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The Apostle of Reason: Hegel & the Desire for Emancipation in the 21st Century

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Prologue: On The Contradiction of Liberal Capitalism

Theories of social class, so Fredric Jameson described at the time, appeared to be on the wane, and far less important, than theories of authoritarianism, racism, and sexism in the aftermath of the postmodern turn. This was at the height of the social welfare period in the 1960s, and during the earliest forgeries of the postmodern cultural revolution that would lead into the 1980s and 1990s – the decades that saw the rise of neoliberalism and the defeat of European Communism. During a moment of class compromise between capital and labour, it appeared then that a class politics, not to mention the agency of the working class as a revolutionary subject, lacked any seriously threatening gesture to the established order. As the Soviet Union veered towards collapse and ultimate demise, the practical project of Communism, too, seemed to have finally been plunged into the dustbin of history. Yet, as Jameson suggests, this retreat from class was far more misleading than it appeared. Although they are structured as radical movements, the demands for greater equality and social justice stemming from feminist, anti-racist, post-colonialist, anti-imperialist, and other similar movements (including, for instance, the student movement) lack any substantive and intrinsic subversive thrust weighed

against the power of capital. As Jameson puts it, “the slogans for populism and the ideals of racial justice and sexual equality were already themselves part and parcel of the Enlightenment itself, inherent not only in a socialist denunciation of capitalism, but even and also in the bourgeois revolution against the ancien régime.”¹ The values for equality and social justice espoused by these movements, as we see in consumer culture, are very easily diffusible and co-optable by capitalism and capitalist ideology, itself. The liberal ideology, in fact, has an interest in equality and social justice to the extent that these are the internal measures of its own success. Nevertheless, it is the actual existence of the social symptom – the exploited – that contradicts even the fantasy and desire for equality present in the liberal ideology, if not necessarily within the capitalist mode of production.

The significance of the Marxist position has thus been to highlight and identify the contradiction at the heart of the relationship between the liberal ideology and the capitalist mode of production. This is a relationship that is not merely arbitrary since liberalism and the liberal legal discourse creates the very conditions of possibility for the development of the capitalist mode of production insofar as it sanctions a specific conception of property, creates and defends (both through the legal or ideological apparatus, and the repressive apparatus of the state) the space of the market as the setting in which freedom and equality may be actualized, and backs the value of the national state’s currency, which becomes the primary means of reifying and measuring human equality in the form of value represented by the money commodity and the wage in the market.² The latter helps us to grasp the correlated and parallel developments in modernity of commodity fetishism, citizenship, and the rise of the liberal subject.³ But if we examine the relationship between the liberal ideology and the capitalist mode of production more closely – that is, to think the contradiction *between* the political and the economic, and not just as a substantive “political economy” – then we might be able to see just where the demands contained in the social justice movements of the past and the present, set *within* global capitalism, come up to and are sustained by an erroneous opposition and a disavowed relation to their desire.

The problem with the liberal ideology has nothing to do with its demands and expectations, nor even with its own measuring stick of legal formalistic equality and social justice. Its problems stem from its own inability to grasp and apprehend the fact for the necessity of inequality contained within capitalist practices of exploitation. We do not have to go through the entire plot of Marx’s *Capital* at this point to acknowledge his dialectical revelation of exploited wage labour as the source of

surplus value; but we do need to be reminded that a system of value production based upon exploitation does indeed require and necessitate the reproduction of inequality in order to do so. We might reflect, as well, on the fact that capital produces a number of its own internal contradictions, not least of which is that between the fact of exploitation and its historically unprecedented levels of productivity and development. In fact, this last point indicates something about the motor of capitalism and the historical unfurling of its own revolutionary capacities. As a system, capitalism begins with its own first principle: production geared towards the accumulation of profit. In order to actualize this principle, it is constantly in need of self-revolutionizing and even at times undermines itself in order to go on pursuing ever expanding profits. This is one reason why Deleuze and Guattari's categories of deterritorialization and reterritorialization make sense materially: capital must constantly engage in a process of deterritorializing itself in order to reterritorialize in heightened forms of productivity and accumulation. This also explains why, over the course of its history, we see that capitalism advances developments in science and technology, and the standard quality of living. It can do all of this, but since it depends upon, for its own existence, its first principle of profit accumulation, it is internally incapable of realizing the demands for equality and social justice proclaimed by liberal idealism.

The liberal ideology is thus at a crossroads that even, in our present context, in twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism (not to mention the strengthening forces of the reactionary right and new nationalist movements on the global stage), demands attention and consideration. If we are to take liberalism at its word, that it desires the concrete expansion of equality, then we need to discover that which is within liberalism that needs to be preserved and that which we need to negate in order for it to realize these goals; and, by doing so, question whether or not the desire for greater equality and social justice justifies the negation of the liberal legal system, which was in fact the progenitor of these very demands. Liberal modernity, as Hegel claimed, was indeed the "end of history," insofar as it established the categories of universal freedom and equality as ideals unto themselves. What makes liberal modernity contradictory is that it undermines, itself, these very goals that it sought to have realized, which is why Adorno and Horkheimer or not entirely wrong with their thesis on the dialectic of enlightenment.

Apart from this, we need to also recognize the significance of the modern national states and the role that they have played in interpellating subjects compliant in the capitalist mode of production, and even at the level of the contradictions at

play between the liberal ideology – demanding universal equality and social justice – and the nationalist ideology demanding an identification of subjects with the *particularity* of their culture, which in fact is a key motivation in the reproduction of xenophobia and racism, which help to legitimize and facilitate the systemic forms of inequality required by capital caught in international competition and inter-imperialist rivalry. Cutting to the chase, my point is that the contradiction between liberalism and capitalism is very much at the centre of our present historical conundrum, faced still with the crises of both, that we can periodize towards the event of the 2008 financial crisis and the various competing interpellations today, from nationalism to liberalism, and perhaps even beyond.

It is already cliché for Žižek scholars to cite his unidentifiable reference to Walter Benjamin's claim that every rise of fascism bears witness to a failed Left revolution.⁴ Nevertheless, this statement suffices to explain in part the current rise in popularity of reactionary nationalist movements around the world. Since national identities have enjoyed a prior stability in the centuries of rising capitalism – where a national identity was needed to help grow the national economies of capitalist states – they appear to have become a comfortable fallback position (not, of course, unlike the patriarchies of both the bourgeois household and the conjugal family in the nineteenth century, and the nuclear family of the mid-twentieth one) in the wake of the crisis, where Leftist concepts and interpellations seem to be having a more tumultuous and precarious rate of success.

The academic Left, over the course of the past fifteen years or so, and particularly since the 2008 crisis, has dabbled somewhat in a return to the idea of Communism. This has been a project given voice by a number of leading intellectual figures on the Left, including Alain Badiou, Jodi Dean, Bruno Bosteels, Antonio Negri, and Slavoj Žižek.⁵ However, given the history and failure of twentieth-century Communism, and even the idea apparent in Marx – or perhaps, more so, in *Marxist* literature – that Communism is meant to represent a *resolution* of all previous historical contradictions – an idea expressed early on, even, in *The Communist Manifesto* – we should ask whether we can still expect the idea, or the *concept* of Communism to be adequate to the task of interpellating an emancipatory consciousness, one that does not retreat into the reactionary particularities of the new nationalisms and chauvinisms. This, according to Todd McGowan, in his book, *Emancipation After Hegel: Achieving a Contradictory Emancipation*, is not at all the case.⁶ His claim, instead – a claim that, as I intend now to explain, I find compelling *if only to bring to fruition the underlying political goals of Marxism* – is that Hegel, much

more so than Marx and the idea of Communism, offers us a far more profound theory of universal emancipation today.

In what follows, I aim to draw out McGowan's theory of universal emancipation, expressed through his reading of Hegel, but I also attend to this theory to reflect upon the material conditions expressed by the contemporary forms of inequality and exploitation, and to question the relationship between the various particular political antagonisms in existence in our current situation, against the universality of the capitalist mode of exploitation. My goal, then, is to argue for the priority of capitalism as the totalizing condition of our political antagonisms, but not to the detriment of other existing antagonisms and contradictions. Quite the contrary, I argue that it is only by negating the determinative forces of global capitalism that we may begin to address at a higher level, other existing contradictions – not to resolve them, as McGowan warns, but to think them and to reason a positive formation for the actuality of freedom.

Introduction: *After* Freud and Marx – Hegel for the Twenty-First Century

McGowan's book on Hegel follows quite closely to his previous book, *Capitalism and Desire*.⁷ His thesis in that book concerns the overlap between the role of the obstacle in the capitalist mode of production (i.e., "The *true* barrier to capitalist production is *capital itself*")⁸ and that of the subject in the psychic, libidinal register of desire. This is particularly the case when we consider how capitalism operates in its consumerist logic and within the space of the market since it is the lure of fantasy and desire that binds subjects in capitalism to the illusory satisfactions of commodities. McGowan argues that in capitalism our fantasies about particular commodities are propelled by the barrier or obstacle that forever prevents our access to enjoyment. What happens, then, is that we confuse our desire for the object barred by the obstacle (the Lacanian *objet a*), that is any and every particular commodity, with our desire for the obstacle, itself. We unknowingly desire the obstacle, according to McGowan, since it is only the obstacle that creates the conditions of possibility for the object. This is why McGowan tends to refer to the Lacanian *objet a* as a "lost object." The object only exists insofar as it is lost, access to which we perceive as prevented by some obstacle or barrier, or even a figure of authority (like a parent or a dictator, or some figure of an enemy or intruder) who is barring our access. It is our pursuit of this lost object that simultaneously propels desire and ensconces us within the field of the capitalist relations of exploitation, like the dangling of the carrot in front of the horse.

Ideologically, capitalism works because of the central role played by commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism creates the conditions of possibility for the entire capitalist mode of production, but it operates through a material and practical reification of belief into the particular object of the money commodity and the wage. While Marxists tend to argue that the commodity conceals the positive network of social relations underlying capitalist production, the Lacanian approach has been more precise in showing that the commodity fetish conceals the very lack in social being, the antagonism or contradiction that forever prevents the possibility of a harmonious whole or resolution. The money commodity, in other words, operates as the focal point tying together the capitalist relations of production. It is an object into which we invest our beliefs so that we may go on, in other circumstances, acting as if we renounce our very belief in “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”⁹ There is, in other words, a dimension of disavowal in commodity fetishism, whereby we are made capable of displacing our concentrated belief in the value of the money commodity, and our investment in *it*, with supra-human qualifications, so that we can otherwise act as secular humanist liberal subjects.¹⁰ The form of fetishism disavowal present within the capitalist relations of production therefore explains why, as Samo Tomšič puts it, capitalism “*demand*s perversion from its subjects.”¹¹ This is because, as Žižek notes, it disavows castration.¹²

While agreeing with McGowan’s claim in *Capitalism and Desire*, that it is in fact the obstacle that the subject desires rather than the lost object that appears to be displaced by it, it seems to me that the argument there remains incomplete. If the structure of desire is one in which we desire the obstacle, and the analytical interpretation is one that is meant to bring awareness to this fact, what then are the conditions of possibility for emancipation from the capitalist investment in the commodity fetish, which seems very much capable of actualizing the psychic economy of the desiring subject?¹³ McGowan, as I see it, fills in these blanks with his book on Hegel.

Several key premises animate McGowan’s Hegelian theory of emancipation. First and foremost is the claim that Left Hegelians, and many of the twentieth century interpretations of Hegel miss out on some of his most radical insights because they either bypass or avoid Hegel’s writing, specifically, on Christianity and the state. In the split between the Left and Right Hegelians, the Left took the “good stuff,” as McGowan puts it, including dialectics and the historical development of subjectivity, while the Right took Christianity and the state (2). But as McGowan contends, the latter inform central tenets of Hegel’s dialectical theory of freedom. By ridding Hegel

of this apparent ideological baggage, the Left – and this includes many of the key figures in Western Marxism, including Lukács, Gramsci, Sartre, and the Frankfurt School – lost sight of integral dimensions of Hegel's theoretical importance. Although, according to McGowan, Christianity is central to Hegel's system, it is for him neither the religion of salvation nor that of divine provenance. The significance of Christianity, for Hegel, is instead the fact that it is, according to him, the first religion to reveal the divine as *split* – as a divided subject. Christianity, according to McGowan, shows that God suffers from the same contradictions as humans. Losing this insight, the Left Hegelians, including Marx, miss out on Hegel's emancipatory reading of Christianity, in which the point is not to find reconciliation in the divine, but to bring attention to the fact that no substantial whole exists; that all being is ridden with contradictions. This last point informs the second major premise of McGowan's reading of Hegel. The problem with Marxism and the idea of Communism, according to McGowan, is its vision of an emancipated future *freed* from contradiction.

What Hegel makes explicit is the fact that all being is fissured by contradiction. Coming to know and grasp, to apprehend, the fact of contradiction is, for McGowan, the key insight of Hegel's philosophy. McGowan argues that every political attempt to move past, or eradicate, or transcend contradiction has ultimately resulted in failure, catastrophe, and tragedy, on both the Left and the Right. Fascism, on the one hand, gives rise to a particularity that avoids the universal present in the social symptom, which pronounces the existing contradictions within the political system. The anti-Semitic figure of the Jew, for instance, expresses the universal background against which the particularity of the Nazi and Aryan project towards its own social harmony sets itself and misses in its very attempt to eradicate Jews from Europe. But likewise, McGowan sees European Communism and Stalinism as a Right-wing deviation from Hegel's insights about contradiction as an ontological inevitability. Communism is, in other words, including Marx's vision of it, according to McGowan, premised on the *resolution* of contradiction and as such results in a reversal of the goals it sets out to accomplish: universal emancipation. It's here that Marxism goes too far, even, in avoiding Hegel's interpretation of the emancipatory potentials of the state form.

The state, as we'll see, plays a major role in Hegel's theory of freedom. Although it is very difficult to avoid problems with the abuses of state power in modern history, and particularly its bourgeois form as a class state mechanism representing the interests of the capitalist class (which is why Marx likely favoured the idea of the withering away of the state), the state in McGowan's reading of Hegel becomes a formal necessity in the realization of the potential towards freedom. The

state, or something akin to it, according to McGowan, “is necessary to rip subjects out of their attachment to the illusions of their private world.” As McGowan explains, it is through the state form, and its encounter with it, that “the subject recognizes the logical priority of its public being,” which is the positive and practical means through which it can apprehend its own freedom (5).

For me, this view of the state is one of the most intriguing and pressing components of McGowan's Hegelianism. His reading of the state helps to reconcile the gap in his prior critique of capital and the libidinal investment in the obstacle that capital finds capable of inscribing into itself. Moving from the investment in the commodity form towards an investment in the state form is for me, at least, one way of thinking the emancipation from capitalist practices of exploitation. As well, it's a point worth highlighting at a moment when the Left, still, is enraptured by the old idea of the “withering away of the state,” often pronounced these days in radical calls for the elimination of borders.¹⁴ Apart from the practical dilemmas that this presents us with – not merely the challenge over wage declines (a hotly debated and contested issue), but also the practical mechanisms for the allocation of needs and resources (to satisfy medical needs, for instance); it is also worth pointing out the fact that the elimination of borders set within capitalism can only but support capitalist interests (free trade, for instance). This is a view that also appears still to take solace in the resolution of contradictions.

I'd go further, still, in arguing that the emergence of the contemporary culture wars – between the so-called social justice warriors (a Right-wing slur for the Left) and the reactionary alt-Right – is a by-product of the avoidance of contradiction. That is, these new interpellations, these new forms of subjectivization, are the ideological result of avoiding the apprehension of contradiction, perhaps best rendered on the Leftish end of the spectrum by posthumanist, monist, and vitalist conceptions of subjectivity that seek to avoid dualism and contradiction all together.¹⁵ Even the category of the assemblage, or object oriented ontologies, appear to avoid the ontological inevitability of contradiction, preferring instead a utopian vision of a harmonious fluid relationship between the human and the non-human that dissolves entirely the separations between them, and what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “arborescent structures,”¹⁶ rendering the subject-object binary or dualism obsolete. The new subjects of twenty-first century capitalism, and their conceptualizations by new materialisms, posthumanisms, and accelerationisms, are just so many different avenues of avoiding the centrality of contradiction for moral reasons.

It is surely obvious, then, that I agree with this premise in McGowan's reading of contradiction. However, I suggest that this view is evinced by a final implicit premise in his book, that the truth of Hegel has only become visible retroactively, in the aftermath of the twentieth century, and following the theoretical *advances* of Marx and Freud. McGowan states this explicitly with Freud by suggesting that he created "the theoretical apparatus that makes it possible to understand the radicality of Hegel's project" (41). The problem with Hegel, according to McGowan, is that he came too soon and therefore lacked fully the "theoretical apparatus through which he could formulate the drive to sustain and extend contradictions" (40-41). It's only with the arrival of psychoanalysis a century after Hegel that his project of "highlighting contradiction as the subject's fundamental aim" could be articulated fully (41).

McGowan explains that, according to psychoanalysis, "subjects are not driven to eliminate what destroys them and achieve harmony but to find a way to sustain the self-destruction" (41). Freud's discovery of the unconscious, and the further development of his theories of fantasy, desire, and drive, particularly in the way that these have been elaborated by the work of Jacques Lacan, identifies the contradictions at the heart of subjectivity. Subjects viewed through the lens of psychoanalysis do not merely pursue pleasurable outcomes; they also garner enjoyment in the failure to achieve what they perceive to be pursuing, and therefore come to enjoy what might rationally be perceived as a painful experience. The language of psychoanalysis in this way helps to articulate and make more accessible what Hegel aims at with his conception of contradiction. It helps us to see how the subject *pursues* rather than flees from contradictions. But just as Freud, through his discovery and conception of the unconscious, troubles the bourgeois consciousness – Freud shows that the subject is never a fully self-aware, centred individual consciousness, therefore even ripping to shreds the legal-discursive conception of the subject of liberal capitalism, the private individual who is in pursuit of his rational self-interest – so too does Marx trouble the liberal conception of society and history by identifying the class struggle as its political engine.¹⁷ Class struggle, in other words, helps us to grasp the motor of history as one driven by antagonisms between shared collective consciousness rather than as the utilitarian acts of self-interested individuals.

Although McGowan credits Marx for his dialectical critique of capitalism, his critique of Marx's political vision of a Communist resolution to contradiction seems to shade his appreciation for what historical materialism offers as a dialectical

interpretation of the practical contradictions of human material needs. McGowan is not wrong in championing Hegel's vision of emancipation over Marx's, especially given our actual historical experiences of it, but I would argue that it is only *after* the Marxist deviation (if we want to call it that) from the ontological priority of contradiction, and the political history of European Communism, fascism, and present contradictions of capitalism, that the revival of Hegel as an emancipatory figure is made possible in the way that McGowan aspires for him to be. Hegel, in other words, is only realized as a theorist of emancipation in McGowan's reading *after* we have gone through Marx and Freud. It is by doing so that McGowan proves the need for us to stop being Marxists or Communists, or for us to stop naming our project as such, and to embrace a renewed reading of Hegel that allows us to develop an historical concept of universal emancipation adequate to our current needs and conditions.

Through his reading of Hegel, McGowan provides a discourse and a theory of emancipation, revolutionary consciousness, and radical change that surpasses the limits of contemporary Marxisms, new materialisms, and posthumanisms. He develops a formal concept of love (through a reading of Hegel's Christianity) and the state necessary for grasping and apprehending contradictions, not only of capital, but of being as such. Against the new materialists and posthumanists, he provides a characterization of the human subject capable of thinking, and not merely of understanding (or "witnessing") contradiction, through reasoning and love; and against the neo-Communists – or maybe as a comradely nudge towards them – he provides a justification for the form of the state and the law as a means towards our freedom, one which flies in the face of the mantra of the withering away of the state, which I'd say, after all, is an idea replicated, at least rhetorically, in neoliberalism.

Neoliberals argue for less government, all the while using the state apparatus more and more to discipline subjects and to build and regulate a market and market based ethics that only deepens inequality, constraint, and control. But for McGowan, the state can have emancipatory potential, that is if we see it as a means through which to grasp contradiction. It's in this way that he offers a concept of emancipation that goes further than Communism as a *resolution* to all previous historical contradictions. McGowan, instead, reasons that contradictions cannot be eliminated, and every attempt to do so disavows their necessity and ends up reproducing tyranny. We can only come to see this, though, if we – as Žižek often suggests – begin by reversing Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, that the philosophers have only thought in many ways about the world, the point is to change. Instead, it is

necessary to *think* the world. *Thinking*, in fact, is precisely the way that Hegel helps us to single out human subjectivity as an ethical and distinct agent of freedom, separate from the non-human world.

What I'd like now to elaborate upon are some of the insights that McGowan presents through his reading of Hegel, beginning with the implicit Lacanian reading of his theory of reason. But by going through this approach, and in thinking reason in the Lacanian register of the logics of sexuation, I want to move further in conceiving the contradiction between the particularity of the sexual (as well as racial and other) differences, and the universality of the global capitalist system. My goal, here, is to suggest that, regardless of how evidentiary the existence of these other particular contradictions may be, the path towards universal emancipation rests within our own historical approach to the totality of the capitalist system as the setting against which all other contradictions are positioned. Capitalism, in other words, is a primary contradiction, whereas others, like that between the advocates of open borders and populist anti-immigrants, as Žižek points out, are secondary contradictions.¹⁸ Reading these others against the universality of global capitalism is, for me, a way for us to discover the terms of our actual unfreedom and the perpetuation of inequality as then expressed in these various other particularities. In conclusion, I hope to show how McGowan's assertion of the centrality of love and the state, as the positive manifestations of contradiction, help us to express the real potentials for universal emancipation in the times that lie ahead. Love and the state are what's missing in the history of Western Marxism, but with Hegel, as he is read by McGowan, it is also with the advantage of the Lacanian analytical discourse, and its approach to the position of the subject vis-à-vis its enjoyment, that the realization of the Marxist goals for emancipation may be presented more clearly for us today.

Part One: Reasoning Freedom

Sexuation, Understanding, Reasoning

McGowan's reading of Hegel is modeled very closely on Lacanian frameworks, not least of which is Lacan's logics of sexuation. This comes across in his discussion of reasoning and understanding. Reason, according to McGowan, is the highest form of thought for Hegel. It accomplishes what mere being cannot by *thinking* the contradiction. It is opposed to understanding, which avoids contradiction by transforming it into opposition or difference. This distinction, I argue, follows similarly to Lacan's explanation of the masculine and feminine logics.

In Seminar XX: *Encore*, Lacan distinguishes between a masculine logic and a feminine logic. On the masculine side, he explains, the universal function implies the existence of an *exception*, or a limit (all X are submitted to the universal function F; there is at least one X that is not submitted to the universal function F). The masculine logic is one of a finite, limited universal, bearing upon the logic of the phallic master-signifier. The masculine logic is oriented to the phallus as the signifier of symbolic castration: the choice of the affirmative signifier that negates castration (and contradiction in being) as the lack that *is* the subject (\$ in Lacanese). On the feminine side, a particular *negation* implies that *there is no exception*, there is no limit (not all X are submitted to the function F; there is no X that is not submitted to the function F), and in this sense, the feminine subject is capable of *thinking* the contradiction at the heart of being.

Žižek helps to explain the logics of sexuation, and the distinction between the masculine and the feminine logics, by turning to two moments in Lacan's interpretation of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*. Lacan, he explains, divides Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," into two different parts or moments: "I think" and "I am," thought and being; and the subject's entry into the Symbolic order is decided by a foundational forced choice. In Seminar XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan claims that the subject must choose thought and therefore loses being. However, a few years later, in Seminar XIV, *The Logic of Fantasy*, Lacan switches and claims that the subject is now condemned to the choice of being, and thought is then relegated to the position of the unconscious. Žižek's proposal is to read these two different versions, not as mutually exclusive, but as two different ways of reading the logics of sexuation. The masculine subject, according to Žižek, is the one who chooses being, relegating thought to the position of the unconscious, whereas for the feminine subject, the choice is that of thought, therefore risking being.¹⁹ According to Alenka Zupančič, this means that "Woman" represents the exclusion/repression of the split or lack, or contradiction, as such.²⁰ My own claim, therefore, is that the feminine logic correlates with reasoning in the Hegelian register, whereas the masculine logic coincides with that of understanding. As McGowan states explicitly, the actual situation of women in patriarchal society reveals that their existence itself is contradictory, and therefore women are able to *think* this contradiction (81).

For the understanding, as McGowan explains, reality cannot be contradictory at an ontological level, even though we can identify contradictions through differences and oppositions at an epistemological level. But when we think beyond

the mere understanding of the world we become capable of grasping contradiction *as what is*: unlimited or infinite at an ontological level. Understanding avoids contradiction by confining itself to the realm of the possible. Understanding is *limited*, whereas reasoning is *unlimited*.

Nevertheless, there is a logical priority to understanding since it is that which first forms and structures the world that reasoning subsequently thinks.²¹ It therefore establishes a synchronic conscious structure in which stability and comprehension are made possible and intelligible through the relation and differences between one signifier and the next. It is capable, in this way, of identifying logical and epistemological contradictions (or antinomies) through relations of difference and opposition. In this sense, too, the understanding is able to see how its own identity is dependent upon its difference from all other entities. It defines itself, like every signifier, through its difference from all of the others, and in this way bears a resemblance to the Lacanian logic of the signifier. The signifier (S_1) may be read as that which defines the subject for another signifier (S_2), but it is also the one (S_1) for which all the others (S_2), in their opposition, define the subject ($\$$). Insofar as we remain caught in the epistemological field of the understanding – which remains stable and structured at the level of the synchronic (by which I mean the given and the fixed temporally) – we remain unable to think contradiction. By turning the “mass of data” into separate, comprehensible entities, building and establishing structures of knowledge (discourses, even, in the Foucauldian sense), the understanding fails to grasp contradiction, even though it still makes it evident. We could claim, in this sense, that the understanding is oriented towards the phallic signifier as the signifier of lack – the signifier of symbolic castration. It is the affirmation of the phallic signifier that cuts into the material world – the “mass of data” – and establishes difference. Thus, understanding assumes logical priority over reasoning to the extent that, as McGowan explains, “without the dividing power of the understanding, we would have no ability to thematize distinctiveness at all. We would instead confront a mass of data, in which differences would not be able to make a difference for us. The understanding’s act of separation is the fundamental basis for all thought, as Hegel sees it, and lays the groundwork for reason to grasp contradiction” (72).

From the University Discourse to the Hysteric's Discourse, and the Traversal of the Fantasy

We could say, from a different Lacanian lens, that the movement from the understanding to reasoning is somewhat akin to the movement from the Lacanian

university discourse to the hysteric's discourse. The university discourse formalizes knowledge, whereas the latter produces and thinks it through the act of questioning. Like the agent in the university discourse, understanding "enables the subject to recognize its own self-division, a self-division the subject cannot heal since it functions as the condition of the subject's own possibility." The movement towards the hysteric's discourse (and the feminine logic in this sense, too) occurs when the subject recognizes that, even though it cannot heal its self-division, this self-division is emancipatory. This, according to McGowan, is what occurs with the move from understanding to reasoning (72-73).

Reasoning is distinguished from understanding by the fact that it sees contradiction, not merely between itself and the other – although recognizing this difference is a first move in the direction of self-understanding and identity – but when it turns this identification inward towards the self. That is, when the epistemological contradiction is turned into an ontological one, when the subject recognizes that it *is*, itself, what it negates (63). In recognizing and thinking this self-contradiction, the subject becomes capable of self-transformation and change. The difference between the human subject and the external, non-human object/being (and this is a place where I would want to in another space confront some of the claims made by vitalist new materialisms and monist posthumanisms, and object oriented ontologies), is that the former is capable *through thinking of undermining* the very basis for its own existence. As McGowan puts it, "for the subject, negation is not merely external. Subjects encounter contradiction through reason rather than existence. This is the source of the subject's fundamental difference from the natural world. Nature exists in contradiction while the subject discovers contradiction *within itself* and ceases to confront negation as an externality" (65, emphasis added). When the subject recognizes this fact, it introduces otherness into itself, and ceases being what it is (or was).

Regardless of whether the subject recognizes this split within itself, all subjectivity is still driven by this fundamental, ontological contradiction. Even though most subjects don't avowedly embrace contradiction, we all, according to McGowan, unconsciously desire that which disrupts our own apparent self-interests (67). Desire, in fact, "emerges out of the subject's failure to coincide with itself, its lack of self-identity." As McGowan explains, the desiring subject "is a contradictory being that wants to be other than it is" (77). Desire, is thus, the way that contradiction is assumed in the subject, even though for the most part the understanding disavows this fact and translates it or displaces it onto the mere difference from the other. By

doing so, we get the sense of how desire shapes our experience of the world. It is that which, by being included in the understanding as the externalization of contradiction onto mere difference, distorts the subject's understanding of the world. This, too, is how we might come to regard sexual difference as an expression of the lack in being. Sexual difference is the way that desire as the experience of contradiction shapes our relationship to enjoyment into a difference of subjective positions. Reason, in contrast, "makes evident the extent to which the subject's desire shapes the world that it apprehends" (75), and we might want to in this case consider how reasoning, as the apprehension of the contradiction, relates to the particularity of the *sexual* difference.

Rather than creating a safe distance from desire, reason "involves the subject in what it perceives" (76). Reason allows the subject to recognize and apprehend desire as the form that contradiction assumes in itself (78). Desire, though, is still framed in the psychic register by fantasy, the most common of which is the fantasy of transcending contradiction. The fantasy of transcending contradiction is what drives the dialectic forward towards every new articulation of the contradiction, but the fantasy also blinds us to the fact that what we desire is really the contradiction itself. It is contradiction, according to McGowan, that "sustains the subject as desiring" (54). But reasoning is tied to what the psychoanalytic discourse refers to as the traversal of the fantasy.

The subject traverses the fantasy when it comes to recognize (through reasoning) that satisfaction derives from the fantasy itself, rather than from what appears beyond it in the form of the resolution of the contradiction – that is, of obtaining the lost object that might bring an end to the search for a harmonious, completed whole of being. It's when we've traversed the fantasy that we can begin to realize that contradiction is ontologically necessary. However, it is the very propulsion of desire – the fantasy to escape contradiction – that indeed leads us towards our freedom through the repetitious movement of negation. This is why Lacan's motto, the ethic of not giving way on one's desire, is in fact (perhaps counterintuitively) a step towards freedom. We can only think this through reasoning from the position of contradiction – the position of the infinite, of the unlimited, which is also why, returning to logics of sexuation, as Joan Copjec notes, for Lacan the ethical act is feminine (not-all).²²

Here, I want to pause and ask how the feminine position, as a particular articulation of reasoning, may be regarded in the context of the universal. Insofar as the feminine subject is the one most capable of recognizing contradiction in the

register of the phallic signifier, how do things fare when we come up against the much more universalizing dimension of global capitalism. The question here is whether patriarchy is closer to the universal than capitalism, or if it is instead the latter.²³ In other words, insofar as our concern is with universal emancipation, are we in a situation in which patriarchy provides the material context to the universal, or instead does capitalism perform the universalizing operation. If the latter is true, we might need to graft onto the a more universalizing social symptom – the proletariat – the position of recognizing and apprehending the position of contradiction today. Or, perhaps, what we are encountering here is the contradiction between patriarchy and capitalism, since neither necessarily requires the other in order to function. Does this contradiction register at the level of the understanding, whereby we are intuiting a difference between the two, or can we grasp it in terms of the reasoning, in which case we might think the manner in which the contradiction between patriarchy and capitalism evinces the self-contradiction in each? Either way, it is in the fact of their symptoms that each indicates the presence of tyranny and the absence of universal emancipation in the other. I return to this point below.

Freedom, Negation, and Resistance

For Hegel, as McGowan explains, reasoning is the means through which we begin to think and *internalize* contradiction out of what appears to be an external opposition. Our ability to apprehend contradiction, and in so doing change and transform ourselves in the process of recognition, is a dimension that psychoanalysis and historical materialism share with Hegel's dialectics.²⁴ For all three, theory and interpretation precede transformative action. The ability to reason contradictions distinguishes human subjectivity from all other objects in the world; recognizing contradiction enables us to transform *ourself* through negation.

Hegel's fundamental insight, which precedes Freud and psychoanalysis, is the fact that we seek out contradictions rather than retreating from them. In Lacanian terms, we could say that fantasy mediates our conscious desire to solve contradictions and our unconscious drive towards them. Apprehending contradiction through reason is thus, according to McGowan, what Hegel has in mind with his conception of freedom, and is very similar to the way that Lacan understood the traversal of the fantasy. Ideology, in contrast, obscures contradictions by transforming them into differences and oppositions, which are, as McGowan puts it, contradictions in disguise (13). This last fact is perhaps what puts the contradictions pertaining to the sexual difference at odds with those arising out of capitalism. I don't

mean to suggest that the sexual difference is not in fact a contradictory relationship, but that the contradictions between the latter and global capitalism have to be assessed in their totality, at the level of the universal and the particular, rather than simply as mere difference or opposition. Ideology criticism, thus, pertains to our ability to recognize contradictions where they are presented as differences or oppositions.

For me, one of the chief insights of McGowan's book is his discussion, not only of contradiction in Hegel, but of the category of negation, as well as the idea of a self-limitation with regards to the ethical agency of the subject. Nevertheless, it is first through the route of the reasoning that we can grasp the inevitability of contradiction. It is by thinking contradiction through reasoning that we begin to recognize freedom arising as the subject's capacity to negate its own determinations.

We've seen so far how reasoning pertains to the subject's capability to think the ontological presence and necessity of contradiction. While this is a *path* towards freedom, it is not in-itself freedom as such. For freedom to be actualized, we need to consider further what distinguishes human agency from the non-human. According to McGowan, it is the human subject's capacity for negation that truly demonstrates the conditions of freedom. Freedom, he argues, "is unimaginable without negation" (154). The ability to negate the givens of its existence, whether they originate in biology or in culture, is that which provides the basis for the subject's freedom. We may, in other words, be determined by forces external to ourselves, or by forces over which we have no *a priori* control. But we do have the capacity to negate these givens, these determinations, which is a sign of our freedom. To put it in the political register of the Marxist topography, we might say even that if the base determines the superstructure, the subject is capable of negating the base. The subject's ability for self-determination therefore begins with negation. That being said, as McGowan rightly points out, "as long as one negates [only] an external authority, one remains on that authority's terrain rather than one's own" (153). A freedom that manifests itself *only* as resistance, in other words, is no freedom at all (155). Authentic (true) freedom is only discovered when one no longer has any external authorities left to transgress (172). In this sense, freedom consists, not merely through the negation of an external oppositional force, but in apprehending the fact that the subject provides the grounds for its own freedom (164). This is how a subject in-itself becomes a subject for-itself.

Evidence for McGowan's claim about the politics of resistance abounds in our postmodern culture. Today, it almost appears as though resistance is itself part of the

dominant ideology. This is a dimension that often confuses, as Žižek sometimes puts it, the ruling ideology with the ideas that seem to rule. The problem with rebellion, as McGowan, notes, is that it is always positioned in opposition against some substantial other. Rebellion as the ruling ideology requires then the creation and the erection, the propping up, of some figure of a substantial other, or enemy.²⁵ The current debates between the postmodern Left and the alt-Right is demonstrative.

On the one hand, the postmodern Left is constantly at odds with the oppressive orders of white supremacy, misogyny, and trans- and homophobia. Articulated as identity politics, the Left appears to reconcile itself in the terms of modern liberalism along the lines of pride and expressiveness of one's identity. But this contrasts starkly, on the other hand, with the postmodern Right, or the alt-Right, to the extent that the latter finds the Left perspective hypocritical insofar as they appear to permit the expression of all identities, save for the white, cis-heteronormative, masculine identity. While the Left resists the forces of white supremacy and Eurocentrism, sexism, and trans- and homophobia, seeing *these* as expressions of the dominant ideology, the Right resists the forces of the Left, propping *it* up as the dominant discourse today. In both cases, the subjects of the Left and Right are interpellated as subjects of resistance, as subjects of rebellion. Both, too, are propelled by the capitalist and modernist revolutionary mottos of crisis and resistance, in which the need to discover the new is itself a constant force of rebellion and negation. So, when it comes to thinking the emancipatory role of negation, we have to be very careful, as McGowan reminds us, not to take mere negation as the sole import for freedom and universal emancipation. It is the *universal* dimension of negation, freedom, and emancipation, that we need to apprehend.

As McGowan explains, "Hegel's conception of freedom begins with negation, but it ends with the recognition that this negation must manifest itself in some positive form if the subject is to free itself completely from the external authority that it negates" (155). Freedom is discovered, not through a single negation, but from a series of negations. This is why the Lacanian motto, do not give way to your desire, is an ethical position. It drives further the process of negation. But at a certain point in this process, the subject, through reasoning, has to recognize the inevitability of contradiction and therefore ground this apprehension in some *positive* form.

The two forms that McGowan has in mind in his reading of Hegel are love and the state, and it is his developments of these lines in Hegel that mark his own contribution to a contemporary Hegelian theory of emancipation. As we'll see, both

are central to an emancipatory ethics, and both are grounds for a reasoning capable of apprehending contradiction. But the difficulty with both is that they each have the potential either to merely justify that which already exists, or to justify past historical and contemporary atrocities. Since love, first, is read through Christianity in Hegel, it is difficult to avoid the historical role that this notion of love has played in European colonialism and imperialism, not to mention the order of the moral majority of the American neoconservatism. Second, with the state, as the Marxists have shown, on the one hand, through the notion of the class state, and as liberals and neoliberals, and Hayekians, and Randians, libertarians, even anarchists, and all sorts of other anti-Communists have argued, on the other hand, the overbearing power of the state is certainly a concern worth raising. So, what then permits us to see (Christian) love and the state as potentially emancipatory? Here, it's Hegel's rendering of the universal that, according to McGowan, turns the screw.

Part Two: Towards a Theory of Universal Emancipation Today

The Universal Singular Beyond the Particular

The difficulty with a politics of resistance or rebellion is that it doesn't necessarily indicate or explicate the universal dimensions of inequality, and as we have seen is fully capable of resigning itself towards a relativism of oppression. Inequality, according to McGowan, "has its basis in the reduction of contradiction to difference" (82), and even in the terms of the binary opposition as it is deployed culturally and politically we can see where this is the case. As Structuralist and post-Structuralist thinkers, like Jacques Derrida, have shown, the problem with the binary opposition, as an expression of cultural difference, is that one of the terms in the binary always assumes a position of privilege. But that privilege is imposed as an effect of power and inequality, and does in this way manifest itself as the ideological. A common example, one that I've already addressed, is that between the masculine and the feminine.

In a phallogentric society, the masculine – or the phallic signifier – appears to have such a privilege, and it is difficult to deny that our own culture is one that is sexist, not merely at the cultural level, but significantly, too, at an institutional one, which is why something like the #MeToo movement resonates quite well as it has moved from identifying an institutional phallogentrism and into a more interpersonal and cultural one. When we regard binary oppositions in this way, we see them as expressions of a difference between two positive, substantial, yet opposed entities. But when we conceive the binary as a contradiction between affirmation and

negation, we are far more capable of discerning the contradiction underlying the difference. As Fredric Jameson often identifies with his use of the Greimasian semiotic square, a term in a binary is often generally opposed, not merely by some other positive entity or other that expresses its complement, but by that more negative side of what a thing *is not*.

The language of the digital is suggestive here since it allows us to see the binary opposition in terms of the relationship between positive and negative terms, between 1 and 0,²⁶ which I'd equate in the Lacanian register with the difference between that master-signifier (S.) and the subject as split or lacking (\$): positive/negative, affirmation/negation. When we read this into the sexual difference, we may come to understand how the position of negation, contained within the position of the feminine, is an expression rather of the ontological contradiction itself, as the means through which the symptom of the total system of sexuation is articulated and thought, by the way that the feminine even, in its position of the non-all, evinces the very lack in masculinity (the non-masculine that contradicts the masculine). The position of woman is that which is most capable of reasoning and apprehending contradiction because of the very position of women as the social symptom of patriarchy, the complement that identifies the lack in the masculine. In the context of a patriarchal society, the feminine subject position is the one capable of discovering the contradiction, realizing that it is actual and knowable through reason, creating the conditions of possibility for the elimination of inequality. The same, of course, can be said about the racialized subject in the context of European colonialism, which may too be why Hegel found so significant the Haitian revolution that followed the French.²⁷ The #BlackLivesMatter movement, too, is evidence of this in the register of racial difference.²⁸ But what complicates such oppositions and differences further is their articulation with regards to, or as present within, the context of the universal.

McGowan notes that every action implies the invocation of the universal. Whether this is done overtly or explicitly, or not, is of little importance since the universal is always implicitly the setting against which any action takes place. The universal is, in other words, the background to every particularity, which can only assert itself in relation to the universal (even in the abstract). This is why, as McGowan claims, every assertion towards particularity inherently invokes – whether knowingly or not – the universal. This is the situation, for instance, in the case of the already mentioned postmodern (liberal) Left, which attempts to champion every particular identity, asserting to each its own individual authenticity, while throwing

coal at any and every assertion towards universality, which has come to be seen as overly oppressive (or at the very least, anti-democratic) in the same way that Foucault charged the Marxian language of the false consciousness in the ideological as implicitly championing a hierarchical position of truth. How can one, for instance, be allowed to speak universally for or in the place of the other? Here, every particular difference is justified in the name of an anti-universalist approach, but in its very opposition to the universal it inevitably props it up, regardless. Every anti-normative position, in other words, inherently props up its own norm; or, at least, every critique of a norm is itself the imposition of a new one. The universal, we see, still persists as the background against which the particular is articulated. The same is true of the Right nationalist project.

Nationalism and the projects of the national states are, too, examples of a turn towards the particular. As I've already noted above, an inherent xenophobia is the product of the particularity of the national consciousness. This already, as Benedict Anderson notes in his conception of the "imaginary community" is one of the limiting dimensions at play in the formation of the nation as a defined identity.²⁹ But through the exclusionary practice of the production of the national consciousness, the limitations of the nation cannot but be defined by the universalization of the foreign other, who is excluded on the grounds of its difference. In both cases, the Left and the Right, the postmodernist and the nationalist, the turn towards an identity of difference is a project that bypasses the universal in order to articulate the particular.

Particularism is, as McGowan claims, a fundamentally conservative philosophy. As he contends, the product of bypassing the universal in this way cannot but be the reproduction of inequality. Inequality, he argues, "has its basis in the rejection of universality and the celebration of particular difference. Once one abandons the universal for the sake of the particular, one abandons the very terrain on which one might convince others to support one's political program" (192). It's in this way that the turn to particularity can only reproduce inequality through the translation of contradiction into difference or opposition. In contrast, a turn towards the universal is the manner through which each may see in the other a shared relationship of alienation. Shared alienation, as McGowan puts it, is the basis for a shared bond that exists (198). The way to locate and articulate this shared bond of alienation requires, sacrificing "particularity on the altar of universality" (184). This, according to McGowan, is "the only path to an authentic singularity" (Ibid). Arriving at an authentic singularity – that is, the full expression of the ontological necessity of contradiction – comes by way of the universal. By following the universal, and seeing

things in their totality, we become capable of discovering the singularity as the point of expression – that is, as the social symptom – of the universal system.

Put differently, the whole, as McGowan explains, always as a hole. No social whole, he explains, “can achieve a perfect self-identity in which every part has its proper place” (186). The failure to assign every part its proper place is expressed as the singularity, as the social symptom. The universal singular expresses the limits of the social, and in this sense overlaps with the Lacanian conception of the Real. When Marx reads capitalism as a totality, for instance, he does so by examining it in totality, but also as a universal, global system. The global dimensions of capitalism, as a universal system, are much clearer for us today, in twenty-first century capitalism, in the era of globalization, than they were in Marx’s day. Nevertheless, Marx’s foresight was in seeing the expansionary dimensions of the capitalist mode of production, needing to grow as a by-product of its imperative towards profit maximization. Capitalism is a universal system, too, because of its ability to dissolve all local and regional particularities, subsuming them into itself. Regardless of local social, cultural, and political particularities, capitalism is still capable of operating as a global system. It therefore presents itself as the universal background against which all other struggles and contradictions position themselves, and are dissolved, absorbed, or subsumed. It is, of course, also, by reading capitalism as a universal system, that we find a path towards the singularity of the proletariat subject as an expression of the system’s own internal limitations and contradictions. It’s with this in mind that we can again look at the difference proposed between the universal dimensions of the proletariat subject and the feminine subject, and perhaps still see them not as difference but as contradiction, insofar as the feminine remains particular, whereas the proletariat, set in the historical context of global capitalism, expresses the universal singular.³⁰ Nevertheless, there is nothing about the presence of the universal singular that suggests that an emancipatory consciousness is yet present. In the older Hegelian-Marxist language, we have not yet seen the transition from the in-itself to the for-itself of the proletariat.

It is oddly the case that movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter are much more conscientious of and articulate about their own positions of exploitation and oppression; whereas the working class today appears much more aligned towards the nationalist projects of the alt-Right. We might read this difference not as a cultural antagonism, but even as a contradiction present within the proletariat class consciousness itself, with each articulation expressing something opposed in each different expression of the class struggle: through sexism, racism,

and nationalism. What we see, then, is that even the universal singular today is expressed as difference and opposition between these different positions of exploitation, oppression, and inequality; and what we can say is simply this: that their articulation in this way, is perhaps the highest form of the ideology of twenty-first century capitalism. The conundrum that is here expressed, is the same as the one faced by the entire history of Western Marxism, beginning with Lukács and Gramsci, which has asked the very simple question of why the exploited continue to resist the very language of their liberation and insist on remaining caught within the terms that set out their domination. It is here that perhaps the novelty of McGowan's re-reading of Hegel is most welcomed.

Love, Transference, and the Party

McGowan's primary contribution is to read Hegel's universalism through a return to his categories of love and the state. I will deal with the former in this and the next section, and look at the latter in the following one. It is first important to note that it is via his focus on the question of love that McGowan identifies the intersubjective, as opposed to the individual dimensions of emancipatory self-consciousness.

Individualism, as a founding principle of liberalism, is an indication of its primary limitations. It's a principle that Althusser identifies in his theory of subjectivity, which read in its larger context shows that the state apparatus interpellates individuals through the form of the law, in which the subject is the agent of contract and exchange.³¹ This is why, in his theory of ideology, Althusser claims that individuals are interpellated as subjects. It's also, perhaps why his theory of the state and the law is one that makes ideology work, whereas, as we'll see for McGowan, in his reading of Hegel, law and the state can be an arm towards emancipation. This may even be seen if we turn from the Althusserian register to the Lacanian one.

As Mladen Dolar notes, the difference between the Althusserian conception of the subject and the Lacanian subject concerns the fact that subject for Althusser is what makes ideology work, whereas for Lacan subject emerges where ideology fails.³² As both Jodi Dean and I have argued, this suggests that the terms in Althusser's formula should be reversed. It's not that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects, but that ideology interpellates subjects as individuals.³³ This, even, is what Althusser shows as evidentiary in Freud and Marx, insofar as both trouble the bourgeois conception of the individual consciousness.³⁴ In both the liberal, as well as the neoliberal discourse, the key agent is the individual as owner and bearer of values exchangeable in the market. But in both the form of the analytical discourse

and in the Marxist party form we see much more clearly the fact that people cannot act as pure individuals. This is what McGowan finds, as well, in Hegel's writing on Christianity.

The intersubjective dimension of love is missed by most Left Hegelians, according to McGowan, because they tend to bypass Hegel's writing on Christianity. For Hegel, according to McGowan, Christianity is a religion of love, and it is through his approach to the form of love that Hegel most fully develops his philosophy of reason. Hegel's reading of love through Christianity is comparable, even, in the way that McGowan reads him, to the form of intersubjectivity found in the analytical discourse. Recognizing contradiction, according to McGowan, "requires not just the attentiveness of the psychoanalyst but (at the very least) the presence of an interlocutor to the manifestation of the subject's unconscious. Thinking by oneself, one is guaranteed to miss it" (55). What love shares with the analytical discourse is thus the form of the transference, which involves a dimension of trust in the interlocutor that allows them to be a recipient of the manifestations of the subject's unconscious. As Lacan puts it in his seminar on transference, love comes at the beginning of the analytic practice. The problem of love, he says, "interests us insofar as it allows us to understand what happens in transference – and, to a certain extent, because of transference."³⁵

Love, according to McGowan, "represents the identification of contraries and the sustaining of contradiction as a positive force. When one is in love, one unites one's own identity with that of the other. The lover and the beloved become one in their way of finding satisfaction over their own by adopting the other's satisfaction as their own" (99). Love, in other words, enables the subject to translate difference into contradiction. It "provides the avenue for granting contradiction a privileged ontological position" (99). Reason, just like the transference in the analytic discourse, models itself on love and takes its place once we become aware of this. Love and reason provide the terrain for apprehending difference as contradiction, and therefore of discovering the split within *oneself*. As McGowan puts it, "In love, the subject identifies itself with the other's difference, but this identification does not eliminate the difference. It creates a disturbance in the subject's identity that transforms that identity, revealing that identity is never isolated. Love is possible because the relation to difference is already part of every identity even before the subject falls in love. But love makes this difference explicit" (112). Both love and the analytical discourse grasp the centrality of contradiction, not through a relation between the differences, but through the recognition that there is, what Žižek refers

to as a “non-relation.”³⁶ Both love and reason are what help, in this way, to move the subject from the hysteric’s discourse to that of the analyst through the transference. But considering this in the register of an emancipatory movement, we might be wondering what form love can take for the manifestation of this project into some positive force. Turning towards the political, Jodi Dean argues that it’s on this level that we can rethink the form of the Communist party.

Dean has been, perhaps, the most vocal of the Lacanian political thinkers to articulate a psychoanalytic theory of the Leninist party. As she puts it, in Lacanian terms, the party is “an organization situated at the overlap of two lacks,” that of the other and that of the subject, a point that mirrors the discourse on love.³⁷ The party becomes a positive manifestation of this lack, creating a vehicle through which, she says, subjects can express a collective will. The party, Dean writes, “doesn’t resolve contradictions; it expresses them as contradictions.”³⁸ We find, in other words, strong similarities between her conception of the Communist party, and McGowan’s theory of love as the model for an emancipatory form of reasoning. But one of the questions that emerges, as McGowan observes, whenever we invoke Communism as the signifier of political practice following the traumas of the twentieth century (and present day Communism, for instance, in the People’s Republic of China, or even in Latin American Socialism) is how we might distill the difference between a party form in which subjects enact their own self-limitation as the force of freedom, and that of an oppressive party mechanism, in which limits are imposed externally by some substantial other (i.e., one that does not perceive itself to be lacking, such as the Stalinist dictator)? What makes the party form in Dean’s sense any different from the tyrannical or oppressive form found in actually existing Communism or Socialism?

I agree, on the one hand, with Dean’s claim that any positive political force in conditions of contemporary capitalism requires something like a party form, and I also agree that the party form is one that has the potential to be modelled on the psychoanalytic form of the analyst’s discourse, as well as the form of love that McGowan finds in Hegel’s reading of Christianity, and particularly the relationship between the form of love as that which, through reasoning, brings to self-consciousness the fact of contradiction out of the ideological production of differences and oppositions. However, on the other hand, I agree with McGowan that in our present conditions it is still worth questioning the *concept* of Communism as a signifier of emancipation. According to him, love and the concept are Hegelian names “for the way that otherness disturbs identity” (101). Do we yet have a concept,

today, one that rivals Communism and that adequately allows us to think contradiction in a positive form; that is, as capable of realizing universal emancipation, not as a *solution* to contradiction, as McGowan desires, but as a point of formal freedom inscribed through the collective will towards self-limitation? This is a question I will continue to pursue.

Learning to Love the Law (and Marriage)

According to Dean, the Communist party form is distinguished from liberalism, populism, and democracy by the fact that it still perceives the people as a divided subject. She sees this, more so, in terms of the class struggle as a split in the people as a unified subject position.³⁹ Class struggle, I agree, is certainly the form in which contradiction is inscribed into the social. This is how Žižek continues to approach Laclau and Mouffe's claim that the social is split by antagonism.⁴⁰ Class struggle is, for Žižek, the way in which the antagonism as the social real presents itself in the context of capitalist society. However, one question that we need to ask is how the division in the people – the class struggle as the form of the social contradiction – is reasoned by the subject. In other words, how does the class struggle move us from mere *difference* between capital and proletariat (as we find in many of the positivist sociological interpretations of class as socio-economic status) towards the *contradiction* between capital and proletariat? According to Dean, liberalism, populism, and democracy all assert unity, whereas communism asserts a gap, and the party is the positive form of presentation of this gap. But how, still, might we reason this form with regards to the freedom of the subjects in whose name it asserts itself? It's here that I find McGowan somewhat more convincing with regards to his reading of Hegel's theory of the state, which so far remains absent in Dean's theory of Communism, at least to my knowledge.

Hegel, according to McGowan, sees in the state "a social structure that sustains contradiction." The state, he writes, is "the political equivalent to absolute knowing" (202) just as love is the manner in which it is expressed at an intersubjective level, and reasoned in the way that the subject becomes capable of grasping contradiction at the level of thinking. The state is thus the positive embodiment of the subject's freedom. It is the embodiment of the manifestation through which the subject's own freedom is articulated in its own *self*-limitation, as opposed to an externally imposed limitation. The subject becomes free only when *it gives itself* the authority to obey the Law – not because of external force, but because of an internal resignation and limitation. Following the law out of self-authorization,

through one's own self-limitation, is, according to McGowan, the highest form of freedom, just as one remains in love, not out of the control imposed externally by the marriage contract. Freedom in love is not the simple act of negating the marriage contract and following one's desire to accumulate affairs. True free love is the recognition that the subject imposes a self-limitation towards affairs with others because there exists an awareness in the fact that the recognition returned from the lover is the very condition of the subject's own apprehension of the split within itself. It is the very same form that both the party and the state need to express if they are to enact a positive representation of the subject's freedom; they must come to embody the equal and universal dimensions of this freedom, where the freedom of each necessarily re-enforces the freedom of all.

Freedom through the form of the state then depends on a law that *we give to ourselves*. (159). The question is whether the law is one's own. If not, then it reasons to say that we must enact our freedom through its negation, just as falling out of love justifies the negation of the marriage. A substantial other in the form of a law that reproduces difference, opposition, and inequality is thus such an example of a threatening form of the state just as it represents an abusive marriage; and, the task of the Hegelian theorist, in this case, "is one of dismantling the forms that the substantial other takes on as they arise" (162) – that is, of criticizing an authority that assumes the appearance of a substantial, undivided entity – like a dictator or a bad husband, wife, or partner.

Good and Bad States

The state for Hegel is a positive manifestation of contradiction since it expresses the contradiction present within the society between public and private interests, and constantly *confronts* the subject with this contradiction. It creates the formal conditions for the subject's freedom by separating it from its private concerns (202). The state, therefore, operates as a shared obstacle for the collective. It becomes a further embodiment of the collective form of the analyst's discourse, which shares a discursive form that is similar to fetishism; however, in the state form we see the transposition of the obstacle into one that is the expression of contradiction rather than its indefinite negation and postponement.

According to McGowan, totalitarian and oppressive states arise either because they prop up a substantialized figure of external authority (like the dictator), or because of the fact that they confuse civil society for the state form itself, as is the case in liberalism. In civil society, subjects view themselves only as private

individuals, and the form of equality desired is one that seeks out merely the equality of private individuals. Authoritarian leaders try to create social *harmony* amongst the particularities of private individuals, rather than seeking universal emancipation. Social harmony remains ideological inasmuch as its project is one of *eradicating* contradiction. Universal emancipation, in contrast, requires something like the public form of the state to make contradiction apprehensible, and therefore to create the conditions of possibility for authentic freedom and equality.

In liberalism and capitalism, civil society subordinates the state to its service. We see this even more clearly in neoliberalism where, far from dismantling the state mechanisms – as is often claimed by its proponents, who appear to desire less state and less government – they are used to further entrench the market fundamentalism of the neoliberal ideology, using state, government, and market incentives to encourage subjects to act increasingly as individuals in competition with each other over scarce resources. The difference between the liberal conception of the individual and the neoliberal one is found in the difference between an ideal based in equality and one based in competition. For liberals, the market is a space of equal exchange; for neoliberals, it is a space of competition. But in both formations, private self-interest is prioritized over the public good because civil society is prioritized over the state.

Despite McGowan's protestations to the contrary, Anna Kornbluh reminds us that in Marx's writings on the Paris Commune, he too proposes a similar critique and expectation towards the form of the state. Marx's point with regards to the position of the state is not that "there should be no organized institutions of social life, but rather that those institutions should be infrastructures in the service of social life."⁴¹ Kornbluh cites Marx, from his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, who writes that, freedom "consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinated to it."⁴² As she puts it elsewhere (and in a formula that I cannot help but support completely), "We are everywhere, right and left, exhorted to oppose and transcend the state. But the materialism of the signifier, the formalism of the political, offer a counter to this orthodoxy, a path to embracing the state as a limit, embracing the space of the political as the only and proper sphere of life (and death), a path to embracing limits as the condition of freedom."⁴³ It is difficult, here, not to see a resemblance to McGowan's own use of Hegel to argue for the state form, which subordinates the private self-interest of individuals to the public good. Or, to be more precise, the state form is subordinated to the public good, which is a condition for the universal emancipation of all.

As McGowan puts it, whereas civil society encourages people to put self-interest first, “the state demands that the subject recognize itself first and foremost as a public being” (205). The state, for most people today, appears as an oppressive oppositional force, either because of its penchant towards an artificial social harmony – one that necessarily relies upon the exclusion of an other, into whom the universal is displaced, especially in the form of the *nation* state – or because it transforms the state into an arm of civil society. Fascism, too, turns contradiction into opposition, and is often the result of democratic attempts to repress contradiction. Fascism, as McGowan argues, is the result of subjects seeking out contradictions that democracy tries to repress. Fascism is in this way a by-product of democracy’s attempt to create equality out of social harmony, and therefore is required to repress contradiction and the inherent inequalities of capitalism in order to preserve itself. Yet, just like liberal democracy, fascism, too, attempts to create an image of social harmony through the repression of contradiction, via a reified friend/enemy dichotomy (209). Fascism is in this sense an inauthentic revolution, whereas Communist totalitarianism is the perversion of an authentic one. Instead of seeking to produce a social harmony of individuals, McGowan claims that giving priority to the state makes us public individuals before we are private ones (206). That being said, it is perhaps too optimistic simply to propose this model without giving it a concrete expression. This is where we need, finally, to debate the proper historical concept that can give positivity to McGowan’s theory of universal emancipation. This is where, for me, it is still necessary to be an historical materialist.

From the Historical to the Actual Concept

Philosophy, according to Hegel, has limited political force. It has, for McGowan, less an ability to imagine alternative futures than to recognize and interpret existing structures. But in reading existing structures in their totality, that is by reading them through the passage of the universal, we need to ask if it becomes possible to *propose* an alternate future. A *telos* as opposed to a *teleology*. According to McGowan, we may do so, but only within the terms available to us in the present, given to us by the prevailing symbolic structure of society (210). For Hegel, “philosophy intervenes politically by making clear the relations that already exist.” By doing this, showing the social relations that already exist, philosophy identifies what doesn’t fit. It identifies *the* symptom “that expresses the contradiction of the epoch” (210). The piece that doesn’t fit is that which undermines the system. We discover the piece that doesn’t fit through interpretation, rather than by fantasizing about a

solution to contradiction (210). This, according to McGowan, is what Marx proposes. He provides a fantasy for overcoming contradiction, rather than one of how to sustain contradiction. Here, though, I wonder if this is not precisely what Marx had in mind with the concept of Communism, about which, as many commentators note, he had very little to say on the practical level. Is it not perhaps the case that Communism operated for Marx as an emancipatory concept in the Hegelian sense? Or is it truly the case the Communism presents us with the teleology offered by the dialectical materialism of the late Engels or Stalin?

My own view is that Marx's materialist turn looks at how changes in the human society stem from the struggle for access to basic needs rather than abstract ideals of freedom. According to McGowan, Marx's translation of Hegel's philosophy of contradiction into historical materialism betrays Hegel's revolutionary program. For McGowan, Marx therefore represents a Rightist deviation from Hegel since he abandons the centrality of contradiction. Emancipation occurs through contradiction, not as a result of overcoming it. But what if it *is* just such the case that in Marx there is, like in Hegel, a progressive movement *not* towards a resolution of contradiction absolutely, but beyond a *particular* contradiction and towards, as McGowan puts it, more intractable ones (212)?

Žižek makes this case somewhat similarly when he argues in *The Ticklish Subject* for a return to the primacy of the critique of political economy, "not to the detriment of the issues raised by postmodern forms of politicization, but precisely in order to create the conditions for the more effective realization of feminist, ecological, and so on demands."⁴⁴ More recently, he writes likewise, that "the way to think the singular universality of the emancipatory subject as objectively and materially determined is through a negative gesture: of negating capitalism as a substantive determination."⁴⁵ I read these statements in the tradition of historical materialism to indicate the need to negate the existing structures of inequality in order to more adequately address the repressed traumas of the dominant ideology, including its own inability to contend with its own sexism and racism (for instance) despite its apparent penchant for formal equality.

Global capitalism has achieved universality by negating all other external obstacles and barriers to its expansion. The same is true somewhat of technology – if we read it in another register, that of the Anthropocene – which has encompassed the earth, to the extent that nature has at this point been entirely subsumed by technology and the artificial. This is why, perhaps, Jameson sees the postmodern sublime as one that enacts a paranoia about technology rather than nature. But now

that the real subsumption, not merely formal subsumption, of capitalism has engulfed the planet and dissolved all previous particularities – now we are left only with the *internal* limits of the system rather than external obstacles. As Žižek puts it, “when reality reaches its notion, this notion itself has to be transformed.”⁴⁶ As capitalism has subsumed all of its external limits, it now turns inwards, towards implosion. The question is thus not will capitalism end? The question, instead, is what will come next. There is nothing to guarantee the progression of history towards an emancipated society (a teleology), and as things currently stand it appears as though we can expect a deeper move towards authoritarianism and global inequality, set against the background of changing environmental conditions due to climate change. As someone once put it, though, the Earth will go on just fine; it's human beings that we need to worry about. What concept then is adequate to the realization of the project of universal emancipation that McGowan has in mind, but set within our own historical conditions?

The concept for Hegel, as McGowan explains, is a way of interpreting and reasoning contradiction. McGowan rightly states that the historical concept is only knowable in the total interpretation of what exists. Viewed in our historical totality, which concepts, then, are currently on offer to this task?⁴⁷ What are the terms that we currently have on order? Democracy? Communism? Socialism? Liberalism? Conservatism? What about Democratic Socialism?

Hegel's radicality, as we see through McGowan's interpretation, can come only after the collapse of liberalism and capitalism, as well as after the experience of actually existing Communism. We have seen already the contradictions implicit in liberalism and conservatism. Posthumanisms ignore the ethical distinctiveness of the human subject. Movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, although they express a singular universality within the context of phallocentrism, Eurocentrism, and nationalism, are not in themselves universal struggles at a global level. Furthermore, the existing liberal order is everywhere ready to support the demands of women, racialized minorities, and members of the LGBTQ+ communities for greater equality. We see even a strong liberalism at the heart of corporate and technological giants, like Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Google, (the so-called FAANG companies). Everywhere already, it appears that liberal capitalism is a champion of equality. What it fails to see, still, is the inability of liberalism to build universal equality due to its inherent need for inequality in the capitalist mode of production. This is one reason why the new Right identifies these other struggles with liberalism and the power of capitalism. This has been one of the chief reasons

for the call towards Communism on the Left. But the trouble with Communism as a concept is the historical baggage that it still carries; and it appears as though no amount of discussion over “authentic” communism, or “true” communism, will suffice to persuade the people in this direction. The debate over the differences between Communism and Socialism, voiced through figures such as Antonio Negri, Alain Badiou, and Žižek, are inconsequential, as well, since, at least in the West, their individual meanings through Cold War propaganda have been irredeemably combined, and efforts to separate the two falls on deaf ears at the level of the average person. What concept, then, are we left with?

Epilogue: Democratic Socialism – An Historical Concept for Universal Emancipation

I want to propose in conclusion that Democratic Socialism carries this potential today, both to express and reason the contradictions between the universality of public service, the particularity of individual private interest, and the singularity of the subject. We should take notice, for instance, of the way that a proponent of Democratic Socialism, like Bernie Sanders in the U.S., applies the kind of emancipatory logic that McGowan ascribes to Hegel. He is neither presented as a substantial figurehead – we see this, for instance, in his campaign slogan, “Not Me, Us” – nor does he ever attempt to reason Democratic Socialism as a solution, an end to contradiction, but articulates its necessity with reference to the contradictions of capitalism, as when he states, for instance, that he does not believe that the few in the “billionaire class” should have so much, when “so many have so little.” When asked how he defines Democratic Socialism, Sanders asserts his belief in the fact that people should not be working more than forty hours a week and not have the ability to pay for basic necessities. His articulation of Democratic Socialism is not one that proposes a fully concrete resolution, but rather makes explicit and reasons the contradictions that currently exist. His program for Democratic Socialism is one that offers rhetorically a manner of reasoning and expression of the contradictions of capitalism. Congresswoman, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, likewise a representative of the Democratic Socialist movement, has been a leading figure in the fight for a Green New Deal that rightly identifies the overlap between the contradictions of capitalism and those of the environment and climate change. The Green New Deal exemplifies the kind of positive program that identifies existing contradictions and reasons them in their practical and universal materiality.

While many may argue that Democratic Socialism is not itself dialectical, it seems reasonable to suggest that any dialectical materialist worthy of the name

should be able to see it as a concept capable of realizing the freedom in contradiction that McGowan proposes in his study on Hegel. As Žižek suggests, we should not aim to completely eradicate all contradictions, but we may pursue the negation of those forces that repress freedom and universal emancipation. Democratic Socialism may not be a complete solution to the problems of sexism, racism, climate change, or even capitalism entirely. But it is today the formation of our common sense (or our sense of the commons). All things being equal, I, for one, would much rather fight against capitalism (not to mention fight against sexism, racism, and trans-/homophobia) in the conditions of Democratic Socialism than in our present conditions of neoliberalism verging ever further towards a new (nationalist) authoritarianism and within the setting of the looming global climate catastrophe.

Notes:

¹ Fredric Jameson, "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture." In *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 49.

² The English translation of Louis Althusser's *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2014) is a useful guide in reading the logical priority of the legal discourse and the state apparatus in the development and reproduction of the capitalist mode of production, showing that the political gives structure to the economic, of which the latter is not merely an expressive determination of the former. See also, Matthew Flisfeder, "Morality or Enjoyment? On Althusser's Ideological Supplement of the Law." *Mediations* 30.2 (2017): 37-44.

³ On this point, see Colin Mooers, *Imperial Subjects: Citizenship in an Age of Crisis and Empire* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014): 17-42.

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014): 101.

⁵ See, for instance, Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (New York: Verso, 2010); Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012); Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (New York: Verso, 2016); Bruno Bosteels, *The Actuality of Communism* (New York: Verso, 2011); Mark Fisher, "Acid Communism (An Unfinished Introduction)." In *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)*, edited by Darren Ambrose (London: Repeater Books, 2018); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *The Idea of Communism* (New York: Verso, 2010); Slavoj Žižek, ed., *The Idea of Communism, Volume 2: The New York Conference* (New York: Verso, 2013); and, Alex Taek-Gwang Lee and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *The Idea of Communism, Volume 3: The Seoul Conference* (New York: Verso, 2016).

⁶ Todd McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel: Achieving a Contradictory Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). All subsequent references to this text will be made using internal citations.

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- ⁷ McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
- ⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume III*, translated by David Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1991): 358.
- ⁹ Marx, *Capital, Volume I*, translated by Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990): 163.
- ¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, of course, elaborates upon these claims in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989): 23-53.
- ¹¹ Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious* (New York: Verso, 2015). I elaborate on this point in my article, "Postmodern Marxism Today: Jameson, Žižek, and the Demise of Symbolic Efficiency." *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 13.1 (2019): 22-56.
- ¹² Žižek, *Incontinence of the Void: Economico-Philosophical Spandrels* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017): 200.
- ¹³ Marx, in fact, has a statement about this in *Capital, Volume II*, translated by David Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1992), where he states that "capitalism is already essentially abolished once we assume that it is enjoyment that is the driving motive and not enrichment itself." Thank you to Anna Kornbluh for pointing me towards these lines.
- ¹⁴ On this point, it's worth noting controversies surrounding Angela Nagle's article, "The Left Case Against Open Borders." *American Affairs* 2.4 (2018): 17-30. Available at <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/11/the-left-case-against-open-borders/>. Žižek, too, writing supportively of Nagle's view, notes that the contradiction "between advocates of open borders and populist anti-immigrants is a false 'secondary contradiction', whose ultimate function is to obfuscate the need to change the system itself, that is to say, the entire international economic system which, in its present form, gives rise to refugees." Žižek, "Why Secondary Contradictions Matter: A Maoist View." *The Philosophical Salon*. January 7th, 2019. Available at <http://thephilosophicalsalon.com/why-secondary-contradictions-matter-a-maoist-view/>.
- ¹⁵ Jane Bennett's vitalist new materialism in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), and Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (New York: Polity, 2013), are two examples of this kind of thinking. Theirs is a politics that radically seeks to avoid dualism and contradiction through an affirmative and monist orientation.
- ¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
- ¹⁷ This is a point articulated best by Louis Althusser in his essay, "Marx and Freud." In *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
- ¹⁸ Žižek, "Why Secondary Contradictions Matter."
- ¹⁹ Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993): 60-61.
- ²⁰ Alenka Zupančič, *What IS Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017): 36.
- ²¹ These points strike me as similar to Reza Negarestani's project in *Intelligence and Spirit* (Windsor Quarry, UK: Urbanomic, 2018), where he produces a functionalist theory of the mind – the mind as a function, a *doing*, rather than a thing. According to him, mind has the function of giving structure to the world, therefore giving it intelligibility. For him, the constitutive gesture of philosophy is self-consciousness, which has the ability to think the structure of the world and by doing so surpass it. This carries the possibility of creating a structuralist-humanist conception of history, building on the Hegelian project, but also likewise carries forward a psychoanalytic conception of consciousness as

that which gives structure to the world, and the unconscious as that which remains, the remnants of what gets left behind when critical self-consciousness chooses one trajectory over another.

²² Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002): 7.

²³ I would argue that the synthetic articulation of "patriarchal capitalism" is but a mere particularization of the more universalizing dimensions of global capitalism.

²⁴ Žižek notes, too, that this is a dimension that dialectics, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism also share with quantum physics. As he explains, what they all share is a recognition of the fact that knowledge changes reality, that self-consciousness changes its object. It is this knowledge, in the realm of the political, that turns the proletariat into a revolutionary subject. *Incontinence of the Void*, 228.

²⁵ This is one reason why I agree with Žižek's critique of populism in his debate with Ernesto Laclau. Populism, according to Laclau, is always founded upon some formulating alliance founded up a shared opposition to a substantial enemy. But as Žižek shows, the problem with this model is that it is founded on a subjective rather than a material and objective contradiction. See Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005), and Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008). Chantal Mouffe, more recently, takes up a similar defence of populism in her book, *For a Left Populism* (New York: Verso, 2018). Although I take issue with a Left politics framed around the concept of populism, I find Nancy Fraser's interpretation of this concept in *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* (New York: Verso, 2019) to be much closer to an authentic Left analysis and ethics grounded in a materialist understanding of capitalism.

²⁶ Thanks to Clint Burnham for pressing me on this matter with regards to my own interests in dystopian cinema and the representation of digital subjecthood. We can, on the one hand, allegorize the history of the digital as a master code for understanding the present historical moment of twenty-first century capitalism; but likewise, on the other hand, the digital can become the master code through which we can read the structuring role of the binary more generally, in its relation between the affirmative and the negative. See, as well, Alexander Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

²⁷ On this, see Susan Buck-Morss' brilliant reading in *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

²⁸ In the context of American racism, #BlackLivesMatter (as opposed to the ridiculous counter protest, #AllLivesMatter) is a universal expression of *racial* inequality insofar as the latter expresses the social symptom of a culture based on race, but the question is whether or not it stands for inequality as such. The problem with the #AllLivesMatter hashtag is that it misses the singular universal by bypassing racism. #AllLivesMatter is somewhat like the liberal view of inequality in the sense that it has a particular desire for equality but doesn't reason the contradiction between itself and the need for inequality based in capitalist relations of exploitation. #BlackLivesMatter expresses a racial contradiction by identifying the universal singular of racial particularities, but my question is whether or not it expresses the universal singular of the global exploitation of capitalism.

²⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

³⁰ This, I'd claim, is still historically contingent, and given the possibilities for patriarchy to become a post-capitalist universal, as it is depicted on the television series, *The Handmaid's Tale*, for instance, then we might rethink the universal in new historical conditions. In that series, it is clearly the feminine

subject position that expresses the singular universal. But ideologically, we might see the series as a displacement of the contradictions of capitalism onto a false universal that does not at present reign globally. As Angela Nagle has argued in her article, "The Market Theocracy," *Jacobin* (May 10th, 2017, <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/05/handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood-trump-abortion-theocracy>), the problem with *The Handmaid's Tale* is that it appears more as a comforting tale that progressives tell themselves about Trump's America and the past sexism of the 1950s and 1960s in order to avoid confronting the contradictions of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, in which it is capitalist practices of exploitation, more so that a direct or implicit patriarchy, that has imposed real material unfreedoms upon women.

³¹ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2014).

³² Mladen Dolar, "Beyond Interpellation." *Qui parle* 6.2 (1993): 78.

³³ Matthew Flisfeder, *The Symbolic, The Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (New York: Verso, 2016).

³⁴ Althusser, "Marx and Freud."

³⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Transference: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: Polity, 2017): 36. See also, Bruce Fink, *Lacan on Love: An Exploration of Lacan's Seminar VIII, Transference* (New York: Polity, 2015).

³⁶ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012).

³⁷ Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012): 242.

³⁸ Ibid: 244

³⁹ Dean, *Crowds and Party*: 255

⁴⁰ Žižek first develops this argument in response to Laclau and Mouffe's discussion of antagonism in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (New York: Verso, 1985) in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989).

⁴¹ Anna Kornbluh, *Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019):26.

⁴² Marx, cited in Kornbluh: Ibid.

⁴³ Kornbluh, "States of Psychoanalysis: Formalization and the Space of the Political." *Theory & Event* 19.3 (2016). Available at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/623989>.

⁴⁴ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999):356.

⁴⁵ Žižek, *The Relevance of the Communist Manifesto* (New York: Polity, 2019): 55.

⁴⁶ Ibid:57.

⁴⁷ This is a question posted in an episode of the *Why Theory?* podcast, co-hosted by McGowan and Ryan Engley, with special guest, Paul Eisenstein. "A Signifier for the Left" (May 7th, 2019).