DISCOURSES OF IMPOSSIBILITY: CAN PSYCHOANALYSIS BE POLITICAL?

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“The history of psychoanalysis is not finished,” writes Cornelius Castoriadis, “although it is possible that it may finish sooner than we think” [103]. Or should we instead heed the warning of Jean Laplanche: “Reports of the demise of psychoanalysis are merely the obverse of an unquenchable thirst for novelties at any cost. Psychoanalysis is expected to be a constant source . . . of new thrills” [2]. Pace Castoriadis, psychoanalysis is not likely to die out “sooner than we think,” but it is my contention that psychoanalysis must abandon its compulsion, to echo Laplanche, to be a “constant source of new thrills” in favor of more subtle mediations of the intersection between psyche and history. Put another way, it is time, now that Lacan (as its most recent “strong father”) is gone, for psychoanalysis to utilize what it has learned about the intersubjective nature of the Lacanian unconscious and consider its relationship to the sociopolitical.¹

One could argue that it is still to be determined whether the Lacanian “moment” has been liberating or restrictive for psychoanalysis. At the very least, the spectacular phenomenon of Lacanianism has demonstrated that the establishing of “cult” leaders (and its syndrome of discipleship and Oedipal filiations) continues to be the characteristic repetition compulsion of psychoanalysis, what François Roustang, in Dire Mastery, has summarized as a destin si funeste. It may be time for psychoanalysis to abandon its allegiance to “the authority of the master,” a move whose consequences would also entail the relinquishing of its endless fascination with and theorizing of the concept of transference (which never seems very far removed from the question of “mastery”) and

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¹ Sherry Turkle’s Psychoanalytic Politics: Freud’s French Revolution provides a history of the commitment of psychoanalysis to formulate a “psychoanalytic ideology,” specifically the impulses behind the May 1968 revolutionary movement in France, which, in its best moments, sought to theorize the way in which the subject is interpellated into a Lacanian Symbolic. But, as Turkle points out, this attempt failed as the French radical left’s appropriation of Lacanian discourse became stiflingly de rigueur, and the socially revolutionary potential of the “French Freud” movement degenerated into mere “radical chic” [87].
of a clinical treatment that fails to consider the analysand’s intersection with not only the analyst but history itself.²

But how can psychoanalysis enter into a meaningful exchange with politics? How can we forge a dynamic and provocative reciprocity between psychoanalysis and politics that would also respect the dual autonomies of the “psychic” and the “political”? I would argue that the major obstacle to articulating the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics is, ironically, the inherently psychoanalytic concept of transference, what Freud described as that “universal phenomenon of the human mind” [80]—the very concept in which psychoanalysis itself is so thoroughly implicated. In Freud’s conception, transference is a process of “acting out” as a kind of extended repetition compulsion that resists a salutary “working through.” Thus, in order for psychoanalysis to enter into a meaningful exchange with politics, or vice versa, what must occur is a disavowal of transference, whereby one discourse or the other ends up dominating and demanding allegiance to “the authority of the master.”³ If this transference is not disavowed, a “psychoanalytic politics,” or a “political psychoanalysis,” will fail to be a dynamic articulation, or “working through,” of two disparate discourses, but rather will become an unexamined “acting out” of psychoanalysis within politics.

In recent years, there have been encouraging signs of an increasing willingness to renew the relevance of psychoanalysis for ideology critique. In particular, Jean-Joseph Goux, Slavoj Žižek, and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe all deserve credit for attempting, to one degree or another, to contextualize psychoanalysis within the ideological. In this essay I wish to examine the difficulties these otherwise ambitious contextualizations have encountered in their attempts to conceive of a psychoanalytic politics and to reflect on what more needs to be done. I wish to emphasize from the outset that my critique of these authors is motivated not so much by what they argue as by what they don’t argue: that is, they neglect to articulate precisely what the irreducibility of psychoanalysis for ideology critique is. Despite the brilliance of these works, in the final analysis all three beg the question of why we need psychoanalysis for ideology critique: what, in other words, does psychoanalysis add that gives us a better understanding of the operations of ideology and politics? To repeat my earlier claim, the result of this question begging constitutes an “acting out” (that is, a superficial forging of psychoanalytic analogies), instead of a “working through” to genuine (psycho-)political solutions.

In order for psychoanalysis to become a truly sociopolitical discourse, it must “remember” its (often repressed) history in the Frankfurt School’s commitment to historicizing psychoanalysis through a nuancing of the enigmatic links among neurosis, culture, and history. One of the more recent attempts at the elusive synthesis between Marx and Freud is Jean-Joseph Goux’s Symbolic Economics, a brilliant synthesis of psyche and socioeconomy that nonetheless does not take on the task of offering a truly

2. As Castoriadis has observed, surely one of the more perverse effects of Lacanianism has been the recent attention devoted to a theorizing of the “desire of the analyst” as a new and important focus of psychoanalytic discourse—an indication that psychoanalysis may simply be uninclined, for the time being, to relinquish its “fetal destiny” to fetishize the “master”: “For many years now, France has been full of chat about the ‘desire of the analyst.’ But about the ‘desire of the analyst’ nobody cares” [84]. In their introduction to a recent collection of essays on psychoanalysis, Richard Feldstein and Henry Sussman call for a kind of “post-psychoanalysis,” a kind of “hybrid form of psychoanalysis [that] could become decontextualized from the mirror of clinical relations that has customarily supported its claims” [1].

3. For the definitive discussion of how transference operates within the discipline of historiography (that is, how historians transfer onto the past and how history seeks to disavow transference), see Dominick LaCapra’s essay “History and Psychoanalysis.” I am indebted to LaCapra for my analysis of how transference is an obstacle in constituting a psychoanalytic politics.

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political agenda. The reasons for this shortcoming are worth examining in some detail for their illumination of the difficulties of formulating a genuinely psychoanalytic politics.

Goux’s concept of “theoretical numismatics” is an attempt to forge analogies between Marx and Freud through an articulation of the genesis of value form. Marx declared that in a bourgeois economy, a commodity cannot establish its own value; rather this value can be established (that is, structured) only through a transcendental “general equivalent” (that is, gold as an absolute commodity). In other words, the exchange value of a capitalist commodity is a nonempirical, purely transcendent process of signification. We can at this point discern the influence on Goux of a Lacanian discourse of “phallocentrism”: like (the concept of) gold, the “dead” (murdered) father is also a transcendent symbol of a “purely syntactic moment” that creates the general equivalent as the “sign of signs,” the “necessary exclusion from the relative form of value” [18]. In this structuralist/“phallocentric” scheme, Goux depicts a Marxist conception of the operations of bourgeois economy as a more properly “psychic” economy, wherein the general equivalent of exchange value may be viewed as a “paternal metaphor,” a totemic “fulcrum of all symbolic legislation” [21]. Even as gold transcends its status as mere commodity, so also is the phallus not merely an objet petit a, but is rather “the unit(y) for all objects of drive” [22], the symbolic organization of the polymorphous libido of infantile sexuality. Thus, Goux’s “theoretical numismatics” establishes a strictly isomorphic relationship between the phallic and monetary functions such that, for both functions, an immediate, libidinal “investment” in an object gets repressed—or “metaphorized”—by a mystifying symbolic legislation.

More generally, then, for Goux the structure of the psyche is itself composed of layers of past socioeconomic formations whereby “neurosis” is to be perceived as the symptom of a repressed historical period. These socioeconomic formations at one time actualized their own mode of signifying, but, in Goux’s quasi-Lamarckian conception of the unconscious, the current mode of production has supplanted and, indeed, repressed these “traces of historically outdated symbolizations” [75]. These outdated symbolizations are “inscribed” in the dominant structure—“inscribed,” that is to say, by their very “nonrepresentation” by the dominant structure. The psychic apparatus is a symbolic legislation that, like the genesis of value form itself, is structured on repression—or on the distance between nonlinguistic forms of consciousness and linguistic forms of consciousness” [76]. Thus the ontogenesis of an individual psyche is constituted out of the phylogenesis of the history of modes of production and their exchange of signs—with neurosis itself, then, being seen as a kind of “reminiscence” of these repressed stages. And now we get to the heart of the matter for Goux: the analogies between neurosis and ideology as demonstrating “the same signifying syndrome, the same symbolic logic” [80]. Goux argues that “[t]he neurotic subject, like the ideological subject, is constituted by the place it occupies in one of the modes of the process of symbolization” [81]. The operations of ideology resemble those of neurosis insofar as the dominant ideology is itself structured on neurosis as the effect of a repressed (and more “affective”) mode of production and exchange. Ideology, then, functions as outmodeled (repressed) “syndromes” of signification—metaphors whose symbolic (or metaphoric) legislation is dependent on the occulting of earlier signifiers. (It is in this sense, then, that Goux argues that “[t]here is no true symbolism that is not cryptophoric” [124].)

But how inherently psychic are the occulting operations of Goux’s socioeconomic? For Goux, the determination of exchange value is always already an imaginary, or psychic, process; and the signifying structure of ideology, the big “O” Other, is always the structure of the Law—of gold as the Law of economy, or of the Name-of-the-Father as the law of the symbolic. But this Law is the structuration not of “real” content, but of purely representational content. Although Goux argues convincingly that the genesis of value form and previous modes of production have become repressed, his “repression” seems less a genuinely psychic process than a syntactic process that “signifies,” paradoxi-
cally, by means of its own nonrepresentability within current modes of production. Goux’s conception of ideology as a phallocentric process of signification is, as we have seen, indebted to the Lacanian phallus, which, as the signer of its own lack, is the place where loss is inscribed as a positive existence. But the intellectual line of transmission here may be not so much the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father as the Hegelian “negation of the negation” whereby negativity always has a positive, structuring function. For Goux, the nonrepresentability of repression “represents” itself at the moment of its effacement or negation within ideology (just as money attains its exchange value as the negation, the loss, the disappearance of money), with such a process functioning much like Hegel’s contention that a signifying structure constitutes itself out of a central void. For this reason, then, Goux’s analogies between a “conventional” neurosis, where the symptom occurs because of a repressed idea, and a more historicized neurosis, where the symptom occurs because of a repressed historical period, are as elegant as they are removed from real psychic operations. The precise problem here is that for Goux, it is almost as if repression could be recovered semiotically by “reading” the vestigial layers of forgotten signifying formations.

One suspects that Goux’s distinctly “semiotic” as opposed to “psychic” repression may owe its most profound intellectual debt not to Lacanian psychoanalysis but to a Hegelian discourse of negation, where signification (in this case, repression) “originates” in a central void. Goux’s analogies between the general equivalent of exchange value and of phallic signification, and between neurosis and ideology as “signifying syndromes,” are just that—analogy between types of libidinal “investments,” isomorphs heavily informed by Hegel and an emphasis on the genesis of signification as relational. Furthermore, we could argue that if Goux’s “repression” is not inherently psychic, neither is his “ideology” inherently sociopolitical. In a post-Marxist critique, Goux’s reification of the economic as a determinant mode of production insists on a separation of economy from the conditions of its own existence and begs the question of just how determinant capital is. In the final analysis, because Goux conceptualizes repression as a metaphorization of the “sign of signs” (that is, gold or the phallus), his in-every-other-respect ambitious synthesis of Marx and Freud never advances the unconscious beyond processes of signification to more materialist concerns. Pinpointing the intellectual difficulties of forging a true synthesis between psychoanalysis and Marxism, Fredric Jameson warns that what such an articulation must avoid is “ideological ion-exchanges, in which a molecular element of one system is temporarily lent to the other for purposes of stabilization” [386]. In Goux’s conception, gold (as the general equivalent of exchange value) and the phallus (as the repression of the “sign of signs”) lend their mutual support, or “ion-exchange,” to one another’s “syndromes” of signification to stabilize the concept of an “ideological neurosis.” But, in the midst of these isomorphs, what we are left with is a nonmaterialist, merely “signifying” economy and an unconscious structured on the occulting of these economic “signifiers.” Goux has not so much historicized neurosis as metaphorized it, encompassing it into an elegant but quasi-linguistic system of structural semiosis.

More to the point for the formulation of a genuinely psychoanalytic politics, however, is the consequence that in Goux’s synthesis of Marx and Freud, the unconscious remains distanced from the ideological. A psychoanalytic politics will have to go far beyond a mere rapprochement with the economic; it may be time to go beyond, for example, a theorizing of the commodity fetish as a kind of capitalist jouissance, or ongoing refinements of the Frankfurt School’s largely outdated project of studying the “consciousness” industry and the fate of the subject under late capitalism.⁴ A psychoana-

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⁴ In this context, one thinks, for example, of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “schizoanalysis” and their postmodern linkages of economics (or of modes of production) and the unconscious for a new kind of “libidinal politics.” As the new gurus of an “anti-psychiatry,” Deleuze and Guattari
lytic politics, in other words, will have to respect the autonomy of the political, while at the same time maintaining its identity as inherently psychoanalytic.

We could argue that a psychoanalytic politics could originate within a project of providing historical materialism with, specifically, a theory of subjectivity and the unconscious. Because psychoanalysis needs “subjects” as the sine qua non of its discourse, it attracted the attention of Althusser, whose concept of ideology, greatly influenced by Lacan in particular, also needs “subjects” to function. And at this point it is perhaps inevitable that we evaluate the Althusserian project and its affinities with psychoanalysis as a possible foundation for a psychoanalytic politics. Only through a review and reconsideration of Althusser can we fully understand both the successes and the limitations of Žižek’s “going beyond” Althusser for his version of a psychoanalytic politics.

For Althusser, ideology is not simply a kind of Marxist “false consciousness,” but is synonymous with the “lived” experience of human existence itself. More to the point, Althusserian ideology is, in some sense, fundamentally psychoanalytic (or fundamentally Lacanian) in its insistence on the primacy of imaginary representation. In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser defines ideology as “the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real conditions in which they live” [165]. As the coefficient that produces imaginary representations of the individual’s relation to these real conditions, ideology serves to distort and conceal the social contradictions of oppression. Althusser’s ideology is analogous to “lived” experience, then, insofar as its inversion of personal and material causes produces what constitutes individuals as (obedient, freely subjected) subjects. Ideology supplies the subject with satisfying, unified images of selfhood that idealize the subject’s conditions of existence and make these images appear natural, unmediated, and direct.

What is important to emphasize here is that the constitutive category of ideology is the “subject.” Quite simply, Althusserian ideology functions (like psychoanalysis?) by “constituting concrete subjects as subjects” (ISA 173). The consequences for a psychoanalytic politics, then, is that the subject becomes a subject through its relationship to ideology: “. . . there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject; meaning, by the category of the subject and its functioning” [ISA 160]. Specifically, the “subject” is born as a process of “recognition.” Ideology “interpellates” individuals as (grammatical/legal/juridical) subjects, who then “recognize” the existing state of affairs, thus insuring the continuous operations of ideology. For Althusser, recognition takes the form of “ideological recognition,” which guarantees that subjects “work all by themselves” [ISA 183] without consciousness of their position. As Althusser argues, “One thinks in it [ideological discourse] rather than of it” [RC 25]. Thus Althusserian ideology is not conscious of

hypostasize the schizophrenic as the embodiment of a desire (of a “desiring machine”)—a polymorphous libidinal energy whose fragmentation is perpetually subversive to the totalizing urges and codes of capitalism. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari’s essentialization of both schizophrenia (although an admittedly “fragmented” schizophrenia) and desire poses a confrontation between the psyche and a vastly oversimplified, “totalizing” capitalism that still persists in leaving psychoanalysis as a kind of “master discourse” called upon to explain the intersection of psyche and history. (For a nevertheless thoughtful account of “schizoanalysis” as a subversion of capitalist codes, see Eugene W. Holland’s “Schizoanalysis: The Postmodern Contextualization of Psychoanalysis.” For a useful account of psychoanalysis and its complicity with the ethics of capitalism, see Michael Schneider’s chapter “Psychoanalytical Theory and Bourgeois Ideology,” in his Neurosis and Civilization: A Marxist/Freudian Synthesis.)

5. For an excellent account of Lacan’s influence on Althusser’s theory of subjectivity, see Paul Smith, Discerning the Subject [18–21]. For an account of Althusser’s rejection of Lacan late in his career, see Warren Montag, “Freud, Althusser, Lacan.”
itself. In an Althusserian scheme, subjects are always “addressees” of particular social formations and, hence, products of intersubjective relationships. When, as Althusser illustrates, the “police” (or any other discursive formation) utters, “Hey, you there!” [“ISA” 174], the “subject” is born at this precise moment in a process of (imaginary) “recognition.”

We might consider, however, the extent to which Althusser has misappropriated Lacan’s account of the operations of imaginary representation. Lacan would argue that it is the impossibility of the subject’s self-representation that becomes “possible” only in ideology. For Lacan, the subject is formed not simply as a process of “recognition,” but rather as a process of alienation. A Lacanian axiom that is pertinent for a critique of Althusserian “recognition” is that recognition cannot itself be “recognized.” For Althusser, the subject is born when it “recognizes” its hailing of “Hey, you there!” But Lacan would depict this ideological process of “recognition” as the subject’s wishing the Other to recognize him/her. The linguistic hailing “Hey, you there!,” more than simply the ideological addressing of the subject, might be the point at which ideology serves as an illustration of Lacan’s axiom that “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other.” If, for Althusser, the response to the address “Hey, you there!” is the subject’s search for plenitude (the willingness to see oneself as an “addressee”), Lacan would be compelled to characterize this process as a fundamentally unconscious one. The structuration of the Althusserian subject through “recognition,” the process by which the subject always seeks to recognize something, is for Lacan a process not so much of “recognition” as of méconnaissance—or the process of (mis)recognizing the Other’s desire as the subject’s own. The “interpellated” subject becomes constituted as a plenitudinous, freely addressed subject only by a process of suturing—of a disavowal of its alienation in the Other.

If, for Althusser, the subject is always the (belated) effect of the expectations of ideology, for Lacan the temporal valence of this belatedness is the very essence of the subject’s (de)formation. In other words, the temporal illogic of “belatedness” becomes the very essence of the psychic—structuring an unconscious in ways that Althusser failed to perceive. For Lacan, recognition is always a metaleptic process of re-cognition. The goal of plenitude (of seeing oneself as an “addressee”) is constituted within the alienating temporality of the future anterior. This moment of alienation is, of course, Lacan’s elusive “retroversion effect,” wherein “[t]he subject is this emergence [surgissement] which, just before, as subject, was nothing, but which, having scarcely appeared, solidifies into a signifier” [FFC 199].

The Lacanian unconscious comes into being at the moment of the subject’s aphanisis (or “fading”), the moment at which the subject first makes its appearance in the Other. For Lacan, the subject is never fully and successfully interpellated because accession to subjecthood can only occur somewhere in the obscure threshold of what Lacan refers to as the vel, a point of alienation—a “neither one, nor the other”—a shady area of “nonmeaning” that constitutes the disappearance of the subject [FFC 210]. As Lacan argues in another context, “[t]he notation S expresses the necessity that S be eclipsed at

6. Althusser’s failure to perceive the implications of belatedness and its role in the retroactive formation of an unconscious provides a context for a further understanding of Paul Hirst’s critique of the Althusserian “subject” as hopelessly circular: “The concrete individual is ‘abstract;’ it is not yet the subject it will be. It is, however, already a subject in the sense of the subject which supports the process of recognition. Thus something which is not a subject must already have the faculties necessary to support the recognition which will constitute it as a subject” [65]. One implication of Hirst’s critique is that, as John Higgins argues, “Althusser’s subject is a subject without an unconscious” [116]. Althusserian repression is simply a “successful and complete repression, inaugurating a homogeneous and unbroken process of interpellation.” In Higgins’s estimation, Althusserian interpellation is, in the final analysis, an oddly “eternal process” [116].
the precise point where the object a attains its greatest value” [“Desire” 290]. Because of this “eclipsing” effect, the subject can never see itself as it really is. In other words, for Lacan the “subject” can only ever be the (psychic) failure of its own self-representation. At the point of an Althusserian ideology’s utterance of the interpellating “Hey, you there!,” the Lacanian subject, struggling with the “nonmeaning” of its own failed self-representation, feels compelled to counter with the demand, “Che vuoi?”—the “What do you really want?” that signifies the wake of the subject’s “nonmeaning” within the Symbolic network.

We can at this point turn to Slavoj Žižek’s recent study, The Sublime Object of Ideology, which is, among other things, an extended meditation on Lacan’s concept of (mis)recognition and the psychic and ideological consequences that accrue “beyond interpellation.” Specifically, Žižek analyzes the “Che vuoi?” as a moment of “failed interpellation”:

Althusser speaks only of the process of ideological interpellation through which the symbolic machine of ideology is “internalized” into the ideological experience of Meaning and Truth: but . . . this “internalization,” by structural necessity, never fully succeeds . . . there is always a residue, a leftover, a stain of traumatic irrationality and senselessness sticking to it. [43]

For Žižek, the “Che vuoi?” is a failed interpellation that can be defined as “a residue, a leftover”—a kind of hysterical response to the enigmatic desire of the Other. It is this “residue effect” that Althusser failed to perceive. If the hailing of the “Hey, you there!” is the interpellating point de capitol that seeks to pin ideological identifications onto the subject, then, for Žižek, the hysterical “Che vuoi?” is a signifier par excellence, the sign of the subject’s failure to understand that the (Big “O”) Other cannot provide the answer because it is also barred (is always already Ø), marked by “a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack” [122].

For Žižek, this “central lack” is not just the Lacanian manquée être that metaphorically (de)structures the subject, but is rather a real lack that demarcates the space of ideology. The barred Ø of the Symbolic is, in a word, “ideology” itself; the barred Ø becomes the site of Žižek’s attempt to politicize Lacan through its equation with an ideological “Real” that is unassimilable by the subject. In this regard, then, Žižek succeeds not only in politicizing Lacan, but also in “psychoanalyzing” ideology by arguing that ideology manifests itself as the intractable “Real” that eludes symbolization by the subject.

As was the case with Goux, however, just how inherently ideological is Žižek’s ideology? In order to answer this question, let us turn to Laclau and Mouffe’s Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, whose influence Žižek openly acknowledges, particularly their concept of a “radical democracy” as a model for his ideological “Real” as the traumatic “kernel” eluding symbolization by the subject. In recent years, Laclau and Mouffe’s work has been regarded as a virtual blueprint for the disruptions and discontinuities that constitute a distinctly postmodern society. In their radically antiessentialist framework, there is no “sutured space” characteristic of society since “the social itself has no essence.” Because of a “growing proliferation of differences” within society (that is, the often competing claims of race, class, and gender, as well as such recent social movements as gay politics or ecological politics), there occurs what Laclau and Mouffe refer to as a “surplus of meaning of ‘the social’” [96]. Because of the relational and constantly shifting character of every social identity, “society” as such is inherently incomplete and indeed, in some sense, does not exist. Accordingly, for Laclau and Mouffe, their now well-known concept of antagonism bears witness to “the impossibility of a final suture,” to the limit

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of the social. Antagonism becomes a kind of “floating signifier” that points to the impossibility of society to fully constitute itself.

We can now appreciate the extent to which Žižek’s rapprochement between psychoanalysis and ideology is enabled through his appropriation of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse of “impossibility.” He reveals his debt to Laclau and Mouffe in his going beyond Althusser to conceive of ideology not just as an imaginary representation but as an “illusion” that “masks some unsupportable, real, impossible kernel”—in effect, an escape from some “traumatic, real kernel” [45]. For Žižek, much like Laclau and Mouffe, the ideological is “a social reality whose very existence implies the nonknowledge of its participants as to its essence” [21]. Žižek’s project, then, is to elucidate the relevance of psychoanalysis for an ideology which is defined as the impossible site of “nonknowledge.”

Turning the (psychoanalytic) screw of interpretation on Althusser, Žižek might argue that the self exists only on the condition of the misrecognition of ideology’s efacing of the traces of its own impossibility. In such a scheme, Žižek’s primary object of interest becomes the subject-within-ideology who can “enjoy his symptom only in so far as its logic escapes him” [21]. And, thus, ideology is now to be understood as a symptom, with both “ideology” and the “symptom” (the symptom as the demand “Che vuoi?”) being that which is structured on an impossible logic.

Žižek no doubt finds Laclau and Mouffe’s emphasis on the concept of antagonism as the “signifier” of an impossibility so congenial because of his own interest in Lacan’s shift of emphasis during his career from the symbolic to the Real. For Žižek, the “traumatic, real kernel” of ideology is the “place opened by symbolization/historicization: the process of historicization implies an empty place, a nonhistorical kernel around which the symbolic network is articulated” [135]. Like society itself, Lacan’s paradoxical Real, as interpreted by Žižek, “cannot be symbolized, although it is retroactively produced by the symbolization itself” [135]. From this point it is only a small step, then, for Žižek to claim that the Real is a kind of structural causality that is directly analogous to Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of antagonism: “antagonism is precisely such an impossible kernel, a certain limit which is in itself nothing; it is only to be constituted retroactively, from a series of its effects, as the traumatic point which escapes them” [163]. For Žižek, antagonism (like the ideological “symptom”) is the Real, whose retroactive effects account for the dislocations and distortions that rend the symbolic order.

In sum, Žižek acknowledges Laclau and Mouffe for being the first to develop “the logic of the Real” within cultural critique. Taking his cues from their antiessentialist axiom that “society does not exist,” Žižek is led to draw an analogy between the concept of antagonism as the never-fully-articulated, “floating” limit of every social identity, and the Lacanian Real as an impossible, nonexistent (surplus) entity that nevertheless produces any number of traumatic effects. In the final analysis, what we are left with is not a genuinely psychoanalytic politics, but rather, as was the case with Goux, a series of elegant analogies—in this case, between the nonsymbolizable dimension of Lacan’s Real and Laclau and Mouffe’s antiessentialist antagonism. If in Goux’s synthesis of Freud and Marx ideology functions semiotically as the vestigial layers of forgotten signifying formations (ideology as inherently symbolic), in Žižek’s synthesis, ideology becomes that which is inherently nonsymbolic (the “traumatic, real kernel” as the nonsymbolizable)—a synthesis structured on isomorphic “ion-exchanges” between a Lacanian Real and Laclau and Mouffe’s axiom that “society does not exist.”

Let us now return to the question I posed earlier: how inherently ideological is the “impossible logic” of Žižek’s concept of ideology? At this point, I would suggest that one problem with Žižek’s conception of “ideology” as a kind of “floating signifier” (that is, as a “nonhistorical kernel”) is that it is too removed from any materialist specificity. What exactly are the consequences of a psychoanalytic appropriation of Laclau and Mouffe’s axiom that “society does not exist”? What does it mean for a psychoanalytic politics to
say that society “is structured around impossibility” and “traversed” by antagonism? For Žižek, the “surplus of meaning” that characterizes society is to be interpreted as the Real—or, more specifically, the Real as whatever resists symbolization. But I would suggest that this nonsymbolizable Real is not necessarily pertinent to the “surplus of meaning” that Laclau and Mouffe argue characterizes the social. For them, what might be even more important to emphasize is that society lacks an essence not just because it is an “impossible” surplus, but, more specifically, because it is “overdetermined”—an argument with more materialist consequences. Even as Žižek seeks to go beyond Althusser by reclaiming the implications of the Lacanian Real for a critique of ideology, a significant part of Laclau and Mouffe’s agenda is to express their disappointment that Althusser’s concept of overdetermination “tended to disappear from Althusserian discourse” [98]. The value of the concept of overdetermination for an antiessentialist political discourse is that it becomes less consequential to say that society lacks an essence than to say that society is overdetermined, that is, that society must be evaluated in terms of what they refer to as the “precarious and relational character of every identity” [99]. To say that society is not a unified totality, that is, to say that it is “overdetermined,” is to assert that society is inconsistent; and it is this highly complex inconsistency that, I would argue, is not necessarily analogous to the Lacanian Real. The question here is: how inherently psychic is this inconsistency—this “surplus” of meaning that renders the concept of “society” discontinuous? To say that society is traversed by an antagonism that “resists symbolization” is not the same as arguing that the different struggles and subject positions (albeit fragmentary and indeterminate) that make up the discontinuities of the social field of postmodern politics do not exist within some sort of historical materiality.

Society’s “surplus-effect” means that the social has no readily definable ontological essence, but we must pause to consider carefully just where psychoanalytic analysis can go from here—especially if we choose to widen the discursive field from a too-broadly-defined concept of the “ideological” to the explicitly political. The social may have no essence, but, put simply, there will still always be politics. Laclau and Mouffe lament the fading away of “overdetermination” within Althusserian discourse because, as they define it, overdetermination as the “incomplete, open and politically negotiable” character of every social identity [104] is a useful way in which we can acknowledge the almost poststructuralist indeterminacy of social meaning, while at the same time respecting the materiality of political struggle. Admittedly, within the political field identities are never fully fixed. One way Laclau and Mouffe choose to describe the political is the fixing of the point de capiton that attempts to pin down society’s “meaning”—but a point de capiton that is always already perceived as only partially and only momentarily fixing meaning before other “nodal points” of articulation eventually force it into a redefinition. If we claim that the inherent contradictions of a properly politicized “Real” are that which resist symbolization within the social, and that the “political,” too, is that which escapes symbolization, then we must carefully assess the consequences of such an argument. For Žižek, this antiessentialist moment creates a kind of psychoanalytic “hero” whose fall from grace (from the imaginary into the ideological) entails a perpetual enmeshing in the discourse of the signifier as the “sign of an absence.” But the fate of the explicitly political subject is less a fall into the abyss of “nonknowledge” (of “ideology” as a meaningless “traumatic kernel”) than an involvement in the ongoing processes of negotiation, mediation, and rearticulation—processes that, although admittedly theoretically (and pragmatically) endless, are no less engaged with materialist actions, interests, and practices on the part of the materialist “subject.”

In Žižek’s scheme, the subject is an explicitly ideological subject for whom “ideology” becomes defined as a compensation for the failed identifications inherent in the antiessentialist claim that “society does not exist.” In this regard, Žižek is perhaps philosophically closer to Althusser than he would choose to admit insofar as both want
something more from Lacan’s Real (their own version of the “Che vuoi?”) than it can deliver. In particular, Žižek wants the “impossible, traumatic kernel” that constitutes the logic of Lacan’s Real to be analogous (“ion-exchangeable?”) to Laclau and Mouffe’s antagonism, that is, to transform their antagonism into a Lacanian “hole” in the field of the Other. But Laclau and Mouffe would choose to emphasize the “pure negativity” of the ideological less as the (psychic) impossibility of symbolization than as a moment of real overdetermination—an overdetermination that does not prevent participation within concrete practices (however fragmented and momentary). As Laclau and Mouffe themselves point out cogently, “If society is not totally possible, neither is it totally impossible” [129].

The problem here may finally be that Žižek’s interpretation of Laclau and Mouffe’s antagonism (to a greater extent than Goux’s interpretation of Lacan) is less Lacanian (and, hence, less psychic) than it is Hegelian. What is perhaps ultimately at stake in Žižek’s appropriation of Laclau and Mouffe’s concepts of antagonism and radical impossibility for his own characterization of ideology as an instance of “pure negativity” is less an outline for a genuinely psychoanalytic politics than his own carefully constructed “return (via Lacan) to Hegel.” Let us consider the significance of Žižek’s choice of title: the “sublime object” of ideology. Initially taking his cue from Kant’s Critique of Judgement, Žižek defines the Sublime as “an object in which we can experience this very impossibility, this permanent failure of the representation to reach after the Thing” [203]. Žižek argues, however, that it was not Kant but Hegel who fully understood the “dialectical moment” of the sublime: whereas Kant “still presupposes that the Thing-in-itself exists as something positively given beyond the field of representation” [205], Hegel poses the Thing-in-itself as “nothing but this radical negativity” [206; Žižek’s emphasis]. For Žižek, the Hegelian Aufhebung (not unlike Lacan’s Real) is to be characterized as a kind of residue that resists dialectical sublation. More importantly, the sublime object is that which “fills out the empty place of the Thing as the void . . . which, by its very inadequacy, ‘gives body’ to the absolute negativity of the Idea” [206].

As we have seen, throughout his work Žižek successfully argues that ideology is inherently psychic—but if, as I have suggested, he has failed to show how his “ideology” is inherently political, it may be because of the status of the “object” within his discourse of “impossibility.” Interestingly, at one point Laclau and Mouffe characterize society as an “impossible object” of ideology [112], and one wonders if Žižek’s emphasis on the “sublime object” is not at least partially motivated by a direct echo of Laclau and Mouffe. But whereas Laclau and Mouffe’s “impossible object” points to the inherent contradictions of the postmodern political field, Žižek’s “sublime object” figures not the irreconcilability of real social and political movements, but rather das Ding, the status of the impossible Thing (of ideology as the Thing-in-itself) as the “impossible-real” object of desire. What gets occluded (sublated?) in Žižek’s modulation from Laclau and Mouffe’s “impossible” object to his own “sublime” object is the “impossibility” of politics (that is, the very real antagonisms, shifting alliances, and negotiations of real political struggle)

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7. Žižek is hardly to blame for wanting the Real to “do” so much, given that Lacan himself made ever-increasing (and ambiguous) demands on his own concept of the Real. In his recent The Lacanian Delusion, François Roustang offers a history of the development of the Real within Lacan’s thought, a history that, in Roustang’s assessment, poses a number of irreconcilable contradictions. Roustang notes that Lacan first formulated the Real as a product of the psychotic’s incapacity to symbolize. But later, the Real becomes, in Roustang’s terms, a “contradictory Real, which comes to be both an obstacle and a void” [82]. In other words, the Real has modulated from the psychotic’s incapacity to symbolize to, more generally, whatever resists symbolization (a “lack,” or a “gap,” or a “hole,” etc.). Roustang argues that although Lacan felt the need to formulate a Real distinct from the Symbolic, he was never able successfully to separate the two realms.
in favor of a Hegelian discourse that hypostasizes contradiction (and a leftover, “negative” kernel) as an internal condition of every identity. It is in this sense, then, that Žižek’s appropriation of Laclau and Mouffe’s “radical impossibility” seems less engaged with politics and ideology than with the relevance of Lacan’s Real for a philosophical enrichment of our understanding of a Hegelian metaphysics of self-identity as the coincidence with its own void. The discourse of “impossibility” that Žižek celebrates has, I would argue, much closer affinities with the intellectual history of a European discourse on the Sublime as the failure of representation than with the “radical impossibility” of Laclau and Mouffe’s discontinuous field of postmodern politics. In the final analysis, Žižek’s “sublime object” of ideology is a kind of Lacanian tuche, which can only effect a “missed encounter” with the Real of postmodern politics.

The challenge for a psychoanalytic politics is to confront and consider more seriously the daunting complexities of the concept of the “political.” More specifically, it will have to take into account the new struggles and the wide diversity of social relations that have so overdetermined the complex field of postmodern politics. What is the “place” of psychoanalysis within the radically new and shifting political spaces that guarantee there can be no necessary relations amidst a multiplicity of subject-positions? Might not the “and” of the phrase “psychoanalysis and politics” threaten to become merely paratactic when the concept of the “political” within postmodernism (as Laclau and Mouffe have shown) has itself become so unsettled—so multiple and even contradictory? What is the common discursive ground between psychoanalysis and the highly unstable logic of postmodern politics?

It should be pointed out here that Žižek’s attempts to “psychoanalyze” ideology via Laclau and Mouffe were no doubt at least partially adduced by the authors’ own continual deployment of psychoanalytic terminology. For that matter, their claim that “every society [is] constituted as a repression of the consciousness of the impossibility that penetrates them” [125] poses as a virtual manifesto for a psychoanalytic politics, as does their resuscitation of the Althusserian sense of overdetermination as having its origins in Freudian psychoanalysis [97]. Throughout their Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Lacanian terms are liberally distributed: society as an impossible “suture,” the process of articulation as a point de capiton, antagonism as a kind of metonymic, “floating signifier,” temporary negotiations as “nodal points,” and so on. But to what extent are these psychoanalytic metaphors merely metaphorical?

I argue that Laclau and Mouffe’s project of articulating the complexities of a postmodern politics would have been just as innovative and compelling without their psychoanalytic metaphors. The authors’ central concepts of articulation, antagonism, and radical impossibility are not especially enhanced by their recourse to “Lacanianisms” that, although carrying with them a certain provocative charge, do not possess any further polemical value. In order to render more meaningful their invoking of psychoanalytic terms, Laclau and Mouffe would need to be more specific about the precise nature of the intersection between the social (as that which has no “essence”) and the psychic, which, however fragmented, alienated, and deconstructed, is surely a major factor in the implementing of political actions. Their use of psychoanalytic terms to further elucidate certain ideological and political phenomena is too broadly deployed to allow for a consideration of the individual psyche as a factor in the operations of ideology.

What Laclau and Mouffe do not consider, for example, is the difficult question of how the individual psyche is to be factored into collective processes of negotiation and mediation. They characterize antagonism as a kind of “floating signifier,” but this metaphor tells us nothing about what happens politically when the individual subject (to extend their Lacanian scheme to its logical conclusion) desires itself as what it is not. In order to justify their Lacanian terminology, Laclau and Mouffe would have to pursue further the ideological implications of what it means, in an “antagonistic” society, for the
(political) subject to receive no response from the Other of ideology except a signifier that represents that subject for another signifier. As Laclau and Mouffe rightly argue, the political is characterized by conflict and division, but is this conflict psychic as well? Can certain forms of political compromise (a collective “we” that must be formed out of diversity and conflict) be usefully characterized as the overcoming of psychic conflict (narcissism, mimetic identifications turned aggressive, and so on)? In the final analysis, Laclau and Mouffe’s deployment of psychoanalytic metaphors demonstrates that what is still to be determined in culture critique is the irreducibility (or the indispensability) of psychoanalysis within the field of postmodern politics. In short, they beg the question of whether the political field needs psychoanalysis at all: is it possible—indeed, is it desirable—to constitute a psychoanalytic politics?

To summarize these attempts at a psychoanalytic politics by Goux, Žižek, and Laclau and Mouffe, what emerges in all three cases is a kind of discursive “acting out” of psychoanalysis within politics that fails to achieve a disavowal of transference. Žižek’s attempts, for example, to portray hysteria as a kind of “failed interpellation” and to posit the Lacanian Real as analogous to Laclau and Mouffe’s “society that does not exist” effect a transference onto the discourse of the sociopolitical. On the other hand, Goux’s project for a psychic economy, whereby monetary operations are equated with the “dead” (murdered) father of Lacanian psychoanalysis, effects a transference onto psychoanalysis (ironically, the “originator” of the concept of the transference) in order to make the socioeconomic inherently psychic. In both cases, one discourse ends up demanding allegiance by another.

I would argue, however, that the case of Laclau and Mouffe is more complex. I hesitate to make the simple claim that when they equate the Lacanian “floating signifier” with a sociopolitical “antagonism,” Laclau and Mouffe are merely disavowing a transference. Rather, I would suggest that, more than Goux or Žižek, they do come close to a psychoanalytic politics—one that begins not with the transfers between the discourses of psychoanalysis and politics, but rather with their concept of radical democracy as a means of conceptualizing a new “postmodern agency.” In Laclau and Mouffe’s conception, within the field of politics the postmodern agent inevitably inhabits not just multiple and shifting but also conflicting subject-positions; and I would maintain that Laclau and Mouffe’s “postmodern agency,” as a mediation between poststructuralism and an insistence on a historical materialism (that is, as a reminder that the decentered subject is still performing political work within the social field), could serve as the discursive space of a psychoanalytic politics. A focus on postmodern agency could, in other words, advance psychoanalytic discourse beyond transferential analogies and isomorphs within the sociopolitical.

All of which is to argue that the goal here would not be simply to give antagonism the psychoanalytic label of “floating signifier,” but rather to articulate what it means for the postmodern agent to inhabit the site of intersection between the political and the psychic. Ever since its inception, what psychoanalysis has in some sense done best is to offer increasingly refined theories of the “subject” and the unconscious. A focus on Laclau and Mouffe’s postmodern agent as an authoritative site of resistance to ideology will need the insights of psychoanalysis to further understand these moments of resistance; a theory of agency, in other words, will have to take the complexities of the psyche into account. But what direction should such a program take? How inherently “psychoanalytic” and how inherently “political” is the concept of agency? On the one hand, psychoanalysis might wish to present an argument that the subject is, in some sense, blind to its own agency. Lacan might argue, for example, that because we can decide only retroactively what we “will have been,” the “agent” would have performed a (political) act (of opposition or alliance, for example) before it took cognizance of this act. Because for Žižek, the subject can “enjoy his symptom” only insofar as its logic escapes him, then
he might choose to characterize the political work of agency as a kind of “blank spot”—that which the agent must repress in order to organize itself.

But a more inherently political approach to agency would emphasize that the concept of a postmodern agency is a refusal to interpret the subject as merely a “blank spot,” always already undoing itself within a society that “does not exist.” Within the field of postmodern politics, the agent, as we have seen, inevitably inhabits not just multiple and shifting but also conflicting subject-positions. But to acknowledge the multiple and shifting ground of politics should not be to deny that these subject-positions (or agents) are still seeking the ground of their practices and that there is a concreteness to their actions (actions as defined by intervention, opposition, interests, alliances) such that, in certain situations, they could have acted otherwise than they did. The radical contingency that intersects with concrete practices results in an incompatibility of subject-positions, but it is that very incompatibility that can render a return to such concepts as intentionality, accountability, and reasons for action (concepts that have been so thoroughly deconstructed by poststructuralism) worthy of theoretical (and, in particular, psychoanalytic) attention again. The incompatibility that can result from overlapping (and overdetermined) subject-positions may or may not be present to consciousness at any given moment (that is, may or may not be a product of awareness)—and it is this (real) indeterminacy that serves as the discursive space of a psychoanalytic politics. If an Althusserian interpellation, to pose one scenario, results in a division (or Spaltung) of the (Lacanian) subject such that the nonsutured “real” subject (as opposed to the “represented” subject that is readily available for interpellation) is always in the process of disavowing its construction in the field of the Other, then a psychoanalytic politics could have much to say about the psychic valence of these moments of resistance—that is, how they become transformed into political action, how the agent constitutes itself as a “conscious” subject that could have acted otherwise, how it fights for “recognition” within the political field, and so on.

To consider in greater detail the political causes of agency (the building or breakdown of coalitions, the transformation of networks, the integration of hegemonic practices, the redefinition of interests, the negotiation of difference)—in effect, to consider the multiple and shifting political operations of Laclau and Mouffe’s “radical democracy” as they intersect with the intentionality and accountability of the agent—would result in a dynamic, cutting-edge discourse that could both respect the autonomy of the political, that is, acknowledge the real work of political action, and preserve the domain of the psychoanalytic, that is, acknowledge that we can and must continue to talk about the operations of the unconscious within the field of ideology, but in a way that is free of predictable recourse to argument through analogy.

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8. Andrew Ross, also building on Laclau and Mouffe, poses the challenge in terms of the need “to recognize the pluralistic autonomy of different (social) logics of which the psychic is only one, as opposed to assuming that these often contradictory logics can be commonly harnessed either to some neo-positivistic law of evolutionary necessity, or alternately to a hermeneutic understanding of repression that could describe and account for the universality of ideological servitude” [122].

9. A psychoanalytic politics could consider, for example, racism as one of the more harmful consequences of an agency that may or may not be present to consciousness at any given moment. We can turn to the work of Homi Bhabha for a cogent account of how, in particular, the racial stereotype of colonial discourse works according to fundamental psychoanalytic principles. Specifically, Bhabha argues that racism is predicated on fetishism as a need to assert mastery and pleasure: “In the act of disavowal and fixation the colonial subject is returned to the narcissism of the Imaginary and its disidentification of an ideal-ego that is white and whole. . . . The construction of colonial discourse is then a complex articulation of the tropes of fetishism—metaphor and metonymy—and the forms of narcissistic and aggressive identification available to the Imaginary” [163–64].

10. In this regard, it is worth noting that the formation of a psychoanalytic politics could “rescue” Laclau and Mouffe from Stanley Aronowitz’s charge that they are caught “in the logical
psychoanalytic politics would result in a new and vastly enriched movement within political criticism, that is, a more subtle, mediated way of interpreting the complex intersection of the unconscious and the sociopolitical. A focus on the postmodern agent would be the important first step toward a “working through” to a psychoanalytic politics—an end to the repetitive “acting out” of psychoanalytic discourse within the sociopolitical. If a genuinely psychoanalytic politics has so far proven to be a “discourse of impossibility,” it is because the disavowal of transference has, up to this point, served as the obstacle to any attempt at an articulation of the two discourses.

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contradiction of supporting social movements while arguing that agency can be found only in discursive formations” [51].


