

Dialectical materialism and the 'feminine sublime'

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Abstract Drawing primarily on Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian reading of Kant and Hegel, but also taking up arguments made by Joan Copjec and Fredric Jameson, this article asserts a conception of the 'feminine sublime' in accordance with the political-philosophical approach of dialectical materialism. The article begins by distinguishing between historical and dialectical materialism in order to assert what is at stake in the Marxian critique of ideology, followed by a discussion of the Lacanian conception of the feminine subjective position. The conception of the 'feminine sublime' articulated here draws connections between the feminine and proletarian subjective positions, and proposes a way of articulating an ethics of revolutionary subjectivity.

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It is now time to devote some thought to developing an ethics of ... the unlimited, that is, an ethics proper to the woman.

Joan Copjec (Copjec, 1994, p. 236)

Introduction

In her well-known essay, 'Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason', Joan Copjec takes up the question of sexual difference in Lacanian psychoanalysis. She begins by connecting sexual difference to Kant's antinomies of pure reason and explains how, according to Kant, reason will always and inevitably fall into contradiction whenever it is applied to objects that could never possibly be those of our immediate experience. For example, the contradiction between the theory of a finite and an infinite universe: the universe either has



a beginning in time and is limited with regard to space; or, the universe has no beginning in time and has no limit in space, and in relation to both it is infinite. The latter exemplifies what Kant referred to as a mathematical antinomy where, despite the contradiction, both statements are false as the universe in its entirety can never be an object of our immediate experience.

In her essay, Copjec demonstrates how the psychoanalytic conception of sexual difference is analogous to the Kantian antinomies. The problem with sexual difference, as it is explained in psychoanalysis, is that, like the universe in Kant's mathematical antinomies, it can never be an object of our immediate experience. It is, in this sense, Real in 'Lacanese'. Like the Kantian 'euthanasia of pure reason', sex, as Copjec puts it, is 'the stumbling block of sense'. It is 'the internal limit, the failure of signification'. 'Sex' comes to be, in other words, 'where discursive practices falter' (Copjec, 1994, p. 204).

Copjec contrasts her own (Lacanian) position with the post-structuralist position of Judith Butler, particularly as the latter asserts her discursive theory of 'sex' in her well-known text, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). As Copjec explains, when faced with antinomies of pure reason, the subject can either stick to dogmatism, or she can move towards a despairing scepticism (Copjec, 1994, p. 203). In her progressive effort to move beyond the former, Butler, according to Copjec, ends up in the position of the latter. My interest, here, is not necessarily to take up Copjec's critique of Butler in *Gender Trouble*. However, I mention this only to point out that it is her critique of Butler that propels Copjec towards a cogent illumination of the Lacanian formulas of sexuation. I leave it, then, to the reader, to formulate her own position on Copjec's critique of *Gender Trouble*.

My interests, though, lie with Copjec's provocative remarks, in her conclusion, in which she asks her readers to consider thinking in the direction of a theory of feminine (as opposed to 'feminist') political ethics. My aim, then, is to conceive the latter in relation to the political ethics of the Marxian subject: the proletariat. Psychoanalysis and Marxism are each concerned with a central (traumatic) antagonism, which is Real in the Lacanian sense – which, as Copjec notes, is the limit of sense: sexual difference in the case of psychoanalysis and class struggle in the case of Marxism (see Žižek, 2002a, p. 100, 2005, p. 82). In both psychoanalysis and Marxism there is something about the particularity of the (feminine/proletarian) subject – or, more specifically, the singularity of the place that the subject occupies – that overlaps with the Real of the antagonism.

What follows, then, is in many ways a return to some of the central antagonisms in post-May 1968 cultural theory on questions of subjectivity and ideology, particularly those between the positions that arose out of Althusserian 'structural' Marxism and the later post-structuralist positions inspired by the New Social Movements (that is, non-class based political movements), which took up arms at a moment when the supposed political agent of History

(the proletariat) appeared nowhere to challenge the reigning ideology (see Blackman *et al*, 2008, pp. 2–7). As noted by later Lacanian theorists, such as Copjec and the ‘Slovenian School’ (including Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič), many of the problems arising in Althusser’s reading of subjectivity and ideology are owing to certain misreadings of Lacan’s theory of subjectivity, which had inspired much of Althusser’s own theory of ideological interpellation (‘ideology interpellates individuals as subjects’). Furthermore, I claim that there is an inadequate distinction between dialectical materialism and historical materialism in much of contemporary critical and cultural theory (perhaps also a symptom of Althusser’s claim that ‘History is a process without a subject or goal’). The post-structuralist position, I argue, therefore responded to an ill-formed conception of the Marxian and psychoanalytic positions.

Following Copjec’s lead on the question of a feminine ethics, my goal is to show how and where the ethical subject of psychoanalysis (the feminine subject) overlaps with the Marxian subject, the proletariat. In doing so, I draw primarily upon the work of Slavoj Žižek, as well as the Marxian literary theorist, Fredric Jameson. I refer to Jameson early on in order to add some distinctions between the Marxian ‘science’ of ‘historical materialism’ (which I conceive as ‘masculine’ in the Lacanian sense) and the Marxian revolutionary philosophy of ‘dialectical materialism’ (which I take as ‘feminine’). I then take up Žižek’s (Lacanian) theory of ideology, which he connects to the German Idealist philosophy of Kant and Hegel. By looking at the way in which Žižek takes up the ‘sublime object’ of ideology (particularly in Kant and Hegel) – as that which supports the surface level of ideological propositions in the Symbolic order – my goal is to propose a conception of the ‘feminine sublime’, which brings the subject towards a revolutionary subjective position.

The way that Žižek defines the feminine subjective position owes much to the argument put forth by Copjec in ‘Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason’. However, by drawing out further consequences from the way that Lacan continued to approach the Cartesian *cogito*, and the difference between an ‘ethics of desire’ and an ‘ethics of drive’, I find that Žižek’s position develops an ‘ethics of psychoanalysis’ that is much closer to dialectical materialism than that developed by Copjec. Also, it is his attention to the ‘sublime object’ of ideology that allows Žižek to advance a much more forceful return to the Marxian theory of ideology – a central concern for dialectical materialism – by taking up a focus on enjoyment, or *jouissance*. It is this dimension that has been missed by previous theorists of ideology. ‘Feminine enjoyment’, in the Lacanian sense, is thus for Žižek a way of relating to desire that amounts to a political ‘act’. Drawing on Žižek, ultimately, my point is that the ethics of psychoanalysis overlaps with that of dialectical materialism. ‘Woman’, in other words, is the psychoanalytic name for the Marxian subject of History: the proletarian – or, to paraphrase Lacan, ‘Woman’ is one of the names of the proletarian.



Ideology: Between Historical Materialism and Dialectical Materialism

Let's start at the beginning: ideology. As Fredric Jameson puts it, if the Marxian critique of capitalism proves true – if inequality (which is reproduced and manufactured by the capitalist system) is a structurally necessary element of the capitalist mode of production; if history truly is the history of the class struggle and so on – why is it that so many people, particularly those whose interests are asserted by Marxian theory, continue to insist on rejecting its very principles (Jameson, 2009, pp. 318–319)? The goal of ideology critique – at least in the Western Marxist tradition – is to try to resolve this dilemma. Contra Foucault, who claims that the notion of ideology ‘always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth’ (Foucault, 1984, p. 60), what the Marxian theory of ideology asserts is, not that there is some kind of ultimate, perfectly objective, neutral Truth. Rather, the theory of ideology asks the subject to recognize the truth of the position from which she speaks. That is, what an older tradition of ideology criticism referred to as ‘false consciousness’ simply proposes the idea that resistance to the Marxian critique of capitalism involves a misrecognition of the truth of the position occupied by the (exploited) subject, herself. Put differently, ‘false consciousness’ involves a displacement of the central cause of one’s own discontent within the coordinates of everyday existence. For example, rather than locating the cause of her discontent in the objective relations of capitalist production – in exploitation by the capitalist – the subject displaces her discontent onto some kind of externally contingent ‘cause’: the anti-Semitic figure of the ‘Jew’; the ‘Islamic Fundamentalist’; foreign labour and so on. Ultimately, ‘false consciousness’ means putting the blame for the inherent, internal flaws in the system onto some external, contingent figure, or false problem.

In *Marxism and Form* (1971), Jameson notes that Marxism, owing to the nature of the kinds of inquiries it makes upon social existence, has at its disposal two ‘codes’ of sorts by which its object of investigation may be addressed: it has both a subjective and an objective code. As he puts it, ‘history can be written either subjectively, as the history of class struggle, or objectively, as the development of economic modes of production and their evolution from their own internal contradictions’ (Jameson, 1971, p. 297). What we need to add here is that these two codes are implicated in one another so that, in order to read the objective code of the history of one mode of production to another, evolving out of its own inherent limitations and contradictions, this historical perspective must be viewed from the particular subjective position of the proletariat. That is to say that Marxism is nothing close to a total world view; it does not attest to possessing some kind of objective, neutral knowledge about history. Rather, knowledge about history from the Marxian perspective is definitely subjective – but it is a subjective approach to history that speaks to the truth about the position occupied by the proletarian subject *within the objective*

relations of production. Occupying a particular subjective position within the objective relations of production allows the proletarian subject to perceive history in a certain way that remains obscured for the liberal-bourgeois subject in the capitalist relations of production. That is to say that, as Georg Lukács put it, objective reality is the same for both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. What is different is the particular subjective position from which each approaches objective reality (Lukács, 1971, p. 150).

Conceived in this way, it is possible to make a further distinction between the Marxian ‘science’ (as Althusser would have put it) of ‘historical materialism’ and the Marxian philosophy of ‘dialectical materialism’. Historical materialism takes an objective approach to history. Its goal is to examine the transition from one mode of production to another, and at the same time, to consider the formation of superstructural elements in their relation to historical transformations in the economic base. As Marx puts in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, ‘every form of production creates its own legal relations, form of government, etc.’ (Marx, 2005, p. 89). To the latter we should also add cultural institutions, such as the (historically contingent) family structure, the education system, the media, literature and so on. An historical materialist analysis of ideology and culture is therefore occupied by conceiving the connection between the historical stage of the mode of production and the emergence of particular cultural and ideological forms. Hence, Jameson’s conception of the ‘political unconscious’, which refers to the underlying connection between the mode of production and culture, makes more readable his claim that ‘postmodernism’ is the ‘cultural logic’ of late capitalism. According to him, every narrative is political to the extent that it asserts a class ideological position that is connected to the particular historical stage of the mode of production. In this sense, an ideological perspective need not *appear* overtly so: from the perspective of a subject incorporated into the reigning ideology, her position *cannot but* appear as objective and neutral, that is, as ‘common sense’. What she defends, then, in rejecting the critique of ideology, is not her own individual interests and privileges, but ‘*the very preconditions* of those privileges in general’ (Jameson, 1971, p. 184, emphasis added). From the perspective of an historical materialist analysis, our aim, then, is to deconstruct ideology by showing how it expresses the particular subjective position of the ruling class, at the level of representation, within the historical relations of production; and, thus, to demonstrate to the exploited class that its interests are nowhere found within the dominant narrative of historical development, and particularly in the existing conditions of everyday lived reality.

Dialectical materialism, in contrast, deals, not with the objective transition from one mode of production to the next, historically, but with the historical form of the class struggle. Unlike historical materialism, dialectical materialism is concerned with the historical *subject*. Thus, while historical materialism is a method of ‘scientific’ investigation, dialectical materialism is a mechanism for



approaching the formation of class consciousness and revolutionary subjectivity. Dialectical materialism looks at the internal contradictions of the existing relations of production and proposes that the only solution to the deadlocks that arise out of these contradictions is to radically *transform* the existing material relations of production themselves.

In different terms, we could say that, when it comes to the critique of ideology, historical materialism is primarily concerned with the dimensions of representation (which expresses the class interests of capital) – that is, with the representation of (false) ideology at the level of social-cultural content, which asserts the interests of the ruling class, that is, ‘the ruling ideas are, in every epoch, the ideas of the ruling class’. In semiotic terms, we might say that historical materialism deals with the critique of ideology at the level of the signifier. Its objective is to deconstruct the signifier at the level of representation in order to show how the representation itself is a product of the dominant ideology, regulating that which is and is not permissible to the register of, what Jacques Lacan referred to as the Symbolic order, or the ‘big Other’. Thus, we should give credit to structuralist and post-structuralist theory in the twentieth-century for demonstrating how every statement of fact (that is, of ‘Truth’) always-already contains an instance of that which is false in representation. Jacques Derrida’s conception of *différance*, for example, shows how meaning itself is completely circular – the assertion of meaning is always-already the deferral of meaning; and, the only way we can say that anything means anything at all is by way of an added supplement, a ‘transcendental signifier’ that fixes the flow of the Symbolic order, not unlike the ‘phallus’ in psychoanalytic discourse. Attention to the dimensions of representation are, in this sense, ultimately concerned with the ‘masculine’. However, what we get with deconstruction – which claims, in advance, that any statement of fact is already false – is the very context in which we find the emergence of what Slavoj Žižek refers to as a ‘post-ideological era’.

According to Žižek, postmodernism announces the era in which ideology is no longer operative at the level of ‘false consciousness’. This is not so dissimilar to Jameson’s claim that postmodernism results in a ‘breakdown of the signifying chain’ (Jameson, 1984, pp. 71–76). This is a condition that Žižek likens to the context of the ‘demise of symbolic efficiency’ (Žižek, 1999), where the Symbolic order – the big Other – no longer appears to regulate existing reality. Today, everybody already agrees that ‘the big Other does not exist’, thus subtracting the radical potential of this claim. At the end of the twentieth-century, ideology appeared to figure less and less as a problem for radical politics. On the one hand, the post-structuralist approach (via figures such as Derrida and Foucault) deemed the entire approach to ideology as a problematic that forces the Marxian perspective to make an assertion towards Truth – whose truth?

The emergence of New Social Movements, for example, demonstrated that this Truth could no longer simply be asserted along the lines of ‘working-class

struggle'. On the other hand, after the deconstruction of ideology, who can we say, today, is still 'duped' by something called 'ideology'? Drawing upon Peter Sloterdijk's book *The Critique of Cynical Reason* (1988), Žižek argues that cynicism, today, is the reigning ideology. Cynicism, as Sloterdijk puts it, is a kind of 'enlightened false consciousness' (Sloterdijk, 1988, p. 5). The subject of postmodern capitalism is fully aware of the exploitative and often oppressive aspects of capitalism, but nevertheless, she continues to act as if this were not the case. Ideology, then, for Žižek has not so much to do with that to which the subject attests at the level of overt 'belief' – what she asserts (or, 'registers') to the order of the big Other; rather, it has much more to do with the way that she *acts* within the conditions of everyday existence and experience within the coordinates of late capitalist reality. To put this somewhat differently, and to paraphrase Marx, the furthest that one can go in historical materialism (and deconstruction) is to interpret the signifier; the point is to change it – how?

Žižek's Lacanian-Hegelian approach to dialectical materialism posits, here, the necessity of thinking ideology beyond the confines of the Symbolic – to think ideology at the level of the Real. If historical materialism looks at the objective, historical relations of production from the particular subjective position of the proletariat, dialectical materialism implies an *objective transformation* of the sujet, herself. Historical materialism locates the subject within the objective relations of production; dialectical materialism looks to the subject in her movement towards the objectification of history. What we notice, then, is that, implicit in the two is the identification of subject and object, not unlike the psychoanalytic cure. Beyond ideology as representation – ideology at the level of the signifier; the level of the Symbolic – the originality of Žižek's conception of ideology critique is to conceive it against the added, 'objectively subjective' element of the 'sublime object' of ideology – that is, the Lacanian *objet petit a*. My claim in the following is that it is only the feminine subjective position (as it is defined by Lacan) that positions the subject towards a revolutionary ethic. It is only the feminine subjective position that is capable of turning the surplus of *objet petit a* into a drive towards social transformation.

The Sublime Object: From Desire to Drive

The problem for the critique of ideology, today, is that, in the context of post-Cold War, postmodern, late capitalist society, it appears as though we are nowhere restricted from enacting our pleasures. If, in an earlier, 'productivist' stage of capitalism – a stage modelled after the so-called 'Protestant work ethic' – it was deemed necessary to constantly repress one's unconscious desires, limiting oneself to what was 'permissible', then we should see the current stage of postmodern, consumer capitalism as one in which *everything* is permissible – there are no limits in positive 'reality'. In other words, in the period of high



modernism, ‘perversion’ – and the ‘transgression’ of ‘normal’ social behaviour – was subversive. Today, this is no longer the case. In fact, according to Žižek, it is the complete opposite. ‘Perversion’, today, is *constitutive* of the reigning ideology; in postmodernism, transgression has lost its subversive edge. As such, we can perhaps trace the transition from modernism to postmodernism in terms of the movement towards a period when *subversion itself has become the norm*. How, in this situation, where everything is permissible, can we possibly say that something like ‘ideology’ actually exists? The answer, according to Žižek, is to see a transition from the *prohibition* of enjoyment towards the *objigation* to enjoy. The interpellative call of postmodern capitalism is not one of order and prohibition, the call of the ‘Master’; it is, instead, the call of the superego injunction: ‘Enjoy!’ It is in this context that, for Žižek, the logic of the ideological (Master-)Signifier is outweighed by the strength of the ‘sublime object’ of ideology. A sublime object ‘fills out the void, the impossibility of the signifying representation of the subject. In Lacanian terms, it is the objectification of a certain lack: a Thing occupies the place where the signifier is lacking; the fantasy object fills out the lack in the Other (the signifier’s order)’ (Žižek, 1989, p. 208). Sublimation, for Lacan, involves elevating the object to the ‘dignity’ of the Thing. *Objet petit a* is just such an ‘object’.

The *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, is not itself an object of positive, phenomenal reality. Rather, it is *lack objectified* (Žižek, 1999, p. 107). In reality it is nowhere to be found. In this sense, no object is capable of satisfying desire. Desire, itself, is self-reflexive: its aim is to constantly reproduce itself in never, ultimately, coming close to enjoyment. In desire, I find that I can never get what I want: enjoyment/*jouissance*. *Objet petit a* is, thus, the object-cause of desire in the sense that it is the lack in the subject, which develops an objective form. It emerges in the process of trying to come to terms with the Other’s desire, to which the subject demands from the Other: *che vuoi?* – what do you want (from me)? The sublime object embodies, ‘the ultimate failure of the signifying representation of the subject. It is therefore correlative to the subject insofar as – in Lacanian theory – the subject is *nothing but* the impossibility of its own signifying representation – the empty place opened up in the big Other by the failure of representation’ (Žižek, 1989, p. 208). It is through fantasy that the subject comes to stage an answer to this question. Fantasy stages the scenario of our desire: it does not present for us a scenario of fully realizing our desire; rather, it is in fantasy that we stage our relation to desire – to develop some way of knowing *what* we desire. Fantasy tells me why I desire that which I desire. It is in this way that fantasy, according to Žižek, is the support of ‘reality’, below the surface, at some fantasmatic level. The way that we approach reality depends largely upon the way in which we relate to our desire at the level of fantasy. As such, the sublime object is always something that stands outside of the positive, concrete order of ‘representation’. The ‘sublime object’ of ideology, is not something that we can ever know in representation; rather, it is the very

support of our emergence into the Symbolic order *as* desiring beings. The moment that fantasy begins to disintegrate – the fantasy that stages our relation to desire – so too does reality, itself. In other words, fantasy is not an escape from reality; it is the very precondition of our entry into ‘reality’. But how to save from saturation the self-reflexivity of desire – the constant reproduction of desire caused by our constant inability to come close to enjoyment – at a time when we are fully enjoined to realize our desire – that is, when prohibition no longer (supposedly) plays a factor?

Ideological subjects, are in this sense, always, at least to a minimal degree, ‘perverse’ subjects. Žižek provides a very simple explanation for this fact: ‘as soon as it is conceived as prohibited, the Real-impossible changes into something *possible*, that is, into something that cannot be reached, not because of its inherent impossibility but simply because access to it is hindered by the external barrier of a prohibition’ (Žižek, 1993, p. 116). In this way, the entire Symbolic order is structured by a minimal *limit*. Here, ‘prohibition is introduced not to create a disturbance, but to “resolve” some terrifying deadlock’ (Žižek, 2006, p. 89). Borrowing a term from Butler (1997), Žižek asserts that this level of submission to the prohibitory order generates a kind of a ‘passionate attachment’ of the subject to ideology (Žižek, 1999, pp. 247–312).

In Butler’s (Foucauldian) terms, power is always constitutive of subjectivity. As she puts it, power is ‘not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbour and preserve in the beings that we are’ (Butler, 1997, p. 2). Butler’s claim, here, is not so dissimilar from that of Foucault who, in *The History of Sexuality*, argues that repression is, itself, productive of desire (see Foucault, 1990); and, in contrast, Deleuze and Guattari, in their *Anti-Oedipus*, make the alternative claim that desire is still possible after the destruction of power (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1983). That is why, for them, the schizo (who forecloses the prohibitory order of the Name-of-the-Father) is the primary agent of emancipatory politics. Žižek’s Lacanian position is much more radical than that of Butler-Foucault and Deleuze-Guattari, in the sense that, for him, political subjectivization requires risking the *impossibility of desire*. For Žižek, a political ‘act’ requires moving in the direction of an ethics of drive as opposed to an ethics of desire.

If, with desire, the subject can never get access to the object of enjoyment, in drive, the subject is condemned to an unbearable enjoyment of which she can never rid herself. In other words, with desire, subjectivization occurs in relation to an impossible object. With drive, this impossibility itself is objectified; and, to complicate matters further, for Žižek, we are, here, not speaking about two different ‘objects’, but rather, a single object viewed from two different perspectives in what he refers to as a ‘parallax Real’ (see Žižek, 2006). Thus, on the one hand, we are dealing with a ‘lack’, an empty place within the ordinary field of the Symbolic (\$); and, on the other hand, we have a surplus object *without* a place in the Symbolic order (*a*). Here, as Žižek puts it, ‘the empty place in the



structure is strictly correlative to the errant element lacking its place: they are not two different entities, but the front and back of one and the same entity' (Žižek, 2006, p. 122). For him, '[o]bjet petit a is the paradoxical object which directly "is" the subject' (p. 213). According to Žižek, it is in the 'becoming object' – the 'act' through which the subject sticks to an ethics of drive – that makes for radical political subjectivity. As Alenka Zupančič puts it, '[t]he ethical subject is not a subject who *wants* this object but, rather, this object itself. In an act, there is no "divided subject": there is [only] ... the subjective figure that arises from it We may thus conclude that the act ... follows ... the logic of ... "subjectivization without subject" (Zupančič, 2000, p. 104).

If I can put it this way, then, the meaning behind choosing an ethics of drive consists in following the negativity of the void over the positivity of the Symbolic order: choosing 'nothing' instead of something. In desire, it is 'the subject's very endeavour to fill in the gap [that] retroactively sustains and generates this gap' (Žižek, 1999, p. 159). Our objective must be, instead, to choose the very void of subjectivity instead of searching aimlessly for that which will fill in the void. For Lacan, according to Žižek, the subject, as opposed to 'subjectivization', is designated by an act that maintains the ontological priority of the void. It is in this sense that the 'act' involves the dimension of the (death) drive (pp. 159–160).

What I'd like to propose in the remainder of what follows is a connection between Žižek's Lacanian 'ethics of drive' and the feminine subjective position. My objective, here, is to demonstrate how it is the feminine subjective position that offers for us the dimensions of a 'proletarian' position that connects the critique of ideology in dialectical materialism with the psychoanalytic gesture of 'striking at oneself' – of destroying the very kernel of subjectivity: the sublime object. In order to do so, my next move is to raise Žižek's connection between the dynamical and mathematical antinomies in Kant to the Lacanian logics of sexuation – something of which he owes to Copjec.

The Kantian Sublime Object

The Kantian sublime represents the point at which beauty begins to break down. While beauty offers us 'pleasure', the sublime, as Žižek puts it (citing Freud), is 'beyond the pleasure principle'. It is, in other words, 'a paradoxical pleasure procured by displeasure' (Žižek, 1989, p. 202). This is not so dissimilar to the way in which Lacan describes the emergence of pleasure in desire: '[i]t is only insofar as the pleasure of desiring, or, more precisely, the pleasure of experiencing unpleasure, is sustained that we can speak of the sexual valorization of the preliminary stages of the act of love' (Lacan, 1992, p. 152). Pleasure in desire, in other words, produces a certain unpleasure in never actually satisfying desire. Likewise, in Kant, the sublime object procures a displeasure in never knowing the Thing-in-itself.

The sublime, in Kant, speaks to the fact that there is a gap in our experience of empirical objects in phenomenal reality. This gap separates phenomenal reality from the Thing-in-itself. According to Kant, no positive object of representation is capable of adequately representing for us the dimensions of the Thing-in-itself. We can ‘know’ only our knowledge of things, but we cannot, according to Kant, know Things-in-themselves. However, a sublime object allows us to approach this impossibility; it allows us to *experience* the impossibility itself. At this level, the Kantian sublime object gives us *both* pleasure and displeasure: ‘it gives us displeasure because of its inadequacy to the Thing-idea, but precisely through this inadequacy it gives us pleasure by indicating the true, incomparable greatness of the Thing, surpassing every possible phenomenal, empirical experience ... ’ (Žižek, 1989, p. 203). The paradox of the Kantian sublime object is that it provides for us a positive view, in a negative, abstract way, of that which is *beyond* representation.

For Kant, the sublime represents a ‘crack’ in the universal positive order of being. As Žižek puts it, according to Kant, ‘as soon as the Thing-in-itself is posited as unattainable, *every universal is potentially suspended*’. The latter is so since, ‘[e]very universal implies a point of exception at which its validity, its hold, is cancelled It implies a point of singularity. This “singularity” is ultimately *the Kantian subject himself*, namely the empty subject of the transcendental apperception’ (Žižek, 1993, p. 45). The singularity of the subject, the ‘crack’ in the universal, is demonstrated, according to Žižek, in a particular way, as the ‘stumbling block’ in each of Kant’s three critiques: in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the universe as a whole is simultaneously finite and infinite; in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, radical evil becomes an evil that coincides with the Good; and, in the *Critique of Judgement*, in the distinction between aesthetics and teleology – between beauty and purpose – an object is only perceived as beautiful if it is experienced as something that has no purpose. In the case of the latter, we start to see the place of the Kantian ‘sublime object’ as an index of the failed ‘synthesis’ of beauty and purpose (Žižek, 1993, p. 46). Sublime phenomena, in other words, at least in the way that they are experienced – phenomena that arouse in the subject a feeling of the sublime – are neither beautiful, nor do they serve a purpose. Thus, according to Žižek, the Kantian sublime signals ‘the site of the inscription of pure subjectivity whose abyss both beauty and teleology endeavour to conceal by way of the appearance of harmony’ (Žižek, 1993, p. 46). The sublime, in a way, is thus opposed to both beauty and teleology, and it is an object that marks the very place of the *Lacanian* subject as a ‘singularity’, or a ‘crack’ in the universal: the Lacanain subejct marked as ‘\$’.

The split between beauty and teleology in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* signals, for Žižek, the Lacanian distinction between the Law, *qua* Symbolic Ego-ideal, and the Law in its superego dimension (Žižek, 1993, pp. 46–47). For Žižek, this distinction demonstrates how beauty and sublimity are differently related to the domain of ethics. By looking at the distinction between the



beautiful and the sublime, we find a certain crack in the moral Law between the Good and radical evil. Beauty, on the one hand, is the symbol of the Good, ‘that is, of the moral Law as the pacifying agency which reins in our egotism and renders possible harmonious social coexistence’. On the other hand, the ‘dynamical’ sublime, according to Žižek, due to its very failure to symbolize the moral Law, ‘evokes its superego dimension’, which compels me to act against my fundamental interest by humiliating me (Žižek, 1993, p. 47). The superego injunction to ‘Enjoy!’ gains traction by taunting the subject in her failure to enjoy. In our very failure to enjoy, the superego injunction raises in us a feeling of guilt: why are you *not* enjoying yet?! Beauty, the symbol of the Good *qua* moral Law, is thus distinguished from the sublime as the object that invokes in us an ethical stance insofar as it *eludes* the domain of the Good, turning radical evil into an ethical attitude (Žižek, 1993, p. 47); and, it is none other than the Lacanian analyst who, according to Žižek, stands in the position of the ethical figure who, by bringing about the ‘traversing of the fantasy’, ‘steals the kernel of our being’: our fundamental fantasy; or, more precisely, the *objet petit a* as ‘the fantasmatic “stuff of the I”, as that which confers on the \$, on the fissure of the Symbolic order, on the ontological consistency of a “person”, the semblance of a fullness of being’ (Žižek, 1993, p. 48). It is this ‘stuff’ that the analyst ‘destroys’ in the subject, which is why, for Žižek, there is a correlation between the Lacanian analyst and the Communist party: ‘[e]xactly as in Lacan’s discourse of the analyst, what is important about the Party’s knowledge is not its content but the fact that it occupies the place of Truth’ (Žižek, 2002b, p. 188). The Party/analyst does not present for the subject her positive ‘mission’; but, rather, subtracts from the subject the fantasy the limits her ability to ‘act’.

Thus, on the one hand, the sublime, in its opposition to the beautiful, equally signals the distinction between the moral Law, *qua* prohibitive order of the Symbolic Ego-ideal, and the opposition of the dynamical sublime as superego injunction to ‘Enjoy!’, and the ethical attitude of radical evil as the position of the analyst, pulverizing the fundamental fantasy that structures the subject’s approach to phenomenal reality; on the other hand, in its opposition to teleology, the sublime signals our approach to the impossible-Real of *jouissance*. The sublime, in other words, ‘designates nature in its purposeless raging, in the experience of its forces which *does not serve anything* (Lacan’s definition of enjoyment ...) In the sublime, nature does not know – and where “it doesn’t know”, *it enjoys*’ (Žižek, 1993, p. 49).

Logics of Sexuation

The split between the beautiful and the sublime, in Kant, demonstrates, according to both Copjec and Žižek, the very way in which ‘sexual difference’ is inscribed into the split in the sublime itself into dynamical and mathematical

antinomies. As Žižek explains, ‘mathematical antinomies arise when categories are applied to the universe as a whole (the totality of phenomena which is never given to our finite intuition), whereas dynamical antinomies emerge when we apply categories to objects which do not belong to the phenomenal order at all (God, soul)’ (Žižek, 1993, p. 54).

Mathematical antinomies deal with real phenomena, which are beyond the limits of our everyday experience; while, dynamical antinomies, in contrast, deal with objects that do not form part of real, phenomenal reality, but nevertheless belong to the field of experience, making phenomenal experience possible. In Lacanian terms, Žižek proposes that mathematical antinomies be conceived as those of the ‘non-all’, while dynamical antinomies belong to the field of ‘universality’.

In mathematical antinomies, both the thesis and the anti-thesis are false, that is, the object to which the thesis attributes finitude and the anti-thesis attributes infinitude *does not exist* (at least as something conceivable within the parameters of the reality of experience): the universe as a whole, for example, can never be an object of our finite experience. In dynamical antinomies, both the thesis and the anti-thesis are true: there is freedom/there is no freedom. Žižek and Copjec both suggest that the split between dynamical and mathematical antinomies is correlative to the Lacanian logics of sexuation.

On the masculine side of the logics of sexuation (all X are submitted to the function F ; there is at least one X that is exempted from the function F) the universal function implies the existence of an exception. On the feminine side (not-all X are submitted to the function F ; there is no X that could be exempted from the function F) a particular negation implies that there is no exception. The split is, thus, one in which universality is asserted, and one in which it is negated. Finite universality, in other words, is constituted by an exception: a *limit* (the phallic signifier); however, the lack of an exception in the logic of non-all prevents the definition of universality and is *unlimited*. Masculine logic relates to dynamical antinomies (both statements are ‘true’), while feminine logic is related to mathematical antinomies (both statements are false). As a logic that operates on the side of mathematical antinomies, the feminine subject position stands for the Real of sexual difference as such: as positing the very limit of the symbolization of sexual difference, bringing the limit itself to bear upon its own exclusion from the Symbolic. Masculine logic is, therefore, that of affirmation – of representation/symbolization; feminine logic is that of negation (see Copjec, 1994).

The difference between the two formulas of sexuation, then – the masculine and feminine – has to do with the way in which each relates to signification. To be clear, the distinction between the two is not one of biology, but speaks to the way in which sexual difference is integrated into the Symbolic order. Or, rather, it is the very antagonism of sexual difference – the Real of sexual difference – that gives rise to the Symbolic order as such. If I can put it this way: the



Symbolic order arises as a means of making sense of the deadlock of sexual difference. Thus, masculine and feminine subjectivity are different modalities of taking up a position in the Symbolic order; and, we should add, that in occupying a position in the Symbolic order, the subject is grounded in her position by relating, in a particular way, to her desire via fantasy. It is for this reason that Žižek links sexual difference to two different modalities of conceiving the *cogito* in Lacan.

Breaking down the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, Lacan proposed the separation of being and thought, transforming the latter into a forced choice that permits the subject's entry into the Symbolic order. One can either choose being, or one can choose thought. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan claims that the subject is forced to choose thought and that the price to be paid for access to thought is the *loss of being*. However, in *Seminar XVI*, he argues that the subject is condemned to the choice of being, and thought is relegated to the position of the unconscious: 'I am, therefore it thinks'. Here, fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$) stages my relation to desire and thus mediates between being and thought. Žižek's point is that these two formulas of the *cogito* should not be read in a way that might suggest that the latter outweighs the former. Instead, they should each be read as positing the way in which the subject relates to desire along the lines of sexual difference, so that it is in the masculine logic that the subject chooses being, while in feminine logic, the choice is that of thought – it is for this reason that, for Lacan, *la femme n'existe pas*. The feminine logic of non-all chooses thought and loses being.

Jouissance féminine is non-existent because identification with enjoyment raises thought above being, causing a disappearance of the 'T'. Thus, we can say that in masculine logic, the subject distances himself from enjoyment in order to save desire from saturation, putting in place (for himself) obstacles that will prevent its realization. In feminine logic, the subject fully identifies with enjoyment. As Fabio Vighi puts it, '[u]ltimately, the Real of sexual difference refers to the incompatibility of the masculine and feminine ways to deal with the surplus generated by symbolisation. While masculinity turns this surplus into *objet a*, femininity restores it as Real: as the explosive nucleus of negativity/lack consubstantial with every symbolisation' (Vighi, 2009, p. 151). The 'T' of subjectivity is constituted by 'a rejection of the Thing, by way of assuming a distance towards the substance of enjoyment The pure "I think" takes place only when the subject endures the confrontation with the senseless stain of *jouissance*' (Žižek, 1993, p. 62).

We should add, finally, that the difference between masculine and feminine logic is indicated by the subject's relation to the phallus – to the 'phallic signifier'. By means of his attachment to the phallic signifier, man establishes the positive content of his identity in an anticipatory gesture that *evades* his non-existence. Rather than pretending to have the phallus, 'woman is the phallus' and she is able to "enjoy" the Real inconsistency of the symbolic field'

(Vighi, 2009, p. 150). It is this last fact that substantiates my earlier claim that historical materialism is concerned with the masculine, while dialectical materialism is feminine: the phallic logic of the masculine is concerned primarily with the level of representation in the Symbolic, while the feminine non-all overlaps with the Real, the gap in the Symbolic. Thus, while historical materialism can only retroactively take account of the place of the phallic signifier, linking it to the historical stage of the mode of production, dialectical materialism amounts to a Real intervention (that is, 'act') in the Symbolic order. *Jouissance féminine*, in other words, disrupts the Symbolic field of masculine enjoyment by rendering the Real in the space of the Symbolic. Femininity is, in this sense, radically political. As Todd McGowan puts it,

female subjectivity is 'female' because it does not orient itself in relation to the phallic signifier but in relation to the absence of this signifier. As a result, the structure of female subjectivity is inherently political because it is attuned to the incomplete nature of the signifying structure Unlike the structure of male subjectivity which is defined through an exceptional signifier (the phallus) that creates a closed set of men, female subjectivity has no signifier of exception, which means that the set of women is a set without a limit, an infinite set that must remain incomplete. Ideology works on the basis of a masculine logic of exception because it must create the illusion of a whole – a whole society and whole identities – in order to provide a sense of social stability. (McGowan, 2011, p. 119)

It is along the same lines that Žižek proposes thinking the Real of sexual difference in its connection to the ethical position of the (radical) subject:

On the one hand, we have an ethics of desire, of 'not giving way as to one's desire' (*ne pas céder sur son désir*) – to put it briefly, yielding to enjoyment (*jouissance*) means compromising our desire, so the authentic ethical attitude involves sacrificing enjoyment for the sake of the purity of our desire. On the other hand, desire itself is conceived as a defense against enjoyment, i.e., as a mode of compromise (we take flight into the endless symbolic metonymy of desire in order to avoid the Real of *jouissance*). So that the only true ethics is that of *drive*, of our commitment to the *sinthome* which defines the contours of our relation to enjoyment. This tension between an ethics of desire and an ethics of drive further determines Lacan's shift from distancing to identification. (Žižek, 1993, p. 60)

The point to note, here, is the connection between feminine subjectivity and an ethics of drive – that is, to fully identify with enjoyment rather than distancing ourselves from it in order to 'take flight' in the 'endless metonymy of desire', as



in masculine logic; and, doesn't this shift between the early and later Lacan – the shift between the two modes of *cogito*, and between an ethics of desire and an ethics of drive – doesn't this shift signal the radical split between the sublime object itself: of the *objet petit a* as split between desire and drive?

Our position should be, then, that it is feminine subjectivity that is truly radical and overlaps with the aims of dialectical materialism. As Žižek puts it, '[w]oman is a true subject, a subject at its most fundamental, while man is a ridiculous fake. A false pretender' (Žižek, 2006, p. 91). Masculine logic is forever concerned with prolonging the existing order to prevent the de-sublimation of the desire. Feminine logic, by raising thought above being, risks the impossibility of desire, making possible the conditions for an objective 'act'. In my long movement towards thinking the connection between the 'feminine sublime' and dialectical materialism, I want to finally demonstrate the relation between feminine logic and Hegelian 'radical negativity'. It is the latter that fully identifies what I have in mind, here, with the notion of a 'feminine sublime'.

Radical Negativity; or, the 'Feminine Sublime'

The position that I would now like to articulate is the following: with the Kantian sublime we get the coordinates under which subjects are interpellated in ideology – that is, we get the 'masculine sublime' (of 'woman' elevated to the dignity of the 'Thing'). Put differently, the Kantian sublime reproduces the very coordinates of ideological interpellation, and represents the object needing to be deconstructed in historical materialism (as well as in post-structuralist discourse analysis; the primary error of the latter's historicism is the disconnection between the object of representation and the historical mode of production). It is with Hegel, however, that we pass from the existing conditions of ideological interpellation to the *critique of ideology* proper. The point that Žižek makes, is that, for both Kant and Hegel, the *experience* of the sublime remains the same. However, the difference lies in the fact that Hegel 'subtracts' the presupposition that some transcendent Thing persists beyond experience. For Kant, the Thing exists beyond phenomenality. Though, when it comes to the experience of the sublime, for Hegel, we have to limit ourselves to the 'immanence of negativity' in our experience. Hegel's position, as Žižek puts it, is

that there is *nothing* beyond phenomenality, beyond the field of representation. In the experience of radical negativity, of the radical inadequacy of all phenomena to the idea, the experience of the radical fissure between the two – the experience is already *idea itself as 'pure'*, *radical negativity*. Where Kant thinks that he is still dealing only with a negative presentation of the Thing, we are already in the midst of the Thing-in-itself – *for this Thing-in-itself is nothing but this radical*

negativity The negative experience of the Thing must change into the experience of the Thing-in-itself as radical negativity. (Žižek, 1989, pp. 205–206)

For Hegel, then, the way to overcome the limits of representation is not by trying to reach beyond it, but by recognizing that there is *nothing* beyond representation. This ‘nothing’ is the ‘feminine sublime’.

If, with Kant, the sublime object indicates the greatness of the Thing, with Hegel the sublime is not a positive, empirical object that indicates the transcendent Thing-in-itself, but an object whose positive body is the indication of nothing; and, this is a radical negativity that coincides with the subject herself. (Žižek, 1989, p. 206). The Hegelian sublime object embodies the very failure of the signifying representation of the subject. The latter brings the Hegelian position of radical negativity much closer to the Lacanian subject, insofar as the subject, for Lacan, ‘is *nothing but* the impossibility of its own signifying representation – the empty place opened up in the big Other by the failure of representation’ (Žižek, 1989, p. 208).

At the level of (Hegelian) ideology critique, then, Žižek demonstrates how, in the movement from positing, through external, to determinate reflection, the dialectical movement shows the necessity of ‘presupposing the positing’ of the subject’s own presuppositions, which is the foundation upon which the subject’s entry into the Symbolic order – via the phallic function – is founded. The first instance, a position fully integrated in ideology – that is, one’s ‘stupid first impression’ – is an instance of ‘positing reflection’: the naïve reading claiming direct access to the meaning of the text. A problem arises, though, when we realize that there are many different mutually exclusive readings/meanings – ‘How do we choose between them?’ – In ‘external reflection’, the ‘essence’ of the true meaning is posed as unattainable, as a Thing-in-itself, and the true meaning is ‘lost forever’. This, we might say, is the furthest that the Kantian position can lead us, in a kind of subjective ‘parallax view’. The differences, in other words, here, lie at the level of ‘subjective-positions’. Different subjective-positions will yield different perspectives on the ‘essential’ object. With ‘determinate reflection’, though, we discover that the externality of the Thing, the limit of knowledge, is internal to the essence itself. It is the movement of the object, as a ‘pure parallax object’, that meets every apparent movement in the subject (Žižek, 1989, p. 213). Here, we find that essence is ‘nothing’, but it is a nothing that must be objectified in order to ground being. What appears to the position of external reflection as a limit is, in fact, the very condition of the ‘true’ (Žižek, 1989, p. 214).

The Hegelian point is that it is the subject who ‘posits the presuppositions’ of his existence, so that any movement beyond the presuppositions of phenomenal reality must, in a prior gesture, presuppose the positing on the part of the subject. In ideology, the subject presupposes the givenness of reality – that is,



reality in its limited appearance – in advance. This is why the figure of the ‘beautiful soul’ figures so prominently in Žižek’s Hegelian critique of ideology. The figure of the beautiful soul, the hysterical who constantly complains about the limits imposed upon him by the external world, fails to recognize that it is he who ‘structures the “objective” social world in advance so that [he] is able to assume, to play in the role of the fragile, innocent passive victim’ (Žižek, 1989, p. 216). Again, the structure here is related to the Real of sexual difference: ‘[t]he positing of the presuppositions chances upon its limit in the “feminine” non-all, and what eludes it is the Real; whereas the enumeration of the presuppositions of the posited content is made into a closed series by means of the “masculine” performative’ (Žižek, 1993, p. 130).

The Hegelian lesson, here, is strictly correlative with that of psychoanalysis: a Real act consists, not (simply) in an empirical, factual intervention into the real world. A Real act consists in the way in which the subject structures the world in advance in order to make possible the necessary conditions for an ‘act’ proper. The latter is the position, in the process of the psychoanalytic cure, of ‘subjective destitution’, in which

the subject no longer presupposes himself as subject ... he assumes not the existence but the nonexistence of the big Other; he accepts the Real in its utter, meaninglessness idiocy; he keeps open the gap between the Real and its symbolization. The price to be paid for this is that by the same act he also annuls himself as subject (Žižek, 1989, pp. 230–231)

In other words, the subject is ‘driven’ to choose thought over being – therefore losing the latter. She is objectified in her act, making possible *the transformation of the existing material conditions of existence*.

In responding, then, to Copjec’s demand for a feminine ethics, an ethics of the unlimited, particularly from a Marxian perspective, the final psychoanalytic-dialectical materialist point that I want to make, is that, as Žižek notes, the failure of revolutionary politics has too often occurred as a result of the masculine clinging to desire – the endeavour, not towards the ‘beyond’; not towards an identification with enjoyment; but with a distancing from this beyond in order to save (a perverse) desire from saturation. The Kantian (masculine) solution to the Thing-in-itself is to posit it, not as something that does not exist, but as transcendental. However, what if the negation is not in the object, but in the subject. In psychoanalysis, the problem is not whether or not the objective universe ‘out there’ exists. The problem for the subject in psychoanalysis is *the fact of her own non-existence*. The masculine subject evades this dilemma by clinging to the phallic signifier, thus alienating himself in the order of the big Other. The masculine subject’s ‘self-facing gesture transforms the pre-ontological chaotic multitude into the semblance of a positive “objective” order of reality. In this sense, every ontology is “political”:

based on a disavowed contingent “subjective” act of decision’ (Žižek, 1999, p. 158). Death drive is, thus, the answer to the question: why do my attempts to move beyond – to fill in – the lack always end up reproducing the lack? – And the radical emancipatory solution to this dilemma involves, not trying to avoid the lack, but of identifying with it, the ‘feminine sublime’, fully: I am nothing. The fact that ‘Woman does not exist’ is not an obstacle to be overcome, but a recognition that the only authentic, ethical political act belongs to Woman.

About the Author

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