

“... *CE SEUL OBJET DONT LE NÉANT
S’HONORE*”

Slavoj Žižek

Let us take a closer look at Marx’s classical description of the passage from money to capital, with its explicit allusions to the Hegelian and Christian background. First, there is the simple act of market exchange in which I sell in order to buy – I sell the product I own or made in order to buy another one which is of some use to me: “The simple circulation of commodities – selling in order to buy – is a means of carrying out a purpose unconnected with circulation, namely, the appropriation of use-values, the satisfaction of wants.”¹ What happens with the emergence of capital is not just the simple reversal of C-M-C [Commodity-Money-Commodity] into M-C-M, i.e., of investing money into some commodity in order to sell it again and thus get back (more) money; the key effect of this reversal is the ETERNALIZATION of circulation: “The circulation of money as capital is, on the contrary, an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital has therefore no limits.”² Crucial here is the difference between the capitalist and the traditional miser, hoarding his treasure in a secret hide-out, and the capitalist who augments his treasure by throwing it into circulation:

The restless never-ending process of profit-making alone is what he aims at. This boundless greed after riches, this passionate chase after exchan-

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, International Publishers, New York 1967, p. 253.

² Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 254. – It is with this shift to the universal form of circulation as an end-in-itself that we pass from pre-modern ethics, grounded in a reference to some substantial supreme Good, to the paradigmatically modern Kantian ethics in which it is ultimately only the form of duty that matters, i.e. in which duty is to be accomplished for the sake of duty. What this means is that Lacan’s emphasis on how Kant’s ethics is the ethics inherent to the Galilean-Newtonian universe of modern science, has to be supplemented by the insight into how Kant’s ethics is also the ethics inherent to the capitalist logic of circulation as an end-in-itself.

ge-value, is common to the capitalist and the miser; but while the miser is merely a capitalist gone mad, the capitalist is a rational miser. The never-ending augmentation of exchange-value, which the miser strives after, by seeking to save his money from circulation, is attained by the more acute capitalist, by constantly throwing it afresh into circulation.³

This madness of the miser is nonetheless not something which simply disappears with the rise of “normal” capitalism, or its pathological deviation. It is rather inherent to it: the miser has his moment of triumph in the economic crisis. In a crisis, it is not – as one would expect – money which loses its value, and we have to resort to the “real” value of commodities; commodities themselves (the embodiment of “real [use] value”) become useless, because there is no one to buy them. In a crisis,

money suddenly and immediately changes from its merely nominal shape, money of account, into hard cash. Profane commodities can no longer replace it. The use-value of commodities becomes value-less, and their value vanishes in the face of their own form of value. The bourgeois, drunk with prosperity and arrogantly certain of himself, has just declared that money is a purely imaginary creation. ‘Commodities alone are money,’ he said. But now the opposite cry resounds over the markets of the world: only money is a commodity. [...] In a crisis, the antithesis between commodities and their value-form, money, is raised to the level of an absolute contradiction.⁴

Does this not mean that at this moment, far from disintegrating, fetishism is fully asserted in its direct madness?⁵ In crisis, the underlying belief, disavowed and just practiced, is thus DIRECTLY asserted. It is crucial how, in this elevation of money to the status of the only true commodity (“The capitalist knows that all commodities, however scurvy they may look, or however badly they may smell, are in faith and in truth money, inwardly circumcised Jews.”⁶), Marx resorts to the precise Pauline definition of Christians as the

³ Marx, *op.cit.*, p. 254–255.

⁴ Marx, *op.cit.*, p. 236–7.

⁵ This paradox is structurally homologous to that of Casanova, who, in order to seduce a naïve peasant girl, drew a circle on the grass and claimed that staying within it protects you from all dangers like being hit by lightning; when, however, immediately afterwards, an actual violent storm broke out, Casanova, in a moment of panic, himself stepped into this circle, acting as if he believed in its power although he knew very well it was just part of his deception ...

⁶ Marx, *op.cit.*, p. 171.

“inwardly circumcised Jews”: Christians do not need external actual circumcision (i.e., the abandonment of ordinary commodities with use values, dealing only with money), since they know that each of these ordinary commodities is already “inwardly circumcised,” that its true substance is money. – It is even more crucial how Marx describes the passage from money to capital in the precise Hegelian terms of the passage from substance to subject:

In truth, however, value is here [in the capital] the active factor in a process, in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it at the same time changes in magnitude, differentiates itself by throwing off surplus-value from itself; the original value, in other words, expands spontaneously. For the movement, in the course of which it adds surplus-value, is its own movement; its expansion, therefore, is automatic expansion. Because it is value, it has acquired the occult quality of being able to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or, at the least, lays golden eggs. [...]

In simple circulation, C-M-C, the value of commodities attained at the most a form independent of their use-values, i.e., the form of money; but the same value now in the circulation M-C-M, or the circulation of capital, suddenly presents itself as an independent substance, endowed with a motion of its own, passing through a life-process of its own, in which money and commodities are mere forms which it assumes and casts off in turn. Nay, more: instead of simply representing the relations of commodities, it enters now, so to say, into private relations with itself. It differentiates itself as original value from itself as surplus value; as the father differentiates himself from himself qua the son, yet both are one and of one age: for only by the surplus value of 10 pounds dies the 100 pounds originally advanced become capital, and so on as this takes place, so soon as the son, and by the son, the father is begotten, so soon does their difference vanish, and they again become one, 110 pounds.⁷

In short, capital is money which is no longer a mere substance of wealth, its universal embodiment, but value which, through its circulation, generates more value, value which mediates-posit itself, retroactively positing its own presuppositions. First, money appears as a mere means of the exchange of commodities: instead of endless bartering, one first exchanges one's product for the universal equivalent of all commodities, which can then be exchanged for any commodity we may need. Then, once the circulation of the capital

⁷ Marx, *op.cit.*, p. 171–173.

is set in motion, the relationship is inverted, the means turn into an end-in-itself, i.e., the very passage through the “material” domain of use-values (the production of commodities which satisfy an individual’s particular needs) is posited as a moment of what is substantially the self-movement of the capital itself – from this moment onwards, the true aim is no longer the satisfaction of individuals’ needs, but simply more money, the endless repeating of the circulation as such ... This arcane circular movement of self-positing is then equated with the central Christian tenet of the identity of God-the-Father and his Son, of the immaculate conception by means of which the single Father directly (without a female spouse) begets his only son and thus forms what is arguably the ultimate single-parent family.

Is then capital the true Subject/Substance? Yes and no: for Marx, this self-engendering circular movement is – to put it in Freudian terms – precisely the capitalist “unconscious fantasy” which parasitizes upon the proletariat as the “pure substanceless subjectivity”; for this reason, capital’s speculative self-generating dance has a limit, and it brings about the conditions of its own collapse. This insight allows us to solve the key interpretive problem of the above quote: how are we to read its first three words, “in truth, however”? First, of course, they imply that this truth has to be asserted against some false appearance or experience: the everyday experience that the ultimate goal of capital’s circulation is still the satisfaction of human needs, that capital is just a means to bring about this satisfaction in a more efficient way. However, this “truth” is NOT the reality of capitalism: in reality, capital does not engender itself, but exploits the worker’s surplus-value. There is thus a necessary third level to be added to the simple opposition of subjective experience (of capital as a simple means of efficiently satisfying people’s needs) and objective social reality (of exploitation): the “objective deception,” the disavowed “unconscious” fantasy (of the mysterious self-generating circular movement of capital), which is the TRUTH (although not the REALITY) of the capitalist process. Again, quote Lacan, truth has the structure of a fiction: the only way to formulate the truth of capital is to render this fiction of its “immaculate” self-generating movement. And this insight also allows us to locate the weakness of the above-mentioned “deconstructionist” appropriation of Marx’s analysis of capitalism: although it emphasizes the endless process of deferral which characterizes this movement, as well as its fundamental inconclusiveness, its self-blockade, the “deconstructionist” retelling still describes the FANTASY of capital – it describes what individuals believe, although they don’t know it.

This shift from the goal-oriented stance of consumption towards the properly capitalist stance of self-propelling circulation allows us to locate desire and drive with regard to capitalism. Following Jacques-Alain Miller, a

distinction has to be introduced here between lack and hole: lack is spatial, designating a void WITHIN a space, while hole is more radical, it designates the point at which this spatial order itself breaks down (as in a “black hole” in astrophysics).⁸ Therein resides the difference between desire and drive: desire is grounded in its constitutive lack, while drive circulates around a hole, a gap in the order of being. In other words, the circular movement of drive obeys the weird logic of the curved space in which the shortest distance between the two points is not a straight line, but a curve: drive “knows” that the shortest way to attain its aim is to circulate around its goal-object. At the immediate level of addressing individuals, capitalism of course interpellates them as consumers, as subjects of desires, soliciting in them ever new perverse and excessive desires (for which it offers products to satisfy them); furthermore, it obviously also manipulates the “desire to desire,” celebrating the very desire to desire ever new objects and modes of pleasure. However, even if it already manipulates desire in a way which takes into account the fact that the most elementary desire is the desire to reproduce itself as desire (and not to find satisfaction), at this level, we do not yet reach drive. Drive inheres to capitalism at a more fundamental, systemic, level: drive is that which propels the entire capitalist machinery, it is the impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of expanded self-reproduction. We enter the mode of drive the moment the circulation of money as capital becomes “an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital has therefore no limits.” (One should bear in mind here Lacan’s well-known distinction between the aim and the goal of drive: while the goal is the object around which drive circulates, its (true) aim is the endless continuation of this circulation as such.) The capitalist drive thus belongs to no definite individual – it is rather that those individuals who act as direct “agents” of capital (capitalists themselves, top managers) have to display it.

Miller recently proposed a Benjaminian distinction between “constituted anxiety” and “constituent anxiety,” which is crucial with regard to the shift from desire to drive: while the former designated the standard notion of the terrifying and fascinating abyss of anxiety which haunts us, its infernal circle which threatens to draws us in, the latter stands for the “pure” confrontation with *objet petit a* as constituted in its very loss.⁹ Miller is right to emphasize here two features: the difference which separates constituted from constit-

⁸ See Jacques-Alain Miller, “Le nom-du-père, s’en passer, s’en servir,” available on www.lacan.com.

⁹ See Miller, *op. cit.*

uent anxiety concerns the status of the object with regard to fantasy. In a case of constituted anxiety, the object dwells within the confines of a fantasy, while we only get the constituent anxiety when the subject “traverses the fantasy” and confronts the void, the gap, filled up by the fantasmatic object – as Mallarme put it in the famous bracketed last two lines of his “Sonnet en –yx,” *objet petit a* is “ce seul objet dont le Néant s’honore / this sole object with which Nothing is honoured.”

Clear and convincing as it is, Miller’s formula misses the true paradox or, rather, ambiguity of *objet petit a*: when he defines *objet petit a* as the object which overlaps with its loss, which emerges at the very moment of its loss (so that all its fantasmatic incarnations, from breasts to voice and gaze, are metonymic figurations of the void, of nothing), he remains within the horizon of desire – the true object-cause of desire is the void filled in by its fantasmatic incarnations. While, as Lacan emphasizes, *objet petit a* is also the object of drive, the relationship is here thoroughly different: although, in both cases, the link between object and loss is crucial, in the case of *objet petit a* as the object-cause of desire, we have an object which is originally lost, which coincides with its own loss, which emerges as lost, while, in the case of *objet petit a* as the object of drive, the “object” IS DIRECTLY THE LOSS ITSELF – in the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the lost object to loss itself as an object. That is to say, the weird movement called “drive” is not driven by the “impossible” quest for the lost object; it is a push to directly enact the “loss” – the gap, cut, distance – itself. There is thus a DOUBLE distinction to be drawn here: not only between *objet petit a* in its fantasmatic and post-fantasmatic status, but also, within this post-fantasmatic domain itself, between the lost object-cause of desire and the object-loss of drive.

This is why one should not confuse the death drive with the so-called “nirvana principle,” the thrust towards destruction or self-obliteration: the Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension; it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying – a name for the “undead” eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The paradox of the Freudian “death drive” is therefore that it is Freud’s name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny EXCESS of life, for an “undead” urge, which persist beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never “just life”: humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things.

What this means is that it is wrong to claim that the “pure” death drive would have been the impossible “total” will to (self)destruction, the ecstatic self-annihilation in which the subject would have rejoined the fullness of the maternal Thing, but that this will is not realizable, that it gets blocked, stuck to a “partial object.” Such a notion retranslates the death drive into the terms of desire and its lost object: it is in desire that the positive object is a metonymic stand-in for the void of the impossible Thing; it is in desire that the aspiration to fullness is transferred to partial objects – this is what Lacan called the metonymy of desire. One has to be very precise here if we are not to miss Lacan’s point (and thereby confuse desire and drive): drive is not an infinite longing for the Thing which gets fixated onto a partial object – “drive” IS this fixation itself in which resides the “death” dimension of every drive. Drive is not a universal thrust (towards the incestuous Thing) braked and broken up, it IS this brake itself, a brake on instinct, its “stuckness,” as Eric Santner would have put it.¹⁰ The elementary matrix of drive is NOT that of transcending all particular objects towards the void of the Thing (which is then accessible only in its metonymic stand-in), but that of our libido getting “stuck” onto a particular object, condemned to circulate around it forever.

The basic paradox here is that the specifically human dimension – drive as opposed to instinct – emerges precisely when what was originally a mere by-product is elevated into an autonomous aim: man is not more “reflexive”; on the contrary, man perceives as a direct goal what, for an animal, has no intrinsic value. In short, the zero-degree of “humanization” is not a further “mediation” of animal activity, its re-inscription as a subordinated moment of a higher totality (say, we eat and procreate in order to develop higher spiritual potentials), but the radical narrowing of focus, the elevation of a minor activity into an end-in-itself. We become “humans” when we get caught in a closed, self-propelling loop of repeating the same gesture and finding satisfaction in it. We all recall one of the archetypal scenes from cartoons: while dancing, the cat jumps up into the air and turns around its own axis; however, instead of falling back down towards the earth’s surface in accordance with the normal law of gravity, it remains for some time suspended in the air, turning around in the levitated position as if caught in a loop of time, repeating the same circular movement on and on. (One also finds the same shot in some musical comedies which make use of the elements of slapstick: when a dancer turns around him- or herself in the air, s/he remains up there a little bit too long, as if, for a short period of time, s/he succeeded in suspending

¹⁰ See Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2001.

the law of gravity. And, effectively, is such an effect not the ultimate goal of the art of dancing?) In such moments, the “normal” run of things, the “normal” process of being caught in the imbecilic inertia of material reality, is for a brief moment suspended; we enter the magical domain of a suspended animation, of a kind of ethereal rotation which, as it were, sustains itself, hanging in the air like Baron Munchhausen, who raised himself from the swamp by grabbing his own hair and pulling himself up. This rotary movement, in which the linear progress of time is suspended in a repetitive loop, is DRIVE at its most elementary. This, again, is “humanization” at its zero-level: this self-propelling loop which suspends/disrupts linear temporal enchainment. This shift from desire to drive is crucial if one is to properly grasp the crux of the “minimal difference”: at its most fundamental, the minimal difference is not the unfathomable X which elevates an ordinary object into an object of desire, but, rather, the inner torsion which curves the libidinal space and thus transforms instinct into drive.

Consequently, the concept of drive makes the alternative “either burned by the Thing or maintain[ing] a distance” false: in a drive, the “thing itself” is a circulation around the void (or, rather, hole, not void). To put it even more pointedly, the object of drive is not related to the Thing as a filler of its void: drive is literally a counter-movement to desire, it does not strive towards impossible fullness and, being forced to renounce it, gets stuck on a partial object as its remainder – drive is quite literally the very “drive” to BREAK the All of continuity in which we are embedded, to introduce a radical imbalance into it, and the difference between drive and desire is precisely that, in desire, this cut, this fixation onto a partial object, is, as it were, “transcendentalized,” transposed into a stand-in for the void of the Thing.

This is also how one should read Lacan’s thesis on the “satisfaction of drives”: a drive does not bring satisfaction because its object is a stand-in for the Thing, but because a drive, as it were, turns failure into a triumph – in it, the very failure to reach its goal, the repetition of this failure, the endless circulation around the object, generates a satisfaction of its own. As Lacan put it, the true AIM of a drive is not to reach its goal, but to circulate endlessly around it. In the well-known vulgar joke about a fool having his intercourse for the first time, the girl has to tell him exactly what to do: “See this hole between my legs? Put it in here. Now push it deep. Now pull it out. Push it in, pull it out, push it in, pull it out ...” “Now wait a minute,” the fool interrupts her, “make up your mind! In or out?” What the fool misses is precisely the structure of a drive which gets its satisfaction from the indecision itself, from repeated oscillation. – Bruno Boostels’ central Badiouian reproach to this topic of death drive qua self-relating negativity (from his unpublished essay

“Badiou without Žižek”) is that, by way of giving priority to the Act as a negative gesture of radical (self-relating) negativity, as “death drive” *in actu*, I in advance devalue every positive project of imposing a new Order, the fidelity to any positive political Cause:

what causes are there to be kept alive from a psychoanalytical perspective, if for the latter the most radical act consists in the subject's defining gesture of pure negativity that precedes and undermines every one of the possible candidates? [...] Before any inscription of a new truth even has a chance to take place, actually blocking this process in advance by virtue of a structural necessity, the death drive always already has had to come first to wipe the slate clean.

The first thing to note here is how Boostels simply “axiomatically” opposes Lacan's and Badiou's respective notions of act, constraining Lacan to the paradigm of “tragic failure,” to the primacy of negativity over any of its positivizations, while, for Badiou, all “death drive” phenomena are the result of the failure (betrayal, exhaustion) of a positive emancipatory project (do we not find here an echo of the old theological notion of Evil as a mere absence of Good, not as a positive power in itself?). Such a direct confrontation says nothing about the truth value of the two competing theories: Boostels's ultimate reproach to Lacan is tautological: that he is not Badiou – of which Lacan is, for sure, guilty.

Is, however, the opposition between the primacy of negativity and the primacy of the positive Truth really as simple and symmetrical as that? Is Boostels, in order to take sides with Badiou, not compelled to conflate two notions of negativity: the “pure” self-relating negativity and negativity as an ethico-practical failure, as a betrayal of a positive project? In order to approach this topic properly, one would have to focus on the crucial, but often ambiguous, role of the Unnamable in Badiou. To cut a long story short: while, for Badiou, the unnamable Real is the unfathomable external background of a process of Truth (the resisting X which cannot ever be fully “forced” by the Truth), for Lacan, the Unnamable is absolutely inherent, it is the Act itself in its excess over its nominations. Badiou's rationalism remains at the level of the external opposition of Reason and the Unnamable (the Unnamable as the obscure background of Reason): there is no place in it for the moment of “madness” at the very core of Reason itself. A reference to German Idealism is crucial here: following Kant, Schelling deployed the notion of the primordial decision-differentiation (*Ent-Scheidung*), the unconscious atemporal deed by means of which the subject chooses his eternal character which, afterwards,

within his conscious-temporal life, he experiences as the inexorable necessity, as “the way he always was”:

The deed, once accomplished, sinks immediately into the unfathomable depth, thereby acquiring its lasting character. It is the same with the will, which, once posited at the beginning and led into the outside, immediately has to sink into the unconscious. This is the only way the beginning, the beginning that does not cease to be one, the truly eternal beginning, is possible. For here also it holds that the beginning should not know itself. Once done, the deed is eternally done. The decision that is in any way the true beginning should not appear before consciousness, it should not be recalled to mind, since this, precisely, would amount to its recall. He who, apropos of a decision, reserves for himself the right to drag it again to light, will never accomplish the beginning.¹¹

With this abyssal act of freedom, the subject breaks up the rotary movement of drives, this abyss of the Unnamable – in short, this deed is the very founding gesture of naming. Therein resides Schelling’s unheard-of philosophical revolution: he does not simply oppose the dark domain of the rotary movement of pre-ontological drives, this unnamable Real which cannot ever be totally symbolized, to the domain of Logos, of articulated Word which cannot ever totally “force” it (like Badiou, Schelling insists on how there is always a remainder of the unnamable Real – the “indivisible remainder” – which eludes symbolization); at its most radical, the unnamable Unconscious is not external to Logos, it is not its obscure background, but, rather, the very act of Naming, the very founding gesture of Logos. The greatest contingency, the ultimate act of abyssal madness, is the very act of imposing a rational Necessity onto the pre-rational chaos of the Real.

¹¹ F. W. J. von Schelling, *Ages of the World*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1997, p. 181–182. For a more detailed reading of this notion, see Chapter 1 of Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, Verso Books, London 1997.