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Structural deadlocks of capitalist nihilism: Marx, Nietzsche, and a Hegelian Lacan

Atolladeros estructurales del nihilismo capitalista: Marx, Nietzsche y un Lacan hegeliano

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Abstract: This paper seeks to foster an encounter between Marx and a “Slovenian” interpretation of Lacan in order to explore the possibility of reading Marx’s critical project as a theory of capitalist nihilism (in Nietzsche’s sense). It argues that the structural instability — the structural non-relation — that Lacan identifies in Marx and wields against the purportedly non-barred, consistent, and complete nature of the Saussurean structure provides a valuable foundation for examining the paradoxical contours of capitalist nihilism (as theorised in Marx’s texts) by shifting from Saussure to the Hegel-Lacan axis. Moreover, this exercise aims to shed new Lacanian light on key Marxian concepts, approached from a standpoint that attempts to enact a “Marxist” repetition of Nietzsche.

Keywords: Marx; Lacan; Nietzsche; Hegel; Saussure; nihilism.

Resumen: Este artículo busca propiciar un encuentro entre Marx y cierta interpretación “eslovena” de Lacan, con el objetivo de explorar la posibilidad de leer el proyecto crítico de Marx como una teoría sobre el nihilismo capitalista (o el nihilismo moderno, en términos de Nietzsche). A tal efecto, se argumenta que la inestabilidad estructural — la no-relación estructural — que Lacan identifica en Marx y esgrime contra la presuntamente no-barrada, consistente y completa naturaleza de la estructura de Saussure suministra un punto de apoyo decisivo para examinar los contornos paradójicos del nihilismo capitalista mediante el viraje, a partir de Saussure, hacia el eje Hegel-Lacan. Asimismo, se pretende arrojar nueva luz (luz lacaniana) sobre conceptos marxianos clave con el fin de emprender una repetición “marxista” de Nietzsche.

Palabras-clave: Marx; Lacan; Nietzsche; Hegel; Saussure; nihilismo.

1. Introduction

In his works on the homology between Marx and Lacan (mainly in his book *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan*), Samo Tomšič proposes the following thesis: “[...] in the late 1960s Lacan initiated a second return to Freud, in which the reference to structural linguistics (particularly Saussure and Jakobson) was supplemented with Marx’s critique of political economy” (Tomšič, 2015, p. 2).

However, upon close examination, this “supplementation” of structural linguistics with Marx’s mature oeuvre turns out to be much more than a *mere* supplementation — it becomes a “significant shift”:

[...] there is a significant shift in Lacan’s teaching in the mid-1960’s: his theory of language is no longer referred exclusively to structural linguistics but also to the critique of political economy. The reason for this shift lies in the fact that Lacan finds in Marx something that Saussurean structuralism failed to offer, precisely the theory of production, or better a theory of production that departs from discursive asymmetry or social non-relation. Considering this connection between production and social non-relation Lacan will claim that Marx invented the function of the symptom, which is again a logical function: the proletariat as the social symptom embodies the truth of the social bond, which consists in the fact that there is no social relation, that theories of “contract” be it social or economic — liberty, equality, freedom and Bentham, as Marx famously puts it, — are constructions, the function of which is to mask a discursive deadlock. (Tomšič, 2012, p. 101)

Taking a step further, our aim is to supplement this shift by venturing another modification or displacement. If (according to Tomšič’s thesis) Lacan’s shift from Saussure to Marx’s critique of political economy responds to Saussure’s failure to grasp social non-relation (the truth of the social relation as a deadlock), we suggest to extrapolate this displacement to Marx himself and, subsequently, run the risk of reading Marx’s conception of the social bond as a deadlock by (1) defining this deadlock through Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism, and by (2) grasping its articulation through a shift from Saussure to a sort of Lacanian actualization of Hegel. To put it another way, the structuralist failure that Tomšič points to as the reason why Lacan moves from Saussure to Marx is the *same* that lies behind our wager that, in order to deal with the determination of the nihilistic logic of (surplus-)value, one should perform a transition from Saussure to Hegel and Lacan — a Lacan interpreted as “a repetition of Hegel” (Žižek, 2012/2013, p. 5).

To set the scene for this movement, we will begin by indicating that Marx’s critical project (i.e., his works from 1857 onwards) could be read as an (incomplete) theory of nihilism (in Nietzsche’s sense), which immediately raises the problem of how the determination (as precisely

nothing — otherwise it would be *not-even-nothing*) of the peculiar nothingness the term “nihilism” refers to (including all the aporias, paradoxes and inconsistencies it brings with) should be tackled according to Marx’s texts. We will first approach this question through Saussure’s definition of the linguistic sign. However, Saussure’s failure to inscribe the nihilistic inconsistencies, cracks and deadlocks into the very structural field will bring us to a Hegelian and at once Lacanian reading of the deployment of these inconsistencies and deadlocks through concepts such as “appearance”, “apparition”, “immediacy”, “mediation”, “fantasy”, “symptom”, “substance”, “subject”, “Real”, etc. The aim here is very modest and merely suggestive. As far as Lacan is concerned, we will confine ourselves to drawing the attention (albeit not in an exhaustive manner) to how some Lacanian theorems (seen through the lens of the Slovenian School) could contribute to outline a Marxian theory of the nihilistic logic of capitalism, even beyond the question (which is not ours) on how to take Lacan’s explicit and implicit references to Marx. In other words, Lacan is not our *object*, but an excellent conceptual apparatus for leading Marxian critical work — *thematically* interpreted in step with Nietzsche and *methodologically* understood hand in hand with Hegel’s *Logic* (provided that such a distinction has any sense) — to uncommon and (in the best-case scenario) decentring insights.

2. Marx as a reader of Nietzsche

We should thus start with a minimum justification of the viability of reading Marx’s critique of political economy, or Marx’s (surplus-)value theory, as a theory of the nihilistic logic of capitalism. To this end, it will suffice to (1) show some of the many descriptive coincidences between Marx and Nietzsche when the former defines civil or capitalist society and the latter refers to nihilism, and to (2) flesh out how the problem of *value*, which is the problem that sets in motion Marx’s critical theory, compels us to deal with the fact that capitalist exchangeability or alienability presupposes as its inner logic or “objective” determination something *that is not anything at all*, something whose status is strictly *nihilistic*.

Regarding the first point, let us begin with a well-known quote from the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). On the topic of modern or civil society, Marx and Engels state that *all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned*: “Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft, alles Heilige wird entweiht [...]” (MEW 4, p. 465)¹. At the time, Marx had not yet resumed his studies of political economy, and was therefore not yet involved in the gigantic task of writing a critique of political economy — namely “das System der bürgerlichen Ökonomie kritisch dargestellt. Es ist zugleich Darstellung des Systems

¹ Marx’s quotations follow the standard convention.

und durch die Darstellung Kritik desselben” (MEW 29, p. 550). But which system is Marx referring to, and what content is he interested in describing in relation to it? Precisely “die Anatomie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft”, which “in der politischen Ökonomie zu suchen sei” (MEW 13, p. 8). In other words, the same phenomenon he had already presented in 1848 in terms of “melting into air and profanation of all that is holy”. Years later, in one of the early texts from his project of a critique of political economy, Marx writes — in an extract where he describes civil or modern society as one in which “everything is [...] alienable” — the following sentences:

Der selbständige Wert der Dinge, außer insofern er in ihrem bloßen Sein für andres, ihrer Relativität, Austauschbarkeit besteht, der absolute Wert aller Dinge und Verhältnisse wird damit aufgelöst. [...] Es gibt keine absoluten Werte, da dem Geld der Wert als solcher relativ. Es gibt nichts Unveräußerliches, da alles gegen Geld veräußerlich. Es gibt nichts Höheres, Heiliges etc., da alles durch Geld aneignbar. (MEW 42, pp. 728-729)

Throughout these same manuscripts, Marx refers to complete emptiness and complete emptying-out (“vollen Entleerung” — MEW 42, p. 96 — and “völlige Entleerung” — MEW 42, p. 396) on a couple of occasions. As can be seen, this emptiness situates the absence of “absolute value of all things and relations” (*absolute Wert aller Dinge und Verhältnisse*) within the context of general alienability or exchangeability — namely, the market.

For the sake of the parallel we aim to establish, a brief detour via Nietzsche is now convenient. When defining *nihilism*, Nietzsche sometimes uses expressions close to those used by Marx concerning the complete emptiness that characterises modern society. For instance, instead of writing, as Marx does, that “es gibt keine absoluten Werte”, he writes that “es keine absolute Beschaffenheit der Dinge [...] gibt”. Moreover, he explicitly connects the problem of nihilism with the question of values: “Nihilismus: Untergang einer Gesamtwertung” (eKGWB, *Posthumous Fragments*, 1886, 5[70]); “was bedeutet Nihilism? — daß die obersten Werthe sich entwerthen” (eKGWB, *Posthumous Fragments*, 1887, 9[35]). But the similarities do not end here. Already in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882), Nietzsche presents the market (the place where contents are mutually alienated) as the space where modern nihilism spontaneously thrives (see paragraph 125).

Taking this into account, we have good reasons to suspect that what Marx calls “complete emptying” and Nietzsche “(modern) nihilism” are essentially the same, and that, consequently, Marx’s critique of political economy, which critically addresses the anatomy of the society rooted in “complete emptying”, can be reconstructed as a theory on nihilism — as a critical exposition of capitalist nihilism.

Regarding the second point, if we look at *Das Kapital*, it is immediately noticeable that Marx's intention to analyse the capitalist society begins with the concept of *commodity* as the obvious, standard, and general form of wealth. Given that a commodity is an object intended for exchange or alienation, it is not just an use-value (i.e., it is not just useful) but also has exchange-value, which means that there are market-equivalency criteria (so to speak) by virtue of which, in a certain situation, one can alienate a certain set of qualities (a certain thing) in a certain quantity for another set of qualities in another quantity without being legitimated to consider himself hoodwinked, and, in a different situation, being perfectly justified to feel that way. Which are then the market-equivalency criteria proper to exchange-value? Which is the "content" of the *value* we are pointing to when referring to exchange-value? Admittedly, syntagms such as "in a certain situation" and "in a different situation" bring to the fore the fact that the systematicity presupposed in what we call exchange-value is not a property of isolated goods or objects (i.e., it is not a "natural" or "immediate" property), but a trait that emerges from the relation between goods or objects where general alienability is being surmised. Exchange-value is (in a manner of speaking) a property that *this* thing possesses only inasmuch as it is involved in exchange relations with *other* things. This entails that the content or property we are searching for differs from every quality a thing could have on its own, regardless of the others. As we contended before, the independent value of things is dissolved, there are no sacred or irreducible things, precisely because a thing is in principle something you can dispose of.

Let us consider more closely the assumptions implied here. When we exchange one table for ten oranges (in a context of regular and systematic alienability) we assume that, *at least* in the present moment, one table and ten oranges are *equivalent* to each other. Now we cannot help but ask: *in what respect* can a table and ten oranges be the same, be of equal value? Not only physical qualities, but also quantities differ: one *against* ten, tables *against* oranges. Because of this, the only possible way out lies in turning this "they do not share anything at all" into a positive property or substance: what they have in common is precisely *nothing*. We are not just saying that they do not have anything in common. On the contrary, we are finding out that there is, presupposed in general alienability, a *nothingness with consequences* (for example, the ones we daily observe in the market). Value substance (the substance of alienability) is an *effective nothingness*, which makes possible the commensurability between things that are supposed to be qualitatively incomparable. Only by reducing qualitatively different things in different quantities to mere quantities of *one* and the *same* substance that is substantially and qualitatively *nothing*, only through such a *nihilistic* reduction, can general and systematic alienability take place (if the substance were qualified in a certain way, it

would be a property that some things have and others do not, meaning it would not be a substance shared by everything regardless of their qualitative differences). To quote Marx: “Der Wert unterstellt gemeinschaftliche Substanz, und alle Unterschiede, Proportionen, auf bloß quantitative reduziert” (MEW 42, p. 736).

At this abstract level of exposition, value, the nihilistic value, is portrayed as a nihilistic *substance* (in the etymological sense of “standing under”, “underlying”). But this first depiction is not Marx’s last word on the matter. Like the Hegelian Absolute, value should be conceived “not just as *substance*, but just as much as *subject*” (Hegel, 2018, p. 12). This “but just as much as” signifies that value (the nihilistic value) is drilled by an inherent impossibility that a Saussurean point of view tends to obliterate (since, in building a consistent symbolic network, classic structuralism cannot grasp the self-blockage of the substance that functions as one of the two constitutive components of the Marxian “economic structure”). This aspect will be discussed in greater detail later.

Up until now, we have sufficiently seen that (1) the problem of value is implied by the supposition of general and omni-comprehensive alienability, and that (2) the value substance (as Marx puts it) “kann nicht eine geometrische, physikalische, chemische oder sonstige natürliche Eigenschaft der Waren sein” (MEW 23, p. 51), so it must lack any quality, and what has no quality at all is precisely *nothing*, a nothing *positivised* as a common “something” to all commodities, of which they represent a greater or less quantity. Consequently, we could assert that value substance constitutes a *nihilistic* substance: it is indeed *nihilism* that underlies the phenomenon of the general and omni-comprehensive exchange relations.

But does the idea not lurk in the background of an *inexistence* (in Lacanese, the big Other’s inexistence) that nevertheless *works*, generates effects, structures reality?² (Surplus) value is something of this kind: *it does not exist* (for it is *nothing* — and, as we shall see, a barred and impossible nothing), but, without this inexistence, we would lose (capitalist) reality itself.

Inasmuch as nihilistic nothingness is effective in its very inexistence, it cannot but appear in a certain way, it needs to (in a certain way) express itself through its effects, which are the market relations between things. Therefore, its *form of apparition* (*Erscheinungsform*) must be a *thing*-form. Nothingness would be *not-even-nothingness* (a trivial inexistence, an inexistence without effects) if it did not manage to determine itself (as an effective nothingness) through its thing-effects. This is, broadly speaking, the reason why, throughout the first chapter of *Das Kapital*, Marx feels the need to

² “In short, what is formalized, in both Marx and Lacan, is inexistence with consequences, an *effective inexistence*” (Tomšič, 2012, p. 110).

transition from the substance-magnitude of value to its (different) forms of manifestation³. And it is precisely with this transit that Marx begins to face the problem of how the nothingness that value constitutes is effectively *determined* (in social reality), ergo determined as some-*thing* (namely in a *thing*-fashion and through its several forms of “fetishism” and “mystification”), assuming that a *determined nothingness* is already something — which means that, by being determined, (*not-even*)*nothing* becomes *more than nothing*, so what seems to get lost here is precisely nothingness itself.

This allows us to clarify, at least scarcely and in passing, our prior obscure allusion to the inconsistency, even impossibility, of the nihilistic nothing. If (as follows from the concrete development of the abstract point of departure we have briefly exposed) capitalist consistency (i.e., the consistency of the society in which wealth presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities”⁴) relies upon what we have called “value”, whose content is *nothing* (a nihilistic content); and if it is also true that, in order to be (to function, work, or generate effects), nothing has to determine itself as nothing, then the following deadlock presents itself: without determination, nothingness is *not even* nothing (since it lacks any presence, contour or figure); yet, with determination, it becomes *more than* nothing, which attests the impossibility, for nothingness, to coincide with itself: its impossibility of not being always either not-even-nothing or (on the contrary) more-than-nothing. Briefly, where *there is* nothingness, nothingness is always *missed*. On that “missing” on that impossible coincidence with itself, is grounded its very inconsistency: the inconsistency or impossibility around which the very capitalist consistency is paradoxically articulated. At this point, one may wonder whether this feature is not a trait that also defines the (late) Lacanian notion of the Real. Let us quote Žižek:

In the Lacanian perspective, the object as real is then, in the final analysis, just a certain limit: we can *overtake* it, leave it behind us, but we cannot *reach* it. That is the Lacanian reading of the classic paradox of Achilles and the tortoise: Achilles can of course overtake her, but he cannot reach her, catch up with her. [...] That is the Lacanian Real: a certain limit which is always missed — we always come too early or too late. (Žižek, 1989/2008, p. 195)

Here we find an accurate mention of the Lacanian Real that serves as a key, as a helpful pathway for getting to the heart of what is at stake in the determination of nihilistic nothingness. It is

³ From “Werts substanz und Wertgröße” (MEW 23, pp. 49-61) to “Wertform oder der Tauschwert” (pp. 62-85), including “der Fetischcharakter der Ware” (pp. 85-98).

⁴ “Der Reichtum der Gesellschaften, in welchen kapitalistische Produktionsweise herrscht, erscheint als eine „ungeheure Warensammlung“, die einzelne Ware als seine Elementarform” (MEW 23, p. 49).

indeed a *paradoxical* attempt (hence we can label it a “nihilistic paradox”), for it always leads to *overtaking* but never *reaching* what it tries to determine (rendering it *more than nothing* and, consequently, leaving it behind). But the absence of this attempt is *all the more* paradoxical (so we cannot simply escape it), since, in the absence of determination, we “come too early”; so early that, rather than lost by excess, nothingness is lost by default (and not even nothing remains). As the Lacanian Real, our nihilistic value is in itself “nothing at all, just a void, an emptiness in a symbolic structure marking some central impossibility” (Žižek, 1989/2008, p. 195). Following Žižek, we may anticipate that “‘reality’ is the social reality of the actual people involved in interaction and in the productive processes, while the Real is the inexorable ‘abstract’ spectral logic of Capital that determines what goes on in social reality” (Žižek, 2012/2013, p. 244).

Should the “symbolic structure” constitute the (unescapable) attempt to determine nothing, to define the consistency of the nihilistic substance-subject as the inner logic of capitalist reality, we immediately face the fact that, if capitalist reality is consistent at all, it is so on account of the “central impossibility” — the central paradox and inconsistency (namely the nihilistic substance-subject) — around which capitalist reality is effectively structured. In due course we will come back to this question.

3. The nihilistic determination: from Saussure to Hegel (and back to Lacan)

Before dwelling on the comparison between the nihilistic value and the Lacanian Real, we should approach the theme of determination from the (Saussurean) structuralist perspective. First of all, let us argue that it is not a superfluous detour, mainly for the two reasons we shall now remark: (1) Marx himself strives to delineate the logic of value in terms of “economic structure”⁵ by contrasting two series (substance-magnitude/form of apparition) whose reciprocal remission brings about structural identities and differences, namely determination. In an analogous way, Saussure strives to delimitate the linguistic sign in terms of “linguistic structure” by contrasting two chains (signifier/signified) whose reciprocal remission brings about linguistic entities, namely determination⁶. (2) The Saussurean procedure is a response to the extreme difficulty of finding limits, entities and distinctions (that is, determinations) where there are no limits, entities, distinctions or

⁵ See, for instance, (MEW 13, p. 8): “Die Gesamtheit dieser Produktionsverhältnisse bildet die ökonomische Struktur der Gesellschaft, die reale Basis, worauf sich ein juristischer und politischer Überbau erhebt, und welcher bestimmte gesellschaftliche Bewußtseinsformen entsprechen”.

⁶ The method of delimitation “consists of using speaking as the source material of language and picturing it as two parallel chains, one of concepts (A) and the other of sound-images (B)” (Saussure, 1959, p. 104).

determinations at all, where there is only a “confused mass” (Saussure, 1959, p. 104), a “continuous ribbon” with “no self-sufficient and clear-cut division” (Saussure, 1959, p. 103) — but, wherever there is no “set of predelimited” (Saussure, 1959, p. 104) entities or things, wherever things are contingently defined and can therefore be alienated without any essential restriction, is it not precisely the *nihilistic* presumption that is being spontaneously assumed? The affinity between Marx and Saussure becomes even more striking in light of the following extract: “Here as in political economy we are confronted with the notion of value; both sciences are concerned with *a system for equating things of different orders* — labour and wages in one and a signified and signifier in the other” (Saussure, 1959, p. 79).

Unknowingly, Saussure hits the nail on the head as far as, in Marx’s critique of political economy, the distinction between abstract labour as the substance of value and wages as the basic form of “all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production” (MEW 23, p. 562) corresponds to the distinction between the two series whose reciprocal remission defines the economic structure, namely “substance-magnitude” and “form of apparition”. However, there is no place in Saussure’s theory for such a notion of *Schein* or *Erscheinung* (it would be a bit hasty to interpret the signifier as the form in which the signified manifests itself; either way, in Saussure’s linguistics there is not a theory on essence and appearance —in any case, not a “naturalistic” one, which is precisely what Saussure explicitly breaks out of, but not even an *express* “formalistic” approach to these concepts). Certainly,

What Marx is proposing here is a structure in the strict “structuralist” sense of the term. What is a structure? Not just the complex articulation of elements — the minimal definition of a “structure” is that it involves (at least) two levels, so that the “deep” structure is displaced/“mystified” in the superficial “obvious” structure. (Žižek, 2010, p. 224)

Notwithstanding, this statement should be read as the index of the inherent limitation and inadequacy of structuralism. Saussure’s proposal fits the bill inasmuch as it offers a possible way out of the indeterminacy of value as nothingness by constructing a symbolic consistency in which entities are effectively defined. However, it cannot account for the *specificity* of what is at stake in Marx, it is too much “abstract” (i.e., vague, imprecise) to convey the *difference* between the two Marxian levels, one of which is the essential manifestation of the other, and for instance the two linguistic chains. At this point, one cannot but immediately evoke the textual place where the relation between the notions that integrate the semantic field of what in Marx constitutes the upper structural level (that of forms of manifestation) is accurately analysed, namely the Hegelian *Lehre vom Wesen* (1813).

Doubtlessly, Hegel's text provides us with a detailed analysis of the dialectics of "essence" and "appearance/apparition", which are, so to speak, the two interwoven Marxian series (value, which is *essentially* a substance-magnitude, only *appears* at the form-level). If this were the *sole* reason for shifting from Saussure to Hegel, it would be plainly insufficient. But, on top of this, what we find in Saussure's procedure, namely a vehicle of determination, is precisely the *kernel* of Hegel's logic of essence: *determination* is indeed the logical element that rules the central part of Hegel's *Wissenschaft der Logik*⁷. Moreover, Hegel himself uses (in his *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*) the categories of essence, reflection, etc. to think all the splits that constitute *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*⁸, which is the same phenomenon in which we are trying to identify a nihilistic logic.

Of course, there is a crucial question to be addressed here: why, as far as determination is concerned apropos of Marx's theory of capitalist nihilism, should we follow Hegel and (at the same time) distance ourselves from Saussure? The answer we obtain is (*au fond*) a Lacanian one. In Saussure, the nihilistic paradox, the impossibility or inconsistency of nothingness, becomes masked or tamed through the consistency of a formal network of symbolic relations that are homeostatic and consistent *per se*, thereby disguising the fact that capitalist consistency is articulated around the very inconsistency of nothingness: around the impossibility, for nothingness, to coincide with itself, to not miss itself. In Saussure we encounter a symbolic relation, a differential relation in which the identity of each moment resides in its difference to the opposite moment, thus generating stable symbolic delimitations. And it is precisely here that Saussure barks up the wrong tree, since his stable symbolic mechanism conceals the fact that the nihilistic paradox is a wobbly one, the fact that nothingness is always not-even-nothingness or more-than-nothingness, being this imbalance the very *movement* through which not-even nothingness mediates with itself through the very excess of its determination as nothingness. It comes at this point the pivotal Hegelian finesse, for this precise movement of self-mediation is what transpires in Hegel's logic: his notion of determination is based on contradiction, and contradiction generates the movement of determination itself, of a stumbling determination that unfolds its constitutive deadlock, its inner impossibility, through the failure of the process of its (consistent) symbolic determination. Therefore, in Hegel's *Bestimmung*, by virtue of its intrinsic

⁷ "El elemento lógico de la esencia es la determinación" (Espinoza Lolas, 2016, p. 286).

⁸ "La determinación característica de la sociedad civil es la escisión o la división. [...] El análisis recurre por ello a categorías lógicas que pertenecen a la esfera de la esencia, en la medida en que con ella la idea lógica, exponiendo su mediación en lo que parece oponerla a su inmediatez, despliega todas las figuras de la dualidad" (Kervégan, 2007, pp. 213-214).

inconsistency, each *quid* passes immediately into its opposite. But, by proceeding this way, is Hegel not touching the Lacanian Real? In Žižek's words:

Finally, the Real is defined as a point of the immediate coincidence of the opposite poles: each pole passes immediately into its opposite; each is already in itself its own opposite. The only philosophical counterpart here is Hegelian dialectics: at the very beginning of his *Logic*, Being and Nothingness are not complementary, neither is Hegel's point that each of them obtains its identity through its difference from the other. The point is that Being in itself, when we try to grasp it "as it is", in its pure abstraction and indeterminacy, without further specification, reveals itself to be Nothingness. (Žižek, 1989/2008, p. 194)

Seminar XVI (1968-1969), in which (according to Tomšič's thesis) Marx becomes a major reference in Lacan's psychoanalysis, notably deals with a rear concept of structure that is not in tune with the Saussurean transcendentalism of the symbolic:

Structure is to be taken in the sense in which it is something upmost real, the real itself. [...]. Structure is therefore the real. This is in general determined by its convergence towards the impossible. Precisely in this the structure is real. (Lacan, 2006, p. 30)

Commenting on that fragment, Tomšič writes: "Within Saussure this understanding of structure has no place. There the structure is simply equivalent to the symbolic order (the system of differences, the system of equivalence)" (Tomšič, 2012, p. 110).

What Saussure cannot theorise is a symbolic determination whose logic displays contradictions, obstacles, breakdowns, crashes and short-circuits that are not just empirical anomalies (empirical particularities of what pertains to the *parole*), but the unique possibility of determination itself. In short, he cannot theorise a symbolic determination made consistent by the very gap or inconsistency that truncates every particular determination (a structure that "is not a stable constellation of arbitrary relations" (Tomšič, 2021, p. 166)). On the contrary, Hegel and Lacan offer us the pathway into the fact that what prevents the non-contradictory achievement of something like a structural identity is precisely the inherent constituent of the identity itself (the fact that the paradoxes of (surplus-)value, which render society flawed and unstable, are precisely what renders it functional and stable). The entire consistency of *things* hinges on the impossible and disturbing *nothingness* that (constitutively) haunts and thwarts them.

Let us reformulate the central argument. We are not suggesting that Saussure effaces the nihilistic paradox; quite the opposite, he thematises it and tries to cope with it by means of structural determination. The error resides rather in his not grasping the fact that the process through which

symbolic consistency is *gained* (“the big Other, which *presumably* exists, [...] considered ontologically complete” (Tomšic, 2021, p. 169)) is at the same time the process through which symbolic consistency is always *deferred* (“the big Other, which actually does not exist, [...] ontologically unstable and incomplete” (Tomšic, 2021, p. 169)). In other words, removing the obstacle for determination — say “*not-even-nothingness*” — implies losing determination itself — the “determined nothingness” we were aiming for, since a determined nothing is always “more-than-nothing”. Even if the obstacle we try to abolish is not an indetermined nothingness but nothingness itself, by abolishing it we cannot get the “fullness of things”, because — under capitalist conditions — erasing nothingness as the obstacle for conquering things amounts to (again) losing things themselves — as we have mentioned above, there are no alienable contents, there are no capitalistic things, without nihilism as their inherent and driving presupposition. The utmost illusion (Saussure’s illusion) stems from trying to deal *consistently* with an inconsistency (with a paradox, with a peculiar “void” that is never reached) without including in the scope of the consistent dealing-with-it the fracture of consistency itself. In topological terms:

[...] the articulation of [...] exchange-value with use-value presupposes a different topology from the univocal division of inside and outside. The space, in which representation and production intertwine, is simultaneously continuous and discontinuous, displaying the main feature of the Möbius strip. (Tomšic, 2015, p. 61)

It is precisely “a different topology from the univocal division of inside and outside” that Saussure cannot grasp properly through his structural ribbon. The univocal division of inside and outside, of (surplus-)value and its forms of apparition, of nothingness and its thing-forms, cannot fathom the unsurpassable intertwinement that constitutes the nihilistic *Wirklichkeit*. It is not only (in a Saussurean manner) that either side of the opposition cannot exist without its counterpart, but that none of them exists at all, that each of them is *simultaneously* the other, for they are just topological twists of the *same*, each of them being flawed and impossible *on its own* (every reifying form dissolves itself into nothingness, and nothingness dissolves itself into one or another reifying form). There can be no clearer way to synthesize this point than through Tomšic’s following lines on the “structural” difference between Saussure and Lacan (which incidentally highlights that, at least in this respect, Lacan is, against Saussure, profoundly Hegelian). This extract is worth quoting at length:

The signifier has a signified effect — a signified *qua* effect — just like the curvature of the Möbius strip has its flipside effect. Lacan moves beyond Saussure’s well-known comparison of the relation between signifier and signified with a sheet of paper. Whereas in Saussure the

“surface of language” has two sides, in Lacan it has only one, albeit with a curvature or torsion, which explains its activity, the generation of signified effects (which are surely not the only effects language can produce). The speaking being finds itself in a situation comparable to ants in Escher’s drawing of the Möbius strip, whereby one should pay attention to Lacan’s specification of the topological problem at stake: the presence of “something barred” between the signifier and its signified effect. This “something barred” alludes to the bar between the signifier and the signified, which served Saussure to mark their arbitrary link. But arbitrariness is still a stabilising relation and does not go far enough in exposing the real that is at stake in language. The “something” that is barred in the linguistic sign is precisely the relation itself. (Tomšic, 2021, pp. 164-165)

This Möbius-like connection between “inside” and “outside”, which is explicitly thematised by Hegel towards the end of the dialectical movement of what he calls *wesentliche Verhältnis*⁹, also concerns the Lacanian Real “defined as a point of the immediate coincidence of the opposite poles” (defined as such, as we know, due to its contradictory, paradoxical and inconsistent status). Regarding *Seminar XVI*, Miller writes:

When Lacan speaks of a hole at the level of the big Other, he must say that the hole is not a lack, but what permits, on the contrary, in Lacan’s logical elucubrations, the interior circle of the Other to be considered as conjoined to the most exterior circle, almost as its inversion. Lacan says in passing that it is the structure itself of the *object a*, or rather that the *objet a* is this structure in which the most interior is conjoined to the most exterior in its turning. (Miller, 2007, p. 18)

Returning to Marxian nihilistic value, we have already said that it is not *just* a substance, whilst it is initially characterised as such. In a certain sense, from a Saussurian point of view, we cannot avoid a unilaterally substantialist definition of value; bearing in mind, however, that Saussure is not a trivial substantialist, since his “substance” is notably a formal one (his form is *precisely* the substance). Therefore, “substance” means not the opposite of “form”, but of “subject”. In light of Saussure’s differential determination, value is to be thought as “something” *behind* exchange phenomena, as a (differentially constituted) positive entity, and not (in Hegelian-Lacanian terms) as the inner split of an impossible and barred nihilistic substance. Surpassing Saussure’s constraints, value should be cleared up as the movement through which nothingness is always left behind; not in the sense of a sort of *Ding-an-sich* “beyond” phenomena, but in the sense of a permanent and never stabilised movement in which not-even-nothing posits itself as not-even-nothing through its position as more-than-nothing (through its determination as nothing), which indicates that the *core* of (not-

⁹ “So ist das Innere unmittelbar nur das Aeussere, und es ist darum die Bestimmtheit der Aeusserlichkeit, weil es das Innre ist; umgekehrt das Aeussere ist nur ein Inneres, weil es nur ein Aeusseres ist” (Hegel, 1978, p. 365).

even)nothing's relating to its otherness (the core of its self-positing as more-than-nothing) is precisely its self-relating as not-even-nothing, its non-substantial self-movement. To sum up, what Saussure is unable to elucidate is the fact that the nothingness we encounter *behind* exchange phenomena is not just a substantial nothingness (as there is *nothing at all* taking place "behind" so-called reality), not even a mere formal "substance", a mere formal defined entity (in Saussure's terms), but the self-moving gap of the impossible nothing we are tempted to surmise *afterwards* in order to deal with the dysfunctions that structure market's consistency. Consequently, value as nihilistic subject is *not* the grounding rule of value as nihilistic substance, but nihilistic substance's own cut, its own immanent disequilibrium (it is the nihilistic substance itself, perceived not as a consistent identity — against Saussure — but as an identity that always bypasses itself). In a nutshell, there is nothing beyond the phenomena, "nothing" which is not (only) a substance, but the inherent and slippery gap of an impossible substance, namely the subject.

However, this self-moving gap of an impossible nothing is *also* (albeit not only) a *substance*. It is *also* a substance insofar as, within its very movement, it perceives itself as its positive *other* in the guise of a positive entity "behind". We know from the beginning that value constitutes a strict *relation*¹⁰, not a substance, but, in its own movement, it has to experience itself as "something behind", as the "substance" underlying exchange phenomena (so, at this point, the nihilistic relation does not only presuppose exchange phenomena as its other, but it also assumes itself in the guise of a positive otherness, in the guise of a substantial entity existing beyond phenomena). Yet, as soon as we come to the notion of self-valorising value (the notion of *capital*), the nihilistic relation experiences its own *presuppositions* ("appearance" as its other and "nihility" itself as a substantial other) as retroactively *posited* by its own self-mediating movement. At this juncture, one may reasonably retort that value as capital (value as self-valorising) constitutes the ultimate form of *fetishism*¹¹, a form that conceals the ultimate capitalist "symptom" (i.e. labour-force). However, precisely because appearance is not just a presupposed "other" anymore, it is included in the very essential process, so we could claim that capitalist reality turns out to be *fetishistic in itself*: of course, the self-engendering movement of value constitutes a *fantasy*, but (as Lacan points out) "fantasy is on the side of reality: it is, as Lacan once said, the support that gives consistency to what we call 'reality'" (Žižek, 1989/2008, p. 44). Even if value as subject becomes a fetishistic fantasy that

¹⁰ "Outside of their relationship with each other — the relationship in which they are equalized — neither coat nor linen possess value-objectivity [...]" (MEGA 2.6, p. 30).

¹¹ "Marx's critique of fetishism turns out to be more than a mere philosophical curiosity in the entirety of *Capital*, since it targets precisely the hypothesis of the inherent creative potential of the three central capitalist abstractions: commodity, money, and capital" (Tomšič, 2015, p. 7).

conceals its ultimate symptom (we will elaborate on this notion later), what we should immediately notice here is that *this* concealment is not a dreamlike illusion, but the element that structures the effective reality of capitalism. Without this concealment, we would not end up *without* fetishism and *with* reality, but *without* reality itself, for — as we have already seen — (not-even)nothingness determines itself (as more-than-nothing) through various thing-forms (otherwise it would not be determined at all), and capital fetishism is precisely a thing-form in which value-thingness appears as subject, as a self-moving thing that, in its immediate *Schein*, is more akin to a substantial agent than to a subject in the strict Hegelian term¹². Take, for instance, the way in which we are constantly exhorted to “put our money or capital to work”, *as if* money or capital were self-moving things, “subjects”. Most assuredly, the pertinent remark to be made here is that the entire consistency of nihilistic reality hinges upon this fetishistic “as if”.

4. Capitalist nihilism and its symptoms

In view of what has been exposed, let us recall now the passage quoted above, at the beginning of this paper, where Tomšič formulates his central thesis. What Saussure fails to offer to Lacan is a “theory of production that departs from discursive asymmetry or social non-relation”, in the sense that Saussure flounders when trying to aim at “the paradoxes of the symbolic order, or [...] what Lacan in *Seminar XVI* calls ‘discursive consequences’” (Tomšič, 2012, p. 99). In short, the linguist misses the “structural deadlocks within the social bond, and [...] the logical connection between these deadlocks and production” (Tomšič, 2012, p. 100). Conversely, what Marx teaches Lacan is the possibility of fathoming the link between production and social non-relation, for “the novelty of Marx’s approach resides in the fact that he defines society as grounded on non-relation” (Tomšič, 2012, p. 108). As argued before, capitalist society is grounded on a nihilistic relation, and the nihilistic relation constitutes a non-relation insofar as it is internally barred, impossible. According to Lacan, it is because Marx’s novelty resides in defining society in those terms that he invented the *symptom*, which is a logical function that embodies “the truth of the social bond” as precisely a non-relation. In Žižek’s words:

¹² Let us quote Marx: “Fixiert man die besondern Erscheinungsformen, welche der sich verwertende Wert im Kreislauf seines Lebens abwechselnd annimmt, so erhält man die Erklärungen: Kapital ist Geld, Kapital ist Ware. In der Tat aber wird der Wert hier das Subjekt eines Prozesses, worin er unter dem beständigen Wechsel der Formen von Geld und Ware seine Größe selbst verändert, sich als Mehrwert von sich selbst als ursprünglichem Wert abstößt, sich selbst verwertet” (MEW 23, p. 169).

Marx “invented the symptom” (Lacan) by means of detecting a certain fissure, an asymmetry, a certain “pathological” imbalance which belies the universalism of the bourgeois “rights and duties”. This imbalance, far from announcing the “imperfect realization” of these universal principles [...] functions as their constitutive moment. (Žižek, 1989/2008, p. 16)

But why is the proletariat the decisive *symptomatic* figure? The short answer would be that this figure evinces that there is no social relation by making the capitalist system appear as a non-relation between two circulations, namely (1) C-M-C (commodity-money-commodity) and (2) M-C-M' (money-commodity-money)¹³. In the first one, a seller sells their commodity and, with the money acquired, they buy another commodity. Here we have a mere process of satisfying (private, particular) needs. At first sight, the second sequence differs from the first solely by disposing in a different order the same elements. Because M is what opens and closes the sequence, M as the endpoint must differ *quantitatively* from M as the starting point, while (in the first circulation) the difference between the first and the second C could be just a *qualitative* one. Let us consider it carefully. If there were no difference at the end, then we would not have an *exchange* process, but a mere identity. However, since the alienated things are presumed to be *equivalent* to each other, the exchange-value should always be the same, which is not the case in the second circulation (M' is greater than M). How is it then possible to account for M-C-M' without admitting that this exchange violates the equivalence principle? Here *value* seems to *valorise itself* (being the increase in value obtained at the end of the movement M-C-M' what Marx baptised *surplus-value*). But is this difference acceptable without doing away with the theory of value, which defines value as the common “nothing” shared by two different commodities that are equated in an exchange relation? The proper answer could be the following: what this *cul-de-sac* reveals is precisely that value has always already been *surplus-value*, that value without “surplus” is not a trivial mistake, but a structural *appearance* (*Schein*) inherent to surplus-value itself. For Lacan, the same applies to pleasure (a conclusion he can draw thanks to his reading of Marx's critique of political economy):

Surplus-*jouissance*, the connection of pleasure with profitmaking, does not simply undermine the supposedly homeostatic character of the pleasure principle; it shows that the homeostasis is a *necessary* fiction, which structures and supports unconscious production, just as the imaginary achievement of worldview mechanisms consisted in providing an enclosed whole, without cracks in its overall construction. (Tomšič, 2015, p. 122)

¹³ See *Das Kapital I*, Chapter 4 (“Verwandlung von Geld in Kapital”): MEW 23, p. 161 ff.

M-C-M', and the correlative notion of surplus-value, brings to the fore the fact that a constitutive *excess* or *surplus* was operative from the very beginning in the operation of nothingness (in the operation of value), just as it was in the pleasure principle. This concept of *surplus* immediately sheds light on our previous reflections on capitalist nihilism, specially in that our initial notion of (not-even-)nothingness was all too “abstract” and homeostatic: even regardless of its mediating with itself through its excess as (more-than)nothing, (not-even)nothingness is always already disturbed and decentred by its inherent quantitative *surplus*. For the same reason that value is not only a substance but also a subject, and for the same reason that it is always already surplus-value, we could argue that nothingness as not-even-nothing is from the very beginning its own drive for “nihilisation” (for generating, in pure quantitative terms — which are the only ones accepted by (qualitative) indetermination —, “more” nothingness). So the nihilistic relation is not only *qualitatively* out of joint (in the sense that it demands reification, or determination as more-than-nothing), but it is also *quantitatively* deranged (not homeostatic) as far as, (not-even) being nothing, it is already (not-even) being a lust for over and over again greater “amounts” of nothing.

We have not hitherto justified *where surplus-value needs to come from* so that it can be deemed not a violation of the equivalence principle and, with it, of value's theory itself, but its unsettling and harrowing “truth”. A peculiar *alienable* should intervene between M-C and C-M' for the purpose of not violating the “exchange of equivalents” criterion, and this intermediary must be an alienable whose use-value possesses the quality of generating value, of at once conserving and increasing the nihilistic relation. If this alienable, in its use-value, is simultaneously a source of value, then surplus-value could be made sense of without considering any possible violation of the equivalence principle. According to Marx, the *only* alienable that meets this expectation is what he calls *labour-force*, namely the capacity of performing labour. It is so because value substance constitutes an *abstraction*, namely a “nihilisation”, that (always afterwards, i.e., in exchange) *nihilistically* reduces to a certain quantity the so-called real and qualitative labour (we are of course alluding to Marx's concept of *abstract labour*¹⁴). Value *has to be* (for the sake of the argumentative sequence) a nihilistic abstraction or reduction that traces its roots to the real “mediation” necessary for justifying M-M'; hence only from an alienable whose use-value is (real and qualitative) labour (i.e. the real mediation needed for obtaining immediate goods) can proceed the nihilistic abstraction by virtue of which value — the nihilistic value — is indeed generated and therefore increased.

¹⁴ This concept was already introduced in chapter 1 as the characterization of value substance, but it is here that it becomes argumentatively indispensable.

It follows from this that labour-force is “symptomatic”: it thwarts and hinders the capitalistic organic whole in several ways. The sellers of labour-power are equal and free people, they are the sole owners of their labour-force, but the entire game of free and equal owners, the social organic whole, cannot take place without the presence of a certain structural group of people that, aside from being free in the sense that they are not slaves, *are also free from all contents in relation to which they could act freely in the prior sense*¹⁵. They are free, but they have nothing in relation to which they can exercise their freedom. Note that we are not dismissing the first freedom as fallacious; instead, we are suggesting that this freedom is not possible without being intrinsically perforated by another freedom that frees from this very first freedom, in the same sense that value is not possible without being drilled by its constitutive *surplus*. This is why labour-force stands for the Marxian symptom. Value *without* surplus and citizen’s freedom *without* the proletariat’s freeing from citizen’s freedom are not mere delusions, but unilateral appearances whose very *consistency* resides in the very gap or inconsistency opened by what these two “without” (*without* surplus and *without* the second freedom) immediately obliterates and symptomatically unmasks. Here we have the paradoxical condition of the symptom: what enables the game at once spoils it; what guarantees the social bond at once reveals there is no social relation at all. “This is the paradox of the psychoanalytic concept of the symptom: symptom is an element clinging on like a kind of parasite and ‘spoiling the game’, but if we annihilate it things get even worse: we lose all we had” (Žižek, 1989/2008, p. 85).

Capitalist society, just like the Lacanian big Other, does not exist, it is not a consistent organic whole or a consistent symbolic order, and what confers on it something like a consistency is precisely the symptom: the logical function that draws attention to the inner deadlocks of the symbolic order.

But one may go a step further here: whilst labour-force is admittedly the symptom *par excellence*, we should perhaps trace back the concept of symptom to a previous (and more general) notion from where we could also elucidate the specificity of labour-force as symptom. It is precisely the idea of its (qualitative and quantitative) out-of-joint as the unique joint around which nothingness is effectively articulated. As suggested, surplus pertains to nothingness as its very origin, which means that it is not surplus with regard to some original moderation, stability, or homeostasis (the same goes for *surplus-jouissance*: “it is not some *jouissance* that would reach beyond another *jouissance*, in the sense that there would be a certain quantity of *jouissance* to which something more is added” (Tomšič,

¹⁵ “Zur Verwandlung von Geld in Kapital muß der Geldbesitzer also den freien Arbeiter auf dem Warenmarkt vorfinden, frei in dem Doppelsinn, daß er als freie Person über seine Arbeitskraft als seine Ware verfügt, daß er andererseits andre Waren nicht zu verkaufen hat, los und ledig, frei ist von allen zur Verwirklichung seiner Arbeitskraft nötigen Sachen” (MEW 23, p. 183).

2015, p. 67)). Nothingness is not a state *ex nihilo creatum*, but the permanent movement of its pure self-contradiction: if we subtract its *qualitative* excess (its thingness, its determination as more-than-nothing), then not even nothing persists. Alternatively, if we subtract its *quantitative* excess (its inherent drive for being, besides more-than-nothing, *more* nothing), we lose not-even-nothing itself, for not-even-nothing, divested of its excessive *surplus*, is (as we have seen) just the most immediate *Schein*, the inner fiction, of not-even-nothing provided with its excessive surplus. In short, the nihilistic nothingness (the nihilistic value) is not a void *beyond* market disturbances, but the unsurpassable tension or disturbance between (not-even)nothing and both (1) *more-than-nothing* (which points to reification, fetishism, mystification...) and (2) *more-nothing* (which points to surplus-value).

Against this background, it becomes clear that labour-force constitutes an excellent sign of these two *excesses* that, undermining the capitalist symbolic order, at the same time function as a positive condition of it. Regarding (2), we should observe that only (qualitative and real) labour expenditure is *nothing-* and, therefore, *more-nothing-*constituting, for only labour expenditure is the basis on which the further abstract and nihilistic reduction that we call (surplus)value takes place. But this nihilistic reduction only occurs *afterward*, namely through alienation, in exchange relation between things, hence through various *thing-forms*, which leads us to (1), i.e., to reification as inherent in nothing's determining process, through which, by means of determination, the initial (not-even)-*more-nothing* (which is *not-even* insofar as the nihilistic reduction cannot constitute and determine itself irrespective of the market, i.e. irrespective of exchange relations between things) becomes *more-than-nothing*, "becoming" that coincides with the *qualitative* excess mentioned above. To put it in yet another way, *thingness* is the qualitative excess of nothingness, and, in this sense, labour-force constitutes its *supreme* symptom, as soon as we discover in its figure the *only thing* (the only alienable) that must be *necessarily* present so that things in general can be consistently *contingent* (i.e. ontologically *nothing*)¹⁶. In other words, through this symptom assumes positive existence the fact that general alienability relations (i.e. capitalist relations), in which everything is by definition *contingent*, does not work without a *necessary* thing whose alienation, far from being contingent (as any other alienation), is indispensable for the social mechanism not to collapse. Labour-force epitomises the fact that *contingency* as the "ontological" status of things under nihilistic conditions depends upon a *necessary* thing, which, laying bare that the very texture of *contingency*

¹⁶ Nietzsche expresses this ontology as follows: "Jedes Ding hat 2 Gesichter: eins des Vergehens, eins des Werdens" (eKGBW, *Posthumous Fragments*, 1882, 4[88]).

rests upon its opposite (*necessity*), functions as its superlative symptomal point. Labour-force is the figure which renders patent that capitalist nihilism does not work without a certain thing turned into necessary in order that contingency can in general take place. Along these lines, Tomšič indicates that “Marx’s point is [...] that capitalism *can* exist without capitalists because the capitalist drive to self-valorisation is structural, systemic and autonomous — but there cannot be any capitalism without the proletariat” (Tomšič, 2015, pp. 65-66).

The notion of symptom evokes another Lacanian concept, that of *fantasme* (fantasy), whose “traversing” (*la traversée du fantasme*) is described as a process of *identification* with the symptom. Recall that, apropos of capital’s fetishism, we have used the term “fantasy”. Henceforth we will argue that the logic of fantasy constitutes the entire logic of nihilism’s *qualitative excess*, the entire logic of (not-even)nothing determining itself as more-than-nothing — in a few words, the entire logic of reification (fetishism, mystification, etc.) as the support that gives *immediate* “consistency to what we call ‘reality’” (see Žižek quoted above). Without reification, without market relations, we would not have *even* nothing (so we would lose the entire nihilistic reality), since (as we have repeatedly underlined) *nothing* (= value) determines itself only *afterward*, only in exchange relations, only through thing-forms. There is no nihilistic reality without reification (fetishism, mystification, etc.) as its phantasmatic support. Following Tomšič,

Marx thus continuously moves on two different but intimately related levels, that of the *logic of production*, which explains how the abstract and seemingly neutral relations between value support and reproduce concrete social anagogisms, and that of the *logic of fantasy*, which examines the reproduction of objective appearances — whose function is to repress, distort and mystify the existing structural conditions. The logic of production and the logic of fantasy are two basic components of Marx’s notion of critique. (Tomšič, 2015, p. 5)

In the same vein:

The logic of value can only be thoroughly thought in parallel with an elaborate logic of fantasy. The labour theory of value thus becomes a component of critical science, which repeatedly evolves around the interdependency of exploitation and mystification of exploitation, which both reach their peak in the fetishisation of capitalist abstractions. (Tomšič, 2015, p. 104)

Fantasy has of course a structuring function: it is — as Žižek singles out — a “scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void” (Žižek, 1989/2008, p. 141). And this is precisely what nihilism’s *qualitative excess* does: with all its nuances and intricacies, *thingness* shrouds the nihilistic hiatus (and, by shrouding it, makes it appear *shrouded*; by masking

the void, thingness exhibits it, but in a *masked* way). As we have seen, there is a *symptomatic* stain or leftover that both hampers and constitutes the nihilistic social bond, which thus emerges, in its truth, as a social non-relation. In contrast, *thingness* —that is, a purportedly consistent nexus of things being produced and exchanged — expresses the very *fantasy* of a social relation, a scenario in which society does exist, in which social relation is not torn apart in its very constitution. The social non-relation, the nihilistic non-relation, the nihilistic society that does not exist, is however supported by the *fantasme* of a capitalist social relation, of a society that does exist through “wealth”, through an “immense accumulation” of things (see *Das Kapital I*). If, in the last stage of his teaching, Lacan’s approach to the final moment of the analysis describes it in terms of “traversing the fantasy”, meaning by this a sort of experience in which the analysand experiments how fantasy is filling out a void, namely “a void in the Other”, “the lack in the Other” (Žižek, 1989/2008, p. 148), and if “the final Lacanian definition of the end of the psychoanalytic process is *identification with the symptom*” (1989/2008, p. 81), how should this experience be faced with regard to capitalist nihilism? What does “going through the capitalist fantasy” by “identification with the symptom” mean? According to Žižek, “‘going through’ the social fantasy is likewise correlative to identification with a symptom” (Žižek, 1989/2008, p. 143).

Let us put it as follows: the act of experiencing the “thingness fantasy” as filling out the nihilistic void, as masking the nihilistic nothing (i.e., the act of going through the fantasy), is at the same time the act of experiencing that the qualitative excess this concealment brings about with regard to mere nothingness is not a deviation of the “normal functioning” of capitalist nothingness, but its normal functioning itself. That is, the act of recognising in the *excess* that labour-force represents the harmony or equilibrium of the very formation for which it represents an excess — recall that labour-force, the symptom *par excellence*, stands for the excess of *necessity* with regard to contingency (nihilism’s ontology) and, in consequence, also for the excess of *reification* with regard to nothing, *excesses* without whose excessive drive there would not be neither contingency nor nothingness. By merging these two Lacanian notions (identification with a symptom and *la traversée du fantasme*) apropos of capitalist nihilism, we are notably yielding to Marx’s concept of *revolution*: only by identifying itself with its superlative symptom, namely the proletariat, could society traverse the phantasmatic support that gives consistency to it, could society experience how its wealth and its “edifying” ideas are masking an *impossible nothing* (even masking that, *behind*, there is not anything to be masked) which, anyhow, bursts onto the social scene assuming the positive figure of a symptom. Insofar as the symptom positivises what fantasy conceals, the identification with the point at which

the nihilistic impossibility assumes a positive form is correlative to the act of going through the *horror vacui* that shrouds that very nihilistic impossibility.

Following up on this theme, it is perhaps worth weighing up the (in)convenience of trying to identify a sort of Nietzschean version of *la traversée du fantasme* vis-à-vis its spontaneous absence in the well-known distinction between the *Übermensch* and the *letzter Mensch*. Indeed, while the last man “tomorrow [...] will have a new belief and the day after an even newer one” (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 37), while he is ever anew masking the void, on the contrary, the *Übermensch* experiences without any subterfuge how the metaphysical phantasy is filling out a void: how transcendence, the “other world”, conceals its pure being “a heavenly nothing” (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 21). If such were the case, which would be Nietzsche’s symptom, its symptomatic point revealing the dysfunctions of the metaphysical-nihilistic link, the foundation of this link in a structural impasse? Is there in Nietzsche anything like a symptom? Let us just pose the question without attempting to provide an answer to it, a task that, in all likelihood, would require an additional (even more far-reaching) inquiry.

5. The Lacanian “Death of God” and Marx’s concept of mystification

But it is precisely here that we cannot simply dispense with Nietzsche. Our following statements will depart from Zupančič’s Lacanian reading of Nietzsche’s oeuvre. The nihilistic state of affairs — which could be described as “there is no Real”, i.e., no authentic-Beyond conferring consistency to reality, since the Real is nothing else but the “own blind spot or dysfunction” (Zupančič, 2003, p. 80) of the very nihilistic reality — takes place, however, not *as such*, not as the death of the Real (defined as the supreme consistency) and its correlative becoming the void (the intrinsic inconsistency) around which capitalist reality is articulated, but as the full coincidence between the Real and reality: “the reality principle is now conceived of as the only and ultimate Real” (Zupančič, 2003, p. 80) — it is the *letzter Mensch* (we could add) who conceives it so. Briefly, the nihilistic phenomenon, the fact that “there is no Real”, exhibits itself through the overlapping between the Real and reality. This means that, far from having lost “contact with the Thing or the Real” (Zupančič, 2003, p. 81), “we are utterly subjected to it, obliged to serve it and to respond to its inexorable demands” (Zupančič, 2003, p. 81). Where there is no Real, the Real “has moved to the register of the Superego, becoming the source of the imperative of enjoyment that follows us everywhere” (Zupančič, 2003, p. 81).

This is a paradox: where there is no Real, the Real coincides with reality (which is, according to Zupančič, “what Nietzsche calls ‘modern nihilism’” (2003, p. 80)), or the Real has moved to the

register of the Superego. Needless to say, this is the same paradox that Lacan identifies in the absence or death of God, in the atheistic phenomenon: “the true formula of atheism is *God is unconscious*” (Lacan, 1979, p. 59), or “if God doesn’t exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer” (Lacan, 1988, p. 128), etc. But, remarkably, prohibition is not identical to “the imperative of enjoyment”. So the next step to be taken here is to note that “If God is dead, then *jouissance* is neither allowed nor prohibited but ordered and imposed. [...] The death of God undermines the demarcation of prohibition from permission” (Tomšič, 2015, p. 227) — this “real consequence of the death of God” being something that (in line with Tomšič’s thesis) “Lacan’s second return to Freud finds in Marx” (Tomšič, 2015, p. 227). From now on, “*Castration* is displaced from the symbolic law, which permits and prohibits, to the imperative of *jouissance*, which now imposes its own obscene law” (Tomšič, 2015, p. 227).

Whatever the case may be, is it not precisely the paradox by virtue of which the death of God consists in us unconsciously continuing to believe in God (the paradox that reveals that “the very need we experience for all things to have a meaning is the very height of nihilism” (Zupančič, 2003, p. 153)), is it not precisely this paradox — we claim — that is somehow correlative to the one we find in the fact that the nihilistic substance-subject (i.e. surplus-value) must necessarily appear in a thing-form and in the very relation between things, thereby becoming more-than-nothing (otherwise it would be — as repeated *ad nauseam* — not-even-nothing)? The death of God consists in a certain form of (unconscious) *life*; likewise, the peculiar *nothing* (surplus-)value refers to consists in a certain *thingness*. The death of God requires God’s unconscious survival, in the same way that nihilism requires reification and, in particular, fetishistic forms of reification, which is why Žižek explicitly relates the Lacanian “God is unconscious” with the Marxian concept of fetishism (Žižek, 2006, pp. 93-94). As a matter of fact, we could claim that the death of God manifests itself *not* in the guise of “nothing serves or functions as God” but, on the contrary, as “everything can function or serve as God”, precisely because God does not generate any kind of discernment at all (it is thoroughly superfluous). In a parallel way, Lacan defends (as pointed out) that the absence of any mandatory injunction manifests itself not as such, but in the guise of a specific mandatory injunction: “Enjoy!”. Accordingly, as fetishism shows, every commodity “appears to you as a magical object endowed with special powers” (Žižek, 2006, p. 94), regardless of one’s mental representations and opinions concerning the so-called nature of things (social deeds are fetishists *in themselves*, no matter we do not believe in fetishes), and it appears so because (as mentioned) everything can function or serve as God.

However, an additional twist should be introduced here. Wherever there is only reification and fetishism, nothingness is translated into a thing-form, but the paradox we are coping with suggests that here intervenes also a sort of *mistranslation*, since not only *absence* becomes translated, through a thing-form, into some kind of presence, but also this presence itself *mistranslates* the absence it is nonetheless translating; indeed, the death of God not only appears in things and through things, it also appears as life — *God lives in the unconscious*. For that reason, the Marxian concept that best fits this twist is not fetishism, but *mystification*, a form “die das wirkliche Verhältnis unsichtbar macht und grade sein Gegenteil zeigt” (MEW 23, p. 562). Correspondingly, the relation proper to the death of God is the one in which, unconsciously (= invisibly), one continues to believe in God, since God’s death consists in showing precisely its direct opposite, namely its *drive for (unconscious) life*: being *already* dead, God is *still* living. For the same reason, “in our allegedly permissive society [...] ascetism assumes precisely the form of its opposite, of the generalized injunction ‘Enjoy!’” (Žižek, 2006, p. 37). Not by coincidence this Lacanian thesis reminds Žižek of Nietzsche’s *letzter Mensch*: “This, perhaps, is what Nietzsche had in mind with his notion of the Last Man —it is only today that we can really discern the contours of the Last Man, in the guise of the prevailing hedonistic ascetism” (Žižek, 2006, pp. 37-38).

6. Conclusions

Most scholars are intensely concerned with Lacan’s reception of the numerous theorists referred to in his teachings. Such an attempt, important as it may be, was *not* in the slightest the aim of this paper. Intentionally, we have not uttered a word on how deep Marx’s, Hegel’s, or Nietzsche’s imprint on Lacan’s oeuvre is. Much more modestly, we have restricted ourselves to using just some Lacanian ideas for our particular exegetical ends, which could be succinctly formulated in the following statement: What leads Lacan to transition from Saussure to Marx’s critique of political economy is not alien to what could eventually lead a reader of Marx’s (surplus-)value theory as a theory of nihilism (in Nietzsche’s sense) — i.e. as a theory that addresses the nihilistic logic of capital — to transition from Saussure to a “Slovenian” Lacan, namely a Lacan linked to a certain philosophical stance, the Hegelian tradition, according to which every determination brings out an inherent inconsistency, an inherent obstacle, that is simultaneously its positive condition. The gap, flaw, or leftover not only disturbs the consistency of the structure, but also ensures the minimal consistency of its inconsistent balance, insofar as what hinders from inside the social bond, the big Other, or a self-enclosed immediacy, is at the same time what holds it together.

In the first place, regarding Marx's notion of value as a hermeneutical key to comprehend the Lacanian Real, *any* thesis has been endorsed. By contrast, we have just hinted at the possibility of illuminating Marx's notion of value, interpreted as a nihilistic content, from certain features that characterise the Lacanian Real. In this respect, we have seen that, far from producing a homeostatic structure, value stands for the very impossibility of grounding a homeostatic social body on a basis, the nihilistic one, which is in itself paradoxical. So, just as the Lacanian Real, value is not a "rock" to which we have no access because market fluctuations prevent us from it (value is not the *Ding-an-sich* beyond market prices, beyond market phenomena), but *the hindrance itself*. As the Lacanian Real, value is not what we cannot reach, but the very hindrance that prevents us from reaching it, from reaching a value secondarily *retrojected* — or retroactively generated — as "the rock we cannot reach". The nihilistic nothingness — like the Real — is always either *before* or *after* itself, we always get it either *too soon* or *too late*. In other words: the nihilistic nothingness is always displaced from itself, out of joint, but this out-of-joint is precisely what (paradoxically) guarantees the very structural joint. Etcetera.

On this subject, even Žižek falls short when observing that

All the "contradictions" of the expression of value in money stem from the fact that an immaterial social relation has to be expressed in a concrete material object which, in this way, "becomes the form of manifestation of its opposite, abstract human labour". (Žižek, 2017, p. 231)

By all means, (surplus-)value constitutes "an immaterial social relation" as long as "material" stands for what concerns empiricists, positivists, and (in general) *Naturwissenschaftler*, but in no way if it stands for what Žižek himself refers to when he claims, for instance, that Hegel is a materialist thinker. At this point we should — on Žižek's behalf — turn away from Žižek's statement and approach Zupančič's comprehension of materiality as something "not guaranteed by any matter", "not grounded in the primacy of matter nor in matter as first principle, but in the notion of conflict or contradiction" (Zupančič, 2017, p. 78). We are indeed facing *nothing*. However, this "nothing" is not, in Zupančič's sense, "an immaterial social relation", but (taking Žižek's word) "the void of the pure self-contradiction" (Žižek, 2017, p. 34) on which the social non-relation leans, so a sheer materiality in Zupančič's terms. The contradiction is therefore not that of endeavouring to express "an immaterial social relation" in a "concrete material object" (namely money), but that of expressing the nihilistic social non-relation, which is "material" in the sense of purely self-contradictory, paradoxical (even impossible or inconsistent), through a concrete thing-form, which may or may not be "material" in

Naturwissenschaft's sense¹⁷, yet is unquestionably grounded “in the notion of conflict or contradiction”.

On account of the fact that nothingness is unhinged, we have observed that its qualitative excess, its being more-than-itself, its constitutive *thingness*, sets a scenario occupying its own unhinged place. But this scenario, whose logic reminds us of that of Lacan's fantasy, is not primarily the veil concealing “nothing” behind it, but, rather, the very fantasy that *there is a substantial “nothing” hidden behind the veil* — in a sense, it protects us from being overwhelmed by the crude nothingness, but it also keeps at bay the fact that, at its most fundamental, this “crude nothingness” is “something” haunting us (it is a disturbing more-than-nothing) only *on account of* the very phantasmatic scenario.

Admittedly, the fantasy-frame, the fantasy of a social relation, whose movement should be examined considering Hegel's logic of *Schein* and *Erscheinung*, points to reifying, fetishising and mystifying social practices, in conjunction with the various ideological devices that support them, all of which depends (if our claim is to be taken into account) upon the thing-excess of nothingness in its very determination as (more-than)nothing. But the “obscenity” of this thing-excess, its *excessive* character, only *emerges* with the symptom: with it erupts in the midst of the social field the social non-relation around which the very fantasy of a social relation is structured. However, fantasy's *Schein* hides this excess, which reveals the impossibility of a homeostatic social whole; only the identification *of* and *with* the symptom, which embodies the fact that the social mechanism “does not work” (despite working “impeccably”), allows us to accept and confront this impossibility and thereby go through the phantasmatic frame. If (*mutatis mutandis*) the Lacanian “identification with the symptom” could be joined with Marx's concept of “revolution” (being the former, at least, a *conditio sine qua non* for the latter), the traversing of the fundamental fantasy, insofar as it implies the acceptance that there is no Big Other, should be related (also: *mutatis mutandis*) to Nietzsche's assumption of the death of God. In Lacanian terms, this death consists in a certain ongoing existence; a paradox whose kernel, obviously linkable (as Žižek proposes) with Marxian fetishism, loses its crucial dimension if another Marxian *Erscheinungsform*, namely mystification, becomes neglected, precisely because what distinguishes mystification is the apparition of the direct opposite (“grade sein Gegenteil”) of the very relation that is nonetheless appearing through it; just as, in Lacan, the absence

¹⁷ “[...] money fetishism will culminate with the passage to its electronic form, when the last traces of its materiality disappear—electronic money is the third form, after “real” money, which directly embodies its value (gold, silver), and paper money which, although a “mere sign” with no intrinsic value, still clings to its material existence. And it is only at this stage, when money becomes a purely virtual point of reference, that it finally assumes the form of an indestructible spectral presence” (Žižek, 2017, p. 233).

of mandatory commands comes on stage in the form of its opposite, and, in Nietzsche's *letzter Mensch*, "narcissistic self-fulfilment" transpires through "the utterly ascetic discipline of jogging and eating health food" (Žižek, 2006, p. 37). Even Nietzsche himself foreshadowed, in an almost literal way, Lacan's idea:

[...] we should be justified in deducing, with no little probability, that from the unstoppable decline in faith in the Christian God there is, even now, a considerable decline in the consciousness of human debt; indeed, the possibility cannot be rejected out of hand that the complete and definitive victory of atheism might release humanity from this whole feeling of being indebted towards its beginnings, its *causa prima*. [...] I actually spoke as though this moralization did not exist, consequently, as though these concepts would necessarily come to an end once the basic premise no longer applied, the credence we lend our "creditor", God. The facts diverge from this in a terrible way. With the moralization of the concepts debt/guilt and duty and their relegation to *bad* conscience, we have, in reality, an attempt to *reverse* the direction of the development I have described, or at least halt this movement. (Nietzsche, 2006/2007, pp. 62-63)

Considering this, how could the suspicion not dawn on us that Nietzsche and later Lacan may be unexpected thinkers of the very *Erscheinungsform* which the mature Marx distinguished from fetishism by accurately defining the term "mystification"? Was not Marx, in this sense, the first great thinker of the death of God as a necrophiliac compulsion rather than a proper burial ceremony?

Without a shadow of a doubt, we cannot but expect that, in addressing all these issues, someone will wonder what's that got to do with the price of fish. However, it is by no means dismissible that interpreting the logic of capitalism as a nihilistic logic, which could also be clarified by referring to certain psychoanalytic theorems, somewhat curtails the hastiness of thinking that the entire problem of capital is merely a matter of a particular "economic model" among others. Fortunately, the theoretical power unleashed by Marx's texts, as evidenced by the possibility of enriching them with contributions from other great thinkers (none of whom are "economists"), far outweighs the risks of falling into that all-too-common hastiness.

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