



The Politics of Impossibility: A Socio-Symbolic Analysis of Society, the Subject, Identification, and Ideology

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THE POLITICS OF IMPOSSIBILITY:
A SOCIO-SYMBOLIC ANALYSIS OF SOCIETY, IDENTIFICATION, AND
IDEOLOGY

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of the Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

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ABSTRACT

The present study seeks to explain why every discursive articulation of society must fail both to constitute itself as a closed totality and to fully symbolize and give meaning to individual subjects. It further seeks to explain how this symmetrical lack in society and the social agent contributes to our understanding of the multiple and flexible structures of ideological (dis)identification. This model of society and the subject will draw primarily from the discourse-theoretical analytics developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and extended by others. Often referred to by the terms “discourse theory” or “hegemony theory,” this body of work applies semiotics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and post-Gramscian Marxism to contemporary social struggles. The present study also draws significantly from Lacanian psychoanalysis and from those theorists (notably Yannis Stavrakakis and Slavoj Žižek) who have begun to articulate a distinctively Lacanian political theory.

Dedicated to Redrider

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*”

--Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

“*Il n’y a pas de métalangage*”

--Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XIV*

1.1 Il n'y a pas

“There is no outside-text.” “There is no meta-language.”¹ Each of these aphorisms, one belonging to poststructuralism and the other to psychoanalysis, presents the impossibility of any position outside of concrete discourses from which to interpret or critique their truth-effects. Derrida’s formulation suggests that concepts have no existence independent of their articulation within a network of interconnected texts; there is no stable truth that is transcendental in relation to the discursive and historical contexts through which it is produced and deployed. A preliminary reading of Lacan’s statement yields a similar claim, that there is no neutral enunciative position from which one can comment upon ordinary utterances, fixing their meaning once and for all. There is no

¹ Derrida’s often-quoted statement can be found in *Of Grammatology* (158). The quote from Lacan originates from *Seminar XIV: La logique du fantasme*, which (to the best of my knowledge) remains unpublished at the time of this writing and is available only in the form of unedited French typescripts.

methodology or style of commentary that can provide mastery over the surplus of meaning that is produced by every signifying practice.²

Thus, Derrida and Lacan both assert that no discourse can serve as the neutral language through which the truth claims of other discourses may be evaluated. The absence of any decontextualized position of enunciation has important implications for social critique, which, in its classical mode at least, endeavors to rend the veil of false consciousness in order to reveal actual relations of exploitation and domination. If, however, there is no mode of analysis that can claim unmediated access to truth or objectivity, then how can we identify a discourse or a consciousness as “false”? If, rather than describing reality or expressing truth, signifying structures produce these as their effects, then what becomes of the category of distortion?

In addition to raising troubling questions about the position (or even the possibility) of social critique, the propositions of deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis also call into question any description of society as a structural totality. Contrary to the axioms of Western metaphysics, Derrida argues that structures do not possess anything like fixed centers or essences that could establish secure limits on the combination and substitution of structural elements. In the absence of a stable center, no ordered set of relations can ever achieve the status of a coherent and unified totality. Further, Derrida suggests that every process of ordering produces a surplus that limits and

² See Slavoj Žižek’s “Which Subject of the Real?” in *Sublime Object of Ideology* for a discussion of this statement by Lacan (153-199).

subverts totalization. The inevitability of surplus ensures the persistence of a contested terrain of unfixity that escapes articulation by any single structure.

Lacan approaches the failure of totalization through a discussion of the symbolic order, a network of differential relations between signifying elements that provides the categories and identities through which subjectivity and social reality are produced.

Lacan's symbolic order is a failed structural totality, a discursive complex that maintains the illusion of its consistency through a set of constitutive exclusions. Upon the founding of a symbolic order, these gaps in symbolization retroactively produce a set of distortions in social and subjective reality. Lacan identifies this warping of the discursive weave with a register of human experience that he terms "the Real." For Lacan, the Real also represents an ineradicable negativity that every process of symbolic structuration fails to master. The Real is not only that which occupies the site of lack in a symbolic structure, but also the pre-symbolic non-meaning that founds the process of symbolization. At the level of the individual subject, this pre-symbolic Real is associated with the substance of the living body that cannot be fully integrated into the symbolic.

There are, of course, significant differences between Derrida's account of the impossibility of structural closure and the one offered by Lacan. Some have sought to "correct" deconstruction in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis (notably Žižek) or to present them as opposed schools of thought. Derrida is accused, for example, of occluding the presence of bodily existence, and Lacan's conception of the pre-symbolic Real is aligned with the hoary tradition of "occidental metaphysics." In the present

analysis, however, we argue that a thorough account of the failure of structural totality requires insights from both theorists.

If the claims of deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis dislocate the conventional categories of social theory, the present study seeks to respond to the need to provide alternative formulations of society, the subject, and social critique. Society can no longer be taken for granted as a self-identical, empirical object; neither should it be regarded as a structural totality characterized by a set of intelligible and stable relations between the elements or levels that make it up. Instead, we should regard structured networks of social relations as socio-symbolic orders, discursive formations limited by their failure to master a field of surplus meaning and haunted by the traces of an ineradicable negativity. It follows from this conception of the social order as a failed structural totality that the articulation of every social identity must also be precarious and incomplete. There are no closed systems of differences or self-contained essences that could provide the basis for a politics of identity. There are, instead, discursively constructed subject positions that mobilize a politics of identification and performative citation. Finally, in the absence of an extra-discursive or metalinguistic position from which to critique ideological distortion, it becomes necessary to identify ideology with those discourses and objects of desire that conceal the impossibility of structural totality and stable identity.

The principles for this approach to social theory and critique will be drawn not only from Derrida and Lacan, but also from the discourse-theoretical analytics developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In their foundational text, *Hegemony and*

Socialist Strategy, Laclau and Mouffe offer a discursive theory of the social that rejects the notion that social agents possess essential identities or that society can be regarded as a sutured totality. We will also draw from the emerging field of Lacanian political theory, especially from the work of Yannis Stavrakakis and Slavoj Žižek, in order to specify the unique ontological status of social antagonism and to provide an account of the constitution of social fantasies in terms of the Lacanian concept of the Real.

Chapter two develops a semiotics of the social that recognizes the impossibility of structural closure. The social order is discursively constructed by practices of articulation that order signifying elements (both linguistic and non-linguistic) according to logics of difference and equivalence. This order shares a number of features with the Lacanian symbolic order, especially the notion that the symbolic always fails to constitute itself as a sutured totality. This chapter also explores the failure of the socio-symbolic order through a discussion of undecidability, chains of equivalence, social antagonism, and that chimerical entity which Lacan refers to as “the Real.”

Chapter three poses the question: “why is the subject impossible?” Here we suggest that every identity is a failed identity. The subject can only achieve a semblance of stability and coherence through practices of identification with images, signifying elements, and objects of desire. These identifications, however, are always ambivalent and alienating. The specular image projects a vision of consistency, yet always remains external. The discourses of the socio-symbolic order offer meaningful social identity, yet they also demand that the subject-to-be sacrifice that portion of bodily enjoyment which they cannot symbolize.

In the following chapter, “how does ideology mask impossibility,” we propose a general theory of ideology as the non-recognition or disavowal of the impossibility of society and the subject. The constitutive lack that characterizes both the socio-symbolic order and structural identity is denied through identificatory practices that take as their objects nodal points, signifiers, discursive positions, images, and objects of desire that incarnate the impossible closure of that order or that seem to offer the promise of stable identity. This chapter also develops a model of ideological identification adapted from Lacanian schemas of alienation and separation in order to account for both naïve and cynical ideological practice.

Before moving on to an account of the social order in terms of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, it will be helpful to first sketch the development of the theories of signification leading up to its constitution as a frame of analysis. This detour will establish some basic principles that will be crucial to the subsequent elaboration of the discursive construction of the social. We will examine the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and the formalization of his structural linguistics into a “science of the sign,” and then proceed to the radicalization of semiotics through Lacan’s theory of the signifier and Derrida’s critique of logocentrism and structural totality.

1.2 From a Theory of the Sign to Discourse Theory

Unlike classical linguistics, which seeks to explain the historical development of language through time, Ferdinand de Saussure utilizes a synchronic analysis to explain how linguistic structures produce meaning. Saussurean linguistics approaches language as a system of rules for combination and substitution (*la langue*), which both used and

produced by individual speech acts (*la parole*). Saussure's analysis of language rejects the common sense notion that language is "a naming-process—a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names." Denying that words have any natural, unmediated relation to the objects they constitute, Saussure develops a theory of the linguistic sign as a "two-sided psychological entity." The sign does not consist of "a thing and a name," but rather of "a concept and a sound-image" that Saussure designates respectively, a signified and a signifier (Saussure 65-66).

Based upon this formulation of the linguistic sign, Saussure famously concludes, "in language there are only differences *without positive terms*" (120). The signifier, or mental sound-image, has no positive existence as a term outside of its relationship to other terms within a language. The sound-image [peʹr], for example, has no intrinsic identity or positive existence outside of its relative variance, within a particular system of differences, from other signifiers such as [deʹr] and [teʹr]. The same is true of a signified such as "democracy," which only takes on meaning through its relations to such concepts as "communism," "despotism," and so forth.

Saussure also made it clear that the relationship between the two "sides" of the sign, the signifier and the signified, is "arbitrary" and "unmotivated" (67). The signifier has "no natural connection with the signified" (Saussure 69). The signified "pear" is linked to the signifier [peʹr] in English and to the signifier [pwar] in French. There is, therefore, no natural connection between the sound-image [peʹr] and the idea of a sweet juicy fruit with green skin. Each sign, "pear" in English and "poire" in French, is the result of the combination, according to the formal rules provided by its respective

language, of a signified and a signifier. The production of meaning, for Saussure, is the result of parallel differences between signifiers and signifieds operating according to a set of structural relations.

It must be admitted that there are a number of problems with Saussure's model. Chief among them is the claim that there is an isomorphic relationship between the signifier and the signified. As Stavrakakis explains, "Saussure retains the concept of difference as applicable only to the levels of the signifier (the 'sound pattern') and the signified (the 'concept') when viewed independently from one another. Viewed together they produce something positive: the sign" (23-24). In order to maintain that signifiers and signifieds operate in exactly the same way (through relations of difference) while also claiming that the sign is split, it becomes necessary to distinguish between phonic and conceptual substances. It is, however, a logical contradiction to look to substance to explain the purely formal operation of language. Such an appeal is not unlike trying to explain the rules of chess by distinguishing between pieces that are made of plastic and those that are made of stone (Torfing 87). Without the support of an illegitimate appeal to substance, asserting an isomorphic relation between these two registers must "necessarily lead to the collapse of the distinction between signifier and signified (and the dissolution of the category of the sign)" (Laclau "Identity" 69).

It was Hjelmslev and his colleagues who carried out this "dissolution." Imposing a stricter formalization, the Copenhagen School broke down Saussure's signifier and signified into smaller units, phonemes and semes, each set possessing its own rules of combination (Torfing 88; Laclau "Identity" 69). The separation of Saussurean linguistics

from notions of phonic and conceptual substances, and its further formalization by Hjemslev and others expanded its applications beyond linguistic analysis. The move from a theory of the linguistic sign to a general theory of signifying systems (semiotics), meant that structural linguistics' "general principles of analysis" could now be applied to such disparate cultural productions as fashion, advertising, film, literature, and art (Torfing 89). The social semiotics of discourse theory expands this analytic framework even further by investigating the discursive construction of social and political identities. It does so, however, by submitting formal semiotics to both the Lacanian theory of the signifier and to the poststructuralist critique of structural totality.

In *Lacan and the Political*, Stavrakakis provides a concise statement of Lacan's radicalization of the structuralist theory of the sign: "meaning is produced by signifiers; it springs from the signifier to the signified and not vice versa" (25). This represents a reversal within semiotics for, as Derrida has demonstrated, the structural division of the sign into signifier and signified has always implicitly privileged the latter. The partitioning of the sign is, in fact, another manifestation of the time-honored metaphysical "distinction between the sensible and the intelligible" (Derrida OG 13). Such a distinction serves the end of isolating meaning or "intelligibility" from the merely "sensible" signifier. This division reflects a desire for "a signified able to 'take place' in its intelligibility, before its 'fall,' before any expulsion into the exteriority of the sensible here below" (Derrida OG 13). To imagine such a pure signified requires that the signifier be figured as lack, dispersion, and difference in relation to a full, unified, and self-identical plenitude of meaning. A signified constituted in this way would be

transcendental in relation to the sign; it would be pure meaning, anterior to and ultimately separate from any discursive articulation.

Contrary to this metaphysical prejudice in favor of the signified, Lacan asserts the autonomy of the signifier. The signifier does not transparently express a pre-given meaning; meaning is an effect of the relations between signifiers and their articulations within signifying chains. In “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,” Lacan writes the relationship between the two terms as S/s: “the signifier over the signified, 'over' corresponding to the bar separating the two stages” (*Ecrits* 141). Rather than two terms in an isomorphic relationship or two sides of a single positive entity (the sign), Lacan designates the signifier and the signified as corresponding to two “distinct orders” (*Ecrits* 141). The order of the signifier operates as a “system of differential couplings,” each signifier linking to others “according to the laws of a closed order” (Lacan *Ecrits* 144). A signifying chain is a set of such links between signifying elements, one that also always refers to other chains. Lacan suggests that we imagine a signifying chain as something like a set of “links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links” (*Ecrits* 145).

This dense interlocking mail of signifiers introduces into the theory of signification “an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (Lacan *Ecrits* 145). As Stavrakakis explains, “every signification refers to another one and so on and so forth; the signified is lost in the metonymic sliding characteristic of the signifying chain” (26). For example, imagine that the protagonist in a gangster movie breaks open a window with the butt of his tommy gun and shouts, “Get down! It’s the law!” before firing madly

at a car pulling into the driveway. If we understand the signifier “the law” to refer directly to the signified concept of a rule of conduct, we are likely to find this statement very confusing. The sense of the statement, however, actually depends upon the combination of one word, “the law,” with another to which it is formally related, “police officer.” In such cases we find that meaning is produced by nothing other than a “word-to-word” connection, a link between signifiers (Lacan *Ecrits* 148).

The “sliding of the signified” that Lacan refers to is also due to the diachronic dimension that metonymy introduces into the signified: “the signifier, by its very nature, always anticipates meaning by deploying its dimension in some sense before it” (*Ecrits* 145). This is to say that meaning never keeps pace with the unfolding of a chain of signification, but is always left behind, runs ahead, circles back, or is endlessly delayed. Saussure was forced to exclude this diachronic dimension from the signified in order to retain the notions of stable units of meaning and the isomorphism of the signifier and the signified.

Lacan draws equally on Jakobson’s notion of metaphor to develop his theory of signifying chains. For Lacan, metaphor designates the substitution of “one word for another,” rather than their combination (*Ecrits* 148). In a synecdoche, such as the one offered earlier, there is a relation of contiguity between the terms—“the law” is a whole, which refers to a part of itself that acts as its instrument, “a police officer.” Metaphoric relations, however, are based upon an assumed similarity between the terms. Returning to our gangster picture for a moment, let us imagine that the protagonist has just perforated the squad car with a burst of automatic weapons fire. With the proud defiance

typical of these characters, he shouts, “take that pig!” We can be assured that a similarity is being asserted between “police officer” and “pig,” as the terms lack anything like a formal contiguous relationship.

It might be disputed at this point that the relationship between the signs “law” and “police officer,” and “police officer” and “pig” are not at the level of signifiers, as Lacan claims, but at least in part at the level of signifieds. As we have seen, figuring the distinction between signifier and signified in this way results in the contradictory position of appealing to an essential difference between two kinds of substances, one phonic and the other conceptual. Still, if one must collapse any ultimate distinction within the sign between the signifier and the signified, why then assert the autonomy of the former as Lacan does?

Since the final aim of Lacan’s application of Jakobson’s theory of metaphor and metonymy is to describe the linguistic functioning of the unconscious, it is only appropriate to turn to a clinical example to resolve this issue. In his discussion of Lacan in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Laclau offers an answer to this question through

a reference to Bruce Fink's reading of a classical case study. Fink summarizes the well-known case of Freud's "Rat Man" in this way:

As a child, the Rat Man identified with rats (*Ratten*) as biting creatures that are often treated cruelly by other humans, he himself having been severely beaten by his father for having bitten his nurse. Certain ideas then become part of the "rat complex" due to meaning: rats can spread diseases such as syphilis, just like man's penis. Hence rat = penis. But other ideas become grafted onto the rat complex due to the word *Ratten* itself, not its meanings: *Raten* means installments, and leads to the equation of rats and florins; *Spielratte* means gambler, and the Rat Man's father, having incurred a debt gambling, becomes drawn into the rat complex. (Fink 22)

Laclau notes that some of the connections between elements in the "rat complex" operate by means of "a passage through the signified" (the link between "rat" and "penis"), while others (the association of "installments" with "rat" and "gambler") are linked solely at the level of signifiers ("Identity" 70). What the two different kinds of connection have in common "is a displacement of signification determined by a system of structural positions in which each element (conceptual or phonic) functions as a signifier" ("Identity" 70). Once it becomes clear that every signifying element "acquires value only through its reference to the whole system of signifiers in which it is inscribed," it is no longer possible to maintain a necessary distinction between signifier and signified (Laclau "Identity" 70).

Derrida parallels Laclau when he challenges the illegitimate division between phonic and graphic substance that leads Saussure to privilege speech over writing: "from the moment [. . .] that one recognizes that every signified is also in the position of signifier, the distinction between signifier and signified

becomes problematical at its roots” (*Positions* 26). Thus, we should avoid the fallacy of constructing differences between signifying terms on the basis of a metaphysical distinction between substances. “No element can function as a sign,” Derrida tells us, “without referring to another element” (*Positions* 26).

He concludes that “each ‘element’” whether signified or signifier “is constituted only on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system” (*Positions* 26). No element in a signifying chain can be constituted as a simple unit of conceptual meaning, the metaphysical understanding of the term signified. Each element—be it conceptual, verbal, graphic, etc.—only takes on meaning through the differential relations between it and other elements in the chain. This explains Laclau’s statement that “the primacy of the signifier should be asserted, but with the proviso that signifiers, signifieds and signs should all be considered as signifiers” (“Identity” 70).

If meaning is the result of the combination and substitution of signifying elements according to their relations in a signifying chain, then it seems that meaning could proliferate endlessly. The most common complaints against poststructuralist theories of signification find their basis in this potentially limitless polysemy: if the signified always “slides,” and if mechanisms such as metaphor and metonymy allow signifiers to enter into an effectively infinite number of displacements and condensations, then it seems that one can argue that a sign or a text can signify anything one wants it to. These objections needn’t delay us here, however.

With his term *point de capiton*, Lacan accounts for the partial fixation of meaning within a signifying chain. As he explains in his seminar on the psychoses, “everything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier, similar to these little lines of force that an upholstery button forms on the surface of material. It’s the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in [. . . a] discourse to be situated retroactively and prospectively” (Lacan III 268). *Points de capiton*, which social discourse theory refers to as nodal points, are empty signifiers that retroactively stabilize a group of floating signifiers by partially fixing their meaning.

The concept of discursive formations, regulated by nodal points that impose a partial closure, provides a compelling alternative to the notion of structural totality. In the absence of an essence, a fixed center that provides the single organizing principle of the structure, final closure is impossible. As Derrida explains, the notion of a decentered structure becomes synonymous with discourse: “it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center [. . .] that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was [. . .] the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse” (“Structure” 280). In the next chapter, we will examine in more depth the implications of a discursive approach to society that recognizes both the impossibility of structural closure and the inevitability of a surplus of meaning that escapes fixation.

CHAPTER 2

WHY IS SOCIETY IMPOSSIBLE?

2.1 Y2K, or The Problem of Undecidability

At first, the theoretical arguments offered in this chapter about the constitutive lack within the social field that prevents its final closure as society are likely to seem somewhat removed from everyday social reality. Yet, at the turn of the millennium it seemed to many that a single, widespread instance of structural instability might result in a cascading failure of our social-technological systems, possibly even precipitating a global nuclear catastrophe. News organizations, government agencies, and groups such as the Co-Intelligence Institute and the Cassandra Project predicted that the “year 2000 problem” could result in a disruption of flows in currency and oil, the loss of power in cities throughout the world, the release of toxic chemicals or radiation into populated areas, the collapse of the international banking system, or even the accidental launch of the Russian nuclear arsenal.

Setting aside these apocalyptic fantasies for the moment, we find in the Y2K problem the crisis of an undecidable structure. Many computers and programs, along with chips embedded in common devices, vehicles, and industrial machinery were simply incapable of symbolizing the year 2000. Because dates are used as a reference points for

a variety of calculations, programmers typically record dates as dd/mm/yy. By shaving the first two digits off of every four-digit year programmers are able to economize

memory, compounding the savings over millions of calculations. This presented a problem in the year 2000, however. It was feared that when presented with a “00,” most computers would simply process the numbers as “1900.”

The appearance of “00” after the orderly progression of a series of numbers (97, 98, 99 . . .) can be registered as the reiteration of the first number in the set (00), as a circling back to the beginning. Alternately, it can be registered as the beginning of a new sequence that will follow the pattern of the first. There is nothing internal to this string of numbers (00, 01, 02 . . . 97, 98, 99, 00) that provides a rule for which of these two possibilities is to be expressed and which is to be repressed. There is, then, nothing about this chain of signifiers that provides the basis for choosing one possibility over the other. As Laclau suggests, “no structure can find within itself the principle of its own closure” (“Discourse” 433).

An undecidable structure such as this one requires that a force, partially external to it, impose a decision about which organizing principle will stabilize it (Laclau “Discourse” 433). The failure of the structure to fully determine the relationships between its elements makes such a decision possible: “a decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program” (Derrida *Limited* 116). To recognize that a structure is *undecidable* is not, however, to suggest that it is *indeterminate*.

The Y2K problem perfectly illustrates Derrida's point that "undecidability is always a *determinate* oscillation between possibilities . . . these possibilities are themselves highly *determined* in strictly *defined* situations" (*Limited* 148). The appearance of "00" in this string of numbers can only be explained by a limited number of principles. Thus, although the meaning of this string is not completely fixed, it is not completely open either.

Before the intervention of concerned programmers, one of two structural possibilities was operable—the second iteration of "00" registered as "1900." Afterwards, the second iteration of "00" registered as "2000." In either case, the stabilization of the structure does not rely only on the necessary unfolding of its internal logic, but rather on a contingent decision, a force that acts on the structure but is not fully determined by it. The apparent closure of every structure is actually the result of such decisions "between structural undecidables" that in imposing one principle, represses those "possible alternatives that are not carried out." (Laclau *New* 30). The claim that closed structures, totalities, and positive objects are all the results of "decisions taken in an undecidable terrain" constitutes a significant break from forms of political theory that regard society, social relations, and social agents as empirically given (Laclau "Discourse" 435).

By recognizing the undecidability of every structure, a discourse theoretical approach denies the possibility of any fixed and immutable center that can, in advance, account for how relationships between structural elements will develop. In an early essay,

Derrida argues that the category of structure “has always been neutralized or reduced” in Western philosophy by attaching it to a center or placing it in relation to “a point of presence” or “a fixed origin” (“Structure” 278). This center is supposed to provide the singular and fundamental organizing principle of a given structure. As such, it acts to “orient, balance, and organize” the structure, while itself evading the process of structuration: “thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality” (Derrida “Structure” 278-279).

Derrida explains that the function of such a center, or essence, is to limit the “play” within a structure, to restrict “the permutation or transformation of its elements” (“Structure” 279). The center acts as the organizing principle of the structure, establishing the syntax by which structural elements can be combined and exchanged. Regulating the relationships between structural elements, but escaping the process of structuration, the center is also “the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible” (Derrida “Structure” 279). In economist models of society, for example, the internal logic of the economic level determines the form and function of other levels of the social totality. It not only provides the principles by which elements from these levels can be altered and arranged, but also imposes strict limits on this activity. Thus, although “the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form,” it nonetheless “closes off the play which it opens and makes possible” (Derrida “Structure” 278-279).

In Saussurean linguistics, the role of the center was played either by the autonomous subject or by the transcendental signified. This insistence on an essentialist conception of structure presented a considerable obstacle to the development of discourse as a theory of de-centered structures. In the first case, the unfolding of the signifying chain is dictated by “the whims of the speaker and does not present any structural regularity graspable by a general theory” (Laclau “Discourse” 432). In the second, the isomorphism between the signifier and the signified results in the production of the sign as a positive entity. In order to maintain the dualistic conception of the sign, Saussure appealed to a distinction between essences, one phonic and the other conceptual. The signified, as an intelligible unit of conceptual meaning existing anterior to any articulation in a sensible signifier, functions as the transcendental center of all signification.³

Beginning with the increased formalization of Saussure’s theory of the sign by Hjelmslev and the glossematic school of Copenhagen, structural linguistics began to overcome these limitations and to develop into a general theory of meaningful structures (Laclau “Discourse” 433). As we noted in the introduction, Hjelmslev refined Saussure’s model of the sign by subdividing the signifier and signified into smaller units, thereby rejecting the essentialist conception of the sign as a positive entity (Laclau “Discourse” 432). By investigating the institutional and linguistic structures that determine “what is ‘sayable’” in a given context, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and others questioned the structuring role of an autonomous subject (Laclau “Discourse” 433).

³ See Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing”

Poststructuralist developments further demonstrated that the identity of signifying elements within a discourse cannot be fixed through reference to a stable, transcendental signified. As the theories of Jakobson and Lacan indicate, the signified cannot be conceptualized as an unchanging unit of conceptual meaning bound to a particular signifier. The identity of the signified is, instead, contingent upon the diachronic unfolding of a chain of signifiers. Signifiers owe their identities, which are never completely fixed, to a system of structural relations between signifying elements. Without the structuring force of the signified acting as a stabilizing center, the substitutions, combination, or displacement of signifiers is only limited by the formal operations of metaphor and metonymy.

This is not to say that, in the absence of a fixed center, relations between structural elements can proliferate infinitely or haphazardly. Still, the movement from structural totality to discourse has (sometimes willfully) been misinterpreted as the absence of any organizing principle, the opening of structure to the unfettered play of its elements. Derrida, however, categorically rejects this position: “first of all, I never proposed a kind of ‘all or nothing’ choice between pure realization of self-presence and complete freeplay or undecidability” (*Limited* 115). The move to a conception of structure as de-centered and undecidable does not entail the “complete freeplay” of structural elements: “there can be no ‘completeness’ where freeplay is concerned” (Derrida *Limited* 115). A discourse theoretical approach to the social field recognizes that every configuration of social relations is undecidable and incomplete. Because their development cannot be reduced to the movement of an internal logic,

structural relations are always partially determined by an external exercise of power, a decision.

2.2 Discourse and the Field of Discursivity

As we have seen, “discourse” should be understood as a general theory of structure that moves beyond conventional distinctions “between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic” (Laclau “Discourse” 431). “Discourse” does not merely “refer to a particular set of objects, but to a viewpoint from which it [is] possible to redescribe” the production of identity and meaning in our social reality (Laclau “Discourse” 433). To consider the social field in terms of discursive practices rather than structural totalities and transcendent essences is also to move beyond the “positivity of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe 93). This approach recognizes that “society and social agents lack any essence,” and that these obtain their consistency only from the “relative and precarious forms of fixation which accompany the establishment of a certain [socio-symbolic] order” (Laclau and Mouffe 98).

Discourse, then, does not merely reflect or communicate a set of positive, pre-existing social relations, but rather “constitutes and organizes” them as such (Laclau and Mouffe 95). This conception of discourse sets a socio-symbolic analysis apart from other forms of political analysis, which often treat discourse as the ideas and beliefs of empirically given social agents. Far from playing a secondary role, discourses constitute the objects that we encounter in our collective reality and articulate the positions that are available to us as social agents. If Lacan found that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” discourse theory discovers that the same is true of the social field.

In *New Theories of Discourse*, Jacob Torfing provides a rigorous and precise formulation of discourse: “a differential ensemble of signifying sequences that, in the absence of a fixed centre, fails to invoke a complete closure” (Torfing 86). Torfing’s definition embraces discourse theory’s conception of structure as a de-centered assemblage of structural elements lacking any single, stable principle of organization. The identities of the structural elements do not depend upon reference to an essence or a totality. Identities are derived, instead, from the formal, differential relationships that elements establish with one another as the signifying chain unfolds.

Despite the poststructuralist formalization of the concept, the contemporary notion of discourse continues to be confused with “language” and “ideas.” A socio-symbolic analysis, however, does not seek to examine the rhetorics and ideas of empirically given social agents, but to account for the discursive construction of social reality. In order to occupy our collective reality, every meaningful object and social identity must be discursively articulated. It must be defined, at least in part, in terms of its differential relations with other signifying elements in an assemblage.

This is not to say that subject positions and recognizable objects are simply linguistic constructions or mental projections. Laclau and Mouffe are emphatic that “the fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition” (108). Of course, we are constantly encountering contingent events. Yet, if these are to be integrated into our reality, they must be assigned an identity through a discursive articulation. As the authors explain:

An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of ‘natural phenomena’ or ‘expressions of the wrath of God,’ depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside of any discursive conditions of emergence. (Laclau and Mouffe 108)

If an object or event is to possess identity and meaning, it must be given a place in relation to other elements within a signifying chain. An event may certainly occur that cannot be articulated by the discursive formations that make up the social order. Such an event, however, *cannot be thought in the category of “object.”* Without symbolic identity, it is not an object at all, but rather a traumatic irruption of non-meaning into social reality. If it appears to us at all, its presence will be spectral and uncanny.

With the formalization of discourse as a theoretical concept, the opposition between the non-discursive and the discursive is surpassed. The social field can no longer be divided into “an objective field constituted outside of any discursive intervention, and a discourse consisting of the pure expression of thought” (Laclau and Mouffe 108). As we have seen, there is no primordial objectivity that can be separated from any discursive conditions of emergence. Without this boundary of essence between the non-discursive and the discursive, a formal analysis discovers that social formations always possess a discursive character:

if the so-called non-discursive complexes—institutions, techniques, productive organizations, and so on—are analysed, we will only find more or less complex forms of differential positions among objects, which do not arise from a necessity external to the system structuring them and which can only therefore be conceived as discursive articulations. (Laclau and Mouffe 107)

Material social formations are *always discursive*. They are “relational systems of differential entities,” the development of which cannot be explained through reference to any “objective necessity (God, Nature, Reason)” (Torfing 90). Discursive structures are also *always material*. The structural elements that make them up may be linguistic or extra-linguistic: “the linguistic and non-linguistic elements are not merely juxtaposed, but constitute a differential and structured system of positions—that is, a discourse” (Laclau and Mouffe 108).

The appearance of a “7.0 Earthquake” in our social reality, for example, requires that an ordered set of relationships be established between a set of particularly violent tremors, the Richter scale, a set of devices used to measure seismic activities, a set of rules for making statements, a set of institutions (including professional relationships, textbooks and scientific journals, laboratories, etc.), and a subject position (seismologist) with the enunciative authority to categorize just these kinds of events. As this example demonstrates, we find within every discursive entity “a dispersion of very diverse material elements” (Laclau and Mouffe 108).

In order to explain the formation of differential positions, it will be necessary to introduce several interconnected terms from Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. The authors use the term *articulation* to refer to “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (105). The term *moment* designates a differential position that is articulated within a concrete discourse. *Element*, by contrast, is “any difference that is

not discursively articulated” (Laclau and Mouffe 105). The distinction between moments and elements is not between the discursive and the non- or extra-discursive. It refers, rather, to the degree of fixity/unfixity of signifying elements (Torfing 92-93). If a discourse is “a system of differential entities—that is, of moments” that fails to achieve final closure, then “such a system only exists as a partial limitation of a ‘surplus of meaning’ which subverts it” (Laclau and Mouffe 111).

Discourse theory labels this undecidable terrain of surplus meaning *the field of discursivity*. A conception of the social field as discourse, as a de-centered and incomplete structure that can never achieve totalization or closure, rules out the possibility that society could ever be constituted as a fixed system of differences. The impossibility of closure requires that there always be differences that escape articulation by any one discourse. Thus, Laclau and Mouffe argue that “‘Society’ is not a valid object of discourse.’ There is no single underlying principle fixing—and hence constituting—the whole field of differences” (111). If the articulation of elements into moments can never be completely carried out, there will always remain within the social “a field of undecidability which constantly overflows and subverts the attempt to fix a stable set of differential positions” (Torfing 92). This field is not simply extra-discursive, for just as the pure “interiority of a fixed system of differences” is impossible, so is “pure exteriority” (Laclau and Mouffe 111). For an element to be completely exterior to discourse, it would have to be completely internal to itself. Such an entity would be a self-contained essence, not a structural element. Thus, the elements within the field of discursivity are not completely external to the moments of established discourses.

Although elements may enter into manifold structural relationships with discourses, their identities (unlike those of moments) are not fixed by them. Elements, then, are equivalent to floating signifiers that do not possess anything like a fixed meaning, but vary widely according to their discursive context.

Lacking a totalizing center, discourse can never impose a complete fixation of the field of discursivity. To assert that there is nothing that escapes differential articulation within some discourse is, paradoxically, to slip back into the positivist position. One has retained the idea of a full positivity, merely transferring it from “an extra-discursive ground to the plurality of the discursive field” (Laclau “Death” 299). As Laclau cautions, “in the same way that we have a naturalistic positivism we can have a semiotic or phenomenological one” (“Death” 299). Discourse theory avoids a relapse into positivism by maintaining the openness of the field of discursivity as an ineradicable surplus that prevents the closure of every discourse.

Although there always remains a “surplus of meaning” that escapes articulation, discourses do maintain a relative closure. In order to account for this partial fixation of meaning, discourse theory draws from Lacan’s discussion of the *point de caption*, or quilting point. Laclau and Mouffe use the term *nodal point* to refer to empty signifiers that limit “the productivity of the signifying chain” (112). These signifiers play an important role in the stability of discursive structures, for “a discourse incapable of generating any fixity of meaning is the discourse of a psychotic” (Laclau and Mouffe 112).

As we noted earlier, nodal points retroactively stabilize groups of signifying elements by partially fixing their meaning. Slavoj Žižek offers a relevant example when he suggests that within the discourse of Communism, “class struggle” serves as such a nodal point:

‘class struggle’ confers a precise and fixed signification to all other elements: democracy (so-called ‘real democracy’ as opposed to ‘bourgeois formal democracy’ as a legal form of exploitation); to feminism (the exploitation of women as resulting from the class-conditioned division of labor); to ecologism (the destruction of natural resources as a logical consequence of profit-oriented capitalist production); to the peace movement (the principal danger to peace is adventurist imperialism); and so on. (87-88)

Until a nodal point fixes their meaning within a given discourse, elements are free to “float” without settling upon a particular signification. The nodal point is always “empty,” having no fixed signification of its own⁴. Yet, because it serves the structural function of retroactively joining signifiers to one another in a

⁴ For a more in depth account of the empty character of nodal points, see Laclau’s “Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?” in *Emancipation(s)* (Verso 1996, 36-47).

relatively stable chain, it is often mistaken for an essence, a transcendental source of meaning that becomes a site of identification and “mythical investment” (Stavrakakis 60). For Laclau and Mouffe, the practice of articulation consists of the construction of nodal points that transform elements into the moments of a discourse.

2.3 The Logic of Equivalence: The Discursive Articulation of Social Antagonism

The ordering of discourses and discursive fields relies upon the complementary logics of difference and equivalence. To this point we have been primarily concerned with the logic of difference. Semiotics, for example, refers to this logic when it concludes that the identities of signifiers are defined solely by their difference from one another within a particular discourse. The expansion of relations of difference is checked, finally, by the lack of a center that could impose a final totalization upon the field of discursivity. The surplus that accompanies any partial fixation of meaning is not, however, the only force that subverts the transformation of elements into moments (Torfing 96).

As Laclau and Mouffe explain, one of the factors barring the totalization of the logic of difference is the countervailing logic of equivalence:

the condition for a full presence [e.g., a structural-discursive totality] is the existence of a closed space where each differential position is fixed as a specific and irreplaceable moment. So the first condition for the subversion of that space, for the prevention of that closure, is that the specificity of each position should be dissolved. (127)

The logic of equivalence carries out just this dissolution by linking the differential positions together into a new signifying chain within which they are made equivalent. In order to be equivalent, two terms must first be different from each other. Equivalence, then, “creates a second meaning which, though parasitic on the first, subverts it: the differences cancel one another out insofar as they are used to express something identical underlying them all” (Laclau and Mouffe 128). The discourse of the global justice movement, for example, does not fail to articulate differences between its constituent groups: organized labor; students; environmentalists; feminist, queer, and anti-racist activists; “black bloc” anarchists; etc. These movements and their particular struggles are not rendered identical, but are made equivalent by virtue of their common opposition to neoliberal discourse and to the excesses of global capitalism.

The interplay between the logic of difference and the logic of equivalence provides the basis for the structuring of the social and political field. Although the logic of difference plays the primary role in establishing the identities of objects and subject positions within discourses, the logic of equivalence plays an equally crucial role in establishing *the limits* of concrete discourses. It does so not by reference to a center that unifies all of the differential positions, but “by means of excluding a radical otherness that has no common measure with the differential system from which it is excluded, and that therefore poses a constant threat to that system” (Torfing 124).

Chains of equivalence are also attempts to discursively articulate those forces of social antagonism which prevent the closure of the social field: “antagonisms [. . .] constitute the limits of society, the latter’s impossibility of fully constituting itself” (Laclau and Mouffe 125). In discourse theory, antagonism does not refer to mere hostility or to an objective or logical relation between terms. As Žižek explains, antagonism “is neither contradiction nor opposition but the ‘impossible’ relationship between the two terms: each of them is preventing the other from achieving its identity with itself, to become what it really is” (Žižek “Beyond” 251). This radical alterity, signified through chains of equivalence, acts as an ineradicable obstacle to the expansion of the differential logic of discourse.

A contemporary example can serve to clarify these points. The response of the Bush administration to the attacks upon the World Trade Center and the Pentagon represents the articulation of an antagonizing force through the expansion of a chain of equivalence. In a state of the union address delivered in January of 2002, President Bush declared that Iran, Iraq, North Korea “and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil” (par. 21). The President also suggested that this alliance of nations represents the “world’s most dangerous regimes,” an affiliation of rogue states that “threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons” (“Delivers” par. 23). In an earlier speech, delivered to the United Nations General Assembly one month after the attacks, Bush argued that “civilization, itself, the civilization we share, is threatened” by “enemies that hate

not our policies, but our existence” (“Remarks” par.12, 37). In this new global war, it is claimed, there is no neutrality: “nations are either with us or against us in the war on terror” (“Calls” par. 14).

In his speech to the nation, Bush signifies the differential entities “Iran,” “Iraq,” and “North Korea” in terms of a chain of equivalence. The term “axis” suggests an alliance between states with a set of shared interests and objectives such that they can be understood as constituting a single identity. In order to regard these nations as an “axis,” the differential identities of each must be subverted. Within the discourse of the war on terror, these regimes are equivalent by virtue of being “evil,” that is, by developing weapons of mass destruction that threaten the United States (whether wielded by the nations themselves or by terrorists who somehow acquire these weapons from them).

In order to articulate this equivalence, the specific political, social, and cultural differences between each country must be undermined. To regard these states as an “axis” the particular relations between them (or their indifference to one another) must also be suppressed. Iran and Iraq have a long history of conflict and remain bitter enemies. For its part, North Korea has never had significant diplomatic or military associations with either Iran or Iraq. Within this discourse, each discursive moment that once signified Iran, Iraq, or North Korea is transformed by the logic of equivalence and “acquires the floating character of an element” (Laclau and Mouffe 127).

The more moments that are pulled into the chain of equivalence, the more that each is drained of its specificity and meaning. The result is not the creation of a new identity that would provide a legitimate place for the antagonizing force in the discursive system. The emptiness of the term “axis of evil” is due to the fact that within the discourse of the war on terror, it is constructed as a negation of the discourse rather than as a moment within it—the only positive characteristic assigned to these regimes is that, collectively, they represent a threats to “us” and “civilization.”

Within the discourse of the war on terror, the “axis of evil” does not represent a physical force opposed to “civilization” in the same way that two colliding objects are opposed to each other. Social forces are not physical objects, and any discussion of them in terms of opposition is entirely metaphorical (Laclau and Mouffe 123). Discursively articulated social forces are not simply conceptual either, and the antagonisms between them cannot be explained in terms of logical contradiction. As Laclau and Mouffe observe, “we all participate in a number of mutually contradictory belief systems, and yet no antagonism emerges from these contradictions. Contradiction does not, therefore, necessarily imply an antagonistic relation” (124). The “axis of evil” does not simply contradict the logic of civilization; it threatens the existence of civilization.

The relationship between “civilization” and the “axis of evil” cannot be expressed in terms of A / B. The “axis of evil” does not possess a positive and complete identity, the characteristics of which can simply be contrasted to

“civilization.” Neither can the axis be reduced to “non-A.” That which is not “A” simply differs from “A” in some way. Such a difference could be domesticated as a moment within a discourse of “civilization.” Here, however, the axis of evil is actually “anti-A,” the active negation of civilization. According to the discourse of the war on terror, the antagonizing force does not represent a counter-discourse opposed to “our policies,” but a force of radical negation, an incarnate evil that “hates our existence.” The differences between these countries only matter in the chain of equivalence insofar as they express the same identical “evil” and “hatred.” At the extreme of absolute equivalence identity becomes purely negative.

What the ideological understanding of antagonism overlooks is the impossibility of closure. Prior to any antagonistic force threatening it, every discursive identity is already incomplete: “if identities are only differences within a discursive system, no identity can be fully constituted unless the system is a closed one” (Laclau “Discourse” 433). “A,” in the first place, is never completely “A.” The discursive articulation of antagonism relies upon the illusion that it is possible for society to achieve complete self-identity as a closed system of differences. It is further posited that that this (imaginary) closure and stability is threatened and subverted *only* by an external, antagonistic force. With the annihilation of the antagonist, it is promised, the constitution of that impossible object, “society,” is assured. Or, as President Bush expresses it, “we know that evil is real, but good will prevail against it” (“Remarks” 39).

Within a given social field, neither the logic of difference nor the logic of equivalence will dominate completely (Torfing 125). Although chains of equivalence may subvert the differential character of discursive positions, “equivalential condensation is never complete. If society is not totally possible, neither is it totally impossible” (Laclau and Mouffe 129). With the expansion of the logic of difference, identities proliferate and the social field becomes more complex. By contrast, the expansion of the logic of equivalence results in “the simplification of the political space” (Laclau and Mouffe 130).

Within the present national rhetoric we find precisely this condensation of the discursive field. The war on terror reduces the complexity of international relations to “a clear-cut political frontier” which divides the world into two antagonistic camps, those who are “with us” and those who are “against us” (Torfing 126). Clearly, the impact of the expansion of the logic of equivalence is not limited to those who are “against us.” We are called on, in the war on terror, to “act, first and foremost, not as Republicans, not as Democrats, but as Americans” (Bush “Delivers” par. 27).

The threat posed by evil forces imposes “a certain sameness” upon the two political parties (Torfing 125). As articulated in the discourse of the war on terror, the two parties are united as “Americans,” equivalent in their common commitment to “justice,” “liberty” and “freedom.” Yet, the differential identities of these terms is also subverted by the chain of equivalence. They begin to acquire the character of floating elements, signifying only the fullness of

community that is threatened by evil (Torfing 125). The disarticulation of these signifiers from their partial fixations within concrete discourses has produced disturbing results. Those suspected of committing acts of terrorism may be denied due process and detained indefinitely in the name “justice;” wiretapping and other forms of electronic surveillance may be used against protestors in the defense of “liberty;” and dissenting journalists and intellectuals may be intimidated, harassed, or fired because of the threat that they pose to “freedom.”

It is a mistake to dismiss the discourse of the war on terror as cynical manipulation or “empty rhetoric,” as a distortion of political reality (although it is certainly that as well). We should recognize it as an attempt to reformulate the discursive bounds of (Western) “civilization” and the United States (“us”). Whether or not it finally succeeds in stabilizing the social field in terms of the nodal points “good” and “evil,” “civilization” and “terror,” “us” and “them” depends entirely upon the outcome of a political struggle for hegemony. Because of the open and incomplete character of the social, a variety of hegemonic forces compete to fix floating elements as moments of their own discourses. The role of political struggle in the articulation of social reality is more or less pronounced depending upon the relative fixity of a given social order. That is to say, “the hegemonic dimension of politics only expands as the open, non-sutured character of the social increases” (Laclau and Mouffe 136).

The collective trauma of the September 11 attacks acted to dislocate the social field, disturbing the fixity of differential relations and expanding the field

of discursivity. Thus far, it appears that the political right has been better able to recognize and take advantage of this opportunity to rearticulate the social in terms of its opposition to an antagonistic other—“we are all Americans now.” As we will see in our next section, this projection of the impossibility of structural closure onto an antagonistic other that prohibits it is precisely the structure of social fantasy.

2.4 Social Fantasy: Between Reality and the Real

To this point we have been concerned with the undecidability of every structure, the distinction between discourse and the field of discursivity, and the discursive articulation of social antagonism through the logic of equivalence. All of these phenomena relate to what Lacan refers to as the symbolic register of human experience. As we have seen, the impossibility of society can be understood as the inability of signifying structures to articulate the social field as a discursive totality. Yet, as Stavarakakis points out, “if symbolization is never total then something must always be escaping it” (48). This “something” is the Lacanian Real. In order to explain the phantasmatic construction of social reality, it will be necessary to analyze the relation between discursive articulation and that paradoxical Thing which is “simultaneously both the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization *and* a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency” (Zizek SO 169).

In Lacan’s seminars and writings, the symbolic order (or the Other) refers to the external signifying network that determines, and may even be said to

produce, the subject. In his teachings, Lacan also emphasized that the Other is always lacking, that it does not exist as a closed and consistent totality. It is not surprising that a discourse analytic approach to the social field should have so much in common with Lacan's statements about the symbolic. Lacan's discussion of the symbolic order built upon and radicalized the structural linguistics of de Saussure and Jakobson. Discourse theory, in turn, appropriated and adapted concepts from Lacan—the production of the signified by the signifier, the logics of metaphor and metonymy, the function of *points de capiton*/nodal points. Lacan's conception of the symbolic order cannot be reduced to discourse (the Other as language). However, the description of the social field provided by discourse theory may be regarded as a partial account of the “socio-symbolic order.” Approaching the social field as a socio-symbolic order allows us to draw upon elaborations of the Lacanian Real and the structure of fantasy.⁵

In offering an initial definition of the Lacanian Real, we may render it as that which is lacking in the symbolic order. As we noted earlier, every object that we encounter in our collective reality must be constructed as an object of discourse; it must be symbolized. This necessity does not, however, preclude the possibility that collective traumas and other contingent events may occur that have no place in a particular socio-symbolic order. In fact, it follows from the impossibility of discursive closure that there must be exclusions and gaps in every

⁵ We will reserve our discussion of the imaginary register and a more precise discussion of the symbolic order in Lacanian theory for the following chapter.

social order, and that these are not accidental, but constitutive. The Real is the distortion produced in social reality when a given socio-symbolic order encounters what is impossible for it to symbolize if it is to remain consistent and intelligible.

Our present discourses, for example, are perfectly capable of signifying earthquakes of various magnitudes. Regardless of the death and destruction they may cause, such events can be integrated into our existing social reality. Encounters with the Real do not involve pulling away the curtain in order to reveal the “objective reality” or “brute materiality” of an event outside of any discursive articulation—e.g., the “simple fact” of an earthquake or its “literal” tremors. The irruption of the Real entails precisely the opposite; it is the “shock of a contingent encounter which disrupts the automatic circulation of the symbolic mechanism . . . a traumatic encounter which ruins the balance of the symbolic universe” (Zizek SO 171). Its presence is not marked by a lapse into certainty (it was, after all, only an earthquake), but rather by a disturbing experience of *unreality*. This is why, in his explanations of the Real, Zizek so often turns to the science fiction and horror stories for his examples.

More than any others, these genres stage the failure of social reality to retain its stability and coherence in the face of that Thing which has no place within it. In the classic film *Poltergeist*, for example, an invisible, spectral force threatens a suburban family. It begins by moving furniture, changing channels on the television, and tickling the residents. By the film’s conclusion, however, this

nameless force has bitten into flesh, spirited away the family's daughter, and invested quite ordinary objects—a suburban home, a clown doll, a dead tree, a television screen—with a fantastic, terrifying character. Soon after the disturbances begin, the family looks for outside help: "I already looked in the Yellow Pages. Furniture movers we got. Strange phenomenon, there's no listing" (*Poltergeist*). The Real is precisely that for which there is no listing, that which has not been assigned a place in the symbolic. Thus, the Real is not simply external to the symbolic, but is the retroactive effect of its failure (Laclau, "Identity" 68).

There is, however, another, "pre-symbolic" dimension of the Real.⁶ For Lacan, this dimension is associated with the infant's experience of unity with the mother's body before the acquisition of language, or more generally with an experience of the living body that is unmediated by symbolization. The pre-symbolic Real, then, is often retroactively fantasized as a state of undifferentiated wholeness and satisfaction. We will have more to say in the following chapter about the subject's traumatic entry into the symbolic order and the loss of pre-symbolic enjoyment. For now, it suffices to recognize that the concept of the Real refers not only to a failure of symbolization, but also to "the starting point, the basis, the foundation of the process of symbolization" (Žižek SO 169).

⁶ For the remainder of this study we will use the term "the Real" to refer to that dimension of the Lacanian Real that is the retroactive product of the failure of the symbolic. We will use the term "pre-symbolic Real" to refer to the radical non-meaning that founds the process of symbolization and is associated in Lacan with the enjoyment of the living body. Thus, we use "the Real" to refer to the specific gaps within particular symbolic orders, and "the pre-symbolic Real" to refer to that which disrupts *every* symbolic order.

The Real in this sense is the ground of the symbolic, the traumatic non-meaning that resists discursive articulation. The process of symbolization cuts down this radical negativity, but there are always scraps, remainders, and leftovers that disturb the smooth functioning of the symbolic. The pre-symbolic Real, then, is “an entity which, although it does not exist (in the sense of ‘really existing’, taking place in reality), has a series of properties—it exercises a certain structural causality, it can produce a series of effects in the symbolic reality of subjects” (Zizek SO 163).

Clearly, there is a very real danger of misunderstanding the pre-symbolic Real as a kind of essence. We have defined an essence as a positive entity that maintains its ontological consistency while determining the relationships between structural elements. The reference of every structural element to an essence also provides the basis for structural closure. The Real, by contrast, cannot serve as such a reference. It disrupts discursive structures rather than stabilizing them. Further, because the Real can only be posited through the distortions it brings about in the symbolic order, it cannot be said to possess any ontological consistency. The Real is an essence that does not exist. It is an entity that does not guarantee totalization, but blocks it. We should resist the temptation to dismiss out of hand the Lacanian concept of the Real as a contradictory or nonsensical concept, for the “immediate coincidence of opposite or even contradictory determinations is what *defines* the Lacanian Real” (Zizek SO 171).

The concept of the Real is valuable to socio-symbolic analysis because it provides a framework within which to theorize that force of negation that prevents the final closure of society. In his account of the Winnebago tribe, Claude Lévi-Strauss discovered just this force of radical negation: the Real of social antagonism. The Winnebago's were hierarchically divided into two sub-groups. When called upon to draw a visual representation of their village, members of the dominant group drew a circle within a circle, oriented around the central temple. Members of the subordinate group drew a single circle split in half by a clear line of demarcation. The standard, relativist reading of this difference would likely assert that members of each group simply perceive the actual organization of physical and social space in different ways. Žižek, however, argues that:

The very splitting into the two 'relative' perceptions implies a hidden reference to a constant—not the objective, 'actual' disposition of buildings but a traumatic kernel, a fundamental antagonism the inhabitants of the village were unable to symbolize, to account for, to 'internalize', to come to terms with—an imbalance in social relations that prevented the community from stabilizing itself into a harmonious whole. The two perceptions of the ground plan are simply two mutually exclusive endeavors to cope with this traumatic antagonism, to heal its wound via the imposition of a balanced symbolic structure. (Žižek "Class" 112)

The conflicting representations of the Winnebago's communal space both refer to the social antagonism that prevents the closure of the social field. As the hard kernel that resists the closure of society as a harmonious whole, social antagonism is the Real of the socio-symbolic order. It is unfortunate that in this and subsequent works, Žižek has sought to reduce the Real of antagonism to an

archaic and uncritiqued formulation of class struggle. For reasons that should, by now, be obvious, it is incoherent to assign a class character to that force which resists symbolization and prevents the closure of society.⁷

If we follow Lacan's teachings regarding the relationship between the symbolic and the Real, we must conclude that social reality requires the support of a fantasy structure that serves as its defense against the Real. Social fantasies mask the impossibility of society by positing some external other that prohibits its constitution as a well-ordered whole. As Stavrakakis explains, "the social fantasy of a harmonious social or natural order can only be sustained if all the persisting disorders can be attributed to an alien intruder" (65). Through fantasy, social antagonism is displaced onto an alien other who supposedly prohibits what is already impossible. The impossible fullness of society is presented as possible *by means of its prohibition*. The fantasy promises that, once the antagonistic other is annihilated, the present incompleteness of the social will be overcome and things will "return to normal." This "return to normal" is a return to "a lost state of harmony, unity, and fullness" that is nothing other than a retroactive production of the fantasy—a projection of fullness into the pre-symbolic Real (Stavrakakis 52).

The discourse of the war on terror, with its fixation on "security" and "terror" provides a clear example of the operation of social fantasy. America,

⁷ If the social field is founded, once and for all, on this single, Real antagonistic division then there is hardly any need for a socio-symbolic analysis of the social. In other words, one might as well declare as irrelevant all of the theoretical advances outlined thus far and become an orthodox Marxist. See Laclau's critique of Žižek's class reductionism in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*.

prior to the September 11th attacks, is posited as secure and free from fear. Within this fantasy, the only obstacle prohibiting a return to this impossible fullness is the existence of the enemy as an embodiment of “terror” and “evil.” If the fantasy is to be traversed, it must first be recognized that the impossibility of society is not the result of a positive, external obstacle. Although the choice of the alien other onto which the failure of society is projected is not purely arbitrary, it remains, nevertheless, *a projection* (Laclau “Structure” 198-199).

This is the point that Žižek wishes to make regarding Nazism:

What we are tempted to say is that the Nazi anti-Semitic violence was ‘false’ in the same way . . . betraying an inability to confront the real kernel of the trauma (the social antagonism). So what we are claiming is that anti-Semitic violence, say, is not only ‘factually wrong’ (Jews are ‘not really like that’ exploiting us and organizing a universal plot) and/or ‘morally wrong’ (unacceptable in terms of elementary standards of decency, etc.), but also ‘untrue’ in the sense of an inauthenticity which is simultaneously epistemological and ethical [. . .] even if the rich Jews ‘really’ exploited German workers, seduced their daughters, dominated the popular press, and so on, *anti-Semitism is still an emphatically ‘untrue,’ pathological ideological condition—why?* What makes it pathological is the *disavowed subjective libidinal investment* in the figure of the Jew—the way social antagonism is displaced-obliterated by being ‘projected’ into the figure of the Jew. (“Class” 126-127)

In Lacanian theory, truth is not to be found in the symbolic register, but in the Real. Thus, the displacement of the impossibility of society onto the figure of the Jew is untrue because it fails to recognize the Real of social antagonism.

Antagonism is constitutive of every social field, and the promise of closure offered by anti-Semitism can never be fulfilled. The phantasmatic figure of the Jew blocks a fullness that is always already impossible. Further, Nazism is

inauthentic in that it repressed the enjoyment invested in the figure of the Jew as a fascinating object that conceals the failure of the socio-symbolic order to constitute itself as society. It is inauthentic because it refuses the encounter with the Real of antagonism and desire.

A similar critique can be offered of the war on terror. To reach the level of social fantasy, it is not enough to point out that it is “factually incorrect” to describe Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as a formal alliance of terrorist states. Neither is it sufficient to condemn the loss of civil liberties through reference to the ethical norms of liberal democracy. An analysis of the war on terror as a social fantasy requires a recognition that the annihilation of Al-Qaeda, the “axis of evil,” etc. will not result in the achievement of a harmonious society. Such a society is impossible *a priori* because the pre-symbolic Real, in the form of social antagonism, is constitutive of the social field.

In August 17, 2002, the 115th birthday of Marcus Garvey, thousands of African American activists converged on Washington, D.C. to demand reparations from the United States government. In his speech to the demonstrators, Rev. Herbert Daughtry suggested that the “innocence” and “security” lost after September the eleventh never existed for many citizens:

those who are experiencing fear today as a result of September the eleventh—I just want to say to you: ‘welcome to Black America’ [. . .] We have lived with terror so long that we have normalized it [...] we have been subjected to terror as no other people.

The projection of the impossibility of constituting America as a well-ordered whole onto an alien other acts to displace the traumatic antagonisms within America onto an external enemy. As with anti-Semitism, this fantastic structure is untrue because it fails to acknowledge that antagonism is an ineradicable feature of every socio-symbolic order. As Rev. Daughtry's remarks make clear, it is also inauthentic—the Real trauma of racist violence is disavowed by positing that victory in the war on terror will allow a “return” to an America posited as secure and free from terror.

CHAPTER 3

WHY IS THE SUBJECT IMPOSSIBLE?

3.1 Every Identity Is A Failed Identity

Every identity is, necessarily, a failed identity. Because every socio-symbolic order fails to constitute itself as a closed system of differences, every social identity must remain partial and incomplete. To take up a place within social reality, the subject-to-be must recognize itself in the representations of a collective imaginary and in the signifiers made available by discourses. By identifying itself with images and discursive moments, this subject gains a semblance of stability and coherence. Yet, because identity can only be obtained by way of “a detour through the other,” the social subject must give up unmediated access to that aspect of its being which the social order cannot articulate (Fuss 2). Clearly, such an account of the formation of political subjects cannot be contained within the terms of the (now stale) opposition between class struggle and identity politics. What is needed, instead, is a psychoanalytic political theory that recognizes that “the politics of the subject, the politics of identity formation, can only be understood as a politics of impossibility” (Stavrakakis 35).

Key psychoanalytic concepts of identification, alienation, lack, and enjoyment are uniquely suited to the theoretical terrain opened by the poststructuralist dislocation of

idealist and essentialist conceptions of the subject. Psychoanalysis, especially the thought of Jacques Lacan, is capable of providing an account of the subject that does not

seek reduce it to a biological essence or to a structural emanation. The psychoanalytic subject provides a model that can fully embrace the poststructuralist critique of conscious present subjectivity while also avoiding its excesses. Because psychoanalysis has never located subjectivity in an autonomous consciousness, the much-hailed “death” of the Cartesian subject need not entail the dissolution of the subject as an analytic category. In particular, a conception of the social agent adapted from the Lacanian subject allows us to acknowledge the impossibility of structural closure and, thus, of full identity, while also referring to a subject that, although it lacks any independent ontological consistency, persists in excess of structural determination.

The theory of identification, as presented in Freud and Lacan, will provide the basis for our explanation of the subject’s efforts to gain a stable identity through a relation to the social order. As Diana Fuss explains, identification and its failure explicitly stages the impossibility of the subject: “identification is a process that keeps identity at a distance, that prevents identity from every approximating the status of an ontological given, even as it makes possible the *illusion* of an identity as unmediated, secure, totalizable” (2). For Freud, the desire to be the other, an ambivalent desire that may take the form of rivalry just as easily as adoration, is responsible for the formation of the ego as the seat of conscious subjectivity.

The ego emerges as a sedimentation of disappointments, love-objects that the subject has attempted to internalize in order to avoid losing them entirely. Although instructive, the theory of identification in Freud’s writing remains flawed and incomplete. Diana Fuss and Judith Butler offer productive critiques and expansions of Freud’s theory,

eschewing any simple opposition between desire and identification and examining those identifications that the subject has disavowed. Jacques Lacan introduces a distinction between imaginary and symbolic identifications and, unlike Freud, places the ego in the field of objects rather than as an agency within the subject.

Lacan also foregrounds the alienating dimension of identification; even when internalized, the images and signifiers that represent the subject retain their foreign character. The constitution of the subject within the social field, what Judith Butler terms *subjection*, is the result of a choice between a meaningless existence and an alienated existence in subordination to the socio-symbolic Other:

Bound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making, the subject seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent. Social categories signify subordination and existence at once . . . within subjection the price of existence is subordination. (PLP 20)

Clearly, this is no choice at all. In order for its existence to have meaning, for itself and for others, the subject-to-be must allow itself to be articulated through social and linguistic categories. To refuse a place in the socio-symbolic order is, finally, to slip into the abyss of non-meaning or delusion, to occupy a psychotic universe.

Staging the scene of subjection as the identification of a subject-to-be with the categories provided by the social Other raises the question of the ontological status of this subject. As Butler explains, “the figure to which we refer has not yet acquired existence and is not part of a verifiable explanation . . . the paradox of subjection implies a paradox of referentiality: namely, that we must refer to what does not yet exist” (PLP 4). In a

manner that parallels our previous discussion of the Real in the social field, the choice of the subject prior to subjection can only be hypothesized through its distortions in the psychic life of an already alienated subject.⁸

3.2 Identification in Freud and the Dilemma of Desire

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud grounds his explanation of identification and desire in the Oedipus complex and the family. The “little boy” in Freud’s narrative “takes his father as his ideal.” He seeks to act in the way that his father acts and to desire what his father desires. Patterning himself on the father, the “little boy” also desires (sexual) possession of his mother. This results in “two psychologically distinct ties: a straightforward sexual object-cathexis towards his mother and a typical identification towards his father.” Thus, Freud maintains a distinction between desire and identification, between “what one would like to *be*” and what “one would like to *have*” (Freud *Group* 60-62).

For Freud, “identification is the original form of emotional tie with an object” (*Group* 65). Identification, the desire to *be* another, precedes the desire *for* another. More specifically, Freud argues that the identification with the father “is a direct and immediate identification and takes place earlier than any object-cathexis” (*Reader* 639). All too often, however, desire for an object “regresses” to identification. When the

⁸ In this context “before” and “prior to” should *not* be read as referring unproblematically to temporal coordinates. In the same way that every reference to the “pre-Symbolic Real” is always made from within the Symbolic Order, every reference to a “subject before subjection” is a retroactive (re)construction of a mythic, inaugural scene. The positing of such a scene, awkward as it may be, is necessary if one is to account for the gap between the social subject’s symbolic identifications and that which cannot be symbolized by the socio-symbolic order.

relation to the loved object is blocked, the subject tries to take on those traits that it loved in the lost object or to occupy its position.

This provides one of the links in the logical chain through which Freud analyzes Dora's hysterical coughing. Dora, the subject of one of psychoanalysis' best known case studies, is a young girl from a wealthy family who is passionately attached to her father. By means of an extended interpretation that we will not attempt to summarize here, Freud concludes that Dora's fits of coughing actually derive from her jealousy of a woman (Frau K.) that she believes performs oral sex on her father. Dora's symptom is derived from the fact that her father receives sexual gratification from Frau K's throat. Her cough represents an identification with Frau K, one that compensates for the fact that this woman (rather than Dora herself) has become the object of the father's affections. According to Freud, Dora sustains her erotic attachment to her father by imagining herself in the position of the woman pleasuring him. An identification, then, may be built upon "a jealous rivalry." Freud explains, "a rival that cannot be overcome may be integrated into the subject's personality through an identification (*Reader* 644).⁹

This detour through Dora's case demonstrates that identification is "ambivalent from the very first; it can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as into a wish for someone's removal" (*Group* 61). Dora may feel strongly attached to Frau K. as the kind of woman desired by her father, yet she may also jealously desire to usurp her. Similarly, the little boy may admire and imitate his father, while simultaneously nurturing a desire

⁹ This is the example of identification in relation to the neurotic symptom suggested by Freud in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.

to eliminate and replace him. The psychoanalytic shibboleth of the Oedipus complex is itself founded upon an ambivalent identification with the father that supports both a desire for the mother and, later, a desire for the father's removal. As Freud says elsewhere, the boy's "identification with his father then takes on a hostile colouring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with his mother . . . it seems as if the ambivalence inherent in the identification from the beginning had become manifest" (*Reader* 640).

Freud also links identification with the formation of the ego. In psychoanalysis, the ego is associated with perception and conscious subjectivity: "it is to the ego that consciousness is attached" (*Reader* 630). It is well known that in Freud's theory the ego and the conscious processes associated with it make up only a small part of the subject: "at any given moment conscious includes only a small content, so that the greater part of what we call conscious knowledge must in any case be for very considerable periods of time in a state of latency, that is to say, of being psychically unconscious" (*Reader* 574). The ego does not merely fail to recognize unconscious thoughts and feelings, but actively prevents these from emerging into consciousness. The Freudian subject, then, is split along an axis that divides the ego from the content that it represses from consciousness. The psychic life of the subject is structured around "the antithesis between the coherent ego and the repressed which is split off from it" (*Reader* 631).

In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud explains that the ego is founded and maintained through identifications. When an object of erotic desire is blocked or otherwise becomes a source of disappointment for the subject, desire may be displaced onto some other

object. Alternately, the subject may identify with the lost object and “set [it] up again inside the ego” (*Reader* 638). The ego seeks to reconstruct itself in the image of the love-object, as if to say to the desiring subject: “Look, you can love me too-I am so like the object” (*Reader* 638). The ego, then, is constituted as “a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes,” an entity that takes its structure from the contingent “history of those object-choices” (*Reader* 638). Although the ego provides the subject with a coherent representation of itself, it is actually made up of a series of heterogeneous, and often conflicting, identifications. As Diana Fuss explains, “what Freudian psychoanalysis understands by ‘subjectivity’ is precisely this struggle to negotiate a constantly changing field of ambivalent identifications; indeed, subjectivity can be most concisely understood as *the history of one’s identifications*” (34).

The Freudian notion of identification, as we have outlined it here, can provide the basis for theorizing an unstable, desiring political subject. Yet, as Fuss cautions, Freudian identification “carries with it a host of theoretical problems, ideological incoherencies, and conceptual difficulties” (11). Before providing an explanation of the role played by identification in the formation of socio-political subjects, it will first be necessary to speak to some of these difficulties. Principle among them is the strict opposition that Freudian theory maintains between identification and desire, the desire to be the other and the desire for the other. As Fuss points out, “to desire and to identify with the same person at the same time is, in this model, a theoretical impossibility” (Fuss 11). In their heterodox appropriations of identification, feminists, queer theorists, and others have thoroughly undermined this distinction.

Fuss is not alone in arguing that the boundary between identification and desire serves the function of disavowing same-sex desire: “if two people of the same sex desire one another, it is because one of the two has cross-identified with the opposite sex” (12). In other words, to desire someone of the same sex first requires a “regression” from heterosexual desire to identification. Consequently, “for Freud, the story of homosexual desire is always a displaced form of heterosexuality” (Fuss 12). Lesbian desire, for example, is understood as the result of a masculine identification that then mimics a “normal” desire for other women. The assumption of a normative heterosexuality cannot, finally, provide grounds for a legitimate epistemological distinction between desire and identification. Even in Freud’s own texts, the relationship between desire and identification is far more complex than an opposition between separate processes will allow. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, for example, Freud describes identification as “a preliminary stage of object-choice, that is the first way . . . that the ego picks out an object” (*Reader* 587). Despite Freud’s attempt to separate them, desire and identification interpenetrate each other and the boundaries between them remain fluid and indeterminate.

Judith Butler makes precisely this point in her discussion of identification in *Bodies That Matter*: “to identify is not to oppose desire” (100). Butler suggests, instead, that identification is the site at which desire is negotiated. The identifications with socially available images and signifiers that found the subject are themselves expressions of desire: “the subject pursues subordination as the promise of existence . . . [and] subjection exploits the desire for existence, where existence is always conferred from

elsewhere” (PLP 21). The inauguration of the subject through identification with and subordination to the social order requires a logically “prior desire for social existence, a desire exploited by regulatory power” (PLP 19).

Butler’s work also introduces the valuable category of “disavowed identifications,” identifications that protect the subject from socially prohibited desires. Because it involves an ambivalent relationship to its object, identification may facilitate a desire or, alternately, defend against it. Marking a decisive break from psychoanalytic orthodoxy, Butler maintains that “sexed positions are . . . secured through the repudiation and abjection of homosexuality and the assumption of a normative heterosexuality” (BTM 111). The maintenance of a relatively consistent identification with a normative gendered subject position, then, requires the disavowal of those identifications that may disrupt normative heterosexuality. Though renounced, these disidentifications (with queers, butches, queens, and others) *are still identifications*: “a radical refusal to identify with a given position suggests that on some level an identification has already taken place, an identification that is made and disavowed” (BTM 113). The formation of the normative heterosexual subject requires not only a rejection of *the desire to be* some “other” gender, but also *the desire for* a person with a gender like one’s own: “The formula ‘I have never loved’ someone of a similar gender and ‘I have never lost’ any such person predicates the ‘I’ on the ‘never-never’ of that love and loss” (PLP 23).

Thus, Butler suggests that identification with a normative gendered position not only presupposes heterosexual desire as its support, but also requires a disavowed

identification with non-normative gender and a foreclosure of same-sex desire. In Butler's formulations, we encounter the inadequacy of the Freudian division between identification and desire as well as the need to account for identifications that have been disavowed. Finally, Butler cautions that the illusion of coherent identities requires this double structure of repudiation (of what has been recognized and rejected) and foreclosure (of what has been repressed before even becoming conscious). Those identities that have the greatest power to elicit the subject's desire for unity and consistency do so "through the production, exclusion, and repudiation of abjected" subject position (BTM 113). Although normative gender positions present the most obvious example of coherency at the cost of exclusion, the politics of the normalized gay movement ("no sex please, we're gay") follows a similar pattern.¹⁰

Fuss and Butler's reformulations of the relation between desire and identification help to resolve a major dilemma within Freud's theory. Freud's assumption of the nuclear family as the primary site of subject-formation and of the father as the earliest identification have also been thoroughly critiqued. It is, however, beyond the scope of the present study to engage with the rich literature charting the encounter between feminism and psychoanalysis out of which many of these analyses emerge.

The work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari also provides a fascinating critique of Oedipalization (and the primary identification upon which it is, supposedly, founded) by arguing that the nuclear family is a uniquely capitalist social formation and that desire

¹⁰ See Michael Warner's *The Trouble With Normal* for an analysis of the normalized gay movement and what he refers to as "the politics of shame."

and subjectivity must be thought in terms of the syncretic category “desiring-production.” Here again, an exploration of the richness (and eccentricity) of a text like *The Anti-Oedipus* will lead us too far from the central concern of this chapter. It will have to suffice, then, to point out that one need not accept the Oedipal narrative or the primacy of the nuclear family in the formation of the subject in order to appropriate Freud’s notion of identification for the purposes of political theory. Further, Freud is not the only source for the theory of identification, as it is greatly refined in the work of Jacques Lacan. His account of the formation of the ego is a productive re-working of Freud’s theory and, finally, shares more in common with our explicit concerns in this chapter: the impossibility of full identity, the subject’s alienated relationship to images and signifiers, and the Real of the subject that escapes discursive articulation.

3.3 Imaginary Identification and Alienation in the Symbolic

For Lacan, the ego comes about when the child first identifies with a reflected image of itself. He goes on to suggest that this “mirror stage” should be understood “*as an identification . . . the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [. . .] an image*” (Lacan *Ecrits* 4). At the time of the mirror stage, the child is “an inchoate collection of desires,” a “fragmented body” characterized by “turbulent movements,” “confusion” and “disharmony” (Lacan III 39, 95, *Ecrits* 6). As Fink explains, subjectivity at this stage amounts to little more than an “unorganized jumble of sensations and impulses” (Fink 37). The mirror image, however, appears to possess the unity and coordination that the child lacks. The child is fascinated with the image offered by the mirror because it is unified and coherent in a way that he is not, yet he also hates

the image because it is an external and inaccessible object. As Lacan explains, “in as much as he recognizes his unity in an object, he feels himself to be in disarray in relation to the latter” (II 169).

The child’s identification with the specular image operates through the register of experience that Lacan designates “the imaginary.” The imaginary refers to the realm of images, whether “conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined” (Sheridan 279). As illustrated by the mirror stage, imaginary relations are characterized by tension and ambivalence: “every imaginary relation comes about via a kind of *you or me* between the subject and the object [of imaginary identification]. That is to say—*If it’s you, I’m not. If it’s me, it’s you who isn’t*” (Lacan II 169).

Thus, imaginary relations are characterized by intense fluctuations between love and hate, a perpetual oscillation that can only find resolution in the symbolic order. The ambivalence of imaginary relations is due to the fact that the subject seeks unity and self-recognition from an external image that it can never fully integrate. As Lacan explains, the subject “will never be completely unified precisely because this is brought about in an alienating way, in the form of a foreign image” (III 95). The subject can never be self-identical; a gap will always remain between it and the imaginary object. Because it is founded upon such an ambivalent, alienating relation to an image, Lacan locates the ego in the realm of objects, rather than equating it with the subject: “the ego really is an object” (II 49).

The experience of imaginary identification is not unique to infancy, for the adult ego that provides the “mirage” of stable subjectivity is itself “an imaginary construction”

made up of “a sum of identifications” (II 243, 209). The jumble of conflicting identifications with socially available ideal images forms the basis of the adult ego. As Fink puts it:

Once internalized, these various images fuse, in a manner of speaking, into a vast global image [. . .] it is this crystallization of images which allows for a coherent ‘sense of self’ [. . .] and a great deal of our attempt to ‘make sense’ of the world around us involves juxtaposing what we see and hear with this internalized self-image [. . .] (37)

For Lacan, the appearance of the ego as a coherent, unified, and stable identity is an illusion concealing and repressing the operations of the unconscious: “the ego is essentially an *alter ego*” (III 39). When we refer to ourselves as “I,” (e.g., “I could never say/do something so horrible”), we are almost always referring to this synthesized and idealized version of ourselves.

Although the formation of the mirror stage and the ego are primarily functions of the imaginary, they are also supported by the symbolic. Images are always “enmeshed in the symbolic order,” and “the imaginary experience is inscribed in the register of the symbolic as early as you can think it” (II 257). The imaginary and the symbolic registers are distinct dimensions, yet they “criss-cross” and become “mixed up together” (II 105). Lacan also suggests “the symbolic relation is constituted . . . prior to the fixation of the self-image, prior to the structuring of the ego” (II 257). To function, imaginary identifications require the support of signifying structures. In the mirror stage, for example, the child will only internalize the reflected image if parents and others confirm—likely through spoken language, “yes, that’s you!”—that he should seek to identify himself with this image. Even before entering into the imaginary relation with its

reflection, the child has been assigned a name. This name may reflect both the desires of the parents and a discursive structure of kinship (a given name and a family name).

Before the child has formed an ego as an imaginary construct, he is already called upon to respond to the hail of his proper name, a signifier of the other's desire and the hail of an alien system.

In Seminar XI, Lacan describes the subject's entry into to the symbolic order as a "forced choice." No subject can occupy social reality without identifying with moments articulated by those discourses that constitute a given socio-symbolic order. To assume a social identity and to gain self-recognition outside of psychosis, the subject must submit to representation by a signifier. As we suggested, the most rudimentary example is the proper name, which signifies the subject to others. To have one's name erased from the symbolic is to be "rubbed out" of social reality, to die a social (if not necessarily a literal) death. Although Lacan assigns to the imaginary the primary role in the construction of the ego, he maintains that "that which is properly speaking the experience of the subject, that which causes the subject to exist, is to be located at the level of the emergence of the symbolic" (XI 219). To truly come into existence, the subject must submit to the forced choice of symbolic alienation. Thus, Lacan states that it is "alienation . . . [that] constitutes the subject as such" ("Position" 268).

In order to illustrate the compulsory nature of this "choice," Lacan compares it to a mugger that presents his victim with two unequal options: "your money or your life." To choose from among these options is to have no choice at all, for "if I choose the money, I lose both." (Lacan XI 212). Clearly, one must choose to give up one's money if

one wishes to survive the encounter with the mugger. The choice is “forced” because to choose the other option is to lose both one’s life *and* one’s money (which the mugger will surely take away once he has carried out his threat). Still, the choice to give up one’s money does not present an agreeable solution to the problem either, for “if I choose life, I have life without the money, a life deprived of something” (Lacan XI 212).

The subject’s entry into discourse and the symbolic order has the same character as the encounter with the mugger, but with much higher stakes. The Other demands that the subject choose between meaningful existence and unmediated access to its being: “the subject cannot be wholly represented in the Other: there is always a remainder” (Laurent 25). The discursive formations available to the subject within a given social reality can never completely symbolize her being. Yet, to have meaning and identity of any kind, the subject must rely upon discursive-symbolic structures. Consequently, as subjects, we are compelled to make a forced choice: “if we choose being, the subject disappears, it eludes us, it falls into non-meaning. If we choose meaning, the meaning survives only deprived of that part of non-meaning that is, strictly speaking, that which constitutes in the realization of the subject” (Lacan XI 211). Just as one must give up something valuable in order to escape death at the hands of a mugger, the subject must agree to live a life “deprived of something” in order to gain a symbolic identity.

This “something” is *jouissance*, the subject’s living being. In Lacan’s teachings *jouissance*, or enjoyment, undergoes a number of transformations. Any presentation of it is necessarily incomplete and involves an act of synthesis and interpretation. Here we are concerned with what Dylan Evans terms “*jouissance* of the body,” that remainder of

being which is in excess of the symbolic order's ability to symbolize and make use of. Thus, in his seminar entitled *Encore*, Lacan states that "being is the *jouissance* of the body as such" and that it can be defined as that which "serves no purpose" in the symbolic (XX 6, 3). Lacan also identifies the body as an "enjoying substance" (XX 23). The notion of substance advanced here does not, however, refer to an essential materiality, but rather to "the substance of the body . . . defined only as that which enjoys itself" (XX 23).

In this context, enjoyment can be linked with the concepts of the libido and the drives (Evans 11, Soler 52). Following Freud, Lacan associates the libido with instinctual energy or "pure life instinct" free of any aim to preserve or to destroy itself (XI 196). He also suggests that the Freudian drives correspond to "the drift of *jouissance*" (XX 112). Drives are established early in a child's development, when the instinctual energy of the living body becomes channeled and territorialized. As the child is cared for, sites of pleasure are inscribed upon its body, which define its erotic zones. Libido is thereby directed and the child's incoherent energies are converted into a set of drives (oral, anal, etc.), which are then culturally regulated. Some parts of the body become sites of pleasure (in Lacan's earlier writings *jouissance* is associated with pleasurable sensations, especially orgasm), while others are effectively rendered dead to enjoyment. The result of this process of territorialization, the drives represent closed circuits of libidinal energy that become fixated on particular objects. In its pursuit of its drives, the subject is actually seeking its lost enjoyment or, as Marie Jaanus puts it: "at stake in the drive are lost, objective fragments of our own body" (124).

The subordination to a signifier demanded by the veil of alienation forces the subject to give up any unmediated relationship to enjoyment and the drives: “at the very moment at which the subject identifies with such a signifier, he is petrified. He is defined as if he were dead, or as if he were lacking the living part of his being that contains his jouissance” (Laurent 25). Thus, the subject’s entry into discourse involves a fossilization of the libido, a draining away of enjoyment (Evan 13). The subject’s being-enjoyment occupies the position of the pre-symbolic Real in relation to the symbolic order, “the subject cannot be wholly represented in the Other: there is always a remainder” (Laurent 25).

Synonymous with the pre-symbolic dimension of the Real discussed in the previous chapter, the scraps of enjoyment left to the alienated subject persist as the ineradicable residue of symbolization. Still, we can only learn of this enjoyment-before-alienation after the fact and through the symbolic: “the letter kills, but we learn this from the letter itself” (Lacan “Position” 275). As we have seen, the subject comes into existence through the forced choice of identification with a failed structural totality. Yet, functioning as the pre-symbolic Real, the subject of enjoyment also acts as the indelible kernel that prevents the totalization of the structure.

To conclude our discussion of alienation, we offer a schema by Jacques-Alain Miller as a kind of visual summary of the process:

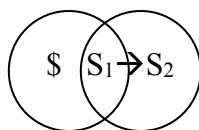


Figure 3.1: Schema of alienation

The (\$) represents the subject (S)¹¹ crossed by a bar (|). This bar marks the otherness within the subject: the split between the subject of enjoyment and the representation of the subject in the Other. The split subject (\$) is here placed in relation to the symbolic order, or the Other ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$). The Other consists of a master signifier (S_1) that fixes the signification of a number of other, secondary signifiers (S_2). As we have already discussed, master signifiers (nodal points-*points de capiton*-quilting points) are empty in themselves, but act to establish discourses by setting the boundaries for the free play of other signifying elements (Laurent 30).

Alienation describes the process by which the subject seeks a stable identity through identification with a signifier that represents it in the social field. This process should not be understood as a single moment in the development of the subject, but rather as a model for the relationship between the subject and the social signifiers made available by discursive articulations. The promise of a unified identity remains unfulfilled, however, because of the alienating character of the Other. As Stavrakakis explains, “the subject of the signifier, the subject constituted on the basis of the acceptance of the laws of language, is uncovered as the subject of lack *par excellence*” (20). The impossibility of a stable symbolic identity is due also, of course, to the promiscuity of the signifier, its tendency to metonymic sliding and metaphoric

¹¹ Pronounced the same way as “*Es*,” Freud’s id.

substitution. Asserting once again the primacy of the signifier over the signified, Lacan maintains in “The Position of the Unconscious” that the division of the subject “derives from nothing other than that very same play, the play of signifiers—signifiers, not signs” (267).

The subject’s quest for a stable identity, however, need not end with alienation. The subject may, in fact, realize that the stability it seeks through identification with a signifier is, finally, impossible. Lacanian theory uses the term separation to designate the process by which the subject recognizes the failure of the symbolic order to provide a stable and coherent identity. Separation occurs at the moment that the Other “shows some sign of incompleteness, fallibility, or deficiency” for the subject (Fink 53). Once the subject recognizes that both it and the symbolic order are barred (lacking and incomplete), she begins to desire some way out of the predicament. As Colette Soler suggests, “separation supposes a want to get out, a want to know what one is beyond what the Other can say, beyond what is inscribed in the Other” (49). Desire (a desire to escape alienation, to “get out”) is central to the structure of separation.

A second of J.-A. Millers’ schemas illustrates this process:

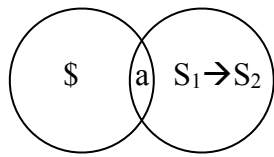


Figure 3.2: Schema of separation

Here, the split subject (\$) maintains an indirect relation to the symbolic order ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$), one that is mediated by some object of desire (a). As with the Lacanian concept of enjoyment to which it is related, this “object little a” is multifaceted and may be defined in a number of ways depending upon the theoretical or clinical context in which it is being discussed. For the moment, we will rely here on Stavrakakis’ explanation.

Because the symbolic also lacks, it cannot “provide us with a solution for our [own] division, an exit from this frustrating state” (Stavrakakis 45). In an attempt to resolve this dilemma, the subject fantasizes an object that conceals the lack in the subject and the symbolic order (Stavrakakis 45).

A childless young man may imagine, for example, that a successful child will be capable of redeeming the father’s failures and lost opportunities. Thus, the would-be father constitutes this unborn child as an object of desire that allows him to disavow his own failures and to maintain an ideal image of himself—“it’s too late for my dreams, but I can still see them come true through my son.” The same young man, having lived a different life in which he reluctantly accepted the responsibility for an unplanned child may construct this child as the singular obstacle to his own self-fulfillment—“if it weren’t for my son, I could make something of myself.” In both of these examples, the subject imagines that the presence or the absence of something quite ordinary (a child)

holds the magical power to grant him wholeness and completeness. We will have more to say about the object *a* in our discussion of cynical identification and ideological fantasy in the next chapter.

The constitution of every political identity takes place through the identification of the lacking subject with socially available images and signifiers. Yet, the subject's quest for a stable and coherent identity in the collective imaginary and the socio-symbolic order is doomed to failure. The subject can never impose a final suture between his being and the images and signifiers that he assumes. "What belongs to the socio-symbolic Other," Stavrakakis cautions, "can never become totally ours; it can never become us: it will *always* be a source of ambivalence and alienation and this gap can never be bridged" (34). The impossibility of closing this gap means that the promise of full identity is never realized and that the process of identification can never come to an end. It is precisely the failure of this process that triggers new acts of identification (Laclau and Zac 33).

The importance of this account of identification and the lacking subject to political analysis is not simply to explain the relationship of the individual to society and politics (Stavrakakis 36). One should avoid the temptation of misrecognizing the split subject as providing a model of "the individual psyche," the subjective complement to "objective" social relations. The subject cannot achieve the status of an "autonomous individual" any more than the social order can constitute itself as "society." If we are to retain discourse theory's insights into the impossibility of the social order, then a theory of the subject cannot simply act as the supplement that fills this lack in the "objective"

level. As Stavrakakis points out, “one lack is no lack at all” (41). In order to truly break from essential or totalizing conceptions of society and the social agent it is necessary to take into account both of these lacks—the lack in the subject and the lack in the Other” (41).

CHAPTER 4

HOW DOES IDEOLOGY MASK IMPOSSIBILITY?

4.1 The End of Ideology?

The constitutive incompleteness of the social discloses the always-present potential for structural transformation and subjective agency. A social order does not constitute itself as a stable totality governed by internal principles, but is established by contingent decisions that partially fix the social field. The subject is equally the site of a decision, exercising agency through practices of identification and articulation. The space of subjective agency always remains open because the determining power of every discursive formation is limited by its failure to fully constitute itself (Laclau *New* 44). The recognition of the possibility of agency and social change may be blocked, however, by discourses that reify the social order and collective fantasies that screen social antagonisms.

In order for the social theory presented in these pages to contribute to a project of emancipatory social transformation, it must be linked to a discourse of social critique that exposes the operation of ideological discourses and collective fantasies. By calling attention to the structural failures and social antagonisms that these conceal, a socio-symbolic critique could identify opportunities for new articulations. Such a discourse would also respond to the present need for a new mode of social critique brought about

by the epistemological crisis in the Marxist theory of ideology and by the need to explain the cynical social practices that characterizes the aftermath of the Cold War.

In contemporary critical discourse, the term “ideology” has approached the state of an empty signifier, divested of specific content, and linked in a chain of equivalence to “false representation,” “distortion,” and so forth. This evacuation of the specificity of the theory of ideology through an extension of a chain of equivalence is linked to the progressive erosion of any terrain that might be sensibly regarded as extra-ideological. The critical operations enabled by the classical theory of ideology require the availability of just such a terrain, a position outside of ideology from which to critique its mystifications.

Yet, if this position can no longer be secured by the usual methods (invocations of the scientific or metalinguistic status of critical discourse or the supposedly objective character of its descriptions), then the entire project of ideology critique is threatened. As a response to this crisis, the semantic and structural borders of “the ideological” have expanded to encircle a vast terrain. In “The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology,” Ernesto Laclau concurs with Slavoj Žižek that ideology may have finally succumbed to the centrifugal force of its own expansion: “at some stage the frontier dividing the ideological from the non-ideological is blurred and, as a result, there is an inflation of the concept of ideology which loses, in that way, all analytical precision” (297).

The relevance of the category of ideology is not threatened because it encompasses too little of the present theoretical terrain, but precisely because it

encompasses too much. If any reference to an “outside-text” or a metalanguage must be foreclosed, then it seems impossible any longer to refer to any reality or structural position that is anterior to or independent of the ideological. Ideology, a category originally intended to describe a relationship of distortion between objective reality and social consciousness, seems to have lost its ability to fulfill this function. As Laclau explains, ideology disintegrates as an analytic category to the extent that “it begins to embrace everything, including the very neutral, extra-ideological ground supposed to provide the standard by means of which one can measure ideological distortion” (“Death” 298).

The need for a new mode of social critique cannot, however, be attributed solely to the declining value of ideology as a signifier of a specific theoretical terrain. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the unchecked global expansion of Western consumer culture makes an analysis of cynical social practice a necessary and urgent project. According to Žižek, the opposed camps of Cold War antagonism represented “two modes of cynical ideology: ‘consumerist’, post-Protestant, late-capitalist cynicism, and the cynicism that pertained to the late ‘real Socialism.’” In the latter case, one was called upon to perform the empty forms of belief under the threat of totalitarian violence. In the former, society is supposedly structured around free argumentation and the consent of the governed, yet one is conscious that the near-monopoly control of mass media production by a small number of private corporations severely limits the constitution of anything remotely approaching the ideal of a public sphere (Žižek “Spectre” 18).

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek urges us to extend social critique beyond attempts to reveal the falseness of ideological truths. He openly wonders if “this concept of ideology as a naïve consciousness still appl[ies] to today’s world” (Žižek SO 29). Žižek seems, at times, inclined to dismiss such a concept in our present context in which the primary operation of ideology is cynical: “the subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask” (SO 29). However, in a period marked by the pervasiveness of naïve attachments to conservative, nationalist, and neo-imperialist ideologies in the United States—precisely the site where one might expect to find universal late capitalist cynicism—it is clear that the classical mode of ideological critique needs to be reformulated rather than simply discarded. There remains a persisting need to explain those identifications with ideology that are structured by “naïve” belief or the acceptance of doctrinal authority.

In order to understand the present dissipation of the category of ideology and to point towards the possibility of its “resurrection,” it is useful to examine several of Marx’s statements regarding social topology and class consciousness that have contributed to the present difficulties. The development of the theory of ideology has, in many cases, suffered from problems already present in these classical formulations. Although they are often combined in a given analysis, classical Marxism maintains two conceptually distinct approaches to ideology (Laclau *New* 89, Torfing 113).

According to the first approach, ideology is understood as a level within a social topology. In his *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, for example, Marx

describes society as a structural totality, consisting of two discrete levels, the economic structure and the superstructure: “The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which corresponds definite forms of social consciousness” (Marx 211). As the foundation of the totality “society,” the economic base (the social relations by which the material conditions for human existence are produced and reproduced within a given mode of production) determines the superstructure (non-economic social formations which can be explained through reference to the base) (Elster 172). Within this model, ideology (along with politics) is identified as a superstructural level within the social totality (Laclau “Death” 321).

According to the second approach, ideology is understood as false consciousness. This is the sense we find in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, which explains the rise to power of Napoleon’s bungling nephew in terms of a struggle between rival classes. Before turning to contemporary events, Marx and Engels briefly consider the symbolism of the French Revolution. Regarding the revolution as a struggle for the establishment of “modern *bourgeois* society,” they comment upon the use of classical imagery by the bourgeoisie to represent their particular struggle as one of universal human emancipation: “And in the classically austere traditions of the Roman Republic its gladiators found the ideals and the art forms, the self-deceptions that they needed in order to conceal from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the content of their struggles and to maintain their passion on the high plane of great history. . . .” (189). Thus, the

bourgeoisie maintained a false image of itself, that of a universal class capable of representing the interests of society in general.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx argues that such a distortion is a necessary element in class struggle: “every class striving to gain control . . . must first win political power in order to represent its interests in turn as the universal interest, something which that class is forced to do immediately” (Marx 120). Self-deception, however, is hardly a sufficient condition for securing control over the governed. If hegemony is to be maintained, those ruled must misrecognize their own interests, identifying these with the interests of the ruling class: “The class having the means of material production has also control over the means of intellectual production, so that it also controls, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of intellectual production” (Marx 129). In the hands of a ruling class, consciousness and thought become instruments of distortion and domination. The particular interests of the ruling class are falsely presented as if they were universal and the ruled class, lacking the ability to recognize its own interests, is deceived. In both cases there is a misrecognition, a failure of representation to properly mediate between consciousness (the subject) and material reality (the object) (Hawkes 14).

Clearly, a reformulation of the theory of ideology that builds upon an understanding of the social field as a constitutively incomplete socio-symbolic order must break decisively from the first approach. Theories of ideology that identify it with a distinct level within a social topology often rely upon an essentialist conception of the social, whether in the form of economism or structural totalization. In analyses that rely

upon the base-superstructure metaphor, there is a strong temptation to assign to the economic base the place of a fixed center that determines the form and function of the ideological level. Even when the relationship between ideology and economy is not defined in terms of direct determination, a topological model may still conceive of the economy as an autonomous object or *a priori* category, a pre-given positivity with no conditions of emergence other than its own abstract logic. Marxist theory has offered a number of corrections to these problems: asserting the relative autonomy of the superstructure and its reciprocal action on the base, for example, or bracketing the base-superstructure metaphor altogether (as Althusser does). There is no place, however, in our present theoretical framework for any conception of ideology as a level within the internal composition of a unified structure or objective totality.

A revised theory of ideology that would be consistent with the model presented in this study must emerge, instead, from the conceptual problems surrounding the categories of distortion and misrepresentation (Laclau “Death” 299). Again, our approach will part ways with the classical formulation. Within Marxist thought, the false consciousness approach to ideology usually assumes that social agents are constituted first and foremost as class subjects, and that ideology offers them a distorted representation of their true interests. It is claimed that these interests are derived from the subjects’ shared structural position within material relations of production. Laclau argues, however, that this approach results in a flawed conception the subject and social agency: “the notion of false consciousness only makes sense if the identity of the social agent can be fixed” (Laclau *New* 92). If, as we have been arguing, structural relations and social identities can never

fully constitute themselves, then the identity of the social agent can never be fixed in this way. This is not to say that social agents may not be constituted as class subjects, but only that this will be the result of a contingent articulation rather than the expression a structural necessity.

A theory of ideology that too closely ties distortion to the misrepresentation of class interests also runs the risk of reducing social antagonism and political identities to a pair of opposed positions within a closed structure. Laclau and Mouffe explain that, although a given social field may be divided into “two antagonistic camps” by the dominance of a single chain of equivalence, such a division is a contingent articulation and must not be taken as “*an original and immutable datum*” (151). Further, a description of our present political scene in terms of an antagonistic struggle between opposed classes fails to grasp its complexity. Contemporary social movements articulated in terms of environmentalism, anti-racism, global justice, and queer politics, for example, can’t be reduced to an essential (or displaced) class character without considerable conceptual violence.

However, the failure of the class reductionist approach to offer a convincing account of social antagonism cannot be explained simply in terms of the historical emergence of greater social complexity. Class struggle provided an insufficient explanation of Marx’s own time. It required, from its inception, the support of secondary forms of explanation:

class opposition is incapable of dividing the totality of the social body into two antagonistic camps, of reproducing itself *automatically* as a line of demarcation in the political sphere. It is for this reason that the

affirmation of the class struggle as the fundamental principle of political division always has to be explained by supplementary hypotheses which relegated its full applicability to the future: historical-sociological hypotheses—the simplification of the social structure, which would lead to the coincidence of real political struggles and struggles between the classes as agents constituted at the level of relations of production; hypotheses regarding the consciousness of the agents—the transition from the class in itself to the class for itself. (Laclau and Mouffe 151-152)

The pressure to explain the present in terms of class opposition is relieved in this version of Marxist thought by the promise that, due to the unfolding of the laws of capitalism, classes will become increasingly polarized at some unspecified time in the future (the “historical-sociological hypotheses”). As Laclau has argued, however, it is not at all clear why a logical contradiction in a mode of production must necessarily result in a war between opposed classes as orthodox Marxism contends.¹²

The other hypotheses supporting the model of class struggle are those concerning the consciousness of class subjects. When collectives of class subjects fail to recognize that they occupy identical positions in relation to the means of production, they remain merely a “class in itself.” Thus, commenting on the French peasantry under Louis Bonaparte, Marx suggests that “insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class” (200).

It is only when class subjects become aware of their shared interests that they become a “class for itself”: “insofar as a millions of families under economic conditions

¹² In the title essay of *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, Laclau argues that the distinction between contradiction and antagonism should be rigorously maintained. A logical contradiction within a mode of production may or may not result in social antagonism: “the fact that it is impossible for an economic system to expand indefinitely does not *necessarily* mean that its collapse must take the form of a confrontation between groups [i.e., class struggle]” (6).

of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class” (Marx 200). This supplementary explanation purports to explain why class subjects fail to recognize their objective interests, and thus to account for why class struggle does not emerge as the primary antagonism of a given social order.

This conception of false consciousness and class struggle is clearly incompatible with our notion of society and social agency. A socio-symbolic approach to ideology cannot assume that political agency and social antagonism must take the form of a struggle between opposed classes. We have argued, instead, that social agents are constituted through signifying practices that establish nodal points. These nodal points partially fix the meaning of other signifiers, transforming elements in the field of discursivity into the moments of concrete discourses. Through identification with these nodal points and discursive moments, subjects are constituted as social agents. We have also provided an account of social antagonism as a force of negation that prevents the closure of society as a sutured totality, a concept very near to that of the Lacanian Real.

Although it will not be disputed that social agents may be constituted through discursive practices that deploy the nodal point “class struggle,” it is not the case that these classes possess objective interests that can be derived from their position within relations of production. The aims of social agents are, instead, the product of the articulation of collective wills. As Laclau notes, even when a social agent is constituted as “the proletariat” or “the workers,” there is no guarantee that this agent will articulate its interests in terms of a struggle over ownership and control of the means of production:

unless we are confronted with a situation of extreme exploitation, the worker's attitude vis-à-vis capitalism will depend entirely on how his or her *identity* is constituted--as socialists knew a long time ago, when they were confronted by reformist tendencies in the trade-union movement. There is nothing in the workers demands which is *intrinsically* anti-capitalist. ("Structure" 202-203)

Following Laclau, we maintain a distinction between contradictions within production and class antagonism. The former may take the form of "a contradiction without antagonism" while the latter may take the form of "an antagonism without contradiction" ("Structure" 202). Laclau argues, "it does not logically follow from the fact that the surplus-value is extracted from the worker that the latter will resist such extraction" ("Structure" 202). Because the constitution of antagonistic social agents cannot be deduced from economic contradictions, the organization of the social order in terms of class struggle is not a historical or logical necessity. Class struggle, then, is only one of the many forms that social antagonism and political agency may take. If class struggle is a contingent form of social organization rather than the objective truth of the social order, then its necessary relation to the theory of ideology should be suspended.

4.2 Towards A General Theory of Ideology

In this study we have argued that the social order should be understood as an undecidable, decentered structure that is persistently troubled by a failure of symbolization and by the ineradicable Real of social antagonism. It also follows from the failure of every socio-symbolic order to constitute itself as a closed system of differences and the impossibility of fully symbolizing bodily enjoyment that self-transparent social identity can never be achieved. In this new theoretical terrain we must set aside the

notion that ideology can be located as a level within a structural totality or characterized as a misrepresentation of class interests. We should not understand the distortion of ideology as a false representation of objective social relations (e.g., relations of capitalist exploitation), but rather as the projection of the impossible closure, fullness, and self-transparency of society or the subject onto some particular content.

The concept of distortion normally assumes a primary meaning that is falsified in a way that can be made visible after the fact. Without a fully constituted prior meaning, it seems that one can hardly talk of distortion. Laclau proposes a solution to this difficulty that does not require reference to a prior objectivity or a transcendental meaning: “the original meaning is illusory and the distortive operation consists in precisely creating that illusion—that is, to project into something which is essentially divided the illusion of a fullness and self-transparency that it lacks” (“Death” 301). Despite its necessity, primary meaning remains an impossible object. Although the distortion constitutive of ideology requires a primary meaning to operate, the place of this meaning is a site of lack, not of fullness. Laclau describes this projection in terms of incarnation, the attempt by a particular content to occupy the place of primary meaning. The result is the double and interdependent distortion that characterizes ideological representation:

On the one hand closure as such, being an impossible operation, cannot have a content of its own and only shows itself through its projection in an object different from itself. On the other hand this particular object, which at some point assumes the role of incarnating the closure of an ideological horizon, will be deformed as a result of that incarnating function. Between the particularity of the object which attempts to fulfill the operation of closure and this operation, there is a relation of mutual dependency in which each of the two poles is required, and at the same time, each partially limits the effects of the other. (Laclau “Death” 303)

It is on the basis of this understanding of distortion that we may conceive of ideology as a denial of the constitutive lack of the socio-symbolic order and the subject through practices of identification. Here we wish to extend Laclau's formulation of the primary meaning that is distorted in ideology to the impossibility of stable identity, as well as the impossibility of society. Because these lacks overlap, our position is already implicit in Laclau's explanation.

The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to developing a theory of ideology consistent with the following general definition: *ideology is the non-recognition or disavowal of the constitutive lack of the socio-symbolic order and the impossibility of self-transparent subjectivity through identificatory practices that take as their objects nodal points, signifiers, discursive positions (moments), images, and objects of desire that incarnate the closure of that order and/ or the promise of stable identity* . Despite its awkwardness, this definition of ideology has the advantage of condensing the conclusions presented in the previous two chapters. The "and/or" of this definition is especially clumsy, yet it is necessary to recognize that not every ideological identification interpellates subjects through the promise of a harmonious society. Our most passionate attachments to ideological forms may seem to have little to do with a desire (conscious or unconscious) for social objectivity or a utopian social order. In many cases, the promise of stable identity alone provides a sufficient enticement for the identificatory practices of desiring subjects. The point we wish to make is that incarnations that do not directly promise the achievement of a harmonious society may nonetheless compel ideological

identification. The discourses of corporate advertising, for example, seldom aspire to establish a utopian society. They promise, however, that satisfaction, identity, and autonomy can be achieved through consumption and participation in the market.

This conception of ideology has the advantage of addressing both of the concerns we raised at the start of this chapter: the crisis of the Marxist theory of ideology and the need to critique cynical social practice. The definition of ideological distortion as the incarnation of an impossible fullness re-establishes a line of demarcation between the ideological and the extra-ideological. It is no longer necessary to establish the distance between a discourse of social critique and an ideological one by elevating the former to the status of a metalanguage. A discourse is ideological by virtue of covering over the lack in the socio-symbolic order and the subject; any discourse that does not fulfill this function is, by this definition, not an ideological discourse. In this context, to assert the non-ideological character of a discourse is to make no special claims about its status; it says nothing about the discourse's value, the veracity of its truth claims, or the nature of its relations to other discourses.

This conception of ideology also addresses the need to explain those ideological practices that do not rely upon conscious belief for their effect. A socio-symbolic approach to ideological identification maintains a distinction between non-recognition and disavowal, between a naïve relation to concrete ideological elements (signifiers, images, positions) and a cynical one. In the case of a naïve interpellation, the subject does not recognize that the object of its desire and identification cannot, in fact, provide it with a stable identity or ensure a harmonious society. In a cynical identification,

however, the subject knows very well that the ideology in question is lacking (to borrow a phrase that Žižek is fond of, the cynical subject knows that the emperor has no clothes). In this case, the cynical subject recognizes the failure of the ideology in question, yet engages in a fetishistic disavowal of this realization through an identification with some fascinating object of desire. This *objet petit a* promises to patch up the holes in the Other, or at least, in its captivating presence, to act as a distraction. Thus, ideological elements, operating individually or in assemblages, interpose themselves between the subject and a full recognition of social and subjective impossibility.

There remain several ancillary points that must be addressed before we discuss the differences between modes of ideological identification. First, we wish to align our approach with Althusser's thesis that "ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices" and that "this existence is material" ("Ideology" 125). Ideology is not simply a false representation, a figment of consciousness, but rather comes into being through ritualized social practices. Our claim for the material character of ideology follows directly from our accounts of discourse and articulation. Because every material object possesses discursive conditions of emergence, there is no boundary of essence separating the discursive and the non-discursive. As we argued in chapter two, material social formations are always discursive and discursive formations are always material. Discursive social formations are constituted, sustained, and transformed through collective practices that articulate linguistic and non-linguistic signifying elements.

Drawing from Althusser once again, we insist that "the category of subject

[. . .] is the constitutive category of all ideology” (“Ideology” 129). Ideology is dependent upon the activity of subjects and is also responsible for their production: “all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (Althusser “Ideology” 129). The constitution of the subject functions through interpellation, or “rituals of ideological recognition,” such as the introduction at a dinner party, the handshake with someone met in the street, or the policeman’s hail (Althusser “Ideology” 130). Yet it should be clarified that ideologies do not simply exist in a state of latency, fully formed in the abstract space of thought, waiting to be activated by individual subjects.

Judith Butler’s formulations of citation and performativity can help to clarify the way in which the apparent anteriority of ideology is actually (re)produced by the identificatory practices enacted by concrete subjects. The force of ideological ritual depends upon the activity of subjects who attempt to approximate and cite its ideal form in their performances. In the scenes of interpellation, subjects are compelled to play their parts as if they were citing a script, and are admonished if they “forget their lines” or take too many liberties with the (ideal) ideological text (Althusser’s “bad subjects”).

Yet, the production of ideology as a set of self-evident social norms and identities is, already, the result of citation. Ideology is constituted as an “anterior and inapproximable ideal [. . .] by the very citations it is said to command” (Butler BTM 14). An ideological practice does not exist “in a fixed form *prior* to its citation,” Butler explains, “but is produced through citation as that which exceeds the mortal approximation enacted by the subject” (Butler BTM 14). Here we are reminded that

subjection is characterized by a recursive logic: the ideal forms of ideological rituals are produced as a surplus of the identificatory practices of subjects who are compelled to reiterate just these ideal forms. Ideological distortion requires the manifold and diverse identificatory practices of subjects in relation to incarnations of closure. In the following section, we hope to provide a description of the different modalities of ideological identification through a schematization of the split subject's relation to nodal points, discursive moments, and objects of desire

4.3 Ideological Identification: Obedience, Transference, and Cynicism

We will return here to the Lacanian schemas of alienation and separation (introduced in chapter 3) in order to outline three relations between the lacking subject and an incarnation of social or subjective closure. Two of these positions, obedience and transference, may be represented in terms of alienation ($\$ \diamond S_1$ and $\$ \diamond S_1 \rightarrow S_2$, respectively). Ideological fantasy, however, must be mapped onto the schema for separation ($\$ \diamond a$). As with all schematizations, these represent a condensation of much more complex processes. These schemas also present ideological identification in terms of the subject's relation to the socio-symbolic order and only describe identifications in the imaginary register to the extent that these are supported by the symbolic. It is our hope, however, that these distinctions can serve as a heuristic for thinking about the manifold relationships between subjects and ideologies in terms that illuminate our general definition. Before proceeding, we should also reiterate that when we speak of identification we do not maintain the Freudian distinction between identification and desire. These practices may involve the desire-to-be, the desire for, or the desire-to-be-

desired-by the object of identification in any number of possible combinations and arrangements.

Nodal points that partially fix the meaning of secondary signifying elements structure ideological discourses. The subject in a relationship of obedience to an ideological discourse submits unquestioningly to its authority without seeking after the reasons for why it should be obeyed. A subject in an obedient relationship to a nationalist ideology, for example, earnestly enacts his passionate attachment to the nation's master signifiers by pledging allegiance to its flag, singing its anthem, saluting its troops, and obeying its leaders. He may even go so far as to sacrifice his civil rights or his own life in defense of the nodal points that provide him with the illusion of a stable identity as a "patriot" or "good citizen." His attachment to these nodal points may also be due to the fact that they present an idealized representation of the nation as if it were an objective fact. In either case, the emptiness of the nodal points is misrecognized and they are invested with the power to suture the subject and the social order. This form of identification is characterized by the subject's obedience to the practices compelled by ideological discourse, without requiring any justification as to why it should be obeyed.

In her discussion of Lacan's Seminar XI, Soler explains that in alienation the subject is presented with two choices: "either to become petrified in a signifier or to slide into meaning" (48). The obedient subject has become "petrified" through its unquestioning identification with the nodal points of an ideological discourse. This relationship can be schematized as $\$ \langle \rangle S_1$. $\$$ represents the split subject theorized in our third chapter and S_1 stands in for the nodal point(s) that incarnates social and/or

subjective closure. The obedient patriot questions neither the reasons offered for his loyalty, nor his own status as a “good citizen.” Such a subject parallels exactly “what Lacan calls a subject petrified by the signifier [. . .] a subject that doesn’t ask any questions” (Soler 48).

But what of the subject who, in alienation, chooses to “slide into meaning?” This subject maintains a transferential relationship to ideological discourse ($\$ \leftrightarrow S_1 \rightarrow S_2$). Zizek describes just this structure in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: “transference names the vicious circle of belief: the reasons why we should believe are persuasive only to those who already believe” (38). Although the ideological discourse is lacking and incomplete, the subject nonetheless regards it as the source of immanent, stable truth. By acting as if this discourse was already “in the know,” the subject allows herself to be convinced that stable identity and closure can be achieved. By seeking the truth contained within an ideology’s secondary signifiers, the subject has already submitted to its authority. An intra-ideological critique (there is no position outside of ideology) of the subject’s identification will face considerable resistance, for facts contradicting the ideology inevitably become arguments in its favor.

Zizek argues that such attachments ultimately serve to conceal the non-meaning of the master signifier that anchors the ideological discourse:

[Ideology is] *authority without truth*. The necessary structural illusion which drives people to believe that truth can be found in laws describes precisely the mechanism of *transference*: transference is this supposition of a Truth, of a Meaning behind the stupid, traumatic, inconsistent fact of the Law (SO 38).

Thus, a subject in a transferential relationship to a nationalist ideology denies the clumsy operation of authority, the traumatic non-meaning at the heart of the ideology. She justifies his allegiance to the nation's empty master signifiers through the secondary significations and systems of knowledge attached to these. This subject salutes the troops because she believes them to be the guardians of her freedom, obeys the country's leaders because they are democratically elected, and fights in the country's wars because she believes these to be just.

Finally, there is the subject of separation, the one who has seen through the ideology's illusion of consistency and closure. This supposed unmasking of the ideological illusion of "false consciousness" does not, however, free the subject from ideology, but rather places her in a new relationship to ideological discourse ($\$ \diamond a$). The subject maintains a cynical distance from the discourse's authority and truth claims, yet ideology continues to structure her everyday behavior. Further, the barring of the ideological Other results in the retroactive production of a fascinating object (the Lacanian object a). This object, in its dazzling presence, places itself in the site of lack that the subject shares with the symbolic order, offering itself either as the fetish that promises to suture society or as the singular obstacle to its achievement.

A subject participating in a nationalist ideological fantasy may act just as other subjects do—pledging allegiance to the flag, saluting the troops, fighting in the wars—but without believing in any of the ideas associated with these activities. Such a subject, having lost faith in the nation, may still wish for the nation to believe in itself, expressing this wish through the creation of some object a .

In *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek suggests that, with the fall of Communism, Eastern Europe has been constituted as such an object of desire for the West: “the real object of fascination for the West is the *gaze*, namely the supposedly naïve gaze by means of which Eastern Europe stares back at the West, fascinated by its democracy” (“Enjoy” 200). Although the West seems to have lost its fervor for democratic governance—many of us in the U.S. no longer even bother to vote—Eastern Europe can be imagined as the site for the production of a fascinated and fascinating gaze, one that originates from “the point from which [the] West sees itself in a likable, idealized form, as worthy of love” (Žižek “Enjoy” 200). Similarly, our cynical patriot may have long ago seen through the hypocrisy of the national rhetoric, yet he may perform his civic observances in order to enjoy the fantasy of a naïve gaze that looks upon him with love and admiration. Such a subject will persist in his own hypocrisy, so long as he may retain this fantastic object and the enjoyment that it organizes

By mapping the subject’s identifications with ideological discourse onto J.A. Miller’s schemas for the Lacanian concepts of alienation and separation, we hope to have provided a preliminary framework for thinking about the relationships between subjects and ideological discourses. A further study might examine the flexibility of subjects, their ability to move fluidly between these positions—someone who is largely cynical about the nation, for example, may be ready to submit in a period of nationalist expansion.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

We will conclude this study by providing an illustration of the advantages of our model while also recognizing its limitations. In the first section, “Artful Bigotry and Kitsch,” we offer a paradigmatic example of ideological fantasy through which we hope to demonstrate the relevance of a discourse theoretical-Lacanian approach to social critique. In the section that follows, “Axiomatization and Dislocation,” we address one of the shortcomings of our model: its failure to specify capitalism as a theoretical object and to describe its impact upon the social field.

5.1 Artful Bigotry and Kitsch: Irony, Racism, and Cynical Ideology

On April 18 of 2002, the Ohio-based fashion designers and retailers Abercrombie and Fitch withdrew a line of T-shirts featuring caricatures of Chinese Americans emblazoned with advertisements for fictional laundries and restaurants. One of the shirts promoted the fictional “Wok-N-Bowl” where one could eat Chinese while throwing strikes. Another offered the winking guarantee that at “Wong Brothers Laundry,” “two Wongs can make it white.” Asian American activists were quick to attack these images as racial stereotypes and to demand that they be removed from the racks. In an article for the online zine *hardboiled*, Kevin Lee asks: “Do they [Abercrombie and Fitch] see a mass of consumers so full of self-hate and self-loathing that they will latch onto any negative stereotype of themselves and parade it around town like a yellow minstrel?” (par.15).

Lee’s remarks suggest that the practices organized around these shirts function primarily to represent and to maintain the misrepresentations of Asian Americans by a racist ideology. Lee also argues that Abercrombie is hoping to capitalize on Asian American “self-hate” by marketing these shirts to consumers willing to identify with demeaning images that express a racist doctrine. Lee’s interpretation takes its form from the classical critique of ideology, the unmasking of the illusion that distorts some primary content (here reality of Asian Americans).

What such an analysis fails to account for is precisely the cynical operation of ideology at work in the practices of ironic consumption. The participants in the design, marketing, retailing and consumption of the shirts do not necessarily misrecognize the caricatures of Asian Americans as the reality of actual Asian American people. The racist

ideology at work in these practices does not act through conscious belief and misrecognition of an objective reality. It functions according to the structure of unconscious fantasy.

Writing for Poppolitics.com, cultural critic Mimi Nguyen points out that Kevin Lee's response to the T-shirts, while an effective first step towards an ideological critique of the images, is ultimately insufficient:

The clothiers acknowledge these are not realistic images. To accuse the company of 'misrepresenting' Chinese or Asian men, culture, whatever, with negative stereotypes, is to forego the messier aspects of contemporary cultural politics. The standard criticism -- articulated during the controversy as a matter of 'misleading [consumers] as to what Asian people are' -- does not suffice. (par. 7)

As Nguyen points out, it is not enough to simply reveal that the shirts are expressions of a racist ideology that conceals the truth of "what Asian people are" in their supposedly pre-ideological positivity (par. 7). This model of analysis, while retaining a degree of rhetorical and strategic value, is finally insufficient when confronted with a set of social relations within which the participants (here the marketers, retailers, and consumers of the shirts) don't believe in the truth of the ideology that they enact. Their identification with racist images and signifiers is not direct, but rather mediated by some fascinating object.

As Žižek has pointed out, one of the strategic insufficiencies of the classical critique of ideology is that the response to it has already been prepared "in advance" (Žižek SO 30). What better example of such a "response prepared in advance" than that of Abercrombie's spin doctors: "the public relations arm of Abercrombie

suggested that these t-shirts were meant to be funny. Ironic, right?” (Nguyen par. 12). As Nguyen points out, however, “in this instance, irony is conservative in its operation,” offering as it does the fantasy of a society free from social antagonism (par. 12). The inadequacy of the classical critique lies primarily in the fact that the marketers, retailers, and consumers of these shirts do not take ideological truth seriously—they already know very well that the racist stereotypes of Chinese Americans are a form of “false consciousness.”

From the beginning, the shirts subvert a literal reading through their association with the Abercrombie and Fitch brand name. Abercrombie & Fitch has associated its brand name with preppiness, provocation, and irony. Acting as a nodal point, the brand name retroactively establishes the meaning of the racist stereotypes depicted on its shirts by “quilting” the ideological field—giving meaning to signifiers that do not have fixed significations. The meaning of these signifiers (stereotypes of Chinese Americans) has long been established within a racist signifying chain, but as the “humorous” and “ironic” use of them shows, they remain available to other discourses.

The master signifier “Abercrombie & Fitch” assigns new meanings to these elements within its own signifying chain. They are now meant to connote humor, irony, and kitsch--meanings established and guaranteed by the “Name of the Brand.” As Nguyen points out, “the reproduction of an image of a historical stereotype *right now* is *not* the reproduction of the meaning of the stereotype in its original social creation” (par. 11). At the same time that we acknowledge the operation of a brand discourse, we should

remain attentive to the fact that the shirts' kitschy quality relies on a reference to racist ideology *as such*, even if just to laugh at it.

We find that it is inadequate to accuse the marketers, retailers, or consumers of an error of knowledge. The cynical subject has prepared a response to this critique in advance: "I don't believe any of that racist nonsense, how could you be so naïve as to take me seriously?" The classical notion of "false consciousness" is simply not operative here. The cynical subject has never really assented to the truth claims of a racist ideology; she knows very well that these claims are an illusion. The real "false consciousness" at work is the failure to recognize that the maintenance of ironic distance from ideological truth does not constitute freedom from ideology.

Nguyen engages in this critique when she points out that the practices of marketing and consuming these images, while not making truth claims for a racist ideology, nonetheless pose a certain "as if":

It implies that if a long enough view is taken, all histories, current events and individual dramas are insignificant in the "immensity of life." The production of these caricatures is not a gesture to reinstate turn-of-the-century Chinese exclusion, legal discrimination or even the emasculation of Chinese men, as much as it is a dismissal of these histories as meaningful in the present. (par. 12)

The marketing and consumption of these images, then, represses the Real trauma of racism that structures the socio-symbolic order of American society. The Abercrombie images are not a simple repetition of the racist stereotypes of a hegemonic articulation, but rather a repression of the history of racism. By acting *as if* this traumatic history is no longer relevant, the production and circulation of these T-shirts functions to maintain a

space of ideological fantasy. As we know, “the stake” of such fantasies is to deny the ineradicable antagonisms in society “that cannot be integrated” into its symbolization of itself (Zizek SO 126).

The practices organized around these Abercrombie and Fitch shirts clearly correspond to the schema of fantasy by which a split subject disavows the failure of the socio-symbolic order by maintaining an identification with an object of desire. The subject denies the truth-value of the racist ideology, going so far as to act as if it were completely irrelevant to the present. These practices suggest, contra Lee, that the racist ideology once directed against Chinese and Asian Americans no longer operates to negate the differential articulation of their identities. By disavowing both the power such a racist ideology retains to negate identities and the continued impact of its former hegemony, these practices imagine a sutured social space in which such images would not have the power to offend anyone. Thus, by reveling in the failure of a racist ideology to produce effects of truth and authority in the present, the subject is able to act as if he occupies a society free from the traumatic history of racism and the social antagonism it represents.

We should also not fail to recognize that “there is always a certain *enjoyment* attached to ideological fantasy” (Torfing 117). Concealing the failure of society to free itself from social antagonism by acting as if this has already occurred, “marks an eruption of enjoyment in the social field” (Torfing 117). In this instance, the ironic enjoyment of the shirts requires a naïve gaze, situated in the past, that has an entirely different relationship to the racist ideology. There is no pleasure to be had from the fantasy

organized by shirts, no winking transgression, if one cannot imagine that the ideology they mock was not *at one time believed by someone*.

Without the nostalgic enjoyment of this gaze, constituted as a Lacanian object a, the shirts lose their power to fascinate. They become just another article of clothing on an Urban Outfitters rack or hanging in a preppie's closet. To function, the fantasy requires the imagined gaze of a subject in a relation of obedience or transference to racist ideology. Further, this gaze must be exiled to the past so that it cannot threaten the contemporary closure of society that the practices presuppose.

5.2 Axiomatization and Dislocation

The project of the present study has been to formulate a social theory on the basis of insights drawn from poststructuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Although a socio-symbolic approach manages to resolve some of the conceptual difficulties that have plagued other theories (especially structural Marxism), it also fails (in a sometimes spectacular way) to resolve others. Rather than despair at this state of affairs, we may regard these shortcomings as an opportunity to further develop the model. As Laclau suggests, "if new ideas, new discourses, new social demands adapt badly to the ground they reoccupy it is this tension that must provide a starting point" (*New* 76).

It will be observed, perhaps, that one of the problems to which our model has "adapted badly" is the need to provide some account of contemporary capitalism. A social theory that cannot in some way formulate capitalism as a theoretical object or at least describe its effects upon the social processes in which it is embedded will retain only a limited relevance and utility to present struggles for social justice and global

emancipation. Adapting a discourse theoretical understanding of the social order to an analysis of capitalism is surely a necessary project, but one that is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of the present study. Here we will only gesture towards one possible approach to this problem by linking capitalism with a force of dislocation operating according to “axiomatization,” a dynamic social logic theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari point to the uniqueness of capitalism as a material social logic that articulates the social order according to axioms. They suggest that all other forms of social organization rely upon a logic of difference in order to establish a dense network of social codes that maintain qualitative differences between objects, individuals, and types of labor. Axiomatization, by contrast, establishes equivalences between discursively constructed objects and measures them in terms of quantities. Axiomatization is the logic of commodification that makes an hour of labor exchangeable with a pound of sugar, subjecting them both to “money as [an] abstract universal equivalent” (Holland 67). As Eugene Holland explains, axiomatization “defies and subverts” the codes by which a society establishes differences between “products,” “consumers,” and “labor-power” by applying the same “quantitative calculus” to all of them (66-67). Deleuze and Guattari refer to this process of displacing material cultural codes as “decoding.” They define capitalism in terms of “a social axiomatic that stands opposed to codes [differential articulations] in every respect” (Deleuze and Guattari 248).

As with other equivalential social logics, axiomatization results in a subversion of differential meaning: “axiomatic social organization under capitalism [. . .] is quantitative and strictly meaningless” (Holland 67). The identities of workers, for example, are

reduced to specified quanta of labor-power, and wealth is deterritorialized from any connection to discursively articulated material objects (property, machinery, and, in an age of electronic fund transfer, even paper money). Although the operation of this quantitative calculus may provide the basis for new forms of social antagonism, it does not, by itself, provide the means for their discursive articulation.

An equivalential logic of anti-colonial struggle, by contrast, subverts differential identities (race, gender, cultural difference) by re-articulating these elements in terms of a central antagonism between colonized and colonizer. Clearly, the nodal points “native” and “imperial subject” can serve as signifiers of passionate identification. However, barring a political terrain completely unfamiliar to us, “abstract quantum of labor-power” and “unit of liquid wealth” surely cannot. Thus, unlike other logics of equivalence, axiomatization is not capable of establishing the discursive boundaries of the social field. Or, to put it in Deleuze and Guattari’s distinct theoretical language: “unlike previous social machines, the capitalist machine is incapable of providing a code that will apply to the whole of the social field” (33)

Axiomatization, then, acts on the social order primarily as a force of dislocation. That is, it destabilizes the partial fixation of relations between structural elements that establish a given socio-symbolic order. This understanding of capitalism as first and foremost an equivalential, quantitative logic of disarticulation and decoding has the potential to provide the basis for a theoretical elaboration of Laclau’s observation that “there is something in contemporary capitalism which really tends to multiply dislocations and thus create a plurality of new antagonisms” (*New* 51). In the same essay,

Laclau notes that “commodification is at the heart of the multiple dislocations of traditional social relations” (*New* 41). Although it is productive of social antagonisms through the subversion of differential identity, axiomatization fails to provide a means for articulating these antagonisms. Instead, axiomatization “tends toward a threshold” of absolute decoding (Deleuze and Guattari 33). The limit of axiomatization is not the complete suturing of the social order (determination by the economy coupled with ideological hegemony), but rather its complete disintegration.

Yet, the articulation of the social order is not simply replaced or overwhelmed by axiomatic dislocation. Rather, by constantly de-articulating moments into elements, axiomatization accelerates and stimulates the activity of difference—more new identities, cheaper, and faster, in order to keep up with or to resist run-away de-coding. Insofar as they act counter the operation of a logic of axiomatic equivalence, equivalential chains are also deterritorialized and partially fixed social identities become visible again as floating elements.

Thus, the historical operation of capitalist axiomatization is to effect an evermore rapid decoding of socio-symbolic orders, transforming assemblages of elements and articulated moments into elemental flows. If the present source of our political optimism lies in the proliferation of unarticulated elements that allows for a political struggle for hegemony to take place through practices of articulation, then this situation can be attributed, at least, in part, to the operation of capitalist axiomatization. Late capitalism is characterized by the constant courting and displacing of the limit of absolute dislocation. It may be just this acceleration of de-coding (of essentialist class identities, for example)

that has multiplied and finally made visible elements *qua* elements in socio-political space in the same way that an earlier acceleration made possible the discovery of labour power *qua* labour power.

Although Deleuze and Guattari's materialist semiotics can provide some resources for rethinking capitalism within an understanding of the social field as a socio-symbolic order, there remain a number of perhaps unbridgeable gaps between schizoanalysis and discourse theory. Axiomatization will likely prove only a provisional model for reformulating the specificity of contemporary capitalism in the theoretical terrain of socio-symbolic analysis.

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