the hidden abode of production, all the power relations of open domination and brutal exploitation that dare not show themselves in the eden of distribution are unleashed. This idea thus dismisses the moralizing trend of traditional Marxism when it comes to the opposition between production and distribution only to apply it fullheartedly in the sole sphere of production: thus, the surplus would derive from the fact that the workers are mercilessly forced to work longer and longer hours in conditions that are consistently becoming more miserable. Even conceding the fact that Marx's elaborate descriptions of the inhuman working conditions in the *Capital* could lead to such an idea, we should consider these touching descriptions as an unnecessary supplement to Marx's theory, a supplement that even contradicts the theory he elaborates. Hence, in order to block this misunderstanding, one should notice that, for Marx, even in the hidden abode of production,

the generation of plus-value actually derives not from medieval relations of production and open exploitation, but from the modern, fair, clean and abstract rules of distribution. As Karatami noticed, the proponents of this idea of production as dark sphere of brutal exploitation, hidden behind the noble appearance of the sphere of fair distribution, conceive the relationship between capitalists and wage workers as a (disguised) extension of that between feudal lord and serfs and they believe that this was Marx's idea. But it originated in the Ricardian Socialists... [This] should be distinguished from that aspect of Marx that actually elucidated the enigma of surplus value. The best it can do is to explain absolute surplus value (achieved by the prolongation of the labor day), but not relative surplus value (achieved by the improvement of labor productivity) – the particular characteristic of industrial capitalism<sup>71</sup>. Hence, this moralizing trend, which, even though it places the fundamental contradiction of capitalism in production, conceives it as brutal exploitation of the worker by the capitalist, misses precisely the specific capitalist way of generating plus-value: even though this brutal way of extracting plus-value by prolonging the working day is not at all a thing of the past, but, just like the 'primitive accumulation' techniques, is still vastly employed today in the multitude of the sweat-shops of the world, it is not what is specifically capitalist in the mode of production; nor its eradication and replacement with more fair modes of extracting plus-value would solve the structural injustice of capitalism. The specifically capitalist mode of extracting plus-value is based on the 'relative plus-value', which need not imply the prolongation of the working hours, but can sometimes lead even to their shortening<sup>72</sup>. As such, it is not based on power relations, open exploitation, brutal treatment of the working class by its oppressor: it is a structural injustice which derives from the fair rule of the abstract law of value.

#### *2.4. Towards a critical Marxist theory of bureaucracy*

Now, if we are to consider this Marxian labour theory of value from the perspective of our purpose here, it seems we are dealing with a major deadlock. The three elements we are trying to put together (Marx's labour theory of value; its bureaucratic premises or

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<sup>71</sup> Karatami, *Transcritique*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>72</sup> The 'structural' difference between 'absolute plus-value' and 'relative plus-value' is parallel to the historical difference between the 'formal subsumption of labour under capital' and the 'real subsumption of labour under capital' (Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 1019-1025)



supplement; and, eventually, the Lacanian touch) seem to be of such nature that any combination of two of them necessarily excludes the third element: we could put together the labour theory of value with some thesis of critical legal nature, which could claim that all this capitalist evolution required a certain, specific juridical framework – but then the –ahistoricist– Lacanian theories concerning the Law, the subject, the signifier, would seem out of place; or we could mix together a –structuralist– reading of Marx’s labour theory of value with a Lacanian discussion on the paradoxes of language, law and formalism, but this would rule out any historical involvement of the modern phenomenon of bureaucracy<sup>73</sup>. The second alternative deserves a few more words: as a matter of fact, without Lacan’s name on it, it does have a certain presence among the theories of capitalism – and, even better, it does accommodate a theory of bureaucracy, even if it is the classical theory of bureaucracy of Max Weber. This thesis – neo-Smithian, to call it by its name – assumes that capitalism, even though represented a historical phenomenon, brought with it a logical, and hence, ahistorical process of rationalization of the existing processes of production and distribution. Practically, all the pathological strains that were previously impinging on the rational relations of production and distribution were logically, even though historically, removed with the appearance of capitalism. Capitalism is, from this perspective, nothing but the generalization and rationalization of a mode of exchange existing from the beginning of time. And bureaucracy, in its modern manifestation, is nothing but the administrative and juridical side of this rationalization<sup>74</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> This alternative seems to have its origins, again, in Marx’s works themselves, as an opposition between, roughly, an interpretation focused on ‘ideology’ and an interpretation focused on ‘fetishism’: „The theory of ideology is fundamentally a *theory of the State* (by which we mean the mode of domination inherent in the State), whereas that of fetishism is fundamentally a *theory of the market* (the mode of subjection or constitution of the world of subjects and objects inherent in the organization of society as market and its domination by market forces... From the idea of overthrowing a bourgeois domination which has entered into contradiction with the development of civil society [an idea developed by Marx in Paris, and against Hegel’s theory of the *Rechtstaat*], we have moved to the idea of the resolution of a contradiction inherent in the mode of *socialization* produced by capitalism [an idea developed mostly in London, against the bourgeois political economists]”, Etienne Balibar, *The philosophy of Marx*, Verso, London & New York, 2007 [first edition: 1995], pp. 77-78.

<sup>74</sup> This neo-Smithian model – called the ‘commercialization model’ – has been criticized by Ellen Meiksins Wood in *The Origins of Capitalism. A Longer View*, Verso, London & New York, 2002; it has also been the object of critique in the famous ‘agrarian capitalism’ debate: Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, Verso, London & New York, 2003; T.H. Aston, C. H. E. Philpin (ed.), *The Brenner Debate*, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

The only way to avoid this path and, yet, be able to develop our analysis towards a theory of bureaucracy would be to conceive this opposition between rationalization (that is, logical development) and historical explanation in a more dialectic way. From this perspective, the only way to conciliate the anhistorical aspects present in the Lacanian theory (which is usually understood as presenting the structural paradoxes involved in the subjective structure ó that is, the hidden part of the rational subject, which is just as natural and anhistorical as his visible part) and in the modern bureaucracy (which, according to the usual view, is historical only as regards its origin; while its goal and function ó the rationalization of the social relations ó appear somehow transhistorical) with the historical nature of capitalism as revealed by Marx is to conceive anhistoricity as, somehow, historically produced: that is, the anhistorical nature of the bureaucracy and of the (psychoanalytical) subject are the necessary products of a certain historical phenomenon: namely, the capitalist mode of production. This doesn't mean that their anhistorical nature is a mere sham: contrary to the traditional Marxist way of demystifying appearances in order to reveal the hidden essences, Marx's method, as we just saw, consists in considering this fair surface as a necessary mode of appearance of the hidden processes. The fair principles of exchange are not violated in the mechanism of generating plus-value in production: on the contrary, the plus-value results from their faithful application.

So how is this anhistoricity generated historically? In our previous presentation of Marx's labour theory of value, his arguments seem to follow logically one after the other, obeying a rule which seems to belong not to the contingences of history, but to the destiny of the history of being. However, this is not how Marx presents this development. From time to time, in crucial moments, he stops the logical progress, only to notice that, in order for this consequences to be met, certain particular historical circumstances had to be ensured. In what follows, I will analyze a little bit more closely these crucial points in which, in Marx's *Capital*, history generates anhistoricity and certain particular contingencies spawn an objective and necessary logic.

The first relevant point at which Marx stops to consider such historical presuppositions is when discussing the generalization of exchange: contrary to the neo-Smithian thesis according to which exchange processes tend to develop and extend naturally, by themselves, Marx notices that: "The first way in which an object of utility attains the possibility of becoming an exchange-value is to exist as a non-use-value, as a quantum of use-value

superfluous to the immediate needs of its owner. Things are in themselves external to man, and therefore alienable. In order that this alienation may be reciprocal, it is only necessary for men to agree tacitly to treat each other as the private owners of those alienable things, and, precisely for that reason, as persons who are independent of each other. But this relationship of reciprocal isolation and foreignness does not exist for the members of a primitive community of natural origin<sup>75</sup>. Hence, commercial exchange, which appeared in the beginning only at the margins of society, could develop only on the condition that ancient forms of social relations would be shattered and the members of the old tribes and clans could regard themselves as independent and atomistic individuals.

The second relevant historical incursion made by Marx takes place when he is discussing Aristotle: how is it, he wonders, that even though Aristotle discovered the use-value and the exchange-value, he could not problematize value as such? The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour because and in so far as they are human labour in general, could not be deciphered until the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion. This however becomes possible only in a society where the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labour, hence the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>75</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 182.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152. The same dialectical relation, in which a specific historical conjuncture has to be presupposed in order for an objective and necessary logic to develop is analyzed in *Grundrisse*: "... the presupposition of exchange value, as the objective basis of the whole system of production, already in itself implies compulsion over the individual, since his immediate product is not a product for him, but only *becomes* such in the social process, and since it *must* take on this general but nevertheless external form ; and that the individual has an existence only as a producer of exchange value, hence that the whole negation of his natural existence is already implied; that he is therefore entirely determined by society; that this further presupposes a division of labour, in which the individual is already posited in relations other than that of mere *exchanger*. That therefore this presupposition by no means arises either out of the individual's will or out of the immediate nature of the individual, but that it is, rather, *historical*, and posits the individual as already *determined* by society". (Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 247-248). Not incidentally, this passage is immediately followed by a blunt critique of the utopian socialists (or, of what today we would call 'rational choice Marxists') who think that the revolutionary task consists in attempting to save the fair principles of exchange from their corruption by the capitalists, thus failing to see the mutual implication of these two levels, the fair exchange and the hidden production: "What this reveals, on the other side, is the foolishness of those socialists who want to depict socialism as the realization of the ideals of *bourgeois* society) who demonstrate that exchange and exchange value are *originally* (in time) or *essentially* (in their adequate form) a system of universal freedom and equality, but that they have been perverted by money, capital etc... [this is the] utopian inability to grasp the *necessary difference* [my emphasis] between the real and the ideal form of bourgeois society... [and the

In both cases, in order for certain abstract processes to take hold, certain social relations had to be imposed as natural and legitimated as legitimate. The same is true about the famous 'primitive accumulation': contrary to the common wisdom, primitive accumulation is not so much, or not only, the dark prehistory of capitalism, made of robbery, theft, violence and dispossession; at the same time, it is the long process by means of which what previously appeared as theft, was later established as lawful appropriation. 'These methods [of primitive accumulation] depend in part on brute force, for instance the colonial system. But they all employ the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, as in a hothouse, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition'<sup>77</sup>. The most famous argument for legitimating and legitimating such processes of appropriation was John Locke's theory of property: under its banner, any appropriation which enhances the productivity of a certain property is legitimate. The capitalist appropriation not only of the common properties, but also of the otherwise dormant labour-power of the worker was thus completely legitimate<sup>78</sup>.

Finally, we reach the historical conditions of the realization of plus-value that we analyzed, in an ahistorical way, in the previous section. Even though, as Marx clearly states, the 'rational' principles of fair exchange are strictly followed here, the relations of production necessary to the production of surplus value are in no way natural and ahistorical. There is at least one historical condition for this to happen:

'For the transformation of money into capital, therefore, the owner of money must find the free worker available on the commodity market; and this worker must be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his

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inability to see that the ideal expression] is in fact only the inverted projection of this reality". (*Ibid.*, pp. 248-249)

<sup>77</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, pp. 915-916.

<sup>78</sup> From the notorious Hugo Grotius to today's think-tanks, all forms of capitalism had such historical legitimating agencies. See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital*, Verso, London & New York, 2005 for a historical survey of them. Nor are these techniques belonging to the primitive accumulation of capital restricted to the presumably forgotten era of the prehistory of capitalism. As the contemporary history teaches us, they are ever recurring procedures which are deployed wherever necessary, from the massive privatizations in the postcommunist Eastern Europe to the 'socialization of costs, privatization of profits' principle followed in the current economic crisis. Their Lockean legitimization in terms of increased productivity is also ever recurring in them.

own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid of them, he is free of all the objects needed for the realization of his labour power. One thing is clear: nature does not produce on the one hand owners of money or commodities, and on the other hand men possessing nothing but their own labour-power. This relation has no basis in natural history, nor does it have a social basis common to all periods of human history. It is clearly the result of a past historical development, the product of many economic revolutions, of the extinction of a whole series of older formations of social production. The historical conditions of [the existence of capital are met] only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence finds the free worker available, on the market, as the seller of his own labour-power. And this one historical pre-condition comprises a world's history. Capital, therefore, announces from the outset a new epoch in the process of social production<sup>79</sup>.

So what happens once this historical condition coupled with this anhistorical trend are allowed to develop to their utmost limit? So far, we have mentioned in several places the fundamental contradiction of capitalism as traditional Marxism understands it, but we never discussed the outbreak of the fundamental contradiction as understood in critical Marxism. We insisted so much on the 'fairness' aspect of capitalism that we risk losing sight of the 'injustice' aspect. It is time to fill in this blank. Under the unstoppable thrust for surplus value, capitalism cannot but drive to ever increased levels of productivity. But increased productivity only generates plus-value until it becomes generalized. Once it is generalized, the so-called treadmill effect occurs: once the increase in productivity is generalized, the magnitude of value yielded in that time period, because of its abstract and general temporal determination, falls back to its previous level. Once it has become generalized, the advance in productivity is absorbed into the 'socially necessary labour time'. Hence, the incessant drive for increased productivity leads eventually to the supersession of direct human labor by the productive powers of socially general knowledge as the primary social source of material wealth. But, at the same time, the capitalist mode of production, based as it is on the direct expenditure of labour time, remains in place. Thus, this contradiction consists in the fact that, as the capitalist mode of production continues to develop, the labour expenditure becomes

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<sup>79</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, pp. 273-274.

increasingly superfluous from the standpoint of the production of material wealth, yet necessary as the source of value. Thus, this contradiction is internal to the very mode of production: Capital itself is the moving contradiction, in that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence it posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition for the necessary<sup>80</sup>.

So, as one can see, history has to do all its best in order for anhistoricity to occur. And this anhistorical or posthistorical epoch is not devoid of its contradictions. Now let us briefly recapitulate the road so far. We have, on the one hand, a set of seemingly fair, rational and trans-historical conditions of production: again, liberty, equality, property and Bentham. On the other hand, we have the hidden abode of production, in which the faithful observance of these fair principles generates plus-value and eventually leads to the open contradiction in which the law of value becomes all the more powerful in the same measure in which it becomes unapplicable, and thus the superfluous becomes the sole measure of the necessary. The relation between these two sides is a properly dialectical one: it is not just an operation of legitimating a certain status quo, or of hegemonizing (i.e. presenting as properly universal) the particular domination of a certain class. The relation goes in both directions: just as much as the abstract principles are legitimating a certain mode of production (this aspect was the sole one criticized by traditional Marxism), they are, in a sense, real, in as much as they are the correct expression of the abstract domination characterizing the capitalist mode of production. They are, thus, both effects and causes, both expression and what is expressed. If they are to be conceived as mere surface, we are to stress that they are an efficient surface. Not a mere appearance and illusion, but an objective appearance and a necessary illusion.

What does all this entail for our present purpose? In order for the law of value to reach its utmost efficiency, a certain juridical conception has to be implemented and generalized. As Marx noticed: 'the juridical moment of the Person enters here, as well as that of freedom, in so far as it is contained in the former' when the economic form, exchange, posits the all-

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<sup>80</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 706.

sided equality of its subjects, then the content, the individual as well as the objective material which drives towards the exchange, is *freedom*. Equality and freedom are thus not only respected in exchange based on exchange values, but, also, the exchange of exchange values is the productive, real basis of all *equality and freedom*. As pure ideas they are merely the idealized expression of this basis; as developed in juridical, political, social relations, they are merely this basis to a higher power<sup>81</sup>. What does the juridical moment of the Personø and its subsequent definition of freedom, imply? As the previous passage from Marx states, it implies a conflation of two different notions of freedom: the labourer has to be free in both senses of the terms: free, as in without any other property except his labour power; and free, in the sense that it can relate freely to his own person and capacities, which he can, consequently, dispose of and alienate. Now this two aspects of freedom ó freedom from the point of view of property, and from the point of view of autonomy ó in no way naturally coincide. In order for them to be spontaneously identified with one another, certain processes have to occur, a certain way of inscribing the autonomy of the bare subject into the equal space of the law has to take place. The inscription of the empty subject in the space of law, and the official act by means of which his autonomy is granted and recognized as his capacity to freely relate and thus alienate his own capacities, this process is the basic operation of the bureaucratic agency. Thus, a possible critical Marxist definition of bureaucracy would characterize it as those statal agencies and procedures by means of which the socialization and naturalization of the law of value are enforced. This definition is clearly at odds with the Trotskyist view, for which, as we saw, the bureaucratic activity is constantly in tension with the law of value, and because of which there is, in general, a discontinuity between state socialism (ruled by bureaucracy) and capitalism (ruled by the law of value). But since from our perspective there is a sort of continuity between the law of value and the task of bureaucracy ó namely, that the latter has to ensure the social and legal framework in which the silent and smooth functioning of the former can occur ó the differences between the two kinds of political and economical regimes is less sharp, and clearly they are not in a relation of opposition. Even more, these differences between ñreally existing socialismø and plain capitalist social structures should be accounted not in terms of the presence or absence of bureaucratic planning and centralization, but in terms of variations of the law of value. From this perspective, even the contemporary attacks on ñbureaucracyø can be explained as

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 243-245.

objective constraints imposed by the recent mutations in the law of value: while, in some part, these attacks represent the ever renewed anarchist or libertarian critique of social mediation ó in which they are bound to remain for ever actual and inactual, as an irreducible longing for premodern forms of immediacy and spontaneity ó they also reflect the new structure and requirements of the law of value, in its passage from its classic Fordist structure to its new post-Fordist rearrangement. As such, the demand for a more ‘efficient’, ‘flexible’, ‘dynamic’ bureaucracy is nothing but the constraint imposed on the bureaucratic apparatus to adapt to the final mutation of the law of value, in which, as Marx announced in *Grundrisse*, the superfluous becomes the only condition of the necessary. In the same way in which, in the new realm of the ‘immaterial work’, the necessary work is reduced to a minimum, only to cover and colonize, as superfluous work, whatever remained of the old ‘free time’, the necessary, autonomous centralizing and coordinating activity of bureaucracy is reduced ó as a social cost ó to a minimum, while at the same time, its direct submission to the requirements of the law of value conflate the bureaucratic activities, this time as extractors of plus-value, to the whole domain of social life.

This critical Marxist definition of bureaucracy also entails a different relationship between the political and the economical domain. In the classical Marxist account, in which there is either a relative autonomy of the political, and a determination in the last instance by the economic, or, in more orthodox views, a clear-cut determination of the political by the economic sphere, these two social instances are always thought as two fully separated and constituted domains. However, once we assume that the point of convergence between the economical and the political is the very law of value, their relationship changes: the two instances are no longer separate from one another, nor are they fully constituted in themselves. They are mutually contaminated, in an intricate affair in which both the economy and the political are, in themselves, not-all, and in which their identity with themselves is blocked by the extimate (to borrow Lacan’s pun) presence of the other term. The non-enclosure of the political and the economical is their point of convergence, the point in which, in their very own domain, they encounter the foreign presence of the other: the law



of value, as the economical element in the political realm, or class-struggle, as the political core of the economic domain<sup>82</sup>.

There is, finally, a third consequence of this definition of bureaucracy as social reproduction and juridical inscription of the politico-economical law of value. The classical by now liberal and democratic view assumes that there is a clear-cut division between the political sphere, which is liable to deliberation and has to claim legitimacy, and the economical sphere, which, because of its *‘natural’* nature, cannot be approached as legitimate or illegitimate, but only as efficient or inefficient. The opposition between the political and the economical thus reproduces the old oppositions between freedom and necessity, culture and nature. If this is the case, we should notice that the present definition of bureaucracy introduces here a third term which radically disturbs this idyllic relationship. Here, also, a possible objection to our definition of bureaucracy can be preempted: why is it that the task of socializing the law of value is placed in the hands of the bureaucracy, and not in some other institution hands, preferably a sphere, like the political apparatus or the juridical as such, which could be liable to debate and could be accountable in terms of legitimation? The answer lies in the very locus and function of the law of value and, according to our definition, bureaucracy: since the proper place of bureaucracy, as the agency in charge with the socialization of the law of value, is at the very encounter between the economic sphere and the political domain, its status has to lie somewhere beyond the mere opposition between necessity and freedom, legitimacy and efficiency. In the same way in which, in the realm of production, the law of value operates silently, as it were, at the backs of the producers, in a similar way, in the social, public domain, the socialization of the law of value operates all the more efficiently as it operates silently, beyond *ó* or rather before *ó* the proper public space of legitimation. It is not accountable in terms of legitimation, simply because it is its very activity the one that

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<sup>82</sup> “Politics is thus a name for the distance of the economy from itself. Its space is opened up by the gap that separates the economic as the absent Cause from the economy in its ‘oppositional determination’, as one of the elements of the social totality: there is politics *because* the economy is ‘non-all’, because the economic is an ‘impotent’ impassive pseudo-cause. The economic is thus here double inscribed in the precise sense which defines the Lacanian Real: it is simultaneously the hard core ‘expressed’ in other struggles through the displacements and other forms of distortion, and the very structuring principle of these distortions... To put it paradoxically, one can reduce all political, juridical, cultural content to the ‘economic base’, deciphering it as its expression – all *except* class struggle, which is the political in the economic itself”, Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Verso, London & New York, 2008, pp. 291, 293.

demarcates the space for deliberation and legitimation, by opposing it to the realm of necessity which is the smooth reproduction of the law of value.

Now let us return to our definition of bureaucracy. Its activity, which consists in opening the space for the democratic activity of deliberation and legitimation only by subtracting from it the sphere of the efficient reproduction of the necessary law of value, this activity implies the translation of those metaphysical principles active in the law of value into general concepts of the civil law. There are at least three such metaphysical ideas tacitly operating in the background of the law of value<sup>83</sup>: firstly, there is the imposition of a clear opposition between private and public, a difference which ensures the very generation of plus-value: while, on the public surface, the labour-power is paid according to the legitimate principles of equal exchange, it can be used at will in the lawless realm of the private consumption of the capitalist. Secondly, there is the idea that subjective capacity or possibility (the labour force) can be correctly measured and equated with a determinate objective quantity (its exchange value), by means of the common denominator of abstract time; or, briefly, that the common denominator between possibility and act, subject and object is time: the economy of time, to this all economy ultimately reduces itself, as Marx said<sup>84</sup>. Finally, and more important for us, there is a certain idea of the subject in which, under the banner of the modern reflexive autonomy, subjectivity is conceived on the model of property. And this idea, as it usually happens, is all the more effective in the absence of its object, that is, where property is missing: not owning anything means owning one-self, one's own detachable and alienable capacities. Blessed are the poor, for they are the only autonomous subjects, the only ones who have the privilege of alienating, externalizing and selling themselves. The fundamental operation of bureaucracy consists in ensuring the logic and sustainability of this link between property and subjectivity, or, rather, the definition of subjective autonomy as self-property.

However, there is, in the Marxian body of works, a notorious lack of both the issues that have proved to be here crucial: there is no systematic problematization of Law, nor of the

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<sup>83</sup> The idea that the capitalist mode of production is nothing but the technical realization of metaphysics is an argument common to such radically opposed thinkers as Heidegger (see his *Question Concerning Technology*) and Adorno (see Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*).

<sup>84</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 173.

subject (not in his Robinsoe aspect of methodological individual, but, literally, in his constitution of *subject* ó autonomous and subjected, or, rather, autonomous in as much as he is subjected). Thus, if we are to analyze bureaucracy as the operation of inscribing the free subject into the space of Law and of converting his self-property into autonomy, we seem to be obliged to look somewhere else for conceptual tools to use. On the other hand, the most articulate theory dealing with the encounter between subject and Law, and in which subjectivity is precisely understood in relation to Law, is the Lacanian one<sup>85</sup>. Not incidentally, one of the basic insights of Lacan's theory is the way in which the subject splits under the incidence of the Law, and the way in which the constitution of the empty subject (\$) involves his separation from a mysterious *objet a*, which is thus alienated and opposes the subject as his own correspondent among the objects (in a similar fashion to the way in which, for Marx, under the incidence of the law of value, the subject alienates his labour-force which, as agent of ever increased productivity, starts to oppose him as an autonomous force). Thus, the possible critical Marxist theory of bureaucracy, even though it laid down its own basis, will have to be constructed using the tools borrowed from the Lacanian theory. The path towards the Lacanian theory of bureaucracy is now opened.

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<sup>85</sup> In an otherwise brilliant essay, Joe Valente has argued in a quite convincing manner the impossible nature of a theoretical encounter between Marx and Lacan. Yet, for all this impossibility, there seems to be, at least on the Marxist side, also some necessity: "The revolutionary pragmatism of Marxism ultimately requires a robust version of agency, which the deterministic sociopolitical ontology of Marxism tends to preempt or undermine, particularly in its high liberal guise. In other words, Marxism requires an account of the insertion of subjectivity within the prevailing mechanism as something other than a free agent or a simple arm of the machine, in short, it requires a subjectivity seen as fully intentionalized contingency. Lacan's systematic construction of the signifier as symptomatizing, positing language in its material form as simultaneously motivating, stabilizing, and decentering, could easily look like a blueprint for squaring Marxism's vicious circle. However, Lacan's blueprint tends to point in the opposite direction from Marxism: instead of extracting revolutionary agency from the toils of determinism, it locates agency as a fading mediation in the auto-positioning of the signifier through which any social determination is apprehended". (Joe Valente, 'Lacan's Marxism, Marxism's Lacan', in Jean-Michel Rabaté (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 157). Now, since theoretically we are not concerned here with the 'revolutionary pragmatism' of Marx's text, but with its critical theory aspect, not with its prophetic potential but with its hermeneutical force, we can accept the negative (in terms of pragmatics) influence of the Lacanian theory of the subject on the Marxian framework as objectively accurate, and, even more, we can greet the definition of agency as 'fading mediation in the auto-positioning of the signifier' as a chance to insert in it a theory of bureaucracy.

## Chapter 3.

### Lacan's Bureau

This chapter will be spent inside the Lacanian conceptual cabinet. I will inspect several of his key concepts, namely those which, in my perspective, can provide the theoretical basis for a theory of bureaucracy. Many of the most famous Lacanian concepts will thus be ignored – such as desire, Name-of-the-father, *jouissance* – or will be only briefly touched upon, since I will focus mainly on those categories that can contribute to the proper articulation of the theory of bureaucracy. The chapter has a three layer structure, and mimics a sort of organic self-development: it starts with three 'elementary' 'atomistic' concepts; then deals with several dual relations between such elementary concepts; and ends with the discussion of a proper conceptual structure, involving a constellation of four elementary concepts. This path also leads from what is perceived as the most properly psychoanalytical domain – the profoundly subjective – to what appears to be as a genuine social configuration, thus leaving us on the very threshold towards the theory of bureaucracy<sup>1</sup>.

#### 3.1. *The elements*

##### a) The Signifier

Among the Lacanian concepts, the signifier is, probably, the one with most occurrences throughout his life and work<sup>2</sup>. Unlike other concepts, which had their moments of fame in a

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, both these affirmations hold only from an exoteric point of view, and should be radically amended from a Lacanian perspective: it is thus hard to talk about an 'elementary' or 'atomistic' concept with regards to the signifier or the subject, since both of them are already in themselves dual, if not plainly structural; and it is also wrong to envisage the direction of this development as a trajectory from the 'profoundly subjective' to the exteriority of the social, since the concepts analyzed in the first part – at least the signifier and the *objet a* – stand precisely for the socially a priori, that is, for the paradoxical dimension of the exterior-interior, or what Lacan called 'extimacy' (*extimité*).

<sup>2</sup> This uninterrupted obsession with the signifier has been accused by some of Lacan's critiques as amounting to an inflation of the sphere of the signifier and to a constitutive vagueness of this concept, which seems to

particular point of Lacan's thinking, only to be marginalized or even abandoned later on, the signifier's importance and relevance have remained constant and unquestioned in all of Lacan's texts<sup>3</sup>. Such constant use of this concept could not have failed to produce a sort of crystallization of the theory of the signifier in a few slogan-definitions, which occur, as in a nutshell, in different points of Lacan's texts and whose role is to refer the reader (or listener) to the developed articulation of that theory produced in a previous point of his teachings. In what follows, I will attempt to reconstruct the Lacanian theory of the signifier starting from three of the most famous slogan-definitions of the signifier.

*All genuine signifier is a signifier who doesn't signify anything. The more it doesn't signify anything, the more it is indestructible*<sup>4</sup>.

Lacan's theory of the signifier is a radicalization of Saussure's theory of the sign. Basically, Lacan does to Saussure's theory what he normally does to Freud's theory – a constant attempt to further develop its novelty, and to push its path-breaking insights even beyond the contingent constraints and limits imposed on both Saussure and Freud by their historical location. Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* already represented a revolution in the history of linguistics: by conceiving the sign as a dual structure (the signified and the signifier), he managed to do away with the referent and with all its metaphysical

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designate, for Lacan, virtually anything and everything – see, for example, Alain Costes, *Lacan. Le fourvoisement linguistique. La métaphore introuvable*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2003. This objection is, somehow, true, provided it is not understood as objection, but only as faithful description. There is, indeed, in Lacan's theory, a deliberate treatment of different entities (signifiers, signifieds, symptoms, failed acts etc.) as signifiers. But there is a reason for this, and it has to do with the awkward materiality of the signifier: „What is important is not to confuse 'materiality' with the phonic substance as such... The primacy of the signifier should be asserted, but with the proviso that signifiers, signifieds and signs should all be conceived of as signifiers. To go back to the example of the 'rat complex': the fact that the association of 'rat' with 'penis' involves a passage through the signified, while the association with 'instalment' takes place through a merely verbal bridge, constitutes a perfectly secondary distinction: in both cases there is a displacement of signification determined by a system of structural positions in which each element (conceptual or phonic) functions as a signifier – that is, it acquires its value only through its reference to the whole system of signifiers within which it is inscribed... So we will understand by 'materiality of the signifier' not the phonic substance as such but the inability of *any* linguistic element – whether phonic or conceptual – to refer *directly* to a signified". (Ernesto Laclau in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau & Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso, London & New York, 2000, pp. 70-71).

<sup>3</sup> As for the hermeneutical method applied here, in spite of the fact that there is a wide agreement on the existence of different periods of Lacan's thought – the young, structuralist Lacan followed by the mature, post-structuralist one – I will approach his theory analytically, and without regards for its internal history and development.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre III : Les psychoses (1955-1956)*, Association Freudienne Internationale, p. 339.

presuppositions that were present in the previous linguistic theories. But if the sign is to be conceived as being without relation to the referent, its nature changes dramatically: it is no longer a positive entity, but an entity whose identity is provided only by its difference from the other linguistic elements ó thus, a being of pure difference, and, since all link to the real referent is gone, a being instituted through radical arbitrariness: it is what it is only because it is not something else.

Lacan's intervention will consist in erecting a theory of the (efficiency of the) signifier on the very basis of the destruction of Saussure's sign. For this purpose, he will apply a certain treatment, or, more exactly, four operations on Saussure's concept of the sign:

1. The disappearance of the existing parallelism between the terms inscribed on both hands of the bar [the signifying bar, the one that unites and separates, for Saussure, the two halves of the sign: s/S, the signified and the signifier];
2. The disappearance of the Saussurean ellipse, which was always present for the linguist and which symbolizes the structural unity of the sign;
3. The substitution of the Saussurean formula concerning the two sides of the sign with the designation of the two sequences of the algorithm;
4. Finally, the accent on the bar which separates S from s.

In substance, what Lacan does is to replace the Saussurean unity of the sign with a structural and irreducible tension, resistance quite, between its two sides ó the signifier and the signified. The autonomy that the signifier thus comes to enjoy in Lacan's theory, its autonomy from the signified, derives from this emphasis on the bar that separates the signifier from its signification. But this operation has a clear, although double, goal: on one hand, the emancipation of linguistics from the philosophical concept of representation; on the other hand ó and this should be the means for that goal ó the dumping of the theme of arbitrariness. Although this theme has been one of the main innovations of Saussure with regard to classic linguistics, the philosophical concept or presupposition of the representation and referent is still present in it ó even though in negated form. Lacan's endeavor is to do

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<sup>5</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le titre de la lettre. (Une lecture de Lacan)*, Galilée, Paris, 1973, p. 39.

away with them for good. Following again the excellent analysis made by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy:

“The philosophical problematic of the sign is the question of the *arbitrary*. What is questioned [by Lacan] is a certain way of posing the problem of the arbitrary, or, more exactly, the treatment of language to which a certain position of the arbitrary obliges. This positing of the arbitrary is the recognition, let us say post-Cratylos, of the aporia of *reference*. All the uneasiness comes from having thought language in relation with the thing. For Lacan, the goal is to separate linguistics from the philosophy of sign. Lacan’s algorithm is the sign in as much as it doesn’t signify anything.”<sup>6</sup>

But what does the non-signifying nature of the signifier have to do with its indestructibility? In order to understand this, we should state a few words concerning the materiality of the signifier. Lacan’s theory seems to be deeply paradoxical, if not plain contradictory here: on one hand, stressing repeatedly the materiality of the signifier; on the other hand, describing this materiality in rather ‘immaterial’ terms, as constitutive indivisibility and indestructibility<sup>7</sup> of the signifier. The Lacanian materiality of the signifier has two aspects: firstly, the intricate relation of the signifier to its place; secondly, the indivisible nature of the signifier. Let us explain them in reverse order: the signifier is indivisible because it has no positive nature or substance. There is nothing to divide there, since the signifier is nothing but pure difference. Thus, the signifier’s materiality is clearly a non-substantial one. But this differential nature of the signifier – more about it below –, which replaces the Saussurean arbitrariness of the sign, makes it so that the signifier has to be thought in strict interaction with its place. The signifier is, paradoxically, nothing but its relation to its place in the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

<sup>7</sup> This paradoxical ‘immaterial materiality’ has pushed Jacques Derrida, in a famous text, to qualify this materiality of the signifier as plain ideality and thus criticize Lacan as disguised metaphysician – see “Le facteur de la vérité”, in *La carte postale. De Socrate à Freud et au-delà*, Flammarion, Paris, 1980, pp. 441-523. For a Lacanian rebuttal of this objection see Barbara Johnson, “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida”, in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Jacques Lacan. Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, vol. 2, Routledge, New York, 2003, pp. 282-318.

signifying chain: 'The signifier is the difference between places, it is the very possibility of localization. It doesn't divide in places, it divides the places – that is, it institutes them'<sup>8</sup>.

*The sign is that which represents something for somebody*<sup>9</sup>.

There is a strange development that occurs in Lacan's linguistic theory: it is as if, once his description of the signifier reduced all trace of representation, referent and, thus, all the presuppositions of the classical philosophy of language, we would witness a sort of 'return of the repressed' by means of which all this representational apparatus reappears, in another place, in the theory. This is Lacan's own definition of the sign, which seems to emphasize those very traits which he rejected in the definition of the signifier. Thus, the sign is, for Lacan, conceived as natural sign, as trace, signal or index, that is, in all cases, as pure reference: the sign represents something. And it represents it for somebody, that is, for a present and aware conscience. This is one of the differences of Lacan's sign from his signifier: the fact that the sign represents something for somebody, while the signifier, as we will see immediately below, represents a subject for another signifier, tries to point out that, while the agent's conscience is implied and presupposed in the case of the sign, as condition of possibility of the whole process of representation, in the case of the signifier, this conscience has to be situated 'on the level of its effects [the effects of the process of representation] and not of its cause'<sup>10</sup>.

In the case of the sign, the subject is rather presupposed, and it is presupposed as the gaze for which the whole process of representation takes place. As such, it doesn't even have to be a plain individual. Lacan's own description here seems, at first sight, a bit contradictory. On the one hand, he claims that 'objectively, there is no need for any kind of subject here, for

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<sup>8</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, *Le titre de la lettre*, p. 46. Thus, as condition of enspacement and detour, the signifier is not so different from Derrida's own *différance*. But there is nevertheless a contrast between the two views: while, for both Lacan and Derrida, this endless movement of *différance* affects all the elements of the signifying chain and institutes it as such, for Lacan, unlike Derrida, this very operation of *différance* has to be inscribed in the chain of signifiers, and the condition of possibility of the whole chain has to be incorporated in one of the elements of the chain – which is, as we will see below, the master-signifier.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XI : Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, (1964), AFI, p. 242.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, *Suture*, [www.lacan.com](http://www.lacan.com)



anybody to recognize the sign in order for this sign and this trace to be there<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, Lacan states that the one for which the sign represents something can be many things, it can be even the whole universe<sup>12</sup>. The only way to reconcile these two statements is to assume that the subject for which the process of representation takes place in the case of the sign is presupposed, as pure gaze and pure conscience, in this process. Even if he is not there physically speaking, the process implies him, it only makes sense for him. This is different in the case of the signifier: here, the process of representation doesn't lead to an exterior gaze or conscience, but is enclosed in the signifying realm: the end point is not a subject, but another signifier. While the thing represented is not something, but a subject<sup>13</sup>.

The Saussurean notion of arbitrariness is fully operative in Lacan's concept of the sign, while for the signifier, the characteristic notion will be that of differentiality. While the sign is arbitrary in relation to an external reality to which it refers but which it cannot touch, the signifier is differential, that is, pure difference which points immanently only towards the other elements of the signifying battery. The inaccessible for it is not as in the case of a sign the external reality but the pure signifier itself, the difference separating and thus constituting signifiers, their inter-diction. The boundary of the sign is the thing, the limit of the signifier is the pure signifier itself. The problem for the signifier is not its impossibility to touch the Real but its impossibility to attain itself or what the signifier lacks is not the extra-linguistic object but the Signifier itself, a non-barred, non-hindered One... The signifier does not simply miss the object, it always-already goes wrong, in relation to itself<sup>14</sup>.

Now, once this is clear, we can move to the most important trait of Lacan's signifier and develop a bit on his most formula concerning it:

*The signifier is what represents a subject for another signifier*<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre III : Les psychoses*, p. 304.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XI : Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, p. 242.

<sup>13</sup> Lacan does not stick always to this clear opposition between sign and signifiers. Some of his formulations can lead to view this opposition in a more nuanced way, as when he says that 'the signifier is the sign of a subject' (*Le séminaire, livre XX: Encore*, (1972-73), Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 130). However, we are holding here to the general – and more clear – view that can be detached from his discussion of the signifier.

<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, Verso, London & New York, 2002 [first edition 1991], p. 112.

<sup>15</sup> Among many of its occurrences, Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, vol. 1, Paris, Seuil, p. 7.

This is one of the most frequent of Lacan's famous slogans. It is, even more, among those few such formulas that have remained unchanged throughout all of his teaching. But its very fame and concision can lead to a series of misunderstandings. Is it any signifier that represents the subject for any signifier? Or only a particular signifier that represents the subject for all the others? Or, inversely, all the signifiers that represent the subject for one particular signifier?

The answer to these alternatives is, somehow, all of them. More exactly, there is a sort of deduction at place here, a deduction from the simple form of the signifier to a general form of the signifier (a deduction which resembles, in some of its traits, Marx's deduction of money as the general equivalent form).

The first problem to be solved here is the following (to which we already alluded before, when discussing the different views of Lacan and Derrida): how is it that the chain of signifiers, the signifying series, which, as we saw, cannot refer to any exterior, how can it be closed on itself, and thus become a totality? How is it that its endless immanent referring of one element to one another can be stopped? Lacan's solution to this paradox consists in taking it at face value: the closure of the signifying chain is provided by the immanent inscription of its non-closure. In order for the signifiers to be able to function as pure differences, there has to be another signifier which stands for difference as such. So, if the signifier is, in itself, nothing but pure difference, this endless play of differences has to be opened *ó* but also closed *ó* by the inscription, in the chain of the signifiers, of a particular signifier which stands for the very difference between the self-enclosed symbolic system and its outside. Once we have this master signifier, the deduction of the general formula of the signifier can be produced:

§There are three meanings of the Lacanian formula of the signifier: 1. the simple form: for *a* signifier, *another* signifier represents the subject; 2. the expanded form: for *a* signifier, *any* of the other signifiers can represent the subject; 3. the general form: *a* (one) signifier represents the subject for *all the other* signifiers<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 24. One has only the 'one' signifier with money, the other signifiers with commodities, and the subject with value in order to get the Marxian deduction of the general formula of exchange and money and its development from simple barter.

The first formula is to be read as: the master signifier (S1) represents for another signifier (S2) its very absence, its lack, which is the subject. The subject is precisely that which has no proper representation, no proper signifier. This is why, in the simple formula, the empty signifier (S1), the signifier without signified, represents the subject for another signifier: the S2 which, in Lacan's work, stands for the signifier of knowledge. But it is precisely the irreducible failure of signifying the subject which engenders the shift from the simple formula to the expanded one: since every signifier misrepresents the subject, the movement of representation goes on to the next signifier, in search for a proper signifier. But since such a signifier doesn't exist by definition, the movement turns into a spurious infinity: for a signifier (S2), *any* of the other signifiers represent the subject. This endless failure of the representational process is put to a halt not by finding a proper signifier which would faithfully represent the subject, but by instating a signifier in which the very failure, the very impossibility of the signifier's representation is reflected into the representation itself. Thus, we get the general formula: a signifier (S1) represents the subject for all the other signifiers. Hence, to conclude this first part, let us listen again the definition of the signifier from the mouth of its very own creator: "Our definition of the signifier (there is no other) is: a signifier is what represents a subject for another signifier. This signifier will thus be the signifier for which all the other signifiers represent the subject; which is to say that without this signifier, all the others would not represent anything"<sup>17</sup>.

#### b) The Subject

In all our previous discussion about the signifier, we have been almost constantly referring to the concept of the subject, a concept which we, nevertheless, assumed as a self-understood hypothesis. In some way, this will prove to be not just a perhaps unavoidable methodological slippage (due to the fact that the concepts of signifier and subject always refer to one another) but, as we will see shortly, the actual statute of the Lacanian subject: that of a hypothesis. As Lacan clearly states: "To say that there is a subject is to say that there is hypothesis"<sup>18</sup>.

So what about this hypothesis which is the subject? The undeniable importance that the concept of the subject holds for Lacan is one of the main aspects that separate his thinking

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, vol. 2, Seuil, Paris, p. 181.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XX: Encore*, p. 129.

from the post-structuralist theories with which it is usually identified. The difference between his theory of the subject and the post-structuralist attack on the concept of subject is, somehow, similar to the already discussed difference between Lacan and Derrida's use of *différance*. While both Lacan and Derrida would agree that there is the general and transcendental operation of *différance*, the permanent enspacement and postponement of meaning and presence that affects the signifying process, for Lacan, unlike Derrida, this operation has to be immanently inscribed in the signifying chain and incorporated in one of its elements. It is almost the same with the subject: on the one hand, Lacan would agree with the usual deconstruction of the metaphysical category of subject and with the post-structuralist critique of the ideas of self-presence and transparency of self-consciousness which lay the foundation of this metaphysical category<sup>19</sup>. However, on the other hand, while this critique entails, for the post-structuralists, the necessary rejection of the category of subject as such, for Lacan, this structural deferral, opacity and non-encounter which necessarily affects self-consciousness *is* the subject. That 'process without subject' rendered famous by Althusser is, for Lacan, already subject.

But the same process we witnessed in the case of the Lacanian treatment of Saussure's sign reoccurs here: in that case, the Lacanian radicalization of Saussure's idea leading to the replacement of the central category of sign with that of the signifier was, afterwards, subject to a sort of return of the repressed, by means of which the Saussurean sign which was previously rejected returned as natural sign in Lacan's theory, opposed to the autonomous signifier; in a similar way, the metaphysical category of the subject is not just simply abandoned by means of its Lacanian critique, but returns in the corpus of the theory under another name: the ego, *le moi*. Thus, Lacan doesn't simply reject the metaphysical idea of subject 'ó with its aspects of self-consciousness, self-presence and transparency 'ó as an illusion, but reinscribes it into his own theory as a necessary illusion. The metaphysical traits of self-presence, transparency, immediate identity with oneself will be thus accounted as characteristics of the *ego* instance, which is, even though necessary, radically different from the subject: it belongs to the imaginary level, while the subject, as we will see immediately below, has to be placed somewhere on the intersection of the axes of the real and the symbolic. The ego, the subject's imaginary identity, whose birth scene is the famous mirror

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<sup>19</sup> For an already classical account of this post-structuralist critique of the subject, see Jacques Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1967.

stage, describes, for Lacan, a constitutive alienation for the subject, yet a necessary one. Without its proper functioning, the subject would be engulfed by the dimensions of the real and/or the symbolic, which is the basic structure of psychosis. Inversely, an inflated imaginary function of the *ego* is what accounts for the structure of neurosis. What is important for us, for the moment, is to fix this opposition between the subject and the *ego*. As Lacan says: "From the moment in which we consider the *ego* as imaginary function, it is far from being identical with the subject. The dimension of the subject, by this very move, cannot be identified with the *ego*. The *ego* is removed thus from its absolute position in the subject, the *ego* is a mirage, an element of the objectal relations of the subject"<sup>20</sup>. While the *ego* is instituted as fixed and enclosed conscious or, as Lacan says, imaginary or identity of the subject and as subjective correlative of the object, the subject, on the contrary, is defined by its non-enclosure and non-identity. As Lacan states in the same paragraph: "if the speaking subject, as such, we have to assume it as subject for a simple reason: the fact that it is capable of lying, which means that it is distinct from what it says"<sup>21</sup>. Or, as the same idea is reaffirmed twenty years later: "The subject is not a being, it is a supposition to what speaks"<sup>22</sup>.

So how is this hypothesis, which is the subject, inscribed into the signifying chain? This fundamental operation bears the Lacanian name of "suture". Suture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse; we shall see that [the subject] figures there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in. For, while there lacking, it is not purely and simply absent. Suture, by extension or the general relation of lack to the structure or of which it is an element, inasmuch as it implies the position of a taking-the-place-of"<sup>23</sup>. Suture, thus, is the technical name for the paradoxical Lacanian operation which we already mentioned, and which consists in enclosing the signifying chain by inscribing in it its very impossibility of enclosure, that is, by counting the lack as an element, or counting zero as one. Suture, in brief, supplies the logic of a paradoxical function whereby a supplementary element is added to the series of signifiers in order to mark the lack of a signifier that could close the set. The endless slide of signifiers (hence deferral of sense) is brought to a halt and

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<sup>20</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre I : Les écrits techniques (1953-54)*, AFI, p. 317.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> "Le je n'est pas un être, c'est un supposé à ce qui parle", *Le Séminaire, livre XX: Encore*, p. 109.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Alain Miller, *Suture*.

allowed to function "as if" it were a closed set through the inclusion of an element that acknowledges the impossibility of closure<sup>24</sup>.

So, now that we have all the elements and operations of the signifiers, the operation of suture of we can close the circle and ask: what is the subject? The subject is the real that has to be presupposed because of the malfunctioning of the symbolic. So, while the post-structuralists derive, from the constitutive non-encounter and deferral of meaning, the very impossibility of the aperceptive instance of the subject, Lacan derives, from the same facts, the subject's necessity: "Lacan's answer to the question asked (and answered in a negative way) by such different philosophers as Althusser and Derrida of 'Can the gap, the opening, the void which precedes the gesture of subjectivation still be called subject?' is an emphatic 'Yes!' The subject itself is *nothing but* the failure of symbolization, of its own symbolic representation"<sup>25</sup>. But the inclusion of the subject in the signifying process does not end up engulfing it, transforming it into a signification. On the contrary, the subject is here inscribed as real, that is, it is paradoxically included as excluded: "«Include me out!» perfectly expresses this intermediate status of the subject's relationship to the symbolic order, between direct inclusion and direct exclusion: 'the subject is not simply included into the signifier's network; rather, his very exclusion from it (signaled by the fact that there is no signified to this signifier) is 'included' in it, marked, registered by it"<sup>26</sup>.

"The subject is part of the real in as much as it is, apparently, impossible"<sup>27</sup>. But aren't we thus led back to an, ultimately, metaphysical presupposition, which considers the subject as a transcendent instance with regards to language and expression, and which assigns it the always privileged and comfortable space of the 'beyond'? In order to counter this view, one should hold to the immanent nature of the Lacanian subject with regards to the signifying process: even though the subject is something real, which we come to presuppose by means of the internal failures of the symbolic, this real is never beyond the symbolic of it is just a

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<sup>24</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire. Lacan Against the Historicists*, MIT Press, London & Cambridge, 1994, pp. 174-175.

<sup>25</sup> Slavoj Žižek in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, *Hegemony, Contingency, Universality*, p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject. The absent centre of political ontology*, Verso, London & New York, 2000, p. 110.

<sup>27</sup> "Le sujet participe du réel en ceci, justement, qu'il est impossible apparemment", Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVII : L'envers de la psychanalyse (1969-1970)*, Seuil, Paris, 1991, p. 119.

hypothesis, an absent cause which we come to assume and reconstruct retroactively because of its present effects. As Lacan would have put it: this real doesn't exist, it only insists. So, ultimately, the relation between signifier and subject goes both ways: the signifier sutures the subject to the structure by inscribing its absence of meaning in the field of meaning, or, to put it otherwise, by counting zero as one. The subject, on the other hand, provides, to use a Heideggerian but nevertheless appropriate term, the Ab-grund of the signifying chain: the abyss as the fundament of the signifiers network, its enclosure which is nothing but the inscription of its constitutive incompleteness: 'if there would be no subject if the symbolic order were complete and autonomous. The place reserved for the subject can only be that of the incompleteness of the system of signifiers, and the subject is a metaphoric covering over of that place'<sup>28</sup>.

#### c) The object *a*

The object *a* is simply Lacan's personal contribution to the psychoanalytic theory, his conceptual invention. While all the other main concepts that he uses can be traced back to the Freudian corpus or can be accounted as radicalizations of certain Freudian ideas 'in line with the Lacanian maxim of the necessary 'return to Freud'' for what concerns the object *a*, Lacan seems ready to accept it and promote it as his own personal invention and theoretical contribution. But for all of Lacan's notorious 'modesty' that is, his insistence throughout his life that his efforts are nothing but an invitation to a re-reading of Freud, he never hesitated to grant a crucial status to his main theoretical invention, this object *a* which, until his personal contribution, was nowhere to be found in the theoretical apparatus of psychoanalysis. Thus, the object *a* is presented as nothing less than the very object of psychoanalysis: 'The object of psychoanalysis is nothing else than what I already advanced as the function that plays the object *a*'<sup>29</sup>. Or, in an even more frank statement: 'This object is what we're running after in psychoanalysis'<sup>30</sup>.

So what is the object *a*? If, on the one hand, Lacan tirelessly emphasized the decisive status of the object *a*, on the other hand, he also consistently resisted all temptation to define it in

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<sup>28</sup> Gilbert D. Chaitin, 'The subject and the symbolic order: historicity, mathematics, poetry', in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, vol. 3, Routledge, New York, 2003, p. 121.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, vol. 2, p. 228.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits*, Seuil, Paris, 2001, p. 207.

some way or another. There are only bits and pieces that we can pick from his theory of the object *a*, which are extremely difficult to articulate in one definition. The object *a* became decisive for Lacan only in the second part of his activity. In his first seminars, the *a* designates only the imaginary other. In his later seminars, the object *a* is to be placed at the very intersection of the imaginary, real and symbolic levels: it is not only the intersection, but the very substance of the famous Borromean knot. Among its characteristics, at least three should be mentioned: first of all, the object *a* is non-specularizable. Non-specular objects are those objects which cannot be distinguished from their mirror image; secondly, object *a* designates the void ó the void as object; and thirdly, to make the confusion even greater, object *a* has the constitutive statute of the remainder, of the residue. Thus being the case, the simplest way to define it ó a definition which will have to be though immediately complicated ó would be to take another path and say that the object *a* is the natural product of the relation between the subject and the signifier: it is that part of the subject which is lost, is separated or falls off the subject, once the subject is inscribed into the signifying chain. But since, as we already know, there is no subject prior to his inscription in the signifying chain, but only as a hypothesis engendered by this chain of signifiers, so it is also with the object *a*: this object which appears as lost did not exist prior to his loss. It is an object that overlaps with its loss, and which emerges only at the moment ó and only as ó its loss. As Lacan explains, óthe important thing is that, natural or not, it is only as linked to the moment of imposition of the signifier that we can speak of *jouissance*. We will never know of the *jouissance* of the castor, because, without the signifier, there is no distance between the *jouissance* and the bodyö<sup>31</sup>.

This paradoxical status of the object *a* is, obviously, full of consequences for its materiality: it actually has none. And Lacan would repeat this fact under various poignant formulas: óThe object *a* is no beingö<sup>32</sup>, or óhis reality is only and purely topologicalö<sup>33</sup>. This immaterial materiality of the object *a* allows us to situate more clearly Lacan's position with respect to other theoretical articulations of the libido: since the unity of the subject is only posited as lost, or as a retroactive effect of its own constitutive splitting, and since the lost object is nothing but a topological being, all this implies that Lacan's theory is as far as possible from those, like Bergson or Deleuze, who conceive of the libido or *jouissance* as an

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse*, p. 205.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XX: Encore*, p. 114.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, p. 305.



endless reservoir or free-floating raw energy. On the contrary, for Lacan, this libido is incorporated into an incorporeal object, an imageless object, or, as he somehow allegorically puts it, in an undead organ ó the famous “lamella”. This purely topological status of the object *a* is, after all, quite in accord with the Lacanian status of the unconscious: contrary to what the current wisdom claims, and even contrary to some of Freud’s affirmations, the unconscious is not to be conceived as a hidden, dark scene beyond conscience, but rather as its pure surface, as the pure form of thought deprived of self-conscience.

If Lacan doesn’t derive the object *a* from Freud’s texts, that doesn’t mean he creates it *ex nihilo*. There are several theoretical axes he follows in the effort of constructing the concept of object *a*. One of them is the Marxian concept of plus-value. There is even a literal similarity between the two, given that the other name of the Lacanian object *a* is “plus-de-jour”. Lacan will indeed clearly state his theoretical debt to Marx for the invention of the object *a*: “the object *a* is precisely identifiable to what has been deducted by a laboring thought, the one of Marx, namely to what symbolically and really can be ascribed to the function of plus-value”<sup>34</sup>. I will not dwell here on this link between Lacan’s object *a* and Marx’s concept of plus-value since I will come back to it in the next chapter.

The other ingredient in Lacan’s concept of the object *a* is Kant’s transcendental object. This link is less stated by Lacan than the link to Marx’s plus-value, but perhaps more easily traceable. In a similar way in which, for Kant, the transcendental object is the condition of possibility of objectality in general, thus opening the space in which the phenomena can appear and, at the same time, the objective correlative of the transcendental subject, for Lacan, the object *a* is fundamentally a metonymical object ó that is, it is the holding-place of all the other objects, their condition of possibility, but, as such, unattainable, and, at the same time, the objective correlative of the empty subject. But, of course, Lacan is no Kantian and this immediate similarity would have to be amended: while, for Kant, the duet constituted by the set of transcendental categories and the transcendental object provides the structure of the subject’s intentionality, that is, of his spontaneous opening to the world in the process of knowing and experience, for Lacan, this primordial opening of the subject is not knowledge-driven, but desire ridden. But here the similarity pops up again: in the same way in which,

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<sup>34</sup> “...le *a* est précisément identifiable à ce qu’a sorti une pensée travailleuse, celle de Marx, à savoir ce qu’il en était, symboliquement et réellement, de la fonction de la plus-value”, Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVII: L’envers de la psychanalyse*, p. 49.

for Kant, the transcendental architectonic provides the necessary structure for the constitution of reality, for Lacan, the duet empty subject- object  $a$  provides the formula of the fantasy: and fantasy, as the pre-configuration of desire, is that which sustains reality<sup>35</sup>. Reality is ordered by the fantasy, in as much as the subject is realized there in his very split<sup>36</sup>. If desire is, for Lacan, the main mode of relating to the world of the subject, fantasy, as the duet empty subject ó object  $a$ , is the scenario of desire, and, thus, the support of reality<sup>37</sup>. Simply, it is fantasy which makes the reality interesting, by allowing the subject to find in it the metonymical avatars of the object  $a$ <sup>38</sup>.

In order to understand this a bit more clearly, we will have to bring into discussion the third axis of construction of the object  $a$ <sup>39</sup>. This third dimension of the object  $a$  is borrowed by Lacan from aesthetics. It has to do, more exactly, with the notion of anamorphosis. Without entering here in the sophisticated Lacanian dialectics between the eye and the gaze, which he deploys in Seminar XI, we will just mention that, from this perspective, the object  $a$  is the equivalent of the anamorphotical stain. At first sight, the anamorphic object is just a stain, a meaningless point in the field of the visible. In order to become fully visible, the perspective must be shifted to such a degree that all the other elements in the field of the visible become irremediably blurred. Thus, similarly, the object  $a$  is the blind spot in the middle of the objective field; the crucial point is that it has to remain blind, blurred, invisible, if reality is to be sustained. The only moments in which the object  $a$  is  $\neg$ visibleøas such is in anxiety: anxiety is, for Lacan, and in an opposite way from Heidegger ó for whom anxiety is precisely the fear without object ó defined as precisely the direct encounter of the object  $a$ , or the feeling generated by the proximity of the object  $a$ . So, while for Heidegger, anxiety is the fear with no object, for Lacan, anxiety is the fear which has nothingness itself

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<sup>35</sup> For a more articulated comparison between Lacan's object  $a$  and Kant's transcendental object, see Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative. Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993, pp. 11-38.

<sup>36</sup> "La réalité, de ce fait, est commandée par le fantasme en tant que le sujet s'y réalise dans sa division même", Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits*, p. 358.

<sup>37</sup> Reality, in its Lacanian sense, should not be confused with the real: it is actually constituted by the exclusion of the real, that is, of the impossible trauma, and this real is obliterated precisely by means of the fantasy. Thus, fantasy has one foot in the reality – which it sustains – and one in the real. This is why, in spite of its fundamental status, the ultimate goal in psychoanalysis is not to touch or fulfil one's fantasy, but to traverse the fantasy and confront the real.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Alain Juranville, *Lacan et la philosophie*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1984, p. 192.

<sup>39</sup> I will leave aside a fourth theoretical ingredient in the concept of object  $a$ , the optical scheme elaborated by Lacan in the first seminar (*Les écrits techniques*), in which, contrary to this later scheme, the object  $a$  is situated in the realm of the imaginary.

as object. The object *a* as the anamorphic object is thus the void around which reality is structured, the void which is nothing but the objective correlative of the empty subject. The ultimate theoretical function of the object *a* is thus revealed: it is to undermine the immediate distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, and to open a paradoxical dimension of the subjectively objective, or objectively subjective.

### 3. 2. *The relations*

#### a) Cogito

Now that we have all the elements, it is time to see the relations they engender. First of all, we should take a look at what they entail for the subject's own identity and self-consciousness, for that ultimate ground of modernity which is the Cartesian cogito. Contrary to what one might have expected, the cogito, and precisely in its Cartesian form, plays a crucial part in Lacan's thought. Actually, Lacan played all his life with various formulas deriving from the Cartesian cogito, from "I think: «therefore I am»"<sup>40</sup>, to "I am the one who thinks «therefore I am»" and so on, indefinitely<sup>41</sup> and up to "I think where I am not, I am where I don't think"<sup>42</sup>.

In fact, Lacan considered that it is the epochal task of psychoanalysis to operate a radicalization of Descartes's cogito. But this radicalized Cartesianism is not intended to provide the ultimate basis of the subject and of psychoanalytic science; as a matter of fact, it is directed precisely against the revisionist trends in psychoanalysis represented by the triumphant "ego psychology" while the latter understands itself as a necessary reinforcement of the conscious, and thus imaginary, ego, Lacan's psychoanalysis, through its very re-articulation of the cogito, attempts to go beyond this emphasis on the imaginary function and to provide as the ultimate ground for the conscious subject its very destitution.

So Lacan's approach to the Cartesian ego is paradoxical: while all modern philosophy had recourse to Descartes's cogito in order to find in it the ultimate ground for the foundation of

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<sup>40</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, vol. 2, p. 230.

<sup>41</sup> "Je suis celui qui pense *Donc je suis*, et ceci indéfiniment", Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse*, p. 184.

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, vol. 1, p. 277.

knowledge and certainty, Lacan uses it also as a necessary ground, but one which grounds only the subject's constitutive split and thus unveils the psychoanalytical subject. 'The Cartesian subject is the presupposition of the unconscious'<sup>43</sup>.

The Cartesian cogito thus provides, as Jean-Claude Milner has dubbed it, Lacan's axiom of the subject: 'there is a subject, different from all form of empirical individuality'. Moreover, this subject, bereft of all substantiality and determination, 'with no self, no reflexivity, no conscience, disjoint from all quality', is to be available for a thought itself minimalist, deprived of any presupposition, to the 'zero degree of thought' common to all possible thought<sup>44</sup>. But in order for all this 'minimalism' to be ensured, Lacan has to focus only on the ultimate, extreme point of the cogito, and separate it from all that follows and what, in Descartes own presentation, is indistinguishable from this extreme point. Thus, Lacan not only separates this point of discovery of the empty subject from the return of its substance and qualities, but plays and insists precisely on this tensioned postponement: it is this very structural delay the one which unveils the constitutive split of the subject, between S1 and S2, the empty subject and the 'substantial' subject of knowledge. As Lacan himself explains: 'I am the one who thinks: «therefore I am», thus marking the fact that the «therefore», the trait of the cause, divides the «I am» of existence from the «I am» of sense'<sup>45</sup>.

There are, therefore, two operations involved in Lacan's radicalization of the cogito. His effort to de-substantiate the subject takes, as its targets, on the one hand, the 'thickness' of the subject, the wealth of qualities that Descartes himself rushes to add, from outside, to the empty subject of the cogito; and, on the other hand, the illusion of the subject's pure transparency to itself, the illusion of the transcendental subjectivity. 'This is why, on the one hand, it is necessary to displace the subject towards the subject of strategy (or of game theory) and, on the other hand, to de-center the subject in relation to the classical subject'<sup>46</sup>. But both of these operations and all this rearticulation of the cogito can be summed up in another famous Lacanian dialectic, the one between the subject of enunciation and the

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<sup>43</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, vol. 2, p. 205.

<sup>44</sup> Jean-Claude Milner, *L'Oeuvre claire. Lacan, la science, la philosophie*, Ed. du Seuil, Paris, 1995, pp. 39-40.

<sup>45</sup> « Je suis ce qui pense : « donc je suis », marquant que le « donc », trait de la cause, divise inauguralement le « je suis » d'existence du « je suis » du sens », Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits*, p. 204.

<sup>46</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le titre de la lettre*, pp. 101-102.

subject of the enunciated. It is not just that the radicalized cogito is translatable into this opposition; it is, more precisely, that "the eccentricity that Freud tries to manifest in the subject's relation to itself can only be rendered in the terms of linguistics, more exactly, in the terms of the opposition between subject of enunciation and subject of enunciated"<sup>47</sup>.

Lacan borrows this opposition from Jakobson's linguistic theory of the shifters. But, just like in the other cases, Lacan borrows this theoretical tool only to radicalize it. The diachronical tension between the cogito's two moments, its extreme point of doubt, and the consequent return of certainties and qualities is restructured by Lacan in a synchronic tension between the empty, merely presupposed subject of enunciation, the pure I, and the substantial subject of the enunciated. So, while for Descartes, the cogito provided the ultimate guaranty of certainty and of the eventual accord between subject and object, self-transparency and objective knowledge, for Lacan, the very same cogito institutes as ultimate ground the constitutive split of the subject, the division between subject of enunciation and subject of enunciated. However, what is just as important is the fact that this gesture of instituting the subject as an extralinguistic entity, as a dimension beyond the mere enunciated is rendered possible only by means of the enunciated, and is, as such, only a presupposition, a hypothesis, of the enunciated. But if the task of the cogito is precisely to make visible the subject's division, if the genuine, founding enunciated is founding only in as much as it points to the dimension of the instance of enunciation, perhaps a more proper formula of the cogito can be found. And Lacan often dwells on this alternative cogito, which is nothing but the famous paradox of the liar: "I lie"<sup>48</sup>. This impossible statement is genuine and can be understood only in as much as it opens the division between subject of enunciated and subject of enunciation: the impossibility of the enunciated attests the existence of a subject which cannot be reduced to the enunciated. And, after all, this is what psychoanalysis is all about: the subject is there, in Lacan's bureau, only in as much as he lies and deceives, that is, only in as much as he has no idea of what he is saying.

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, pp. 161-163.

## b) Alienation-Separation

The concept of alienation was a very popular one in Lacan's cultural milieu, in which both of the leading theoretical trends – existentialism and humanist Marxism – put a large emphasis on this concept. However, Lacan's move with regards to this concept consists in taking it back to its origins. He is basically re-Hegelianizing it. Prior to the Marxian alienation in work, there is the constitutive alienation in language, which makes the former possible: "How could one overcome the alienation in labor? It is like wanting to overcome the alienation of discourse". This can be quite understandable. But then immediately follows a more mysterious statement: "I don't see anything overcoming this alienation except the object that supports its value"<sup>49</sup>. This overcoming of alienation in the object – the object *a* – is what is involved in the second fundamental operation, namely the separation. But let us take things gradually.

Lacan's articulation of the conceptual pair of alienation and separation rehearses the Hegelian developments from the opening chapter of the *Phenomenology of Mind*. Let us remember that Hegel's aporias of the sensible certainty involved, somehow, also the tension between enunciation and enunciated, and practically formulated, *avant la lettre*, what later was to be theorized as the linguistic issue of the "shifters" – how can one save the richness of the immediate concrete in language. At first sight, one simply cannot, and the immediate concreteness of the object of the sensible certainty is irremediably lost through its translation in language, by means of which the particular concrete (the "this") becomes an abstract universal (the word "this"). But as the following developments of the *Phenomenology of Mind* were bound to prove, it is only the spear that produced the wound the one that can heal it, and what at first appears as the painful alienation of language proves to be a necessary passage. All this dialectical development is preserved in Lacan's theory of alienation and separation.

The operation of alienation is the immediate result of the subject's inscription in language, or, more precisely, of his being represented by a signifier for another signifier. The subject is facing here an impossible and yet forced choice: he must choose between the empty signifier and the "positive" signifiers of knowledge. This choice is, after all, faithful to Lacan's

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<sup>49</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits*, pp. 207-208.

reformulation of the Cartesian cogito: I am where I do not think, I think where I am not. For the subject's reality, his figure of alienation consists in being thrown between the subject of knowledge, the false subject of 'I think' and this corporeal remainder which I named the object *a*. Between the two, he must choose. This choice is the choice of thinking, in as much as it excludes the 'I am' of *jouissance*, that 'I am' which is 'I do not think'<sup>50</sup>.

The two operations of alienation and separation are constructed by Lacan on the model of two operations borrowed from mathematical logics: reunion and separation. Thus, the choice that the subject faces, confronted as he is with the relation S1-S2, is similar, for what concerns alienation, with cases like: 'Your money or your life'. The operation of alienation is defined by a choice whose properties are that, in the reunion, there is an element which makes it so that, no matter what I choose, there results as consequence 'neither the one, nor the other'<sup>51</sup>. If, in the case of 'your money or your life' I choose money, I lose both; if I choose life, I get a miserable life, deprived of *jouissance*. In a similar way, in the case of the subject's alienation in the signifying chain, or his forced choice between being and sense: if he chooses being, he gets a meaningless, senseless, idiotic being – this is the choice of psychotics. Thus, the only 'reasonable' choice is to choose sense. But the sense one chooses is necessarily entrusted to the Other, it is only by subscribing to the signifiers that are at a disposal in the Other – as the reservoir of signifiers – that one can make sense at all... One necessarily chooses S2, the signifier of sense and knowledge... But this choice exacts its revenge: we are cut from an essential signifier, marked by S1, the signifier without a signified, a senseless signifier, which reemerges as the incomprehensible, nonsensical message of the unconscious<sup>52</sup>.

Alienation thus described the first, traumatic encounter of the subject with the symbolic order, that is, his inscription in the signifying chain, and the retroactive illusion of loss of *jouissance* (the primordial, maternal paradise) that it generates. So far, we are still in the territory of common knowledge. All this seems to translate the common wisdom according to which the intrusion of the father and the consequent entry of the subject in language

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 358-359. This is why another formula for Lacan's cogito could be: 'I think where the *jouissance* has been evacuated', cf. Slavoj Žižek, *L'intratable. Psychanalyse, politique et culture de masse*, Anthropos, Paris, 1993, p.116.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, p. 246.

<sup>52</sup> Mladen Dolar, "Cogito as the Subject of the Unconscious", in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Cogito and the Unconscious*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1998, p. 20.

destroy the non-mediated unity between mother and child; but this, according to Lacan, is not the whole story: the father intervenes here rather as a savior and pacifier, and discourse is the benefic way out from the suffocating sphere of raw, pure *jouissance* of the mother-infant relation. This way out is opened by separation. This second operation starts the moment in which the subject realizes that the Other in which he is alienated is not-all, not self-sufficient and self-consistent. That the Other is also constituted around a lack. This is why what at first sight appears as profoundly non-intuitive, if not altogether wrong, makes nevertheless sense: the fact that separation is explained by Lacan on the logical model of intersection is explained by the fact that the subject manages to separate himself from the Other by intersecting his lack with the Other's lack. The other's lack is the fact that, in the case of the mother-infant pair, the mother's desire points beyond the child is what institutes the subject as subject of desire. The being which was excluded in the first operation of alienation returns here, but it is no longer a pure, positive being of *jouissance*, but a being marked by lack: "The covering of the two lacks produces something: the very status of the object of desire, which appears precisely where the two lacks coincide is the lack of the subject and the lack of the Other. There is an object involved on both sides, figuring as a pivotal point of fantasy is the object 'within the subject' that one tries to present in order to fill the lack in the Other, to deal with its desire; and on the other hand, the object 'within the Other', its surmised surplus, the source of its unfathomable *jouissance*, the secret clue to what makes the Other enjoy and that one wants to partake of the subject, having lost its being in alienation, nevertheless partakes of it in separation is through the elusive surplus object one can never get hold of".<sup>53</sup>

This is why, to return to the beginning of this section, Lacan claims that the subject's alienation can be overcome only in the object: it can be overcome only in the operation called "separation", that is, the intersection of the two lacks, the subject's and the Other's, which describes the contour of the object *a*.

### c) Superego

The previous developments on alienation and separation followed an almost classical dialectical trajectory: the primordial, immediate unity of the couple mother-infant is, firstly,

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.



negated in the moment of alienation, in which the subject gives up being and gains the much-diminished being of sense, and thus finds himself passively inscribed in the Other (which is, for Lacan, the symbolic order); and then, in a second moment, the subject gains a sort of "autonomy", a separation from this Other by means of the discovery of their overlapping inconsistency (the subject's and the Other's). This should be, as in classical dialectics, the final, reconciliatory moment: the pacifying intervention of the symbolic law, which generates the proper balance between the subject's being and his meaning. But this is not the final moment for Lacan. This is why, while certain dialectical trends are obviously to be found in his oeuvre, there is always a small difference involved, a specific remainder which comes and ruins the dialectical happy-ending. The moment of separation is the moment of the proper constitution of the subject: while the object is, for Lacanian psychoanalysis, fundamentally metonymical, the subject is constitutively metaphorical. In separation, the subject basically operates a sort of ontological metaphor, by means of which the desire of the mother (always traumatizing in its proximity and mystery) is substituted with the Name-of-the-Father: this is the referent of the mother's desire (this is why the substitution is legitimate), and, at the same time, it is the symbolic solution to the real of the mother's desire (this is why the substitution is also benefic). Thus the final moment of the dialectics of alienation and separation is the proper institution of the symbolic law which allows the space for the proper subjectivization of the subject.

But there is a fourth element here which blurs this wonderful dialectic: there is also a dark side of the law, which bears the name, in psychoanalysis, of the superego. The Name-of-the-Father represents the law in its dialectical dimension: Lacan, following Freud's myth of the primitive horde from *Totem and Taboo*, formalizes in the Name-of-the-Father the figure of the primordial father which, once he is killed by his sons, becomes law. The symbolic father is the dead father or the father only in his dimension of law. In a symmetric way, superego designates the undead father, the father who cannot be reduced to a pure symbolical instance but persists in his real *jouissance*. Thus, if the Name-of-the-Father is the institution of the symbolic law, superego is the real of the law: an un-dialecticized law which insists in its

blind, repetitive injunction. 'The superego is simply a discourse that doesn't say anything' Superego, that is, a law without words'<sup>54</sup>.

If psychosis consists, according to Lacan's structuring, in the subject's rejection [forclusion] of the Name-of-the-Father and in his choosing, between being and meaning, being, the superego defines the constellation of neurosis: in neurosis, the subject confuses the symbolic father with the real father, or, the symbolic institution of the Name-of-the-Father with what Lacan calls *père-la-jouissance*, the obscene father of non-mediated enjoyment. This is why superego designates the tensioned relation of the neurotic to the law: on one hand, he has successfully integrated the symbolic order, by passing through the constitutive paternal metaphor; on the other hand, the reverse, dark side of the law comes back to haunt him in the figure of the superego:

'The superego is an imperative, it is coherent with the register of the law, that is to say, with the ensemble of the system of language, in as much as it defines the human condition as such, and not only the condition of the biological individual. On the other hand, we must also stress the unreasonable, blind aspect of the superego, its pure imperative and simple tyranny' I would say that the superego has, on the one hand, a certain relation with the law, and, on the other hand, that this relation is contradictory: it is an unreasonable [insensée] law, a law reduced to nothing but its misrecognition' Superego is at the same time the law and its destruction, its negation. Superego is, essentially, the very word, the law's injunction, in as much as it is reduced to nothing but its root. The law in its entirety is reduced here to something we can't even express, to the 'you must'<sup>55</sup>.

The dialectic of alienation and separation ended by instituting a dialectical law: the subject is, in the end, reconciled with his loss only by finding the same loss in the Other, that is, through an overlapping of losses. This is the necessary path for the constitution of the subject, which follows the logic of the proverbial wound which can be healed only by the spear which smote it, or, as Lacan puts it: 'language knows how to repay the debt that itself generates' Superego is, on the contrary, a non-dialectical law: as Lacan says, 'Superego is

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<sup>54</sup> "Le surmoi est simplement une parole qui ne dit rien... [U]n surmoi, c'est-à-dire une loi sans parole", Jacques Lacan, *Des Noms-du-Père*, Seuil, Paris, 2005, pp. 49, 57.

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre I: Les écrits techniques (1953-54)*, AFI, pp. 181-182.

indeed something like the law, it is a law without dialectics"<sup>56</sup>. But what is a law without dialectics, a pure, repetitive commandment reduced to the empty injunction "you must"? And even more, doesn't all this mean that the superego is a dimension that necessarily accompanies the law, not only as its irreducible real, but also as that aspect which grants law with authority and thus makes law what it is? This seems to be, indeed, what Lacan claims: "The surplus of the superego over the Law is precisely the surplus of the voice; the superego has a voice, the Law is stuck with the letter". But there is no Law without the voice. It seems that the voice, as a senseless remainder of the letter, is what endows the letter with authority, making it not just a signifier but an act<sup>57</sup>.

### 3.3. *The structure*

#### The four discourses

Now we have all the pieces and some of the most relevant relations between them. It is time to try to put the puzzle together and articulate the fundamental structures. There are several such fundamental structures laid out throughout Lacan's work. For our present purposes, I will deal here only with the ones labeled "the four discourses", which Lacan develops in his Seminar XVII: *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*.

However, before approaching the definition and characteristics of Lacan's four discourses, let us recapitulate some of the theses we reached so far, which will prove useful in the task we're facing. Firstly, there is Lacan's dual relation to Hegel's dialectic: in spite of the recurrent dialectical trends in Lacan's oeuvre and his numerous commentaries and references to Hegel, the dialectic, for the French psychoanalyst, is always a sort of negative one, in which the moment of *Aufhebung* never totally succeeds, which makes it so that another, fourth, repressed or rejected element, is bound to reappear. This is why Lacan's structures will involve always four elements, and not just the holy triad of classical dialectics. Secondly, let us remember the odd relation between the signifier and space: it is, on the one hand, the signifier who opens up the possibility of plural positions and places, not the other

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<sup>56</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre III : Les psychoses (1955-1956)*, AFI, p. 485.

<sup>57</sup> Mladen Dolar, 'The Object Voice', in Renata Salecl & Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1996, p. 14.

way around: it is, according to the long Lacanian commentary on Poe's *Purloined Letter*, the letter's (that is, the signifier's) presence in somebody's hand which distributes the positions that will be occupied by the other actors involved; and, on the other hand, and following from this, there is the fact that, once under the incidence of the signifier, that is, once the linguistic dimension is instituted, the primordial tension or relation is not between two different elements – that was Saussure's thesis – but between an element and its place: it is the fact that, in one place, absence has to be counted as presence, zero as one, and the lack of meaning has to be inscribed in the signifying chain, the proper, instituting moment of the signifying structure. This is why, in the case of the four discourses, we will have four different structures generated by the gradual shifting of the four elements with relation to the four available positions. Finally, there is another peculiarity which should be explained: with the four discourses, we are dealing with social structures, that is, we are deep in the public realm of inter-subjectivity. How did we get here, if, up until now, we dealt only with the profound depths of the core of subjectivity? However, if we take a closer look, we can see that the path we followed until now was a straight line on the surface of a Moebius strip: the fact that we seem to have passed, immediately, from pure interiority to pure exteriority is the necessary illusion of the Moebius strip; on the other hand, there is the fact that the two dimensions are actually on the same path: the dimension of sociality was always already present in the main elements and relations that define subjectivity. Moreover, the idea of a hidden treasure of subjectivity which is unattainable by social means is, as we have seen with the discussion on the object *a*, a retroactive illusion generated by the very inscription of the subject in the signifying chain.

A discourse is, according to Lacan, 'what determines the form of a social relation'<sup>58</sup>. But if discourse names, in its Lacanian use, a specific, fundamental social relation, that does not mean that social relations are defined, for Lacan, by what is said in them, by the speech produced there. These fundamental social relations are, as a matter of fact, a 'discourse without words': 'they are beyond words' and, yet, they are instituted by language. 'Discourse is a necessary structure which greatly overcomes speech, which is always more or less circumstantial. What I prefer is a discourse without words. In truth, without words, the discourse can very well maintain itself. It subsists in certain fundamental relations. These

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<sup>58</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XX: Encore*, p. 76.

relations could not subsist without the language. By means of language a certain number of stable relations are instituted, and inside them something that is larger and goes beyond the mere enunciations can be inscribed<sup>59</sup>. How then can we understand this paradox of the discourse being beyond speech and yet instituted by language? It is nothing but a consequence of the signifier's relation with spatiality: the four discourses designate the structuring of the social space under the incidence of the signifier, the opening of four available positions and the presence or absence of the elements in their respective positions.

There are, then, four elements, four positions, and four discourses. The four positions are structured like this:

|                  |                  |
|------------------|------------------|
| <u>The agent</u> | <u>The other</u> |
| The truth        | The production   |

These positions are linked to each other: the agent addresses the other, puts him to work, and from this results a product. However, this interpellation or enjoinder takes place in the name of something, which is the truth of the agent and of his discourse. But the other is not inscribed here merely passively: it is he who initiates the discourse by questioning the agent. Thus, for the other, the agent appears as signifying something: it is signifying his hidden truth, which the other forces the agent to reveal. However, the social relation established by the discourse is far from running smoothly. It is, actually, rather a momentary stabilization of a fundamental deadlock. The real *ó* in its Lacanian sense, as pure disturbance of the symbolic order *ó* reappears here in two ways: as impossibility and impotence. Firstly, it appears between the agent and the other as impossibility: the other's questioning of the agent and the agent's consequent discourse cannot possibly engender neither a smooth production, nor a total revealing of the agent's truth. The other aspect of the real involved here derives from the former, but regards the relation between the elements on the lower level: the truth and the production. Between these two there is a relation of impotence: there is nothing that can relate the other's production to the agent's truth.

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<sup>59</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse*, p. 11.

Let us try to explain all this more clearly by analyzing each of the four discourses. We already saw the four defining positions. The four elements to be distributed in these positions are: the subject (\$), the signifying pair (S1 and S2), and the object *a*.

a) The discourse of the master

|           |           |
|-----------|-----------|
| <u>S1</u> | <u>S2</u> |
| \$        | a         |

The discourse of the master is the most common discourse. It is, one could say, the institution of discourse as such since its defining presupposition is the existence of total(izing) signification. Here, the agent is occupied by the master signifier; the discourse addresses the other as knowledge (S2); its truth is the subjection of the subject (\$), and the final product is the other's *jouissance* (the object *a*). What does all this mean? Lacan constructs this primordial discourse on the model of the Hegelian struggle for recognition, which was developed and largely emphasized, as *the key* to all the *Phenomenology of Mind*, by Kojève in his famous seminars on Hegel. It is actually this Kojévian interpretation the one that Lacan formalizes here. In the struggle for recognition, the master is victorious by proving that he is not afraid of risking his biological existence in exchange for the symbolic recognition by the other; on the contrary, the slave is not ready to risk his life and thus is forced to recognize the master as master. But this is not the end of the story: through the Hegelian-Kojévian dialectics, the fate of the two participants radically changes. As a matter of fact, the master cannot obtain the satisfaction he longed for: his recognition by the slave is useless, since he is not recognizing the slave, and thus the slave's recognition counts virtually for nothing; on the other hand, the slave ends up finding satisfaction in his defeat: being forced to work for the other, the slave begins to master the negativity which he escaped in the primal scene of the confrontation for recognition; through his sustained negativity and labor for the master, the slave acquires a knowledge, a know-how not only of nature, but also of the master's desire. And, finally, the slave's sustained labor ends up producing in him the satisfaction longed for by the master. These are the contents articulated in Lacan's formula: the truth of the master is the other's subjection; the master addresses the other as knowledge: the other is supposed to know the master's wishes and to know the way to fulfill them; finally, the product of this relation is the other's satisfaction, or *jouissance*.

But this is not just a particular, peculiar, maybe even mythical, configuration of social relations. Lacan insists on the fact that the discourse of the master is the discourse *par excellence*, because its thesis is that everything must submit to the law, that there is a world as a totality structured by law. Lacan plays here on the signifier, by writing *le signifiant maître* as *le signifiant m<sup>o</sup>être*: this expresses, at the same time, the master's illusion of autonomy and self-sufficiency, and also ó by means of this self-reference of the signifier ó his idea that the social world can and should be structured by this univocal law, or, rather, by this law of univocity: *õle principe du discours, non pas maîtrisé, mais maître-isé, avec un tiret, du discours en tant que fait maître ô cæst de se croire univoqueö*<sup>60</sup>. Thus, Lacan attempts to shift what, for Kojève, remained a scene of philosophical theatre, a mythical scene, into a structural moment presupposed by the imposition of language as such. õIn this discourse [of the master], there appears the moment in which the master affirms himself. It would be wrong to think that this happens at the level of risk. This risk is mythical. It is a trace of a myth still present in Hegel's phenomenology. What does the master do? He plays on what I have called the crystal of language. Why not use in this respect what in French can be designated by the homonymy between master [*maître*] and being-me [*m<sup>o</sup>être*] or being-me at myself [*m<sup>o</sup>être à moi-même*]. It is from this that the master signifier appearsö<sup>61</sup>. Or, as Lacan repeatedly ó but more mysteriously ó claims: õThere is no master but the signifierö<sup>62</sup>. Thus, the illusion of univocity, of a fixed and totalizing network of significations is the necessary illusion of language, and is, at the same time, necessarily contradicted by the functioning of language. Thus, the Lacanian real resurfaces here in two places: firstly, as a relation of impossibility between the master and slave: the master addresses the slave as knowledge, but this knowledge is, as such, unknown by the master: õThe essence of the master is that he doesn't know what he wants. This is what constitutes the true structure of the discourse of the masterö<sup>63</sup>; secondly, as impotence: there is no possible link between the truth of the discourse (the subject's subjection) and its product (the *jouissance*): There is no coincidence in the fact that the lower level of the discourse of the master provides the very formula of Lacan's fantasy (\$ a), the fantasy being, by definition ó at least one of its definitions ó the attempt, by the subject, to fill in the lack of the Other.

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>62</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, vol. 1, p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse*, p. 34.

Thus, the discourse of the master is characterized by its exclusion, and, by this very mean, by its spontaneous generation of fantasy. The *jouissance* is, at the same time, excluded from the master's law, and yet necessarily generated, included as excluded.

b) The discourse of the University

S2     a

S1     \$

We arrive at the discourse of the university by shifting all the elements in the discourse of the master one position to the left. The place of the master is now taken by knowledge. It addresses the other as *jouissance*, and its product is the subject's division. The truth of this discourse is, obviously, the master. What is the narrative behind this formal shift?

There are several events ó epochal events ó that occur in the passage from the master's discourse to the discourse of the university. They all seem though to be reducible to one thing: the birth of capitalism. As a matter of fact, Lacan plays here with the idea of a fifth discourse: the discourse of the capitalist, which is to be found in the very passage from the master's discourse to the university discourse. I will come back to the capitalist nature of the passage from the first to the second discourse, and to the political implications of this interpretation in the next chapter. For now, let us analyze the concrete changes involved in this passage. For one thing, there is a modification in the role and nature of knowledge. Knowledge is no longer on the side of the other, but in the position of the former master. How did it get there? What happened in the passage from the slave to the modern proletarian is a dispossession of his knowledge: knowledge does not belong anymore to the other, but to the master. That does not mean that the proletarian is more ignorant than the ancient slave. It has to do more with a change in the nature of knowledge: from the ancient know-how, *savoir faire*, of the slave we get to *episteme*, an expert, theoretical, and neutral knowledge. What happens in the passage from the discourse of the ancient master to that of the modern master, which we call capitalist, is a modification in the place of knowledge. It is because he has been dispossessed by something ó before, of course, the communal property ó that the proletarian can be qualified by this term -dispossessed, which justifies the effort and the success of revolution. Can't we see that what he gets back is not what he is owed? The capitalist exploitation deprives him of his knowledge by rendering it useless. What he gets



back from this is something else ó the master's knowledge. This is why he merely changed his master<sup>64</sup>. Briefly, what defines the modern proletariat is, even more than its dispossession of property, its loss of knowledge. But who is the culprit for this epochal robbery? The culprit is, according to Lacan, philosophy: philosophy is the one responsible for the transformation of the ancient, practical *savoir faire* in the modern *episteme*, objective and impartial knowledge. 'Philosophy has played the role of constituting the knowledge of the master, of subtracting it from the slave's knowledge' The *episteme* appeared from an interrogation, a purification of knowledge<sup>65</sup>. As surprising as it might seem, Lacan's reasoning here is quite similar to Heidegger's developments on *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit* from his *Being and Time*: what appears to be primordial, spontaneous and neutral ó the theoretical approach to the world in terms of simple, available presence before the hand (*Vorhandenheit*) ó is actually a secondary mode of intentionality, derived from the practical, primordial one made in terms of being-at-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) and utility. Thus, Lacan's bizarre blaming of the philosophy as responsible for the dispossession of the proletariat of his knowledge has familiar traits with the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics. It is no coincidence that both accounts find their primal scene in Plato: for Lacan, it is the famous scene from *Menon*, in which the philosopher, by asking the right questions, extracts from the slave his unknown, theoretical, knowledge.

There is another major aspect involved in the passage from the master discourse to the university discourse. What previously was excluded, and yet produced, from the discourse ó the other's *jouissance* ó is here incorporated, even addressed as other: the object *a*. And this has to do, again, with the capitalist nature of the passage involved: 'Something has changed in the master's discourse from a certain point in history. From a certain point, the *plus-de-jouir* is counted, accounted, totalized. This is where the accumulation of capital begins<sup>66</sup>. What previously, in the master's discourse, was inscribed only as excluded (the object *a*) and what characterized the real, that is, impossible of this discourse ó the link between \$ and *a* ó is here interrogated, inscribed as such in the normal mechanism of the discourse. 'The impotence of this junction has been suddenly evacuated. The plus-value adds itself to capital: there is no longer any problem there, they are homogeneous, they are all values now<sup>67</sup>. But

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

if this discourse addresses now directly the other as *jouissance*, as plus-value, what it generates is the constantly renewed subjection of the subject (\$).

Why is that? This has to do with the third relevant aspect of the passage from the master's discourse to the university discourse. The hidden truth of the university's discourse is the master. But this very passage of the master below the line is what makes it more opaque, more indestructible. "The fact that knowledge has passed in the position of the master is what, far from elucidating it, blurs even more the question of its truth." This is what makes it impossible to appear, in the course of history, what it is with this truth. The sign of the truth is now somewhere else! What I find more striking is that, starting from this moment in which the deadlock of impotence has been evacuated, the master signifier appears even more unapproachable. Where is it? How to name it? How to stop this little mechanism?<sup>68</sup>. Thus, while the previous impossibility has been properly inscribed in the functioning of the new discourse (\$ a), there appears now a new impotence: the absent link between \$ and S1. The discourse of the university, while addressing the other in terms of *jouissance* and enjoining him to self-mastery, by hiding its truth of the master's discourse, ends up by constantly reproducing the subject's division (\$). The way to self-mastery, proclaimed and reclaimed by the upper side of this discourse, is necessarily contradicted by its lower side.

c) The discourse of the hysterical

|    |    |
|----|----|
| \$ | S1 |
| a  | S2 |

The discourse of the hysterical appears as a reaction to the discourse of the master. Or, more exactly, to the transformation of the master's discourse in university discourse. The hysterical addresses the master and enjoins him to act as a master, to reveal his knowledge and to reveal the hysterical's place in it. This hysterical discourse is such a spontaneous and repetitive reaction to the master's position that Lacan even goes so far as to suggest that, perhaps, it is the hysterical the one who invents the master: "What the hysterical wants is a

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 207.

master. It is absolutely clear. It is so clear that we should raise the question whether it is not from there that the invention of the master started<sup>69</sup>.

The discourse of the hysterical covers, thus, for Lacan, the historical positions of resistance to power. It also expresses Lacan's skeptical view on the possibility of success of such radical endeavors. As he famously stated in his meeting with the rioting French students in 1968: 'The revolutionary aspiration has only one chance, that of leading, always, to the master's discourse' What you are longing for as revolutionaries is a master. You'll have it<sup>70</sup>. Why is it, then, that the possibility of success of such revolutionary attempts is denied from the very beginning? Why are they doomed to fail by definition?

From Lacan's view, it is not even a question of failing. It is, rather, that they succeed in their true intention, namely that of instituting a master. In the discourse of the hysterical, the position of the agent is occupied by the divided subject (\$), who addresses the other in the name of his symptom (the object *a*, which occupies the position of the truth of this discourse). Thus, the hysterical resists the place in which the master's interpellation distributes him, he resists it in the name of the remainder of *jouissance* which is, as we already saw, actually produced by the master's discourse. The hysterical approaches the master with the question regarding his own symptom: 'why is it that I am what you say I am?' The product of this discourse is, thus, knowledge. In Lacan, there is no natural and spontaneous thrust for knowledge: after all, the unconscious is already knowledge, it is knowledge without self-consciousness, hence there is no need for more knowledge, but only for a different relationship with it. Knowledge as such is longed for only by the hysterical. And the actual effect of this discourse is, indeed, to produce knowledge.

So, if, on the one hand, the hysterical discourse fails in its radical political task, it succeeds in generating knowledge. There is another positive side effect produced in this overall failure. It is the fact that, for once, the subject occupies the position of the agent. This is why the hysterical's discourse is the necessary preliminary opening of the psychoanalytical scene. Not only because, here, the subject in its constitutive division is posited as the agent; but also because, by his relating to the other as to a subject-supposed-to-know, the subject operates

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

that  $\neg$ transferø which is the necessary condition for the psychoanalytic relation. As Lacan says, what psychoanalysis requires is a sort of hystericization of the other.

However, the real reappears here in the absent link between the truth of this discourse and its product: the knowledge produced cannot but constantly drive around the kernel of *jouissance* which constitutes the truth of this discourse. The hysterical discourse started as a revolutionary belonging and ended up as accumulation of knowledge. It also started as a configuration of the psychoanalytical scene, but in order for this scene to be properly closed, the four terms of the structure of discourse have all to take one more step to the left.

#### d) The discourse of the analyst

|          |    |
|----------|----|
| <u>a</u> | \$ |
| S2       | S1 |

The discourse of the analyst is at odds with the other discourses: while the masterø discourse, the university discourse and the hysterical discourse were all assimilated, or assimilable, to plain,  $\neg$ publicø social structures and relations, the discourse of the analyst is defined by a constitutive modesty: it is a peculiar social structure which can only take place in certain, particular conditions, in the privacy of the psychoanalytic cabinet, between a certain analyst and a certain patient. In short, it seems to be structurally impossible to generalize. All the previous three discourses designated structures that, contrary to the ø68 motto, walk on the streets. The discourse of the analyst, on the contrary, seems to remain in the cabinet. We will come back to this aspect in the next chapter. Another odd particularity is that, again, different from all the other discourses, this one is a silent discourse. The Lacanian psychoanalystø mission is, as is widely known, to keep stubbornly silent during the treatment. His only, rare words are intended to merely cut the patientø discourse and thus mark its quilting points [*points de capiton*].

But this happens for a reason. In the discourse of the analyst, the place of the agent is occupied by the object *a*. What this means is that the psychoanalyst has to deliberately occupy the place of the otherø *jouissance*. øThe position of the psychoanalyst is made by the object *a*. Substantially, this position is that of the object *a*, in as much as this object

designates precisely what, in the effects of discourse, is the most opaque, the most unknown, and yet essential. It is that effect of discourse which is an effect of rejection<sup>71</sup>. This is why another particularity of this discourse should be mentioned: while a certain thrust for mastery was present in all the other discourses, here, the agent not only has to avoid all intention of mastery, but has to position himself from the very beginning in that place which, eventually, will become the place of rejection, trash, waste.

The truth of this discourse is, finally, knowledge. This is why, in one sense, the psychoanalyst is addressed in the treatment as subject-supposed-to-know. But the goal of the treatment is, actually, to reveal that this supposed knowledge does not belong to the analyst, but to the patient: it is his unknown knowledge. Thus, the S2 stands here for the unconscious knowledge. The illusion of transfer ó the positing of the analyst as subject-supposed-to-know ó is then a necessary illusion, since this knowledge, in order to become effective, in order to become the sustaining truth of the discourse, has to be externalized in the other, transferred to the analyst.

The other of this silent discourse is the subject in his very split, the subject of the signifier. This is why the hystericization of discourse is the necessary preliminary requirement for the opening of the psychoanalytical scene: the subject has to emerge first in his split, through his questioning the master's interpellation in the name of his symptom. However, different in this respect from the hysterical discourse, the discourse of the analyst doesn't produce knowledge. It actually starts from the presupposition of knowledge. What it produces, what it forces the subject to produce, is the master signifier. 'There is no master except the signifier': the goal of the analytic scene is the production of this master signifier ó what previously remained hidden as the truth of the university discourse or questioned in its impotence in the hysterical discourse is here produced, exposed as such. Notice how the upper side of the analyst discourse presents the terms of the formula of fantasy, but in reversed order: this is why the psychoanalytical treatment consists in the necessary traversing of fantasy. While fantasy is the imaginary scenario by means of which the subject attempts to fill in the lack of the Other, here this lack is exposed as such. What about the real which we became accustomed to witness its reappearance in the lower side of the formula?

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

The Lacanian real  $\phi$  as impossibility  $\phi$  that reappears here is, somehow, actually real  $\phi$  in the sense of genuine, appropriate: the impossible link between S2 and S1 is, after all, the proper space of the hypothesis called subject.

Here ends our visit to Lacan's conceptual cabinet. These are the theoretical elements and tools that will be put to use in the following chapter. By unpacking their political and philosophical presuppositions and consequences, and also by re-linking with the previous developments on the Hegelian and Marxian theories, we will attempt to articulate the rudiments of a possible Lacanian theory of bureaucracy.

## Chapter 4.

### A Lacanian Theory of the Bureaucratic Mechanism

This final chapter starts by addressing what must have been the first possible objection to our kind of approach: is there a way to read Lacan politically, aren't we in danger of illegitimately extrapolating a theory concerned merely with private and therapeutical aspects? The first part of the chapter formulates three kinds of answers to this objection, and also compares three different existing versions of such attempts to politicize Lacan. The second part of the chapter attempts to properly articulate the Lacanian theory of bureaucracy, first by re-reading the previous developments on Hegel and Marx through Lacanian lenses, then by summarizing their consequences in the Lacanian theory of discourses, while attempting to also reveal their possible relevance for our current period.

#### *4.1. Political Lacan*

Before proceeding to properly articulate the Lacanian theory of bureaucracy, we should deal with an objection that must have been haunting our efforts from the very beginning: is it even possible to build a social-political theory starting from Lacanian bases? If, on the one hand, it is true – as is commonly accepted – that Lacan was, among the famous post-Freudian psychoanalysts, the one with most concern for elaborating an articulated theory of this discipline, it is also true, on the other hand, that the psychoanalytical theory has a therapeutical function, not an epistemological one, and hence that it doesn't aim at establishing a general set of abstract principles, but to cure and treat particular subjects. In brief, it is a peculiar discipline, particularly resisting to generalities and generalizability: as a matter of fact, its one and only general truth is, perhaps, that the psychoanalytical truth cannot be generalized, that it is differently built and ciphered by each individual. This is what gives it its unique way of articulating theory and practice: thus, with psychoanalysis, we are not just dealing with a practical discipline, that is, with a discipline in which the theory is subsumed to its praxis; the relation is more intricate: as it was famously been put,

the psychoanalytical theory is the theory of why its praxis necessarily fails; or, differently put, if the psychoanalytical treatment would be generally possible, its theory would be no longer necessary. So how can one build, on such unstable bases, a general, social and political theory, one that could break the walls of the psychoanalytical cabinet and the privacy of the analyst-patient relation, in order to account for what is most socially common and public?

I will attempt to answer this objection in three waves. They all have the structure of the argument of precedents. The first such precedent that I will invoke is, of course, Lacan himself. Lacan already did it, so why can't we? The theory of the four discourses, for example, attempts to provide a psychoanalytical formalization of the most common and general social structures. With them, it is impossible to distinguish between the private and subjective space of the psychoanalytical domain and the space of publicity which defines the jurisdiction of the social and political theories. And this is the point of this argument: it is not meant to say that even Lacan himself sometimes broke the limits of his discipline in order to engage in articulating social and political theories, and that this passage must be legitimate, since it was made by the master himself. The point is, rather, that from the standpoint of the Lacanian theory, the very distinction between private and public, interiority and exteriority must be deeply questioned. These two seemingly opposite dimensions are actually to be situated on the two sides of the Möbius strip: we pass from one to the other while following a continuous path. As we already saw in the previous chapter, the subject is always already constituted in the field of the Other, which designates not just his imaginary other — which would point to a mere dual, mirror-like relation — but the transcendental structure of the public space. So, with Lacan's social and political suggestions, we are not dealing with some extensions of the psychoanalytical principles and ideas, to an application of these theorems to a broader, social context; the operation actually goes in the opposite direction: we are dealing with the discovery that social and political relations and structures are always already at work in the most profound subjective space. Thus, the public sphere is not to be built here from bits and pieces of distinct, private existences; the problem, with Lacan, is rather opposite: if the subject is always already caught in and constituted by the a priori social structures, how to explain its uniqueness? I will come back to this issue later. For now, let us point out that Lacan's psychoanalytical theory is not external to the social and political field, nor is it an application of a particular discipline dealing with the subjective intimacy and privacy, but rather that it articulates the transcendental, minimal



structures, situated on the very thin line of demarcation between subjective and public dimensions and which, by means of their functioning, can account for this very opposition.

The second answer is meant to reply to a variation of the objection formulated above. This one goes something like this: maybe there is something politically and socially relevant in psychoanalysis; but surely what can one make out of Lacan's psychoanalysis, with its famously opaque style and impermeable theory? This objection is and the common wisdom underlying it explains the treatment usually applied to Lacan's theory: it is either thrown in together with other theories in the structuralist or post-structuralist trends, and then interpreted by analogy with other authors from the same trend but easier to read; or clearly separated from these currents of thought, in which case, again, there is a double possible reaction: it is either discarded as plain non-sense (as Chomsky famously did), or embraced as the ultimate truth around which sect-like schools of thought begin to form. Against this objection and the reactions that it generates, we should state that, in Lacan's theory, he was not alone. He didn't build his theory *ex nihilo*, under a constant thread of divine inspiration. On the contrary, his developments are full of concepts and ideas borrowed from other disciplines, from the most diverse disciplines: sociology, logics, linguistics, mathematics, philosophy etc<sup>1</sup>. Now, while this fact is accepted by most of the hardcore Lacanians, they seem to assume that, once these concepts and ideas are transferred to the Lacanian domain, they are to stay there, locked and without possibility of exit. Lacan's theory thus resembles a theoretical black hole, in which foreign concepts can be dragged in and swallowed, but from which nothing can be extracted and applied back from where they came. It is no wonder then that some of the most orthodox Lacanians can combine the most sophisticated psychoanalytical theories with the most banal social and political considerations<sup>2</sup>. The only

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<sup>1</sup> Far from conceiving himself as an unquestionable master of thought, Lacan actually placed himself consistently in the position of the disciple of others. Witness not just his repeated injunction to 'return to Freud'. His passionate attachment to other thinkers is expressed even in some of his rather bizarre reactions: as in when, in 1968, after finding out that Kojève died in a meeting of the Common Market in Brussels, he rushed to Kojève's studio in Paris in order to look into his unpublished theoretical notes (cf. Dominique Auffret, *Alexandre Kojève. La philosophie, l'Etat, la fin de l'Histoire*, Grasset, Paris, 1990, p. 523); or, in 1975, after finding out that Heidegger is seriously ill, he rushed in his car from Paris to Freiburg in order to expose to the German philosopher his own theory of the Borromean knot (cf. Elisabeth Roudinesco, 'Vibrant hommage de Jacques Lacan à Martin Heidegger' in *Lacan avec les philosophes*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1991, p. 235).

<sup>2</sup> See Jacques-Alain Miller, *Lettre à Bernard Accoyer et à l'opinion éclairée*, Paris, Atelier de psychanalyse appliquée, 2003; and also Jacques-Alain Miller & Jean-Claude Milner, *Voulez-vous être évalué?*, Grasset, Paris, 2004.

way to counter such deadly combination of utmost expertise and common sense would be to close the circle, open the black whole and re-transfer the concepts and ideas that Lacan borrowed from other disciplines to their original field. The only way to test the accuracy of Lacan's developments on these concepts would be re-apply them back to their initial domain. And this is precisely what we are planning to do with his social and political suggestions.

Finally, a third answer to the same objection follows the same pattern of the argument of precedents and claims, simply, that other people have done it already, so why can't we? There have been, lately, several ó and pretty famous ó social and political theories developing from the Lacanian psychoanalysis. The fact that one can use Lacan's ideas concerning the signifier, the subject and so on, in political ways should be, by now, undisputable. However, there is another problem that appears here, caused precisely by this solution: if it's true, on the one hand, that there is a political theory that can be derived from Lacan's theory, then, on the other hand, how can one explain the major, irreducible differences that we encounter between these Lacan-inspired political theories? As a matter of fact, we see his ideas spreading all over the surface of the political spectrum: to consider only the most famous developments, we can register a conservative Right development (Pierre Legendre), a liberal center one (Yannis Stavrakakis, Ernesto Laclau), and a socialist left one (Slavoj Žižek). I will briefly elaborate on each of these developments, in order to expose the way in which, depending on the case, different elements from Lacan's theory are emphasized while others are marginalized, and also in order to make place, in such a densely populated variety of interpretations, for our interpretation.

Pierre Legendre is, by now, a widely respected shaman of the French culture. Now, this is a hard to get intellectual position, but once it is acquired, it brings with it a world of conveniences. What one has to do in order to become a shaman is to insist that he possesses a knowledge so deep that, for quite explainable reasons, it is unknown by everybody else; eventually, through incessant repetition, there is a chance that people might start to believe it. There is no doubt that Legendre made it. Legendre took from the Lacanian discursive apparatus the worst of it: the impermeable style, the resistance to arguments and reasoning, the use of sudden revelations that don't prove anything but pretend to explain everything. His aim is to apply Lacan's insights to the sphere of law, and thus construct a sort of Lacanian critical legal theory, guided by one main idea, which he actually borrows from Carl

Schmitt: namely, the idea that all political concepts conceal within them theological categories. Thus, his endeavours consist in unveiling the modern social structures, the expert, neutral, objective discourse of the university, in order to reveal in its fundamentals the hidden religious fantasies. Legendre's effort is, one could say, to re-mystify things: 'The ultimate reality, to which it is also associated the industrial organization, is not perceived by anybody. It has to do with the imaginary guaranty, with an asocial and divine truth, from which the whole system of signifiers that structures the human species proceeds'<sup>3</sup>. The link between the Lacanian unconscious and the discourse of law is the fact that, in both cases, we are dealing with a knowledge without consciousness. Thus, one cannot oppose a subjective space to an objective, social space: not only because the 'unconscious is already a jurist'<sup>4</sup>, but also because both these domains 'the subjective and the institutional' exhibit the structure of a 'text without subject'<sup>5</sup>. So far, so good. But then, the whole modern endeavor to establish the state of law represents an effort to absolutize this knowledge without subject; hence, Legendre is left with only one, radical, theory for what concerns the modern process of normalization: it is simply one 'totalitarian nightmare'<sup>6</sup>. And why is that? Because it pretends to an expert management of a religious fantasy: 'the public administration is the organization of salvation'<sup>7</sup>. Or, in a typical statement-explanation provided by Legendre: 'Dans la bureaucratie moderne, í , nous avons affaire encore à cette scène de l'invisible, à l'allégorie de la légalité, qui fait basculer le discours en cet espace d'une dogmatique où se lisent les croyances ayant à dire la Vérité, une imaginaire vérité, dont nous sommes à la fois les captifs et les reproducteurs méthodiques. En d'autres termes, du côté des Lois se tient la grande idole d'une science-fétiche, grace à laquelle vient répondre et dont répond l'auteur supposé du pouvoir. La question est de taille, puisqu'elle consiste finalement à traiter de la politique comme d'une religion'<sup>8</sup>. Faced with such a radical and deep critique of modernity,

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Legendre, *Jouir du pouvoir. Traité de la bureaucratie patriote*, Minuit, Paris, 1976, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Legendre, *L'empire de la vérité. Introduction aux espaces dogmatiques industriels*, Fayard, Paris, 2001 [first edition: 1983], p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Legendre, *Jouir du pouvoir. Traité de la bureaucratie patriote*, p. 133.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

we are left in doubt as to the possible ó if possible ó solution to this tragic destiny: if the modern public administration is nothing but the expert management of a religious fantasy, which is all the more totalitarian, the more it pretends to be objective and neutral, then the only remedy could be to go back to the religious social life and to the theocratic mode of social organization: they would be, at least, sincere. But the problem with Legendre is not just this deeply reactionary political vision. There is also a theoretical problem, which can be articulated strictly from a Lacanian point of view: by constantly emphasizing the hidden imaginary fantasy underlying the seemingly objective symbolic structures of modernity, Legendre misses the fact that, for Lacan, the fantasy, even though decisive and socially structuring, is not the final answer, nor the ultimate reality. On the contrary, it is engendered by the real lack in the symbolic, a lack which it tries to fill with an imaginary scenario. If it is engendered by the real lack in the symbolic, what matters most here is the function and efficiency of the primal cause (the lack and the symbolic), not the fascinating aspects of their effects ó the imaginary fantasy. Nevertheless, by constantly unveiling this hidden religious, medieval, and structuring fantasy underlying the modern social structures, Legendre assumes that this relation is a simple relation of appearance-essence, in which the former has no efficiency or function whatsoever. On the contrary, for Lacan, fantasy is secondary: it is meant to be, eventually, traversed. Staring at it in shock and awe as Legendre does not help very much.

With Laclau and Stavrakakis we encounter a different problem. As we have just seen, Legendre's Lacanian pathos leads him to structure the whole social, political and juridical field on the model of the opposition between symbolic and imaginary, which is, then, simplified into a good old appearance-essence relation. Laclau and Stavrakakis emphasize instead a different axis of the Lacanian triad, namely the one between the symbolic and the real. The guiding opposition that is established here is between politics as constituted and normalized field of social activity (but also economics, administration, etc.) and a dimension that escapes any attempt of structuring and normalization, which is baptized the political. Thus, 'the political seems to acquire a position parallel to that of the Lacanian real' All human productions [Society itself, culture, religion, science] can be understood in the light of that structural failure of the symbolic in relationship to the real<sup>9</sup>. This opposition between

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<sup>9</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 73.

politics and the political as opposition between the symbolic and the real can thus be understood as a tension between a constituted entity and a constitutive one, provided that the latter cannot appear but as an absent cause, one that is perceived only through its disturbing effects in the former, constituted reality. It is the haunting presence of the political, of the real, which guarantees, for both Stavrakakis and Laclau, the structural impossibility of society's closure and, hence, the endless play of different efforts to symbolize, efforts that revolve around this real lack. Hence, after all, the haunting dimension of the real in all politics, that is, in all efforts of stabilization through symbolization, is good news. It is good news in the sense that it provides the theoretical ultimate argument for the ontological superiority of liberal democracy. This argument also deals a deadly blow to all utopian and totalitarian attempts to structure society in a totalized and coherent whole: where all utopian and totalitarian attempts fail is in taking into account the real of the political, the real which resists any definite enclosure of the political space and engenders the endless play of alternative, modest attempts at political symbolizations. Thus, for both Laclau and Stavrakakis, the Lacanian psychoanalytical theory provides the best arguments in defense of the liberal democracy and the fight against totalitarianism. Lacan's real is just a synonym for the fact that, as Laclau constantly states, "society doesn't exist", that the efforts to hegemonize it are necessarily destined to be unstable and to fail eventually. In a typical move of this centrist reading of Lacan, in which we constantly pass from a descriptive, ontological argument to a normative one and back, for both Laclau and Stavrakakis radical democracy is not only the best choice in town, but it is actually, for structural, ontological reasons, the only one: "it might be *possible* to achieve an ethically and politically satisfactory institution of the social field beyond the fantasy of closure which has proved so problematic, if not catastrophic. In other words, *the best way* to organize the social might be one which recognizes the ultimate impossibility around which it is always structured"<sup>10</sup>. This is then the good news brought by Lacan's teaching: it is the good news of reasonable skepticism. Certainty, as Stavrakakis claims, "is a defining characteristics of psychosis". We, on the other hand, reasonable people, should know that "our societies are never harmonious ensembles". Experience shows that this fantasy can never be fully realized. Opening up our symbolic resources to uncertainty is the only prudent move we have left"<sup>11</sup>. Thanks to

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95 (my emphasis).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Laclau and Stavrakakis, Lacan takes his well deserved place in the pantheon of the great heroes of reasonable skepticism (among Socrates and Montaigne, as Stavrakakis ranges him), while our current liberal democracies are proved to be our proper human destiny. There are at least three problems with this centrist account of Lacan. The first is the obvious question: if the main political lesson of Lacan is that of reasonable skepticism and, consequently, that of the supreme modesty ó or modest supremacy ó of liberal democracy, why should one bother to take the pain of studying Lacan's extremely difficult prose, when other famous authors, who reached the very same reasonable conclusions, are available in much simpler form? Why should one take such a complicated detour through the work of Lacan, simply in order to justify what is already common wisdom and the very ideology of the liberal status quo? Secondly, and derived from the first: as we already noticed, there is the problem of the constant passage from descriptive to normative arguments happening in Laclau and Stavrakakis. To borrow Heidegger's famous ontological difference, one could say that the arguments of Laclau and Stavrakakis tend to go like this: first, a certain ontological and structural non-closure is established; then, at the ontic level, a particular political vision, a particular effort of symbolization, is thus privileged: the liberal-democratic argument, who claims to be based on and to correspond to this structural non-closure of the political field. The structural uncertainty at the ontological level becomes a certainty at the ontic level; the impossibility of fully hegemonizing and closing the political field grants, to one particular political actor, the arguments by means of which his position ó the one who pretends to start from this very skeptical awareness ó successfully hegemonizes and closes the political horizon. After all, isn't our current liberal post-utopian form of politics firmly based on this modest, skeptical argument, dominating while reasonably accepting its own limits and impossibility to interfere with the real of our human nature and needs, and to their adequate social expression ó globalized capitalism? Before celebrating this enlightened new form of skeptical domination, one should recall that, perhaps, even worse than the totalitarian domination, worse than the bureaucrat who thinks he is God, is the God who thinks he's just a bureaucrat. Finally, there is a third problem with Laclau and Stavrakakis's account, this one from a strictly Lacanian point of view: from the three elements of Lacan's Borromean knot, they, like Legendre, only focus on the relation between two of them: in this case, the real and the symbolic. The imaginary is, apparently, completely left out, even though, following their developments, it appears that what Laclau and Stavrakis designate as the symbolic, is actually Lacan's imaginary. This is why the whole manner in which they

conceive the relation between the symbolic and the real is extremely odd: there are no surprises here in this relation to surprises. The real lack in the symbolic is firmly established and domesticated by means of the simple awareness that it is there. Its ontological negativity can be exploited positively at the ontic level, symbolized positively, and thus completely tamed. Even its status of absent, constitutive cause is deeply problematic: from a Lacanian perspective, the real is far from being the ultimate ground. True, there is a real lack, hole in the symbolic, but there is, just as well, a symbolic hole in the real. The real is not outside, nor prior to the symbolic: it manifests itself only immanently, in the disturbances of the symbolic. Or, if we are to bring on the scene the whole Lacanian triad: as it is clear from the structure of the Borromean knot, each two elements are linked by means of the third: thus, in our case, the symbolic and the real are linked together by means of the imaginary. Hence, in trying to conceive the proper, accurate relation between the symbolic and the real, the only adequate symbolization of the real, meant to discard all other imaginary, utopian attempts to tame the real, Laclau and Stavrakakis have provided the ultimate imaginary fantasy, the most indestructible utopia: the utopia of post-utopia, the certainty of uncertainty.

The political difference between Žižek and Laclau is similar to the theoretical difference, already analyzed, between Lacan and Derrida. Even though Žižek started as a Laclauian (in the *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 1989), he took care to take his distance very early from this trend of discourse analysis (already in his second book, *For They Know Not What They Do*, 1991). Žižek's self-critique echoes, in this second book, the critique of Laclau and Stavrakakis that we just laid down: 'The *Sublime Object*', Žižek admits, 'contains a series of intertwined weaknesses'. It basically endorses a quasi-transcendental reading of Lacan, focused on the notion of the Real as the impossible thing-in-itself; in so doing, it opens the way to the celebration of failure: to the idea that every act ultimately misfires, and that the proper ethical stance is heroically to accept this failure<sup>12</sup>. So how did Žižek separate himself from this view? In a way, by shifting from post-structuralism to Lacan. Let us briefly recall: for Derrida, the concept of *différance* names the endless deferral of meaning, the structural impossibility of coincidence between signifier and signified, the necessary failure of the consciousness presence to itself. While this operation certainly holds also for Lacan, he

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<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, Verso, London & New York, 1991, pp. XI-XII.

nevertheless adds a crucial thing: this operation has also to be inscribed in one of the elements which, in the field of the signifying relation, incorporates this very impossibility of complete signification. It is the same thing with Laclau and Žižek: for Laclau, every political project is an attempt ó a necessarily failed attempt ó to symbolize the real, constitutive lack, the fatal non-enclosure of any social project. However, for Žižek, there is an element, at the ontic level, which incorporates this ontological impossibility of political and social utopian closure. This element which, at the social level, designates precisely the non-identity with itself of the social, or the fact that, as Laclau says, “society doesn’t exist” is, for Žižek, and depending on the case, the proletariat, or class-struggle. Before accusing Žižek of turning Marx’s concept of the proletariat into a Lacanian category, we should recall that Marx already did this: in his 1843 famous definition of the proletariat, this social entity has all the characteristics of a non-substantial being, a materialization of pure antagonism: “a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates” , which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of any statehood” , which, in a word, is the complete loss of man”<sup>13</sup>. In this definition of the proletariat, society’s non-identity with itself is materialized: the impossible relation between the symbolization of society and its real is, here, subjectivized. It is more or less the same with class-struggle, this one representing the proletariat conceived not as substance, but as subject. For Laclau and Stavrakakis, the relation between economics and the political is pretty clear: “the economic space itself as a discursive construction is always subject to the structural causality of the political; it is limited by the political qua encounter with the real”<sup>14</sup>. The economic domain is here conceived again on the model of the symbolic-real relation: the political is the real, the economic is one of the necessarily failed attempts to symbolize it in a harmonious way. For Žižek, this relation is a bit more complicated:

“There is no proper content of politics; all political struggles and decisions concern other specific spheres of social life (taxation, the regulation of sexual mores and

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, “Laclau with Lacan: Comments on the Relation Between Discourse Theory and Lacanian Psychoanalysis”, in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Jacques Lacan. Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, vol. 3, Routledge, London & New York, 2003, p. 323.



procreation, the health service, and so on and so forth) ó ÷politicsø is merely a formal mode of dealing with these topics, insofar as they emerge as topics of public struggle and decision. This is why ÷everything is (or, rather, can become) politicalø ó insofar as it becomes a stake in political struggle. The economy, on the other hand, is not just one of the spheres of the political struggle, but the ÷causeø of the mutual contamination-expression of struggles... The economic is thus here double inscribed in the precise sense which defines the Lacanian Real: it is simultaneously the hard core ÷expressedø in other struggles through the displacements and other forms of distortion, and the very structuring principle of these distortions... To put it paradoxically, one can reduce all political, juridical, cultural content to the ÷economic baseø deciphering it as its expression ó all *except* class struggle, which is the political in the economic itself<sup>15</sup>.

Here, there is no transcendental status of the political, and consequently no hierarchical relation between the political and the economic, as in Laclau. Both these domains revolve around a common deadlock, the real of class struggle, which is, on the one hand, the ÷political in the economic itselfø and, on the other hand, accounts for the spurious displacements and proliferation of political struggles. This is the core of Žižek's debates with Laclau and Stavrakakis. Laclau's starting point, concerning the society's structural non-closure and the absent-cause status of the political led him to a reappraisal of populism, conceived as the possible articulation of the multitude of political struggles, all revolving ó but addressing differently ó the same, ontological antagonism. Žižek's reply is that such a structuring entity already exists in the field of political struggles, namely class-struggle, hence, the anticapitalist should not be conceived as merely one among a plurality of local struggles, but as the structuring principle of Laclau's ÷chain of equivalencesø<sup>16</sup>. Things look similar in the Žižek-Stavrakakis debate: while Stavrakakis, inspired by his Lacanian readings, pleads for a politics of reasonable scepticism, in which the necessary failure of our endeavours is taken into account from the starting point and actually guarded, against all

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<sup>15</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Verso, London & New York, 2007, pp. 291,293.

<sup>16</sup> The texts of this debate are: Slavoj Žižek, 'Against the Populist Temptation', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 32, 2006, pp. 551-574; Ernesto Laclau, 'Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 32, 2006, pp. 646-680; Slavoj Žižek, 'Schlagend, aber nicht Treffend! Rejoinder to Ernesto Laclau', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 33, 2006, pp. 185-211.

utopian temptation, by the liberal democratic framing, Žizek, guided also by his own Lacanian interpretation, pleads nevertheless for the possibility of the ultimate political act. However, this act is not meant to or arrived at by suspending the impossible real, but by fully endorsing it, by subjetivizing this impossibility ó which is another name for the class-struggle of the proletariat<sup>17</sup>.

Now, in what follows, I will not join hands with any of these three alternative ways of constructing a Lacanian political theory. This is so at least for two reasons: firstly, our present attempt here ó to articulate a Lacanian theory of bureaucracy ó is much more modest than these attempts to define the defining relations between the different dimension of social life: the political, politics, economics, society; it only wants to reveal the nature and implications of one particular social institution ó the bureaucracy. Secondly, our approach is different because it borrows from Lacan a different conceptual tool, not the dialectics between the real, symbolic and imaginary defined by the Borromean knot, but, mainly, the theory of the four discourses. However, for another set of reasons, there is a certain commonality between this present approach and the left Lacanian one pursued by Žizek. Even though we are focusing on just one social institution and structure, namely bureaucracy, this modest endeavour, as it usually happens, bears with it explicit or implicit presumption regarding its urgent and general relevance: hence, in our case, focusing on bureaucracy bears with it the assumption ó which, at least now, becomes explicit ó that by doing this, one can learn something about the defining characteristics of our contemporary social structures. Thus, the modesty of our explicit intentions is betrayed by the arrogance of its assumptions: bureaucracy stands here for the symptom, the suspended and concentrated dialectics of today's dominating social structures. And since the theory of bureaucracy will be articulated here on the basis of the discourse of the university, the whole development will revolve, not because of fidelity to Žizek, but because of fidelity to Lacan, around the capitalist nature of our present day social realities. By granting this name to the defining social structures ó capitalism, not the hidden religious fantasy, as with Legendre, nor the nameless social antagonism, as with Laclau ó our approach thus joins hands, willingly or unwillingly, it doesn't matter, since it does it objectively ó with the Lacanian left.

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<sup>17</sup> The texts of this debate on the nature of the Lacanian act are: Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007; Slavoj Žizek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, pp. 304-333.

#### 4. 2. *Constructing a Lacanian Theory of Bureaucracy*

By now, we must have managed to counter the objection regarding the impossible construction of a Lacanian political theory. However, a different objection could immediately pop up: perhaps Lacan has something interesting to say about politics; but surely this doesn't imply that his ideas must be relevant for a theory of bureaucracy. As a matter of fact, throughout all of Lacan's writings and seminars, there are only three occurrences of the word bureaucracy. Not quite a solid basis for a possible theory of bureaucracy. Even worse, two of these precious and rare occurrences simply mention bureaucracy in its usual popular perception, with its pejorative meaning that the French word *bureaucratie* is so heavily impregnated with. Luckily for us, the third occurrence explicitly links the bureaucratic phenomenon to the discourse of the university. This is the fragile basis on which our Lacanian theory of bureaucracy will be articulated.

But since we are navigating here in uncharted waters, let us at least try to take things one by one. So far, we exposed two different narratives concerning bureaucracy: the Hegelian and the Marxian. Plus, a set of conceptual tools, the Lacanian categories, which, at first sight, do not seem to have anything to do with these two narratives. Why all this? Our thesis is that Lacan's concepts  $\phi$  and especially his discourse of the university  $\phi$  provide the actual encounter between Hegel's and Marx's theories of bureaucracy. In Hegel, the bureaucracy is analyzed in terms of an objective, universal knowledge which can guarantee, by its mediating role between the civil society and the state, the proper social balance. In Marx and in our critical Marxist interpretation, bureaucracy should be accounted in terms of the effort to normalize and reproduce the smooth extraction of plus-value. On one hand, we have a narrative of universal knowledge and balance. On the other hand, we have an account of abstract domination and accumulation of plus-value. Lacan's discourse of the university provides not just the missing link between these two opposite narratives: it actually puts them together, face to face, in a completed structure. We are even tempted to force things and claim that the two sides of the Lacanian formula for the discourse of the university, its left one ( $S_2/S_1$ ) and right one ( $a/\$$ ) are, actually, the Hegelian narrative of bureaucracy, respectively the Marxian one. Let's try to elaborate more on this parallel.

#### 4.2.1. *Hegel with Lacan*

Let us (re)start with Hegel's theory of the state and reread it through a Lacanian filter. According to the general opinion, Hegel's version of the state is the ultimate, most accomplished plea in favor of the classical absolutist state. This, so the doxa goes, is an attempt to reconcile the modern reforms and advances in the theory of the state with a classical structuring which still provides the defining characteristics, the whole compromise resulting in an outlay in which these modest attempts to modernize the state are all subsumed under the absolute figure and will of the monarch. Lacan's reading of Hegel goes against all this established interpretation. For Lacan, Hegel is the sublime representative of the discourse of knowledge and of the university knowledge<sup>18</sup>. Why is that? The reason for which Hegel occupies this unique position of being the most sublime representative of the university discourse has to do, perhaps, with the fact that in his political but also philosophical theory, we are witnessing the very passage from the master's discourse to the university one, and the final victory and establishment of the latter. So perhaps the common wisdom should be read backwards: Hegel is not an attempt to pay lip service to the reformers and to the necessities of modernization by subsuming them to a classical absolutist model of the state, but, on the contrary, as an attempt to save face for the classical model of monarchic sovereignty in a massive theoretical landslide towards a balanced, rational, modern structure of the state, that is, one which can be defined, in Lacanian terms, as belonging to the university discourse.

How do these opposing trends meet in the figure of Hegel's monarch? On the one hand, the monarch is, for Hegel, the moment of pure immediacy and subjectivity that encloses the sophisticated network of mediations which provides the structure of the Hegelian state. As such, the monarch is above all argument and deliberation, even beyond culture, since his appointment is made directly by nature, through immediate inheritance. This absolutist characteristics of the monarch are made even more painful for a modernist ear once Hegel claims that it is in them, in their random and immediate aspect, that the state acquires its subjective truth. On the other hand, however, there are a number of traits which should

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<sup>18</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse (1969-1970)*, Seuil, Paris, 1991, p. 200.

radically alter this common sense perception, according to which we are dealing here with an ode to the model of absolutist monarchy. And these traits cannot be properly understood without the Lacanian theory of the master signifier. Before explaining this presumptuous claim, let us remember an aspect of Lacan's definition of the discourse of the master: in illustrating the master position in this first model of discourse, Lacan uses the ladder provided by Kojève only to abandon it once the final formula of the discourse is reached. The whole story about the struggle for recognition, on which Kojève's reading of the *Phenomenology of Mind* is based, is, according to Lacan, a mythical construction. What makes a master what he is, is not the fact that he was braver than the slave and was ready to risk his life for pure prestige; it is, according to Lacan, the fact that he makes a sign: *«Il fait un signe, le signifiant-maître, tout le monde cavale»*<sup>19</sup>. This is why we are tempted to say that, perhaps, Lacan is abandoning the Kojévian argument as basis for the formula of the discourse of the master only in order to replace it with another Hegelian figure: this time, the figure of the monarch from the *Philosophy of Right*. Because, what does this monarch do? Firstly, one can easily see that the monarch's activity is purely one of signifying: *«In a completely organised state, it is only a question of the culminating point of formal decision; he has only to say 'yes' and dot the 'i's»*<sup>20</sup>. What he has to do is to accompany the decisions made by his counsellors and by the executive with a formal signifier, or, rather, an empty signifier. Secondly, what is the point of this empty, and yet signifying activity? According to Hegel, the monarch is bound by the concrete decisions of his counsellors, and if the constitution is stable, he has often no more to do than sign his name. But this name is important... when a decision is to be made, an 'I will' must be pronounced by man himself. This 'I will' Constitutes the great difference between the ancient world and the modern<sup>21</sup>. Surely, Hegel does not mean by this that while the ancient world was ruled by the anonymous cohorts of officials, it is only the modern state that places them under the rule of the singular monarch. The difference between the ancient and the modern world must lay somewhere else: it has to do with the nature of this empty -I will-. Basically, the operation of the modern monarch is exactly the Lacanian operation of suture: that of inscribing the

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>20</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, addition to § 280, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/prstate1.htm#PR280>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, addition to § 279.

subject, by means of a non-signifying signifier, in the signifying chain. The monarch's duty is to inscribe his empty subjectivity, the pure 'I will', by means of a formal gesture, in the structure of expert decisions, that is, in the network of the signifiers of knowledge. Lacan's observation, according to which what the master does is to play on the words, by shifting 'master' into 'master' and which, at first sight, appeared to be a useless artifice around a simple wordplay is actually verified also: 'the objective aspect belongs to law alone, and the monarch's part is merely to set to the law the subjective 'I will''<sup>22</sup>. What the monarch does is to enclose the structure of expert decisions, of the signifiers of knowledge (S2), by subjectivizing them, by suturing his person to this objective network of decisions.

If this is how things stand, there are at least two crucial consequences we can infer from this: far from designating an ancient, pre-modern structure, Lacan's discourse of the master designates a moment of modernity: the instituting, and yet vanishing gesture of the modern master. Secondly, and derived from this one, there is the constitutive unstable character of this form of discourse: although it is the first, instituting form of discourse, the master's discourse is only a vanishing figure, which, in order to endure, necessarily has to pass in the discourse of the university<sup>23</sup>. Why is that? Why does the master's discourse, in order to endure, have to pass under the veil of the university discourse? The answer to this question, and the necessity of a Lacanian passage through Marx will be provided in a second. For now, let us see that already in Hegel's theory, we are dealing with a structure that resembles the left side of the formula of the university discourse: S2/S1. It is the objective, neutral knowledge of the officials that has the upper hand here. The proper balance and rationality of the state is acquired by the universal class of the civil servants: they are the link between the 'universal egoism' of the civil society and the 'universal altruism' of the state. The class of the civil servants, as the core of the architectonic of the state, is, arguably, an institutional device of 'sense certainty' in a similar way in which, in the opening chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, the universal word suppresses and yet conserves (*Aufhebung*, of course) the particularity of this thing, the duty of the class of civil servants is to translate (that is, suspend and conserve) the particular interests of the civil society into the universal interests of the state, and to materialize the universal interests of the state as their own,

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, addition to § 280.

<sup>23</sup> Echoes of Weber's argument regarding the 'routinization of charisma' are obviously present here.

particular interests. The civil servants are, thus, Hegel's *dialectique à l'arrêt*, that is, the very moving principle of dialectics materialized here and suspended in one of his mediated figures. Apart from this defining characteristic of suspending the particular in the universal, the thing into its signifier, the class of civil servants is the class of knowledge: perhaps, one could risk the interpretation, not only in the sense that they are named only on the basis of their objective knowledge, but also in the sense that they represent, at the social, political and institutional level, the function of objective knowledge, or rather the basic operation of knowledge. But this is the point in which the necessity, and also the impossibility, of Hegel's attempt to subsume this class of universal knowledge to the figure of the subjective will of the monarch is revealed – obviously from a Lacanian point of view. According to Lacan, the problem with Hegel's dialectic is not that the universal and the particular cannot be successfully reconciled, without injustice (this is, basically, Adorno's position and his argument for a negative dialectic). Lacan's point is rather different: "It is in the existence, in which Hegel's genius can be measured, of the natural identity of the particular and universal, that psychoanalysis brings his own paradigm, by showing that this identity is realized only as disjointed from the subject"<sup>24</sup>. In brief, the problem is not that the universal and the particular cannot be reconciled; the problem is that their reconciliation does not happen in consciousness, for a subject, but disjointed from him. The political translation of this thesis provides, as it were, the metaphysical basis for the constant lamenting over the autonomy and unaccountability of bureaucracy: the monarch's effort to subjectivize the objective network of universal knowledge is ultimately doomed to fail. The reconciliation of the universal and the particular happens in itself – in the sphere of the civil service – but not for any subject. It is, thus, its success which explains its necessary failure: the reconciliation of the universal and of the particular takes the form of an external objectivity, becomes a blind autonomous mechanism, whose very objective rationality grants its unreasonable, insistent drive. In the sphere of the civil service, the grandiose architectonic of the state is, as in a nutshell, accomplished; the only problem is that there is no subject, no consciousness to

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<sup>24</sup> Lacan, quoted by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le titre de la lettre. (Une lecture de Lacan)*, Galilée, Paris, 1973, p. 125. And further their relevant commentary: "This formula marks clearly the double relation to Hegel that is engaged here. It is meant to present the exemplary accomplishment, in the 'subject' of psychoanalysis, of the Hegelian dialectic of consciousness. At the same time, what this formula states at its end – the disjunction of the subject – is meant to break this dialectic, or rather to suspend its course before its accomplishment".

witness it. The objective rationality of the state cannot be contained by any subjective, ultimate will, even if it were a monarchic one.

This is one of the Lacanian reasons for which the master's discourse necessarily passes, by its simple repetition and effort to endure, into the university discourse, and the S1/S2 magical moment necessarily reverts into the nameless officialdom of S2/S1. There is another reason for this, and luckily it forces us to take a Marxian detour. There is, according to Lacan, one particular enigma concerning the discourse of the master: "These remarks are meant to make you wonder, and at least to make you raise this question regarding the discourse of the master: how did this discourse manage to maintain its domination, which is proved by the fact that, whether exploited or not, the workers do work... This is a success of what I call the discourse of the master. But in order for this to happen, it had to overcome certain limits... I'm talking about this capital mutation, which gives to the discourse of the master its capitalist style"<sup>25</sup>. Thus, the necessity of the passage from the master's discourse to the university (that is, capitalist discourse) is engendered by the necessary organization and reproduction of labour. But this is a problem not quite absent from Hegel's theory of the state: it is rather present there *as* absent. We can see its consequences, but not its premises. We already pointed, in the first chapter, to the fact that Hegel doesn't deal at all with the working class, even though he takes care to deal with all the other social classes, and in spite of the fact that the laws of the capitalist accumulation and reproduction are not absent from his horizon. It is rather as if Hegel would approach this problem directly from its ultimate consequences: there is no account of the working class, but there is an account of the dramatic consequences of necessary pauperization of the working class brought by the capitalist system of accumulation:

"When civil society is in a state of unimpeded activity, it is engaged in expanding internally in population and industry. The amassing of wealth is intensified by generalising (a) the linkage of men by their needs, and (b) the methods of preparing and distributing the means to satisfy these needs, because it is from this double process of generalisation that the largest profits are derived. That is one side of the picture. The other side is the subdivision and restriction of particular jobs. This results

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<sup>25</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse*, p. 203.



in the dependence and distress of the class tied to work of that sort, and these again entail inability to feel and enjoy the broader freedoms and especially the intellectual benefits of civil society<sup>26</sup>.

But it is not only that the very development of civil society entails the appearance of an excluded class of workers deprived of work and of any means to sustain themselves. Moreover, the very efforts by means of which civil society could attempt to alleviate their poverty are the means that led to this situation, and thus would only increase it:

“When the masses begin to decline into poverty, (a) the burden of maintaining them at their ordinary standard of living might be directly laid on the wealthier classes, or they might receive the means of livelihood directly from other public sources of wealth (e.g. from the endowments of rich hospitals, monasteries, and other foundations). In either case, however, the needy would receive subsistence directly, not by means of their work, and this would violate the principle of civil society and the feeling of individual independence and self-respect in its individual members. (b) As an alternative, they might be given subsistence indirectly through being given work, i.e. the opportunity to work. In this event the volume of production would be increased, but the evil consists precisely in an excess of production and in the lack of a proportionate number of consumers who are themselves also producers, and thus it is simply intensified by both of the methods (a) and (b) by which it is sought to alleviate it. It hence becomes apparent that despite an excess of wealth civil society is not rich enough, i.e. its own resources are insufficient to check excessive poverty and the creation of a penurious rabble<sup>27</sup>.”

Thus, the general pauperization of the working class is not an accident on the path towards the rational state, but its necessary result. And the more civil society amasses wealth, the more poverty it creates. And the more it tries to repair this injustice, the more it actually deepens it. Hegel was at least honest in revealing this consequence, and in admitting that there actually are no solutions to it (clearly the solution represented by exporting this surplus

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<sup>26</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, § 243.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, § 245.

labor force by means of colonization is at odds with the general design of the Hegelian rational state). It is as if Hegel is anticipating Marx here: that famous "class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, that estate which is the dissolution of all estates" seems to be already present here, in this natural and necessary Hegelian development of the modern state. Perhaps the difference between Marx's famous definition of 1843 and Hegel's diagnostic is merely a difference of name, or rather, of naming: in Hegel, we are dealing with an objective development; we encounter this propertyless class only as excluded, generated as excluded from the natural development of society. What Marx does is to bring the "in itself" to "for itself": he subjectivizes this class, names it, and thus forces it to consciously occupy its position.

The objective rationality of Hegel's state, the happy reconciliation of the universal with the particular brought about by the class of the civil servants is, thus, menaced from two opposing sides. On its superior level, Hegel claims victory, and argues that the objective rationality of the state can be successfully subjectivized by the will of the monarch. On its inferior level, Hegel admits defeat, and accepts that the rational development of the state is bound to engender a classless class of socially excluded workers. Perhaps one should be here more Hegelian than Hegel and read this latter aspect as the truth of the former, the failure of closing rationally the civil society into a balanced structure as the truth of the supposedly successful integration of this rational architectonic into the subjective will of the monarch. It is as if, in a similar and opposed way in which the, by now, dominating structure of objective knowledge (S2) reduces the monarch to the pure, empty signifier (S1), on its lower side, it reduces a growing number of its subjects to the status of pure, meaningless being: the history of the worker is that he survives. The domination of the sphere of objective knowledge, the placing of S2 in the position of the agent thus engenders, for the social subject, a forced split, a dilemma which seems to bear all the characteristics of Lacan's cogito: I am where I do not think, I think where I am not. Either pure meaning, without being (the sovereign reduced to the master signifier), or pure being, without social meaning (the working class). How does this scheme nevertheless work, or, rather, how does it manage to reproduce itself, and, in spite of its internal contradictions, manage to integrate the laborless workers and the plus-value they engender? In order to understand this, we will have to revisit Marx accompanied by Lacan.

#### 4.2.2. Marx with Lacan

There are several issues that we left, as it were, suspended, in our chapter on Marx. Above all, there is the rather surprising hypothesis which claims that bureaucracy, and a certain theory of bureaucracy, are to be properly inscribed in an articulated Marxian theory, in the same way in which an astronomer deduces the existence of a planet not from observing it directly through his lenses but by deducing its necessary existence from its perceived effects. In a similar way, we attempted to reveal the necessity of a theory of bureaucracy in Marx, that could fill in the invisible link between the historical and logical aspects of the labor theory of value, and act as the social agency in charge with the naturalization of the capitalist logic of accumulation of plus-value. But since this is a rather complicated issue, let us try to approach things one by one.

Let us start with the similarity, which we already mentioned twice only to postpone its elaboration, between Marx's deduction of the money form and Lacan's theory of the signifier. The passage from simple barter to the properly developed money exchange takes, in the *Capital*, the form of a logical deduction – that is, one that seems to follow only its internal necessities, not external, historical contingencies. In this gradual process, that commodity which serves as the equivalent form passes through, as it were, a process of purification: in the end, the money form becomes universal, replacing the general commodity and, later, the precious metals, not because of its intrinsic qualities, but because it doesn't have any. Its purity provides also its indestructibility: it can be divided *ad infinitum*, it still remains money<sup>28</sup>. All these characteristics are also present in Lacan's notion of the signifier: the signifier is all the more supreme, the more it doesn't signify anything; and it is this aspect which grants it its particular materiality – that is, its indestructibility: since it has no positive identity, being mere differentiality, it is indestructible because there is nothing positive to destruct there. Now, the thesis regarding the similarity between money and language is hardly new<sup>29</sup>. Jean-Joseph Goux, for example, went so far as to suggest a

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<sup>28</sup> This is the logical side of Marx's argument; there is also a historical side to his account, in which this gradual process is explained by the fact that commerce and exchange, which previously were confined to the margins of societies, and took place only in the encounter between different peoples, states or cities, became gradually internalized in the core of the societies.

<sup>29</sup> For patriotic reasons, I feel the urge to mention that one of the first formulations of this thesis occurred in 1648 in the preface to the Romanian translation of *New Testament*, and was made by the archbishop Simion Stefan.

deep compatibility between the two domains: as a matter of fact, Lacan's theory of the signifier cannot be traced back to either semiotical, logical, linguistical or metaphysical theories, but only to the problem of the economic logic of exchange. It is thus no coincidence that the sole pre-Lacanian occurrence of the distinction between the three levels (symbolic, imaginary and real) is to be found in Marx's discussion of money, as symbolic, imaginary and real<sup>30</sup>. However, in order for this similarity to be fully sustainable, and Marx's theory of the money exchange to fully fit Lacan's theory of the signifier – there is no master but the signifier – it is our contention that we should, first of all, follow Marx's developments one step further, from money as the general form of exchange to proper capital, because this is the phase in which the actual autonomization of the exchange form takes place.

The first distinction between money as money and money as capital is nothing more than a difference in their form of circulation<sup>31</sup>. Money, as intermediary in the operation of simple exchange, was used as a means, as exchange value materialized, in a process which was ultimately subsumed to the requirements and demands of use value: a commodity was sold for its exchange value and another commodity was bought for its use value. What happens in the passage from money to capital is that this process of simple exchange is properly closed on itself, and the means becomes the goal itself: now the final stage of the process does no more lie outside the process – in the buyer's consumption of the commodity acquired; but constitutes, on the contrary, the starting point of the next process of exchange: the simple circulation of commodities is a means to a final goal which lies outside circulation, namely the appropriation of use-values, the satisfaction of needs. As against this, the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself. The movement of capital is therefore limitless<sup>32</sup>. Briefly put, capital is money *for itself*. In the form of capital, money as value incorporated takes the appearance of being the actual subject of the process. This is the necessary illusion engendered by the passage of money into capital: value is here the subject of a process in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it changes its own magnitude, throws off surplus-value from itself considered as original value, and thus

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Jean-Joseph Goux, "A propos des trois ronds", in *Lacan avec les philosophes*, pp. 173-178.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx, *The Capital*, vol. 1, Penguin Books, London & New York, 1976, p. 247.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

valorizes itself independently. By virtue of being value, it has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself... Value therefore now becomes value in process, money in process, and, as such, capital<sup>33</sup>. Again, one could ask what is the statute of this Marxian development, whether it is a logical deduction or a historical narrative. The answer to this query is that it is, somehow, both: as such, it is a dialectical account, in which the logical and historical dimensions are deeply intricate. What we get is the way in which a certain historical constellation spurs a necessary logic whose goal is not only its own smooth reproduction, but also the effacement of all traces of its violent, contingent birth. That is why, once this logic is instituted, once money becomes capital and, thus, is inscribed into its own endless circulation in itself and for itself, this process seems to have no beginning and no end, as a necessary transcendental logic that encompasses all history: as Marx ironically put it, from the perspective engendered by this capitalist logic, it is as if *there used to be history, but now there is no more*. This is why, from the standpoint of this everlasting identical present, what is more problematic is not to understand its internal logic, but to explain the fact that there used to be something different prior to it: this is a difficulty which affects even Marxism, as witnessed by the highly ambiguous and unclear developments on the famous *Asian mode of production*.

But this is, for what concerns us, rather secondary. What matters is that, through this developments on the transformation of money into capital and the autonomization of value, we have laid down the preliminary bases for what concerns the Marxian-Lacanian theory of bureaucracy. Now we can slowly approach this issue by asking: what is the epochal event, that major historical emergence of a new transcendental logic, which lays the foundations for this new logic in the same time as its traces are being erased by it? This historical event with meta-historical implications is what, in Lacanian terms, can be accounted as the passage from the discourse of the master to the discourse of the university. The fundamental stumbling block of the discourse of the master was, as we already saw, the impossibility to incorporate its product into the frames of the discourse: the *plus-de-jour* in which we always have to read echoes of the Marxian plus-value, is radically separated from the master, even though it is the social structure engendered by his discourse the one which produces it. But this crucial deadlock is entirely solved once in the discourse of the university:

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 255-256.

“The barrier which we can immediately name at the level of the discourse of the master is the *jouissance*, in as much as it is simply forbidden, forbidden in its essence.” We can try whatever we can, we can say whatever we want, we can attempt to link this production with certain needs, there is nothing to be done. Between the existence of a master and the relation of a production with a truth, there is no link to be saved.” Something changed in the discourse of the master starting from a certain point in history.” From a certain point, *le plus-de-jouir* is counted, accounted, totalized. There, the accumulation of capital begins. Can you see that, in relation to what I previously named the impotence to establish a link between *le plus-de-jouir* and the master, we are gaining something here? The impotence of this junction has been evacuated. The plus-value can be added to capital “there is no problem there, they are homogeneous, we are all surfing in the realm of values now.”<sup>34</sup>

Now, to get back to the Marxian standpoint, the moment in which we are all surfing in the realm of values is the moment in which the relations of simple exchange and money have properly evolved into the process of reproduction and accumulation of capital. At this stage, value constitutes the starting and ending point of the process, and the very moving force of the process. Value is the substance and subject of the process, which is why its reproduction and accumulation is not only natural, but seems even unavoidable, automatic. But what are the actual social implications that this new historical configuration “call it ‘general formula of capital’ or ‘discourse of the university’” entails?

Before answering this question, let us recall some of the relevant points acquired in our previous Marxian digression. First of all, there is the critical Marxist idea according to which capitalism is not to be accounted as a domination of one class over another, but as the social configuration which derives from the development, autonomization and domination of certain abstract social structures, namely those derived from the law of value. From this perspective, Lacan’s discourse of the university provides precisely such an attempt to formalize this abstract social structure defining the capitalist logic. The capitalist logic

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVII: L’envers de la psychanalyse*, pp. 124, 203.

revolves around the fair extraction and accumulation of plus-value. This extraction and accumulation is fair because, as we already saw, it is not acquired in spite or in contradiction with the fair principles of exchange and property, but rather thanks to them. It is the very logic of equivalent exchange and sacred property which generates, paradoxically, an excess and a dispossession of the infamous plus-value. The locus of this paradox, of this short-circuit between a logic of fairness and a constellation of historical injustice is, we claimed, the proper, original locus of the bureaucracy. How did we get such a bizarre idea?

The primordial, defining operation of bureaucracy is the social inscription of the subject. The subject is assigned a signifier which represents him for another signifier: a signature represents the subject for a stamp, or a proper name represents the subject for a serial number. The subject's social registration is thus always inscribed between two signifiers: on the one hand, a singular one, a signifier without signification, which weighs all the more heavily because of its material insignificance (the name, the signature), and, on the other hand, the general signifier of social knowledge (the stamp, or, primordially, the subject's serial number). What does all this have to do with Marx's labor theory of value? Everything. Marx's labor theory of value, as the smooth generation of an excess from which the subject is dispossessed, all following fair principles of equivalent exchange and sacred property, can actually be formalized as a Lacanian operation of a signifier representing the subject for another signifier, and, more crucially, as this operation engendering a surplus, an excess.

In order to explain this parallel, let us follow a bit more closely the conditions and circumstances of the generation of plus-value. As Marx paradoxically put it, the generation and extraction of plus-value "both takes place and does not take place in the sphere of circulation"<sup>35</sup>. It does take place in circulation, because we are dealing here with nothing but a fair exchange of equivalents: the capitalist pays the worker the fair share of his labour-power. It does not take place in circulation, because, once this exchange is made, the capitalist can consume the commodity he acquired – that is, labor-power – by putting it to work. It is, again, his right to privately consume what he bought in the process of exchange: "by the purchase of labor-power, the capitalist incorporates labor, as a living agent of fermentation, into the lifeless constituents of the product, which also belong to him. From his

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<sup>35</sup> Karl Marx, *The Capital*, vol. 1, p. 302.

point of view, the labor process is nothing more than the consumption of the commodity purchased, i.e. of labor-power; but he can consume this labor-power only by adding the means of production to it. The labor process is a process between things the capitalist has purchased, things which belong to him<sup>36</sup>. The only difference from the normal process of exchange and consumption that occurs here has to do, then, with the peculiar nature of this commodity which is bought and sold: namely, labor-power. It has at least two unique characteristics: firstly, that it is inseparable from its owner, the worker; and secondly, that it has the singular capacity to produce, in its consumption, more value than its exchange value, that is, more value than it is required to reproduce it. And this difference between this commodity's use value and exchange value is precisely plus-value: the value of labor-power and the value which that labor-power valorizes in the labor process are two entirely different magnitudes; and this difference was what the capitalist had in mind when he was purchasing the labor-power<sup>37</sup>. So, in order for this fair exchange to take place and the surplus-value to be produced, there are at least two historical conditions to be met: firstly, the logic of exchange has to become absolute, the market has to be generalized and become an end in itself – in brief, money has to have become capital; secondly, a certain social class has to find itself in such conditions that, in order for it to participate in the general social exchange, it has to alienate the only property it has: its own labor-power. It is the fact that he takes into account these conditions and their consequences which allowed Marx to derive the crucial concept of plus-value. As Lacan himself noticed, this concept cannot be derived from a mere historical event, but only from a developed abstract social structure. There used to be labor before, and there used to be alienated labor also. But in order for the plus-value to be generated, counted and added, the developed structure of the capitalist discourse had to be instituted:

Marx starts from the function of the market. His novelty is the place at which he situates labor. It is not the fact that labor is new which allows for his discovery, it is the fact that it is being bought; it is the fact that there is a labor market. This is what allows him to demonstrate what, in his discourse, is inaugural and which is called plus-value. It is not the fact that labor is incorporated into the production of

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.



commodities which is new; nor is the renunciation of *jouissance* which is new, since, contrary to what Hegel says, or what he seems to say, it is this renunciation which constitutes the master and provides the principle of his power. What is new is the fact that there is a discourse which articulates it, this renunciation, and which manifests there what I would call the function of *plus de jouir*. This function appears by means of the discourse because what it proves is, in the renunciation to the *jouissance*, an effect of the discourse itself<sup>38</sup>.

And, a little bit further, Lacan comes back to this idea:

“We can consider this absolutization of the market as the condition for the appearance of plus-value in the discourse. Something, which can hardly be separated from the development of certain effects of language, namely the absolutization of the market to such a degree that it incorporates labor itself, had to occur in order for plus-value to be defined by this fact, that by paying with money the labor, his correct price, as it is determined in the market of the exchange value, there is un-paid value in what appears as the fruit of the labor, in its use value. This unpaid labor although paid fairly from the standpoint of the market’s consistency, this, in the functioning of the capitalist subject, this unpaid labor is plus-value. It is the fruit of the means of articulation which constitute the capitalist discourse of the capitalist logic<sup>39</sup>.”

So far so good: the generation, extraction and accumulation of plus-value cannot be accomplished unless the logic of the market, and the consequent abstract domination of the law of value, is instituted in all its aspects. But what does this have to do with the Lacanian definition of the signifier *ó* as that which represents a subject for another signifier *ó* and, furthermore, with a possible Lacanian theory of bureaucracy? It has to do quite a lot. As a matter of fact, the subject of the law of value, the worker as he is thrown on the labor-market, forced to sell his labor-power for the fair price represented by its exchange value and being, thus, fairly disposed of its use value, this subject is actually placed in a purely

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVI: D’un autre à l’Autre*, Seuil, Paris, 2006, pp. 11-12.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Lacanian relation of being represented by a signifier for another signifier. This parallel is actually elegantly traced by Lacan himself:

“A subject is what is represented by a signifier for another signifier; but isn’t this relation something built on the fact that, as exchange value, the subject involved, in what Marx deciphers, in the economic reality, the subject of the exchange value is represented for what? For his use value. And it is in this rupture that something called plus-value falls off.”<sup>40</sup>

Thus, we can translate all the elements of Marx’s labor theory of value in the terms of Lacan’s theory of the signifier: the subject *ó* in this case, the worker *ó* alienates a part of himself as labor-power, which is represented by its exchange value for another signifier, its use value. And from this relation, as it necessarily happens in Lacan’s definition of the signifier, an excess is produced, a remainder falls off: the object *a*, or, in this case, plus-value. The similarity holds even for the fact that also in this case, in the worker’s labor power inscription between two signifiers, we have a singular signifier, as such meaningless, and external to the general network of signifiers *ó* the labor’s use value, its consumption by the capitalist, which does not count from an economic point of view since it lies outside the sphere of exchange and circulation *ó*, and a general signifier, the signifier of social knowledge, in this case the labor’s exchange value, which establishes its equivalent value by measuring the correct (that is, socially general) magnitude of the values it needs for its reproduction. Thus, Marx’s labor theory of value and Lacan’s theory of the signifier present the same structure, which is very good news for us, since it was on their presumed proximity that we built the hypothesis of a Lacano-Marxian theory of bureaucracy. But surely, in order to arrive at this theory, the simple relation of alienation of the subject in a relation of representation between two signifiers, a singular and a general one, is not enough. There is another crucial aspect of bureaucracy which should be satisfied. Apart from its primordial function of assigning the social inscription of the subject, bureaucracy designates, as we already saw above when discussing Hegel’s theory of the civil service, the gradual autonomization and becoming absolute of the social objective and universal knowledge. After all, this is the defining characteristic of the university discourse, in which knowledge

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

occupies the dominating position. But this is, again, an idea which we can derive from Marx, once we read him through our Lacanian lenses.

Let us then restart again from the crux of Marx's theory, the labor theory of value. As we already repeatedly remarked, the extraction of plus-value does not happen in spite or against those aspects of legal and moral fairness that surround the relation between the capitalist and the worker, but because of them. In this structural and ever recurring process of dispossession, the legitimating principles of capitalism are always respected and reaffirmed. Now *the* ultimate philosophical legitimation of the capitalist process was formulated, as it have been stated by various authors<sup>41</sup>, by John Locke's theory of property. In the Lockean framework, we get the first articulation of the three main elements of the capitalist relation: labor, property and value are here so intimately linked that it seems they engender one another. Locke's argument is that private property and private appropriation from the common good are fully justified where one has added his private labor to the common good: this is not stealing, it is actually giving back ten times more, since private labor creates value, a value which things in the state of common property do not have. In brief, labor adds value and thus justifies appropriation. "It is *labour* then which *puts the greatest part of value upon land*, without which it would scarcely be worth any thing" It is *labour* indeed that *puts the difference of value* on every thing" He who appropriates land to himself by his labour, does not lessen, but increase the common stock of mankind: for the provisions serving to the support of human life, produced by one acre of inclosed and cultivated land, are (to speak much within compass) ten times more than those which are yielded by an acre of land of an equal richness lying waste in common<sup>42</sup>. At first sight, from the point of view of the fairness of the capitalist logic, these noble principles are fully respected in the capitalist relation: and yet, its final result, the rightful appropriation by the worker of the object with which he mixed his labor, does not follow. This is a paradoxical result noticed also by Marx:

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<sup>41</sup> Leo Strauss, *Droit naturel et histoire* [orig: *Natural Right and History*], Champs Flammarion, Paris, 1986, p. 214; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital*, Verso, London & New York, 2005, pp. 119-151.

<sup>42</sup> John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*, <http://www.constitution.org/jl/2ndtreat.htm>, par. 37, 40, 43.

Originally, the rights of property seemed to us to be grounded in a man's own labor. Some such assumption was at least necessary, since only commodity-owners with equal rights confronted each other, and the sole means of appropriating the commodities of others was the alienation of a man's own commodities, commodities which, however, could only be produced by labor. Now, however, property turns out to be the right, on the part of the capitalist, to appropriate the unpaid labor of others or its product, and the impossibility, on the part of the worker, of appropriating his own product. The separation of property from labor thus becomes the necessary consequence of a law that apparently originated in their identity. Therefore, however much the capitalist mode of appropriation may seem to fly in the face of the original laws of commodity production, it nevertheless arises, not from a violation of these laws, but, on the contrary, from their application<sup>43</sup>.

How can one explain such a radical reversal? And a reversal which is not a violation of the Lockean law, but its application, its consequence? Surely, if this is how things stand, one should be able to discern the germ of this potential reversal in Locke's theory itself. And indeed one can. As a matter of fact, there is a slight displacement that occurs in Locke's theory of property: from the idea that the act of enclosing the commons and appropriating the common property is the rightful consequence of my mixing my private labor with the communal nothingness, Locke is imperceptibly precipitating things and abridging the theory to this: it is the very act of enclosing the common property which should count as my private labor, and thus the legitimation of my appropriation of the communal property: "He that incloses land, and has a greater plenty of the conveniences of life from ten acres, than he could have from an hundred left to nature, may truly be said to give ninety acres to mankind"<sup>44</sup>. Thus, the gesture of appropriation becomes its own legitimation: I can take from the communal property because, by doing this, I give back even more. What I give more, the value I add, is ultimately the fence I am building around the communal property. The private labor that I am mixing with the communal property is nothing but the fence, which also justifies and marks its separation from the communal property: the closing, separation and rightful private appropriation are no longer the justified consequences of my adding private

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<sup>43</sup> Karl Marx, *The Capital*, vol. 1, p. 730.

<sup>44</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, par. 37.

labor to the common good; they actually stand for that private labor itself, and thus are self-justifying.

But this is exactly what happens in the capitalist mode of production, and the way in which the faithful observance of the Lockean principle accounts for a result which seems to contradict this principle. The relation is the same, but the elements have now shifted. The place of the Lockean communal property is now taken by the communal labor, the worker's labor. This communal property is rightfully appropriated by the capitalist because he is the one which extracts it from its communal inertia and encloses it. By means of what? What is the fence he is building around it? The means of production, or, what these means of production ultimately amount to: materialized general social knowledge. The means of production, being in the private possession of the capitalist, count for his own personal labor, which, in the labor process, gets mixed with the communal property – in this case, the worker's labor – and which justifies his appropriation of the value generated in this process. The means of production are at once changed into means for the absorption of the labor of others. It is no longer the worker who employs the means of production, but the means of production who employ the worker. Instead of being consumed by him as material elements of his productive activity, they consume him as the ferment necessary to their own life process, and the life-process of capital consists only in its own motion as self-valorizing value<sup>45</sup>. Thus, the private possession of the means of production by the capitalist provides the moving fence by means of which the capitalist can rightfully appropriate the worker's labor: the means of production are, at the same time, labor, materialized labor, undead labor, since they are both active and passive; and, on the other hand, private, the capitalist's own property. As such, they incorporate the core of the Lockean principle – private labour, rightful property – which provides the moving principle and legitimation of the capitalist accumulation. This crucial importance of the function of the means of production explains why, for Marx, the ultimate problem with the capitalist mode of production is the separation of the worker from the means of production, and why, for Lacan, the decisive modification in the passage from the discourse of the master to the discourse of the university is the dispossession of the worker of his knowledge.

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<sup>45</sup> Karl Marx, *The Capital*, vol. 1, p. 425. Also: "The machine does not free the worker from work, but rather deprives the work itself of all content... It is not the worker who employs the conditions of his work, but rather the reverse, the conditions of work who employ the worker" (*ibid.*, p. 548).

The gradual autonomization of the means of production is in a process that follows the general trend of modernity: the autonomization of the means, and which can also describe the general destiny of bureaucracy: that of becoming a non-vanishing mediator, an intermediary which doesn't mediate anymore but becomes autonomous and circular is what defines the nature of labor in capitalism, or, to put it technically, the capitalist mode of production. As Lacan noticed: "In order for production to be distinguished from what has been always called *poiesis*, fabrication, work, manual labor, something which characterizes capitalism has to have become autonomous, namely the means of production, because it is around this that everything revolves, namely around who disposes of these means of production. It is by means of such a homology that the function of knowledge in production can be articulated. The production of knowledge as knowledge is defined as being means of production and not only labor"<sup>46</sup>.

Now we are slowly approaching the dominating role of knowledge in this abstract social structure defining capitalist, a dominating position which explains the label that Lacan applied it: the discourse of the university. Let us attempt now to put the elements in their places. The subject, as we saw is the case in Lacan's theory of the signifier, in Marx's labor theory of value and in the basic and primordial operation of bureaucracy, is what is represented by a signifier for another signifier. But it's not any signifiers we are dealing with. A general signifier of social knowledge (S2, the exchange value of labor-power) represents the worker's labor power for a singular, unique signifier (S1, its use value, that is, its private consumption by the capitalist). From this relation, an excess is generated, the object *a*, or, in this particular case, plus-value. In the discourse of the university, the dominating position is occupied by S2, the signifier of social knowledge. This is what the autonomization of the means of production entail for Marx: the subject becomes separated from his own social knowledge which begins to confront him as an alien power. "What is lost by the specialized workers is concentrated in the capital which confronts them" The worker is brought face to face with the intellectual potentialities of the material process of production as the property of another and as a power which rules over him. Large-scale industry makes science a potentiality for production which is distinct from labor and presses

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<sup>46</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVI: D'un autre à l'Autre*, p. 284.

it into the service of capital<sup>47</sup>. Thus we already have the answer as to the nature of this objective and dominating knowledge: it is the knowledge specific to modern science. There is a crucial difference between modern and pre-modern science, and it has to do with at least two aspects. The first one concerns the accumulative nature of modern science. In Lacan's own words: "I would call this knowledge before Descartes a pre-accumulative state of knowledge. Starting with Descartes, the knowledge, that of science, is constituted on the model of the production of knowledge. In the same way in which one of the essential moments of our structure, which we call social when in reality it is metaphysical and which is capitalism, is the accumulation of capital, the relation of the Cartesian subject to this being which affirms itself there is founded on the accumulation of knowledge. Starting with Descartes, it is knowledge only what can serve to the development of knowledge"<sup>48</sup>. The means of production are, by default, what can contribute to the accumulation of production. Knowledge as modern science is, again, what can contribute to the accumulation of knowledge. But the similarity is not just based on this external analogy: the means of production as such are materialized knowledge, knowledge which has become objective ó objective not only in the sense of neutral and impartial, but also in the sense of opposing the subject, *Gegenstandlich*<sup>49</sup>. This autonomization of science and knowledge from their statute of means to that of goals in themselves is, after all, the defining trait of the university, whose constant enjoinder is "you have to know more". But the truth of this dominating knowledge is the hidden position of the S1, the master's private enjoyment of this social knowledge: after all, the exchange value represents labor for this master signifier, which is the capitalist's private consumption of the product of labor. I will not dwell here on the status of the plus-value, since I touched it numerous times above. One word though concerning its position in the discourse of the university: contrary to what we may have expected ó because of the capitalist nature of the discourse of the university ó plus-value is not placed here in the

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<sup>47</sup> Karl Marx, *The Capital*, vol. 1, p. 482.

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'En guise de conclusion', *Scilicet*, no. 2-3, 1971, p. 394.

<sup>49</sup> This knowledge is objective also in a third sense, in the sense that it concerns the objects, their correct value, or what is called: their price. "The knowledge is not the labor. It requires labor sometimes, but you can also have it without. Knowledge, at the limit, is what we call the price... The price of what? Clearly, the price of the renunciation to *jouissance*... It is from this that we can understand that there is something which, even though paid at its fair price of knowledge under the rules of the market of science, is nevertheless gained for nothing. It is what I called the *plus-de-jour*", Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVI: D'un autre à l'Autre*, pp. 26-27.

position of the product, but in the position of the other. Why is that? For two reasons at least: first, there is the fact that the innovation of the capitalist discourse is that it addresses directly this generated excess, and does not, as the master's discourse, accidentally produces it without the possibility to enjoy it. Secondly, because, according to the logic of capitalism exposed above, in this mode of production it is value which is the moving agent of the whole process and which appears to have acquired the occult ability to spur more value from itself. This position of the other in Lacan's formula is, after all, the position of the one who works in that particular discourse: in this case, the placing of the object *a*, of plus-value in the position of the other translates the necessary capitalist illusion that it is value itself which, in its automatic and independent reproduction, generates more value. Finally, what about the position of the subject in the discourse of the university? The empty, or split Lacanian subject occupies here the position of the product of that discourse. What does that mean? From a Marxian perspective, this is perfectly, almost literally, verified. Not only in the sense that the worker is constitutively split, that because of the fact that he does not own any property with which to participate in the general market, he has to alienate part of himself of his labor-power *ó*, a labor-power which gradually, after being incorporated in the means of production and thus consumed by its buyer, the capitalist, begins to confront him as an alien entity. But also in the sense that this void and split subject which is the worker is actually the necessary product of the capitalist mode of production:

“A division between the product of labor and labor itself, between the objective conditions of labor and subjective labor-power, was therefore the real foundation and the starting point of the process of capitalist production. But what at first was merely a starting point becomes, by means on nothing but the continuity of the process, by simple reproduction, the characteristic result of capitalist production. On the one hand, the production process incessantly converts material wealth into capital, into the capitalist means of enjoyment and his means of valorization. On the other hand, the worker always leaves the process in the same state as he entered it of a personal source of wealth, but deprived of any means of making that wealth a reality for himself... Therefore, the worker himself constantly produces objective wealth, in the form of capital, an alien power that dominates and exploits him; and the capitalist just as constantly produces labor-power, in the form of a subjective source of wealth which is abstract, exists merely in the physical body of the worker, and is separated



from its own means of objectification and realization; in short, the capitalist produces the worker as wage-labourer. This incessant reproduction, this perpetuation of the worker, is the absolutely necessary condition for capitalist production<sup>50</sup>.

From a Lacanian perspective, this result was already presupposed in the premises, that is, in the autonomization of the discourse of science. Lacan's theory of modern science is based on the idea that the subject is absent, or rather inscribed as absent, from the discourse of science: 'The subject is what is missing from knowledge. Knowledge, in its presence, in its mass, in its accumulation, regulated by laws different from that of intuition, and which are those of the symbolic, here it is that we should analyze the real statute of the subject at the historical times of science'<sup>51</sup>. This theory is extremely close to that of Althusser, which he proposed in his 'Three notes concerning the theory of discourse' there, the subject of science, different in this from the subject of arts, of the ideology and of the unconscious, is defined by the fact that he is included as absent in the discourse<sup>52</sup>. In a similar way, modern science is for Lacan that discursive structure from which the subject is absent, or, more exactly, that abstract structure in which the subject is inscribed as absent. The university, as the institution in charge with the reproduction of science, is, thus, quite logically from this perspective, constantly reproducing subjects as excluded from their own knowledge – in this sense, quite similar to the worker's inclusion in the capitalist mode of production. This is why, for Lacan, the student is the brother of the proletarian, and constitutes his contemporary privileged mode of appearance: at the epoch dominated by the discourse of the university, that is, by the autonomization of the objective, neutral knowledge, the subject is constantly reproduced as standing in opposition and under the domination of his own creative powers which now confront him as alien powers.

#### 4.2.3. *Lacan with us*

Now we can go ahead and make public that precious, one and only occurrence of the concept of 'bureaucracy' in Lacan's teachings. From all that preceded this point, it should come as

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<sup>50</sup> Karl Marx, *The Capital*, vol. 1, p. 716.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'En guise de conclusion', p. 395.

<sup>52</sup> Louis Althusser, *Ecrits sur la psychanalyse. Freud et Lacan*, Stock/Imec, Paris, 1993, pp. 124-166.

no surprise the fact that Lacan inscribes this concept in a discussion of the passage from the master's discourse to the university discourse, and that it is related to the necessary nature, but also structurally failing, of Marx's intervention:

“It is odd to see that a doctrine such as the one that Marx articulated on the function of the struggle, of class struggle, has not prevented the birth from it of something which is, for now, the problem of which we are all aware, namely the preservation of the discourse of the master. Of course, this one does not have the structure of the old one, the one placed under the letter M [master]. It is placed to the left of it, under the letter U [university]. What occupies there the position which we call dominant is this  $S_2$ , which is not knowledge of everything, but all-knowing. You can hear there something which is nothing but knowledge, and which we call, what is usually called, bureaucracy”<sup>53</sup>.

Between 1966 and 1970, from the 13<sup>th</sup> Seminar (*La logique du fantasme*) to the 17<sup>th</sup> (*L'envers de la psychanalyse*) the references to capitalism abound in Lacan's seminars. Clearly, this has to do with the immediate historical context and this should be enough to counter-argue those hardcore Lacanians who claim that the theory of the French psychoanalyst should not be applied beyond the strict confines of the psychoanalytical cabinet. Lacan's developments on capitalism, the master's discourse and the university's discourse, Marx and plus-value, the new dominating role of knowledge, had, in relation to the violent protests of the workers and students taking place in that period, a twofold nature: on the one hand, Lacan's developments were meant to render visible the logically necessary nature of the violent protests of those years; but, on the other hand, their very logical necessity, their inscription in the dominating logic, was the explanation for their necessary failure. This is perhaps the reason why many disillusioned '68ers found refuge in Lacan's seminars. The protests of the united students and workers were formulated from the

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<sup>53</sup> “Il est singulier de voir qu'une doctrine telle que Marx en a instauré l'articulation sur la fonction de la lutte, la lutte de classes, n'a pas empêché qu'il en naisse ce qui est bien pour l'instant le problème qui nous est présenté à tous, à savoir le maintien d'un discours du maître. Certes, celui-ci n'a pas la structure de l'ancien, au sens où ce dernier s'installe de la place indiquée sous ce grand M. Il s'installe de celle de gauche, que chapeaute le U. Je vous dirai pourquoi. Ce qui y occupe la place que provisoirement nous appellerons dominante est ceci,  $S_2$ , qui se spécifie d'être, non pas savoir-de-tout, nous n'y sommes pas, mais tout-savoir. Entendez ce qui s'affirme de n'être rien d'autre que savoir, et que l'on appelle, dans le langage courant, la bureaucratie”, Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse*, pp. 33-34.

positions of a humanist (what we called traditional) Marxism<sup>54</sup>: confronted with the double deadlock of the militarized capitalism of the West and of the state capitalism of the East, the protesters were thus forced to face the truth of their un-dialectical position, in which the simple reversal of class domination actually led to a convergence of the two systems. The dictatorship of the proletariat led, in the East, to the establishment of a ruling bureaucracy, which, in the name of its objective all-knowledge, meticulously managed the smooth reproduction of the old capitalist mode of production. The simple reversal of class domination, the task of state socialism understood, in the logic of traditional Marxism, as dealing with the harmonization of production with distribution, and, thus, in the growing centralizing and planning activity, all these aspects led, in the East, to the establishment of a social structure resembling Lacan's discourse of the university. In the West, apart from the recurrent imperialist outbursts, the growing rationalization and turn towards a form of class compromise labeled Western social-democracy led the West to a similar technicization and centralization. This grandiose social architectonic towards which both the West and the East were converging, this finally realized utopia of the Hegelian rational state, was being criticized by the protesters in terms of ruling bureaucracy, to which the humanist ideas of a spontaneous and creative existence were proposed as a genuine alternative. 'Structures don't walk in the streets', claimed the protesters, in one of their famous celebration of the spontaneous being as alternative to the growing bureaucratization of the society. With his four formulas of discourse, Lacan's answer seems to be 'structures do walk in the street, and you are one of them'. He interpreted the protests as a hysterical discourse, that is, one who interpellates the dominating, neutral discourse of knowledge by forcing it to reveal its hidden truth, its master face. 'As hystericals', Lacan told the rioting students at Vincennes, you are longing for a master. You'll have it. Thus, the only success of the protests was the usual success of the provocation: the neutral and impartial power of the dominating expert knowledge was forced to reveal its truth – the power of the master that it was concealing. And yet, this very hysterical discourse was nothing but the product of the university discourse: the empty subject which occupies the position of the product in the university

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<sup>54</sup> Contrary to what that (in)famous piece of right-wing denunciation of French Theory written by the self-designated 'new philosophers' Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut and entitled *La pensée 68* (Gallimard, Paris, 1988) claims, the protests of the later sixties did not find their theoretical ground in the post-structuralist theories, but rather in the humanist Marxism of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, the Freudo-Marxism of Reich and, in parts, the critical theory of Marcuse. The post-structuralist trend was not their inspiration, but rather their theoretical consequence.

discourse, is occupying the position of the agent in the discourse of the hysterical. It is not only that the hysterical discourse is the immediate reaction to the university discourse; moreover, it is the one which actually manages to close the circle and reproduce the domination of the former. Not incidentally, the technicization of the university and the dominating expertocracy in society, which were attacked by the 1968 protests, were only reinforced afterwards. The bureaucratization of society could not be challenged by enjoinders to more creativity and spontaneity, since these latter are nothing but the fantasmatic supplement and ideological reverse of the former. The autonomous, free subject, which confronts the master with his desire for knowledge is the actual product of the university discourse: that free subject, free in the sense of being deprived of all property except his own alienable being.

The critique of power formulated in terms of growing technicization and rationalization, as non-mediated critique of expertocracy and ruling bureaucracy is a recurrent hobby in modernity. On the other hand, the critique of power in terms of plain domination, unmasked oppression of the majority by a small minority is, again, the usual populist temptation. Between these two kinds of social critique – the one in terms of university discourse, abstract domination, and the one in terms of master discourse, open and direct domination – the discourse of the hysterical is actually the operator that guarantees the passage of one into the other and, thus, their mutual reproduction. It should come then as no surprise the fact that today, under the banner of neoliberalism, we seem to witness a kind of hystericization of power itself: instead of relying on this external, and merely probable outcome – the hysterical outburst of society – in order to guarantee for its endless reproduction, it is nowadays power itself which questions, hysterically, the over burdening bureaucratization of society in the West (meaning: the last remains of that class-compromise which is the Western social-democracy), and, symmetrically, the despotic, unchecked and undemocratic rule of those dictators in the third World who refuse to open their oil reserves to American access. The merit of Lacan's developments on the four discourses is to have shown the way in which these two opposing logics actually sustain and generate each other: with the ruling discourse of the university, we have an abstract social structure in which the very domination of fair, objective, universal and neutral knowledge guarantees the extraction and structural appropriation of plus-value, and, more generally, of that unfathomable excess called *plus-de-jour*. There is no question as to the fairness of this social structure: it is actually this structure which defines the rules of fairness: each particular should be measured by the same

universal; and each particular should enjoy, from that universal, the amount of social wealth which is fairly due to him. The law of value, which establishes this real of social fairness, is, itself, even beyond such questions of legitimacy: it is a mathematical, nature-like kind of law, which does nothing more than merely formalize an eternal social process: a subject is what a signifier represents for another signifier; the subject's labor is what its exchange value represents for another's use value. The fact that, in this process of representation, a certain excess is produced, a certain plus-value is generated and appropriated, has to do with the natural state of things.

Could it be, then, that the fourth discourse, that of the analyst, can provide a social alternative to this vicious circle of the other three discourses, to their endless reproduction by means of their constant passage from one another? After all our Lacanian reading of Marx, could we socialize and politicize Lacan's formula of the discourse of the analyst, and read it in a Marxian way? In the discourse of the analyst, the dominating position of knowledge is taken by plus-value; while the hidden truth of this position is no longer the master, but the signifier of knowledge. Moreover, the impossible link, in the discourse of the university, between  $S$  and  $S_1$ , between the subject and the master or the subject being reproduced in its internal division in an automatic process, that is, in a process which he cannot master or is evacuated; even more, the master signifier is actually what is produced here or which we could interpret, in a blatantly non-Lacanian way, in the sense that in this social structure, the subject could finally become the master of its own social being. That relation of representation which constitutes the subject in the university discourse is here, somehow reversed, somehow displaced: here, the subject is no longer represented by an exchange value ( $S_2$ ) for a use value ( $S_1$ ), but by the plus-value ( $a$ ) for the exchange value ( $S_2$ ). How to translate this into plain language? The subject's generated plus-value is representing the subject for the general intellect: the common possession of the means of production is the term on the basis of which the social contribution of the subject is to be measured. In this conscious management of plus-value on the basis of the finally socialized general intellect, the society's autonomy and self-mastery is finally achieved.

However, the deliberate vagueness of Lacan's concept of the object  $a$  can offer us here a different, a bit less optimistic, interpretation. Perhaps, in this reading, we might discover that history proved to be more Lacanian than Lacan, and that it embraced the social structure of

the analyst discourse even before Lacan dared to extrapolate this discourse from his private cabinet. The constitutive ambiguity of the object *a* makes it so that the discourse of the analyst has the exact same formula as the discourse of the pervert. From this standpoint, the dominating position of the object *a* is to be read as a social structure in which the master, finally, does not rule by means of unmasked power, nor by means of impartial and universal knowledge, but by means of his own private enjoyment. From the enlightened West (France, Italy) up to the dark Balkans (Russia, Romania), today's masters seem, indeed, to rule simply by enjoying their own private *plus-de-jouir*. But isn't their impotent domination the very obvious result of the automatic reproduction of the capitalist mode of production? If the law of value is extending its blind reach over all of society's surface, what is left for the master except get married, divorce, throw parties, get laid, in brief, enjoy. From the master's discourse to today's pervert discourse, the circle is happily closed, and the master can finally enjoy his well deserved private *plus-de-jouir*. And while the private life of the rulers fills the public space and is countered with the eminently private concerns of the ruled (more ethics! more morality!) ó as the upper side of the formula reads:  $a \rightarrow \$ \phi$ , the invisible reproduction of the law of value (as the lower side reads:  $S2 \rightarrow S1$ ) can happily go on forever.

## Conclusion

The fact that there is a certain link, or even complicity, between bureaucracy and capitalism should come as no surprise. This idea was already manifest in the classical account of bureaucracy, that of Max Weber. However, in Weber's case, the link between the two notions remains an external one. For one thing, bureaucracy requires, as its precondition, the full development of the market economy, which ensures a large basis of taxation, which, finally, constitutes bureaucracy's source of revenue: "A stable system of *taxation* is the precondition for the permanent existence of bureaucratic administration. For well-known and general reasons, only a fully developed money economy offers a secure basis for such a taxation system"<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, besides this relation according to which capitalism is the precondition of bureaucracy, Weber also traces a parallelism between the operating principles of both bureaucracy and capitalism: they both stand for formal and abstract principles, calculable rules "without regard for persons", deprived of all personal feelings of love, hate, and all "purely personal, irrational and emotional elements which escape calculation"<sup>2</sup>. Preconditioning and parallelism: this way of explaining the relation between capitalism and bureaucracy is, in our opinion, a bit too external and fails to explain their sophisticated intersection.

Perhaps Weber's omission is the explanation of one of the major ambiguities that underlie his theory of bureaucracy: why, if the bureaucratic institution is a necessary factor of the modern rationality of the state and society, why this very same positive phenomenon announces from its beginnings the anonymous and oppressive dictatorship of the officialdom, and thus the growing irrationality of the social mode of organization<sup>3</sup>? From the perspective of his own standards and method of inquiry, Weber's solution should be

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<sup>1</sup> H.H. Gerth, C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1964, pp. 208-209.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

evaluated as a non-solution: a curious materialist answer in which variations in quantity determine changes in quality. This weak Weberian solution nonetheless opened the way and traced the path for endless debates on ‘how much bureaucracy is good and necessary for democracy’ and ‘how much of it is just too much’. These are two of the main reasons for which, in this present dissertation, we tried to go around this classical approach, and maybe, by means of the unusual triad Hegel, Marx and Lacan, illuminate the problems that it left in place. For one thing, the relation between capitalism and bureaucracy is no longer conceived here as merely external. Bureaucracy, instead, comes to be situated at the very core of the capitalist logic. The wonderful capitalist mechanism which consists in converting a specific historical contingency in an objective and necessary logic requires, we argued, a particular agency whose task is precisely this continued transubstantiation of injustice into fairness. And the place and function that bureaucracy necessarily occupies has to do precisely with what, for the Weberian tradition, became the conundrum of the slippery quantitative-qualitative oscillation between rationality and irrationality: bureaucracy is the institutional, almost transcendental, rationalizer of the structural irrationality of capitalism.

Our critical analysis of bureaucracy, made from this perspective, also goes against the recurrent romantic attack on the ‘administered society’ and on the domination of abstract, formal principles – a romantic attitude whose classical origins could also be traced in Weber’s fascination with the charismatic leader, as opposed to the nameless official. The fundamental opposition on which this romantic critique plays is the opposition between, on the one hand, abstraction, mediation, reification and, on the other hand, spontaneity, creativity, immediacy. Our developments have tried to show how this kind of critique, far from endangering the smooth functioning of the bureaucratic mechanism, is already taken into account by it, and how the excess and remainder of creativity, immediacy and spontaneity is not the opposite of the bureaucratic sphere, but, on the contrary, the element on whose perpetual generation, inclusion and reproduction the whole bureaucratic mechanism is based.

This paradoxical nature, or, better, this deployed and administered contradiction which seems to be the natural function of bureaucracy is, we claimed, accurately rendered by that conceptual tool provided by the Lacanian ‘discourse of the university’. Its two sides, left and right, seem to bring together precisely these two immediate oppositions on which the romantic denunciation of bureaucracy is based, making thus manifest their original



complicity in the bureaucratic logic. What exactly each of these pairs of signifiers mean (S2/S1, a/\$) and the way in which, in the bureaucratic mechanism, they mutually call and imply one another, is what we attempted to find out by means of the Hegelian theory of the state and of the Marxian labor theory of value.

On the left side, the S2/S1 provides the *Aufhebung* ó that is, the suppression and conservation ó of the discourse of the master in the discourse of the university. What this means, in the context of the Hegelian theory of the state, is that the crucial and central place that the universal class of the civil servants comes to occupy shifts this whole social and conceptual structure towards the discourse of the university. That does not mean that the old, classical discourse of the master is simply suppressed. What it means is that the master is, somehow, reduced to what it always was: a simple signifying function, charged with the ó superfluous, it would seem, and yet vital ó mission of closing the chain of signifiers, or, in this case, the network of decisions based on objective knowledge, by simply suturing his name and thus accompanying them with his formal -I willø But what this also means is that the contradictions of the master discourse, which always represented the danger of blocking this form of social discourse, are now happily suspended, or rather, successfully integrated as the very reproduction principle of the discourse of the university. More concretely: in the place of the old mode of extracting plus-value by means of recourse to force, to tradition, to religious values, which was always sensible to problems of legitimacy, we now get a fair mode of extracting plus-value, which is unquestionable and a priori legitimate, since it is done in full respect of the formal and objective principles of the universal right. This, again, does not mean that the civil service successfully manages to harmonize the dispersion of particularity at the level of civil society into the universality of the state. Contradictions, major, unavoidable and structural contradictions are bound to appear ó and, as we saw, Hegel did not hesitate to point them out, nor did he conceal the fact that, from the standpoint of this social structure and of its founding principles, they are virtually impossible to address and redress. And yet, he still claimed that the social architectonic built on these principles is the proper rational and harmonious state: thus, in this Hegelian account, the contradictions that necessarily occur at the level of civil society are like the symptom ó that is, the externalized truth ó of this harmonious structure.

It was, perhaps, one of Marx's merits that of solving this Hegelian mystery: why a social mode of organization which necessarily leads to open contradictions at the level of civil

society can still pass for a rational state? His answer is provided in the elaboration of the famous labor theory of value: it is here that we can see that these contradictions are not to be perceived as the stumbling block of this social form of organization, but, on the contrary, as precisely its moving force. The Marxian labor theory of value thus provides the proper mode of inscription of the Hegelian conundrum and of the right side of the discourse of the university (a/\$). As a matter of fact, the Marxian labor theory of value is the immediate and complete translation of Lacan's discourse of the university: the positing of S2, the signifier of knowledge, in the dominating position expresses the dominating role that objective, expert knowledge comes to occupy in this social structure, and the decisive role that the capitalist logic grants to its materialization — not only the technical division of labor, the exclusive knowledge of the capitalist, but also the means of production, the incorporated social knowledge at his disposal. The Lacanian idea according to which this knowledge, expressed by S2, is fundamentally a knowledge that does not know itself, expresses the lack of social control over this division of labor and over the means of production. Thus, while S2, the social knowledge, dominates and distributes the roles in this form of social structure, its hidden truth is still S1, the private enjoyment of the capitalist master. As for the right side of the formula, the one regarding the worker and its plus-value, or the subject and the object *a*, their mode of inscription is so simple and so brilliant that it excludes any concern regarding its legitimacy. A signifier is what represents a subject for another signifier. In the same way in which, in the original operation of bureaucracy, a particular, unique signifier sutures the subject to the network of social signifiers, in a similar way, in the capitalist relation, the exchange value of the subject's labor represents it for the use value it possesses for the capitalist. The difference between the two — plus-value, or the object *a* — is what actually matters, and what is posited, by this logic, in the position of the working agent: this is the necessary illusion of this mode of production, in which value seems to be able to reproduce and multiply itself, and thus act as the subject and moving force of the whole process. While the necessary product of this logic, that element which is included only as excluded, is the empty, split, or free, subject: free, as Marx said, in both senses: of being deprived of all property except his labor-power, and free in the sense of being able to dispose of and alienate his labor-power. This is the historical presupposition which, by means of this abstract social structure, is canceled and posited as the first logical and natural supposition of the capitalist mode of production.

From this standpoint, we can judge how far from the truth are those interpretations, proposed by presumably radical thinkers like Michel Foucault, who see in Marx a mere economist. What we actually have here, in this account of the capitalist mode of production, is an extremely complicated knot, in which logics and history, nature and society, economics and politics all meet. The locus of bureaucracy in this intricate network is that of a particular, unique kind of mediator. A kind of non-vanishing mediator, or better, one whose perpetual mission is to erase its mission, and which, to paraphrase Guy Debord, unites the separate, but it unites it only as separate: while ensuring that the historical contingency is sublated into a natural necessity, it also sees that concerns regarding the expert organization of economy and the social deliberation of politics are properly kept apart. Our interpretation thus goes against the usual view according to which the bureaucratic domain of activity is a clearly circumscribed one, dealing only with the application of the decisions taken elsewhere and with the administration of details, while the grand design of policies belongs to the proper sphere of the elected politicians. Starting from this interpretation, there is only one step towards formulating the critique of the bureaucratic usurpation, in which the mechanical application of decisions seems to gain more importance than the decisions themselves (and even affects and alters those decisions), while the appointed officials have the upper hand over the elected representatives of the people. The interpretation elaborated throughout the thesis started from the assumption that, before circumscribing the bureaucracy to such a delimited sphere of activity, there is a more original function which is taken in charge by bureaucracy: far from being a particular domain of activity in the political and social realm, it is the point from which the different domains of activity are established and distributed, united and kept apart at the same time.

To come back to our discussion on the three kinds of politicizing Lacan, what place should we grant to our analysis? Clearly this has nothing in common with the right Lacanians, and with their insistence on the imaginary hole in the real, that is, the religious fantasy underlying the seemingly disenchanted structure of the modern society. If there is a fantasy to be unveiled here, it does not lie in the hidden strata of society's imaginary, but on the very public surface, not in our darkest thoughts, but, like the Marxian fetishism, in our daily practices. It is an objective fantasy, not a private or even if common delusion. As for the liberal Lacanians, our approach stands with them in the same relation in which critical Marxism stands with traditional Marxism. After all, the liberal Lacanians endeavor consisted basically in a simple reversal of traditional Marxism: while for the latter, economy is to be

conceived as the absent cause of politics, as the hidden infrastructure of the political superstructure, and, thus, as the Real of the political symbolic, for the liberal Lacanians it is the political which constitutes the stumbling Real of the symbolical and seemingly stable structure of economy and society. Society, or economy, is non-all, and this non-identity with themselves is the political. Though, in spite of its semblance of novelty, this conceptualization of the relation between politics and economy in terms of the Real lack, or hole, in the symbolic, is pretty old fashioned. After centuries of modern skepticism, the idea that one cannot conceptualize and organize everything in a stable and total structure should come as common sense. The labeling of this Real deadlock in the symbolic by means of the term *the political*, and the attempt to politicize thus our constitutive, be it ontological or epistemological, finitude, is, at best, a mere nominal innovation and, at worst, a debilitating and spurious political radicalization. After all, anybody can understand or experience the Real hole in the symbolic: this is, one could say, the basic experience of experience. What we attempted here goes in a different, and much more complicated direction: by analyzing the bureaucratic formalization, administration and reproduction of the capitalist contradiction, we attempt to grasp nothing less than the symbolic hole in the Real.

One final point. From the perspective of this epochal alliance between bureaucracy and capitalism, and of the undeniable services that the former has delivered to the latter, the recent neoliberal attack on bureaucracy from the standpoint of the efficiency of capitalism must come as a great irony of history, and, even worse, as a clear rebuttal of our main thesis. Hence, even though this issue lies outside the scope of this thesis, a few words on it seem necessary. What exactly do we have here? On a closer view, we can actually see that the neoliberal attack on bureaucracy, growing stronger and stronger since the late 70s, has been accompanied by a no less virulent attack on the labor theory of value. What happened was that the Marxian understanding of plus-value, as generated by a particular legal and economical inscription of labor, has been replaced by pre-Marxian theories, which explain the generation of plus-value either as speculation, as differences between the prices when buying or selling a commodity, or, more importantly, as the inherent capacity of capital and, more exactly, financial capital, to spurn more value from itself. Actual labor was thus deemed to be more and more unnecessary for the reproduction of plus-value ó hence, all the prophecies concerning *the end of work* and *the retreat from class*. But with labor, and with its particular mode of legal, political and economical inscription managed by the bureaucracy, also went this latter: bureaucracy, as the network of regulations concerning

labor was, also, no longer necessary. If one is to speculate a bit on this recent development, one could conceive it not as a rebuttal of Marx's labor theory of value, but as its ultimate confirmation: as the contemporary expression of Marx's thesis concerning the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. It is this tendency, derived, after all, as a possible outcome of the law of value, which explains that capitalism is forced today to break its own fair rules (fair rules which Marx always presupposed in his analysis of the capitalist mode of production) in order to extract plus-value, either by playing on the non-availability of information, when extracting profits from speculation; or by paying the workers a wage below the exchange-value of their labor-power, as in the sweat-shops of the world; or by resorting to the good old ways of primitive accumulation, as in the recurrent humanitarian interventions and enforced privatizations; or, finally, by succumbing to the pure fetishism of value, as in the financial operations which concern, not incidentally, the very conversion, by means of simple mathematics, of debt into profit. Whether this logic of capitalism will finally prevail or we will come back to the good old capitalism of the labor theory of value is hard to predict, and, from our perspective, not that important. Most probably, and all things being equal, we will be facing an oscillation between the two logics, depending on whether business is good or bad: when the bubble created by the fetishism of value will break off, as it did in 2008, we will be hearing the usual enjoinders to return to a responsible, moral and genuinely productive kind of capitalism. When the dropping rate of profit will make things unbearable in this good old kind of capitalism, we will be taking refuge, again, in non-capitalist modes of extracting plus-value, be they purely speculative or humanistically military. But this is, from our perspective, secondary. What matters is that capitalism and bureaucracy rise and fall always hand in hand.

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