

**Consciousness and the Limits of Social Conformity:  
A Theory of Ideology through the Works of  
Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek**

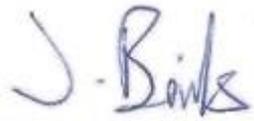
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I, Jonathan Richard Bailes, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J. Bailes". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial 'J' and a distinct 'Bailes'.

Date: 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

## Abstract

This thesis constructs a theory of ideology that outlines various ways individuals internalise conditions in advanced consumer capitalist societies. It defines a concept of ideology and an approach to analysing ideological rationalisation, and identifies currently prevalent ideologies in terms of beliefs, levels of social awareness, and contradictions. These aims are achieved via critical examination of existing ideology theories, in particular those of Herbert Marcuse, Fredric Jameson, and Slavoj Žižek. Specifically, we analyse their dialectical and psychoanalytic conceptions of subjectivity, or approaches to ideology that emphasise both its necessity and partiality, and thus imply a certain inherent potential for transformation. We also affirm their notions of society as an incomplete totality, whose consumerist pluralism is based around some repressed or excluded element, and the idea that ideology theory should identify with that element to gain a wider social perspective. However, our ideology theory does not focus as fully as theirs on the unconscious, or ideology as a libidinal attachment to existing social relations that is identifiable through behaviour, rather than consciously articulated ideas. While we accept a concept of libidinal attachment, we equally emphasise the role that consciously rationalised beliefs and values play in sustaining it by justifying behaviour. We understand that conscious rationalisation is not *merely* a secondary effect of attachment, because it becomes a necessary support in all ideologies that can affect attachment itself if sufficiently challenged. This notion enables us to consider the limits of specific ideologies, and their conditional relations to dominant power structures, that many ideology theories understate. It also has repercussions for the radical political possibilities that Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek analyse, in that, while we accept many of the obstacles that face notions of political change in today's consumer capitalist societies, our theory implies more direct ways in which alternative ideas can challenge dominant social relations by confronting contradictions in affirmative ideologies.

**Key words:** ideology, rationalisation, subjectivity, consciousness, consumerism, radical politics, totality, domination, reification, fragmentation, Marcuse, Jameson, Žižek

*For Cihan*

In other matters no sensible person will behave so irresponsibly or rest content with such feeble grounds for his opinions and for the line he takes. It is only in the highest and most sacred things that he allows himself to do so.

Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

In other words, when the final economic crisis of capitalism develops, *the fate of the revolution (and with it the fate of mankind) will depend on the ideological maturity of the proletariat, i.e. on its class consciousness.*

Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*

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# List of Abbreviations

## Works by Herbert Marcuse

*CRR* = *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (London: Allen Lane, 1972)

*EC* = *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York, NY: Vintage, 1962)

*EL* = *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969)

*ODM* = *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964)

*RT* = 'Repressive Tolerance', *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, by R. P. Wolff, B. Moore jnr. and H. Marcuse (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 93-137

## Works by Fredric Jameson

*AF* = *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005)

*MF* = *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971)

*PM* = *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991)

*PU* = *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1983)

*VOD* = *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009)

## Works by Slavoj Žižek

*FTKN* = *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Verso, 2008)

*FT* = *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009)

*IDLC* = *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008)

*OB* = *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001)

*PF* = *The Plague of Fantasies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Verso, 2008)

*PV* = *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006)

*SOI* = *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Verso, 2008)

*TS* = *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Verso, 2008)

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This thesis constructs a theory of ideology that outlines various ways individuals understand and accept social conditions in advanced consumer capitalism. It defines a concept of ideology and an approach to analysing ideological ‘rationalisation’,<sup>1</sup> according to which different positions are described. These aims are achieved via critical examination of existing ideology theories, in particular those of Herbert Marcuse, Fredric Jameson, and Slavoj Žižek, which incorporate dialectical conceptions of social relations, and identify various ideologies. We adopt numerous core elements of these theories, but also explore common and specific issues they raise. Particularly, we shift ideology theory away from a focus on the unconscious and what we call ‘negative’ ideology, or ideology based on a libidinal attachment to existing social relations that is identifiable through behaviour, rather than consciously articulated ideas. This concept of ideology is negative in the sense that it assumes people do not need to believe in any guiding principles to justify their actions. We accept a concept of libidinal attachment, but emphasise the role that conscious rationalisation plays in sustaining it, by showing how it remains dependent on assumptions, beliefs and values, or ‘positive’ ideological content that justifies behaviour. This approach shows that conscious rationalisation is not *merely* a secondary effect of libidinal attachment, because it becomes a necessary support in all ideologies that can affect the attachment itself if sufficiently challenged. With this notion, we are able to consider the limits of specific ideologies, and their *conditional* relations to dominant power structures, that many ideology theories understate.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In our terms, rationalisation is the conscious aspect of ideology, or beliefs and justifications that support behaviour. In many ways, the concept follows psychoanalytic definitions of rationalisation as a defence mechanism, which ‘offers logical and believable explanations for irrational behaviours that have been prompted by unconscious wishes’ (Anthony Bateman and Jeremy Holmes, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis: Contemporary Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 92). However, according to our understanding of ideology, rationalisation is not merely the way people justify specific instances of irrational behaviour, but how they justify a basic unconscious adherence to a subject position. In this sense, rationalisation is a core component of subjectivity, which develops in accordance with the subject’s relationship to existing cultural norms and concepts of rationality.

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, our approach contrasts with those of Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek, and aspects of certain other major theories of ideology. For example, it challenges Althusser’s stress on how subjects “‘work by themselves’ in the majority of cases’, once they have been ‘inserted into practices governed by rituals of the ISAs [Ideological State Apparatuses]’ (Louis Althusser, *On ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 55). Or, it questions Bourdieu’s understanding that ideological effects are mostly transmitted ‘through language, through the body, through attitudes towards things which are below the level of consciousness’ (Pierre

## Introduction

The thesis addresses a number of interconnected questions: What kinds of ‘affirmative’ ideologies are prevalent in advanced capitalist societies?<sup>3</sup> What are their qualities, in terms of beliefs, social awareness, psychology, and contradictions? What are the strengths and weaknesses in existing ideology theories for describing these ideologies? How do these theoretical approaches affect consideration of political possibilities and practices?

At this stage, it is important to understand what we mean by ‘ideology’. In simple terms, it describes the ways people act and comprehend their actions according to their perception of cultural norms and societal functioning. However, as our focus on Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek implies, we develop this concept in a certain theoretical direction, specifically one that revolves around Marxist dialectics and psychoanalysis. The crucial aspect of these approaches is the way they place incompleteness and contradiction at the heart of both the social order and the psyche. In terms of dialectics, the important point is the tension between maintaining the social order and the contradictions and potentials for change that exist within it. In this sense, ideology either justifies the existing order and represses contradictions (for example, by denying them, or explaining them away as more superficial problems), or it defines the contradictions as fundamental and imagines alternatives based on their resolution. Meanwhile, in terms of psychoanalysis, we understand that consciousness presumes an *unconscious* attachment to language that necessarily integrates subjects into power relations, because any stability of meaning in language implies the dominance of certain ideas over others. Thus, subjects already have an ideological affiliation based on their position in society and exposure to cultural narratives, which most likely conform to dominant notions of maintaining the existing social structure. However, there remains a ‘drive’ in the psyche that also represents a dialectical

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Bourdieu and Terry Eagleton, ‘Doxa and Common Life: An Interview’, in *Mapping Ideology*, pp. 265-277 (p. 270)).

<sup>3</sup> Our concept of ‘affirmative’ ideology is defined in contrast to ‘oppositional’ ideology, and marks a distinction between behaviour and corresponding beliefs that in general tend towards reinforcement of existing social relations, and behaviour and beliefs that tend towards rejection of existing social relations or agitation for large-scale social change. Put this way, affirmative ideology does not only describe belief systems that view dominant ideas and structures as relatively just and reasonable, but also those that understand them as corrupt and unjust, but conform to them regardless (yet, as such, it also implies that different forms of affirmation involve different rationalisations, some of which may be less committed to existing conditions than others). The term ‘affirmative’ in this sense draws on Marcuse’s concept of bourgeois ‘affirmative culture’, in which ‘even unhappiness’, or the acknowledgement that what exists is not ideal, still ‘becomes a means of subordination and acquiescence’ (Herbert Marcuse, ‘The Affirmative Character of Culture’, in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. by Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Allen Lane, 1968), pp. 65-98 (p. 89)).

potential, in that it points to the contingency of attachment and lack of psychological fulfilment. The possibility that subjects may recognise this contingency, and with it the contingency of the social order, then haunts all affirmative ideologies.

Our definition of ideology is thus one that focuses on its different 'political effects', or how ideologies reinforce or resist established institutions and ideas. This approach itself implies a particular political stance, or a radical opposition to existing social relations based on ideas that realising certain obscured potentials could reduce suffering and deprivation. As we see it, this perspective is not deficient for ideological analysis due to its partiality; rather, such partiality is necessary to gain a wider view of the current ideological composition. It enables a theory that formulates different ideological positions in terms of their relationship to each other and some notion of an overall social structure. Ideology theory of this type is thus intrinsically connected to concerns of political change, because it identifies and contests socially dominant assumptions, leading to considerations of their alternatives. In this sense, ideology analysis becomes an important element in the 'three tasks' that comprise political change: 'diagnosis and critique; formulating alternatives; and elaborating strategies of transformation'.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, once we have identified the major problems in the existing system and possible replacements, the question of *how* such changes may occur is dependent on understanding ideologies and potential ways to challenge them.

At the same time, the other main point about our concept of ideology is one that departs from the directions that Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek take, particularly their emphasis on the difficulties for widespread oppositional consciousness to develop within and affect current ideological conditions. In our view, while their conclusions often realistically evaluate dominant power relations, and the sheer scope and adaptability of consumer capitalism, they also involve theoretical assumptions that present the ideological climate as more unified than is necessary. Broadly speaking, these issues surround concepts of reification and one-dimensionality in Marcuse, postmodern fragmentation in Jameson, and the primacy of enjoyment and unconscious attachment in Žižek. In each case, we assert that the uniformity or ubiquity of these factors is overplayed, in a way that can make oppositional consciousness appear politically impotent. As

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 8.

such, the various ideologies that these theories identify are mostly not analysed in terms of contradictions in beliefs and values that can be challenged by such opposition.

We develop our concept based on three proposals that mostly accord with Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek's theories, and a fourth proposal that marks our shift in focus towards conscious rationalisation:

1. Ideology is always present and always political
2. Ideology relates to class division and struggle
3. Ideology is produced by and produces social relations
4. Ideology always relies on conscious, contestable beliefs

These four proposals together constitute an approach to ideology that more equally balances its unconscious aspects, often emphasised in our source material, with the role of conscious rationalisation. Thus, on one hand, ideology involves an unconscious attachment to the social, which is structured by the subject's position in relation to existing ideas and institutions. But, on the other hand, the attachment is consciously rationalised and vulnerable to certain contradictory experiences or alternative ideas, and such challenges may cause ideological shifts which could ultimately alter the subject's position and restructure the form of attachment. In other words, the existing dominant social structure facilitates numerous forms of affirmative rationalisation that then have different 'tipping points', or levels of tolerance for experience/knowledge of contradictions and exclusions, which may be exceeded. The theoretical shift then has repercussions in terms of the way Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek imagine radical social change, in that it implies more direct ways in which alternative ideas can challenge ideologies that support current social relations.

The first important point established by these proposals is that ideological analysis is itself affected by the ideology of the theorist. That is, there is no 'false consciousness' that can be contrasted with some absolute truth or actual reality,<sup>5</sup> even though ideologies can be more self-

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<sup>5</sup> This idea is implied by Engels, in his comment that: 'Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him' (Freidrich Engels, 'Letter from Engels to Franz Mehring', *Marxists.org*, 14 July 1893 <[https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93\\_07\\_14.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm)> [accessed 10 August 2016])

reflexive by recognising themselves as ideologies. This idea also implies that all people have an ideology, whether or not they are interested in social matters, primarily because their actions and beliefs either (tacitly) support the existing social order or reject it. The possibility of rejection then splits the social itself, defining it as a particular formation that necessarily affirms certain values and disavows others. We view this split along 'class' lines, in the sense that dominant capitalist logic implies certain forms of exclusion and disparity, and is especially influential over social behaviour. From this insight, we consider that the plurality of ideological positions in consumer capitalist societies is an expression of a general structuring logic. Thus, even if the cultural field appears to be fragmented and limitless, many ideologies internalise needs and desires that enact the requirements of systemic reproduction. Even so, because social relations are not internalised in a uniform manner, they may also generate ideas that exceed this reproduction, and even influence the structure itself. This point enables us to stress a 'conditional' relationship between ideologies and dominant influences, which relies on social institutions generating justificatory narratives, meeting expectations, and repressing subordinate ideas. These conditions indicate beliefs and assumptions that can be identified and contested, and represent varying levels of commitment to the social order.

This understanding allows us to split ideology into two levels, defined as a 'baseline' of affirmation or rejection, and 'rationalisation' of that basic attachment. In our terms, both these levels are equally important, and comprise a circuitous or mutually constitutive relationship, in the sense that the baseline overdetermines rationalisation, *and* rationalisation influences the baseline. In this way, conscious experience and knowledge can conceivably alter subjects' behaviour, because 'interpellation', or the subject's basic recognition of itself as a subject through language, does not precede rationalisation in a linear cause and effect relationship. It is then pertinent to identify different ideological positions in consumer capitalism to define the kinds of conditional beliefs they have, and the limits of their rationalisation. We argue that, for the subjective and political potentials identified by Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek plausibly to exceed existing social relations in current conditions, the role of conscious rationalisation in ideology must be more fully considered. For Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek, the important point is that people often act in conformist ways *despite* being unable to justify them morally. Therefore, challenging people's

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(para. 4 of 13)). In our understanding, there is no alternative position in which consciousness can access the 'real motives'.

beliefs has little effect on their actions, which are internalised at an unconscious level. In Žižek's Lacanian terms, conscious belief 'disavows' a deeper libidinal attachment, so ideological change instead requires subjects to recognise their 'enjoyment' of conformism for its own sake. In our understanding, however, there remains a line of rationalisation connecting this disavowal to the attachment, because individuals must still explain *why* they do not act according to their beliefs. The root to uncovering the ultimate contingency of their actions is then still that of locating inconsistencies and contradictions in the assumptions behind this rationalisation.

The remainder of this chapter explores our proposals and their theoretical significance in more detail. It establishes the importance of Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek to our concept of ideology, against other possible approaches, and the grounds of inquiry in the subsequent chapters. The three main chapters — on Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek respectively — then investigate the work of each individual, and aim to reinforce central concepts of a dialectical approach to ideology; consider difficulties of expressing and developing oppositional ideology in consumer capitalist societies; identify a range of affirmative ideologies in these conditions, with their particular beliefs and assumptions; and explain how this ideological content is important in imagining solutions to some of the difficulties described. The chapters are structured thematically, based on concepts that all three theorists consider, especially relating to the impact of mass commodification on subjectivity and political agency, as well as our emphasis on ideological rationalisation. The repeated structure allows us to extract a social theory and ideology model from a critical analysis of Marcuse, then develop it through similar analyses of Jameson and Žižek. However, each theory does not merely supersede its predecessor, and we show that aspects of Marcuse's theory from the post-war mass consumerist boom and the cultural revolution of the 1960s remain pertinent, or enable us to reintroduce ideas that are less prominent in the later theories of Jameson and Žižek.

### **1. Ideology is always present and always political**

The initial purpose of this statement is to explain that ideology is not only attributable to ruling ideas, or forces of social domination, as all thought cannot be both ideological and dominant.<sup>6</sup> In our understanding, all thought emerges in language that is embedded within social power

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<sup>6</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Verso, 2007), p. 2.

relations, so any particular viewpoint is implanted in networks of dominance and subordination. Thus, although not every action and thought is politically significant, any set of beliefs and behaviour is political in that it effectively either supports or disrupts the existing networks. From this perspective, any viewpoint is ideological because it has a political effect, so there is no point outside ideology from which it can be analysed, or no consciousness that provides absolutely authoritative understanding of ideologies. Also, because viewpoints contradict each other they cannot all be dominant, and some will have a more subordinate position in power relations. However, different viewpoints have different political and social repercussions, so those that view existing social relations in terms of what they repress or marginalise, and their potentials for transformation, can offer a 'wider' view than others. In this respect, Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek all suggest that particular *subordinate* positions can reveal limits in more common positions that may otherwise be missed. As an ideology itself, this notion already has its own positive ideas, but, in theorising the contingency of ideologies in general, should also have a level of self-reflexivity.

Ideology is thus understood in terms of a dialectic, in which ideologies, as partial views of the social order, are incomplete and imply a potential beyond themselves, within their own contradictions. Recognising this constitutive incompleteness is then a way of enabling consideration of society beyond accepted norms. Society itself is viewed as a 'totality' comprising its supportive ideologies, which is incomplete and contingent because certain notions of acceptable behaviour dominate within it, and therefore repress alternative notions. That repression creates both material deprivation and effective prohibition on certain ideas and interpretations, which point to potentials beyond the totality. The politics of such ideology theory then inevitably identifies with what is normally excluded, but this conception of totality also indicates that *all* understandings of ideology are political, because they either look beyond what exists, or universalise current social relations by *not* considering such potentials.

Throughout the thesis, we affirm the main tenets of this dialectical approach, which are also central to the theories of Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek, and represent the primary common factor between their theories, and our own. With Marcuse, it is manifested particularly in his contrast between 'one-dimensionality', which describes a kind of automatic absorption of dominant ideas, and 'two-dimensional' thinking, which perceives existing values as expressions of

particular and transcendable social forms. As he puts it, the aim is that dialectical philosophy 'frees thought from its enslavement by the established universe of discourse and behaviour', and 'projects its alternatives'. He continues that, although this position remains ideological, its 'effort may be truly therapeutic — to show reality as that which it really is, and to show that which this reality prevents from being'.<sup>7</sup> The point here is not that reality as it 'really is' involves some positive truth which renders certain values absolute, but that it reveals the necessarily ideological nature of any view, which is 'therapeutic' because it indicates that current social contradictions are not essential or universal.

This notion then reappears in Jameson's consideration of History, and his method of textual analysis. History, for Jameson, is what is absent when any particular set of dominant values appears universal and necessary, because it marks the contingency of that dominance and its repression of other values. As such, History implies the continuation of struggle, because no values are eternal, and can therefore be replaced. Yet, as a negative excess, History can only be recognised through its effects, or particular groups that embody the incompleteness of the existing totality. It is not, for Jameson, that there is a correct interpretation of History, but that historicising highlights points of attempted ideological closure in other, less reflexive, interpretations and narratives. Thus, it shows that, while there are only interpretations, 'every individual interpretation must include an interpretation of its own existence, must show its own credentials and justify itself'.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, Jameson's Marxist method is 'true' not because it provides final answers but because it continuously contextualises interpretations (including Marxist ones), revealing their limits and repressed potentials.

In Žižek's theory, the dialectical relationship is embedded in the psychic structure itself, via Lacanian psychoanalytic categories. In these terms, consciousness in language represents entry into ideology, because attachment to language requires stability of meaning. In effect, because there is no absolute, external guarantee of meaning, subjects require a 'fantasy' structure that represses this lack and imagines such a guarantee. Indeed, the aim of Lacanian psychoanalysis is for subjects to recognise this lack, or the arbitrariness of meaning, and take responsibility for their own symbolic attachment. The important point here for Žižek is not that such ideas imply a relativism in which all meaning is equally 'false', but how subjects react to the

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<sup>7</sup> ODM, p. 199.

<sup>8</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Metacommentary', in *The Ideologies of Theory* (London: Verso, 2008), pp. 5-19 (p. 7).

lack of meaning, which has real political consequences in regards to social exclusion. For this reason, he explains 'although ideology is already at work in everything we experience as "reality", we must none the less maintain the tension that keeps the *critique* of ideology alive'.<sup>9</sup>

The common feature in these theories is that they identify ideology as universally present but effectively split between ideological subjects who are 'complicit in concealing the radical contingency of social relations' and those who 'are attentive to its constitutive character'.<sup>10</sup> In this way, two-dimensional thinking, Marxist historicising, and confronting the lack in subjectivity all involve particular positions that are no less ideological than those they analyse. It is important to mark a distinction here, for example, with Althusser's contrast between ideology and science, in that, even though Althusser does not see science as absolute truth, he separates it from ideological thought in which 'the practico-social function is more important than the theoretical function (function as knowledge)'.<sup>11</sup> In Althusser's terms, because Marxism is more self-reflexive it is *less* ideological, whereas for us, while some ideologies involve greater degrees of self-awareness, and higher levels of knowledge, they still contain assumptions and contradictions. Althusser effectively uses the rational connotations of science to privilege his method against other forms of consciousness,<sup>12</sup> whereas we focus on different political consequences (which is not to say that some truth claims do not withstand scrutiny better than others). The result, as Porter explains of Žižek's theory, is that, while 'we can never be certain of the terms of our own ideological enslavement', 'we can maintain a critical position enabling us to point up and negate the limits of ideologies we encounter in the social field'.<sup>13</sup> We therefore emphasise that political and moral assumptions are present in any critique of existing norms.

The other point here is that dialectical theory assumes a critical position in regards to the established political field, because it denies the completeness of that field and indicates repressed potentials. As such it implies that, when social theories lack this critical position, they tend to ignore such potentials and accept the dominant ideas they analyse. Such theory may even

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<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'The Spectre of Ideology', in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. by Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 1-33 (p. 17). (Emphasis in quotes in original text unless otherwise indicated.)

<sup>10</sup> Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p.14.

<sup>11</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Allen Lane, 1969), p. 231.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by C. Gordon, trans. by C. Gordon and others (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1980), p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Porter, 'A World beyond Ideology? Strains in Slavoj Žižek's Ideology Critique', in *Ideology after Poststructuralism*, ed. by Siniša Malešević and Iain MacKenzie (London: Pluto, 2002), pp. 43-63 (p. 62).

repress the role of ideology altogether, by equating it to irrational fundamentalism, in opposition to rational thinking. For example, according to Rawls, 'ideologies, of whatever type, claim a monopoly of the knowledge of truth and justice for some particular race, or social class, or institutional group',<sup>14</sup> which violates the possibility of being a 'competent judge'; and 'a well-ordered society does not require an ideology in order to achieve stability'<sup>15</sup>, because social institutions can be completely transparent. This assumption that ideology applies to only certain people does not consider, for instance, how institutional transparency would still have both an ideological purpose and effect, or that measurements of competency and reason are intertwined with power relations. For Rawls, 'a reasonable man' is someone who tries to take his own predilections into account,<sup>16</sup> which appears similar to self-reflexive ideology. But if those predilections are socially dominant, and society is not viewed in terms of the potential excess of its norms, they remain unrecognised, and 'reasonable' tends to mean aligned with established thinking.<sup>17</sup> In particular, where Rawls views society as an agreement of mutual self-interest and material accumulation,<sup>18</sup> he does not consider such assumptions as ideological or predilections.

Furthermore, even theories that focus on ideology may not adequately account for the relations of dominance and subordination that structure their assumptions. For example, various introductory texts to 'political ideologies' focus on the *content* of conscious political value systems, largely according to established categories within liberal democracies.<sup>19</sup> As studies of ideology, these texts historicise and successfully contest certain established political terms, but do not analyse the totalising effect of the range of categorisations itself. They often distance themselves

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<sup>14</sup> John Rawls, *Collected Papers*, ed. by Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326n.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> As Mouffe explains, in a liberal society, 'political liberalism can provide a consensus among reasonable persons who, *by definition*, are persons who accept the principles of political liberalism' (Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 26).

<sup>18</sup> David Gauthier, 'The Social Contract as Ideology', in *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*, ed. by R. E. Goodin and P. Pettit, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 55-72 (p. 64).

<sup>19</sup> For example: *Contemporary Political Ideologies*, ed. by Roger Eatwell and Anthony Wright (London: Pinter, 1993); Robert Eccleshall and others, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003); Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Roy C. Macridis and Mark Hulliung, *Contemporary Political Ideologies: Movements and Regimes*, 6<sup>th</sup> edn (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1996); Lyman Tower Sargent, *Contemporary Political Ideologies: A Comparative Analysis*, 14<sup>th</sup> edn (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009); Andrew Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). Of these, Freeden's text stands out as the most theoretically grounded and fluid in its designations.

from a 'Marxist' approach to ideology, by characterising its method as one of simple materialist cause and effect,<sup>20</sup> or of oppositions between illusion and reality or truth.<sup>21</sup> Yet, in doing so, these arguments also jettison the structural considerations of Marxism from ideology theory, which help contextualise ideological meaning in concrete social circumstances. As such, decisions about which beliefs qualify as political ideologies tend to follow certain assumptions, such as that cultural and identity issues are more ideology forming today than class or economic ones,<sup>22</sup> and capitalism is not an ideology, because it 'can involve notably different forms'.<sup>23</sup> The question here from an oppositional perspective would be what *ideologically* makes cultural issues central to ideology in current social conditions. That is, something appears to structure the field itself, and the fact that capitalism may have different forms should not disqualify it from consideration in that structuring ideological role. These theories in fact touch on this idea, for example by describing liberalism as 'a background theory or set of presuppositions and sentiments of a supposedly neutral and universal kind'.<sup>24</sup> Here, it is not that everybody is politically liberal, but that liberal terms dominate the arena of what is considered acceptable and possible. Even so, our approach to ideology takes this idea further, because it examines *how* dominant liberalism *and* capitalism overdetermine the categorisation and definition of ideologies, and considers the excess that they repress.

Alternatively, it may be argued that society can be viewed as comprising various discourses intertwined with power relations, without according the repressed or subordinated element any special status. Indeed, all discourses attempt to dominate by exercising power at different points throughout society, and, even the most self-reflexive positions impose positive assumptions. Such ideas are represented by Foucault, who stresses the dispersal of power in 'local and unstable' states,<sup>25</sup> and that domination is not the reserve of the state. However, we believe it should be emphasised that, while power is not possessed solely by a particular group, it is *concentrated* within certain dominating institutions, ideas and interests, most notably in 'the

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<sup>20</sup> Eatwell, 'Ideologies: Approaches and Trends', in *Contemporary Political Ideologies*, pp. 1-22 (p. 10)

<sup>21</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Heywood, *Political ideologies*, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> Eatwell, 'Approaches and Trends', p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Bellamy, 'Liberalism', in *Contemporary Political Ideologies*, pp. 23-49 (p. 23). Freeden similarly describes liberalism as 'a pre-eminent ideology', diffused throughout Western political thought (Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p. 141).

<sup>25</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. by R. Hurley (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1978), p. 93.

bureaucratic state and the organization of the social order by capital'.<sup>26</sup> Foucault's statement that 'all other forms of power relation must refer to' the state, but only 'because power relations have come more and more under state control',<sup>27</sup> does not fully explain how, in all societies, some overarching structure legitimises the norms that overdetermine local power relations. Thus, while our concept of ideology is similar to Foucault's notion of discourse in that it distances itself from false consciousness and absolute truth, it more specifically denotes the macro-political effects of certain discourses and their domination over others in particular circumstances. In other words, such ideology theory shows that, although different discourses 'might be epistemologically of equal worth', their relative positions make 'them structurally and ontologically very different and unequal'.<sup>28</sup>

## **2. Ideology relates to class division and struggle**

Having constructed our approach to ideology around a split between domination and subordination, it is also important how that split is defined. Here, we again draw on Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek in focusing on class division, and the idea that the existing mode of production that structures the totality tends towards economic disparity and exclusion. This disparity is embodied in social groups that control resources, institutions and political ideas, and groups that lack such control, and the way that the existence of each is conditional on the existence of the other. In terms of ideology, the point is not to reduce consciousness to an effect of material forces, although (as Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek all show) ideologies are in some way expressions of their mode of production. That is, it should be understood that they are not merely *determined* by class identity, so that certain social positions correspond to specific beliefs, but are responses to a division which *overdetermines* them. Emphasis on class struggle is thus an attempt to consider the relationship between ideology, politics, culture and economics, via a capitalist logic that cuts across social relations.

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<sup>26</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 208-227 (p. 224).

<sup>28</sup> Malešević, 'Rehabilitating Ideology after Poststructuralism', in *Ideology after Poststructuralism*, pp. 87-110 (p. 99).

Marcuse's work provides us with a basis for this position, by demonstrating how class frames a general background ideology. He theorises a concept of social 'needs' that relate to realities and potentials of production, and historicises the Freudian 'reality principle' to suggest that repression of fulfilment could vary depending on social circumstances. Specifically, the current reality principle continues to demand toil and deprivation, even though technological developments in capitalism could enable their reduction, and is therefore an ideological construct that represents particular class interests. For Marcuse, the reality principle 'applies to the brute *fact* of scarcity what actually is the consequence of a specific *organization* of scarcity, and of a specific existential attitude enforced by this organization'.<sup>29</sup> The question is whether this organisation can be repurposed based on its potentials towards the needs of those who are most deprived or forced into exhausting, repetitive labour. In some ways, Marcuse's theory overreaches, because he argues that even psychic, instinctual repression can be transcended, rather than merely 'surplus' physical repression, but he at least shows how the *material* needs of the subordinated reveal the contingency of dominant social priorities. Thus, when he later considers 'cultural revolution' in the US, he notes that it does not tackle such dominant principles, but demands individual freedoms that are often compatible with a consumerist permissiveness that actually reinforces the demand for continual labour, or recognises the misery of endless toil but offers no alternative.

The idea of an overall material contradiction is also central to Jameson's concept of postmodernism. He shows that the shift to a politics of recognition and difference, in place of large scale economic concerns, relies on a particular mode of production (late capitalism) that continues to define its limits. Thus, the range of pluralist antagonisms generally accepted within the political field is constituted on an exclusion, or by repressing the antagonism between the logic of the field itself and its excess. As with History, for Jameson, 'class' does not denote concrete identities, but is the missing element represented by the relative positions of particular social groups. In fact, Jameson explains, 'capitalism' itself is a representative concept that is 'either the result of scientific reduction [...] or the mark of an imaginary and ideological vision', but is not purely subjective because the laws of capital accumulation and profit really do 'set absolute

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<sup>29</sup> EC, p. 33.

barriers and limits to social changes'.<sup>30</sup> Class is therefore a 'relational' concept, definable in instances where the interests of one group are effectively universalised in production relations, and another group is deprived as a result, until it successfully challenges that universality. Jameson also identifies class relations as those that cannot be made equal without erasing the categories themselves. For example, the proletariat is subordinate to the bourgeoisie *by definition*, and overcoming this dominance would require a new mode of production.

Žižek further clarifies how notions of class struggle restructure the range of recognised struggles in terms of an open potential beyond the existing social order. That is, viewing society as a totality split by class demonstrates a contrast between accepting capitalism as the background to struggle, and opposing the background itself. In this sense, political antagonisms either exclude considerations of alternative economic forms, and work on identity issues within capitalism, or they include such considerations, and reveal a need to combat deep contradictions in capitalism itself. Furthermore, the idea that class struggle is less relevant today, because other antagonisms have become prevalent, merely indicates for Žižek how the constitutive exclusion of certain groups in society has been successfully repressed, indicating even greater dominance and subordination. Class struggle then continues to identify this repressed element, and as such is 'a unique mediating term which, while mooring politics in the economy [...], simultaneously stands for the irreducible political moment in the very heart of the economic'.<sup>31</sup> As with Marcuse and Jameson, Žižek does not refer to a specific social group, but to the inevitable 'Real' of exclusion in any social order, which is represented by subjects who effectively have no access to rights, opportunities and material goods.

These emphases on class division need not imply that ideology is simply a reflection of economic relations, and Marcuse (to an extent), Jameson and Žižek generally avoid such reductionism. Specifically, in our view, while the mode of production is central in social relations, ideologies are not necessarily *direct* internalisations of the demands of production and consumption. Rather, they mediate these demands through beliefs, values and assumptions that may not even be explicitly economic, but inform how individuals conform and the limits of their conformity. In this respect, we can contrast our position with, for example, *The Dominant*

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<sup>30</sup> Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', in *The Jameson Reader*, ed. by Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 277-287 (p. 284).

<sup>31</sup> *IDL*, p. 293.

*Ideology Thesis* of Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, in that, while we accept their point that there is no single ruling ideology which morally validates capitalism for the working classes,<sup>32</sup> it is not simply that 'subordinate classes are controlled by [...] "the dull compulsion" of economic relationships, by the integrative effects of the division of labour, by the coercive nature of law and politics'.<sup>33</sup> For Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, subordinates reproduce existing power relations due to their financial need to work, which enters them into relations of mutual dependency with other classes. This theory then presents this 'economic compulsion' as an alternative to ideology, rather than one aspect of ideology theory. Consequently, when, for example, they criticise Marcuse as a dominant ideology theorist, they miss that he considers how working-class identification with capitalism reflects *both* the economic situation *and* a variety of linguistic and cultural mechanisms. Moreover, in their view, a lack of singular dominant values means there are no significant values, and they do not consider how a plurality of ideologies may support the whole. As such, individuals accept existing relations 'simply because they are there, or because they appear as a coercive external fact', which does not entail 'any set of beliefs, attitudes or "false consciousness"'.<sup>34</sup> In our view, this approach makes politics merely an expression of material conditions, which leaves individuals with no meaningful ability to reflect on their desires, or the possibility and feasibility of doing something else.<sup>35</sup>

Emphasising class struggle requires an ideological judgement, which defines a separation between 'economic' and 'cultural' concerns. Nevertheless, without marking the structuring role of a mode of production, it is difficult to formulate an opposition that exceeds a range of struggles 'within' the capitalist order. An important point of reference here is Laclau and Mouffe, in that while our theory in many ways aligns with theirs, they reject privileging class antagonism. They provide us with some of our basic assumptions, such as that all social forms are contingent, and that different logics are anchored in 'Master Signifiers' that attempt to universalise particular meaning, to maintain social stability and power relations. Laclau also defines ideology as 'the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity', which implies that, since the social requires some stability of meaning, 'the ideological must be seen as

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<sup>32</sup> Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980), p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166

<sup>35</sup> Göran Therborn, 'The New Questions of Subjectivity', in *Mapping Ideology*, pp. 167-178 (p. 177).

constitutive of the social'.<sup>36</sup> Their politics then consists of creating a 'chain of equivalence' to unite different struggles, including opposition to discrimination based on gender, race, and sexuality, and environmental and workers' rights movements. But, as such, the social division this chain represents is not necessarily anchored in the mode of production — these particular identities are 'contingent *social logics*' that 'acquire their meaning in precise conjunctural and relational contexts', and 'none of them has absolute validity'.<sup>37</sup>

Our issue here is not with class antagonism as Laclau and Mouffe define it, as a conflict between particular groups over labour conditions, that represents (in Laclau's words) 'just one species of identity politics, [...] which is becoming less and less important in the world in which we live'.<sup>38</sup> That is, struggles over working conditions are not intrinsically radical, or able to unify social antagonism in general. We also agree with their point that contradictions in the social order are not necessarily experienced as antagonisms, but depend on perceptions and articulations. As Laclau says, 'Each social formation has its own forms of determination and relative autonomy, which are always instituted through a complex process of overdetermination and therefore cannot be established *a priori*'.<sup>39</sup> In effect, antagonisms emerge when individuals identify certain needs that cannot be met without some shift in power relations. However, the wider concept of class we consider (which also does not perceive particular groups as *a priori* representatives of social contradictions), marks the way that, *retrospectively*, certain antagonisms articulate contradictions that are more deeply constitutive of the existing social order.<sup>40</sup> Specifically, class antagonism in this sense marks how capitalist labour as such creates relations of dominance and subordination throughout society that are then embodied in identities.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 92.

<sup>37</sup> Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Verso, 2001), p. 142.

<sup>38</sup> Laclau, 'Structure, History and the Political', in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, ed. by Judith Butler, Laclau and Žižek (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 182-212 (p. 203).

<sup>39</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 91.

<sup>40</sup> In other words, there are 'tendencies' within social relations between what Laclau and Mouffe define as the raw 'existence' of objects, and their 'being', which involves articulation of their properties — for example, wood becomes a source of fuel, or a mountain becomes a source of valuable minerals. For Laclau and Mouffe, while the object must 'exist' to have these properties, 'none of them follows necessarily from its mere existence' (Laclau and Mouffe, 'Post-Marxism without Apologies', *New Left Review*, 1/166 (1987), 79-106 (p. 85)). This distinction does not emphasise that human articulation cannot reverse the roles and make a mountain 'be' fuel, or wood 'be' a source of minerals, so even though wood does not 'exist' as fuel, it (retrospectively) has that *tendency*.

<sup>41</sup> István Mészáros, *The Power of Ideology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Zed Books, 2005), p. lii.

This general concept of class antagonism then implies a different chain of equivalence between various struggles than is possible without it. The inclusion of class in the chain is the difference between confronting intrinsic tendencies towards inequality in logics of commodification and capital accumulation, and confronting inequalities that are theoretically resolvable within capitalism. In other words, it switches radical political aims from 'recognition' or 'affirmative redistribution' (compensation within the same structure), to 'transformative redistribution'.<sup>42</sup> In Laclau and Mouffe's terms, we must seek an 'equivalential articulation between anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-capitalism', which 'may be the condition for the consolidation of each one of these struggles'.<sup>43</sup> Yet, if 'anti-capitalism' is articulated around a constitutive social split, as we suggest, it affects the goals of the whole series (which does not make the other elements in the chain less important), by making the mode of production itself an obstacle to overcoming social division. This wider concept of class implies that it is not simply a matter of uniting a plurality of particular articulations, but that the very 'particularisation' of these issues is an expression of a dominant (liberal, capitalist) logic that stops a more general antagonism from forming.

Without this concept of class, Laclau and Mouffe increasingly seem to accept that some form of capitalism remains the limit to political change. Mouffe explains that 'without calling for the sort of total overthrow of capitalism advocated by some Marxists, one can surely acknowledge that some form of anti-capitalist struggle cannot be eliminated from a radical politics'.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, Laclau states in a response to Žižek that he can agree with Žižek's anti-capitalist stance if he means 'the overcoming of the prevalent neoliberal economic model' through greater state regulation and democratic control, to avoid 'the worst effects of globalization'.<sup>45</sup> In these statements, the term 'anti-capitalism' is used to describe opposition to *aspects or forms of* capitalism (neoliberalism, globalisation), rather than its core elements (such as wage labour). Laclau argues elsewhere that he is not resigned to capitalism, only that it is impossible to predict which antagonism might unify the chain of equivalence into a revolutionary universal, because any can potentially 'involve radical change or global social transformation'.<sup>46</sup> In contrast, the

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<sup>42</sup> Nancy Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a "Post-Socialist" Age', *New Left Review*, 1/212 (1995), 68-93 (pp. 85-86).

<sup>43</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 182.

<sup>44</sup> Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>45</sup> Laclau, 'Structure, History', p. 206.

<sup>46</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 235.

important factor from our perspective is still whether this chain opposes capitalism as a mode of production, which requires certain unifying articulations rather than others.

One problem with our concept of class is that, because it does not privilege a specific social identity, there is no obvious point around which class politics can develop. As Laclau explains, class unity 'should be conceived as a set of subject positions', that are 'systematically interlinked', and 'grounded on a core given by the location of the social agent in the relations of production'.<sup>47</sup> If these subject positions and their location are replaced by abstract notions of needs and exclusion, any 'proletariat' is dispersed and fragmented. As we shall see, Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek all recognise this problem, and it represents a major political challenge implied by their theories that we confront in each chapter. For the moment, the significant point is that this *political* issue should not undermine the *methodological* approach to ideology in terms of class and a split totality. That is, the alternative for ideology theory is to *not* consider the excess of capitalism itself, or other potential modes of production, and thus *not* analyse the deepest ideological assumptions it produces.

### **3. Ideology is produced by and produces social relations**

It follows from our arguments so far that ideologies within a social order are influenced by that order in various ways, and that in consumer capitalist societies the dominant feature is the appearance that any singular structure has been replaced by a free plurality of identities and ideas. However, there is a logic behind pluralism that limits its range, and any idea that a plurality has replaced ideology is ideological, because it disguises what is excluded from the totality. An important aspect of our ideology theory is thus to consider how the social structure overdetermines ideological content, but we also consider how ideology may exceed this influence and even challenge the structure. As such, we mediate between notions of autonomous subjects, who make clear, informed decisions about their interests, and ideas that ideology automatically reflects dominant structures. Throughout the thesis, our position is that, despite powerful social pressures to conform, contradictory experience always carries a potential to cause doubts that may develop into oppositional ideologies.

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<sup>47</sup> Laclau, 'Constructing Universality', in *Contingency, Hegemony*, pp. 281-307 (p. 300).

## Consciousness and the Limits of Social Conformity

Overall, Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek attempt to maintain a similar balance, by identifying certain critical faculties that resist affirmative ideological absorption, but are not always clear how such faculties survive, or what they may achieve. For Marcuse, one-dimensional thinking is in many ways ingrained in institutional structures, such as how mass media repeat specific interpretations of words and exclude others, or how scientific and empirical methods reduce social issues to individual problems, by only conceiving what is, rather than what could be. Also, material factors such as political stability and relatively high average living standards make conformity and stability seem more rational. This vested interest is further increased by consumerism, with its promises of fulfilment that create new needs, and enable the individual 'to continue his performance, which in turn perpetuates his labour and that of the others'.<sup>48</sup> As such, many individuals appear 'trained' from the outset, simply by their position in society and the uniformity of meaning, and one-dimensionality can seem inescapable. Nevertheless, Marcuse continually theorises potential catalysts that could reopen this closed thinking, such as possible 'autonomous' spaces outside commodified production, where alternative cultural forms and politics may be produced, or potential contradictions in the mode of production itself, either due to technological development or because consumerism may raise expectations of fulfilment beyond that which it can accommodate.

Jameson's theory of postmodernism outlines similar forms of internalisation, and emphasises that social fragmentation, and the apparent dominance of styles and opinions, is itself the expression of a certain economic stability. Even so, individuals really encounter fragmented, de-historicised images, interpreted according to different mediatised identities, with no indication of a social totality. This fragmentation reflects globalised commodification, which disconnects consumers from processes of production, and divorces individual news stories from any wider context. Furthermore, for Jameson, the postmodern psyche is also fragmented, in that individuals begin to compartmentalise contradictory experiences rather than rationalise them according to a narrative. It can thus seem that, although Jameson claims postmodernism is 'only' a cultural dominant, most subjects are really incapable of recognising it as such. As with Marcuse, he examines how certain cultural forms still imply political ideals, and also theorises a utopian politics that begins by focusing on particular details. Yet, at this particular historical moment, he

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<sup>48</sup> EC, p. 42.

understands that this and other concepts, such as 'cognitive mapping', merely reintroduce the *possibility* of thinking historically. That is, Jameson concedes that a significant radical movement is not currently possible, but we can begin 'a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived'.<sup>49</sup>

In Žižek's theory, the question of how late capitalism influences desire is accompanied by a more fundamental issue with subjectivity as such. Specifically, the 'fantasy' which structures how subjects rationalise their attachment to the symbolic order is effectively secondary to basic ideological obedience. Thus, all that really matters is the partial 'enjoyment' of unconscious attachment, regardless of how the fantasy justifies experienced contradictions. This point means that, in consumer capitalism, social reproduction is more about participation in commodity exchange than any conscious beliefs. Žižek also identifies a new social demand for subjects to continually find fulfilment through various pleasures, and to take responsibility for their choices. This demand is oppressive, as it removes all guarantees of meaning, leading subjects to desperately seek new authority figures, and creates a culture of blaming individuals for social problems. To resist these psychic and social conditions, Žižek explains that subjects can confront the lack of reason for their symbolic attachment, which then implies various options beyond that prescribed by dominant relations. The point is not that subjects ever escape the influence of cultural norms and material circumstances, but that recognising this lack engenders a different perspective on the existing totality.

At certain points, these theories present current social conditions as *overly* totalising, in that the potentials for change seem impossible within the realities described. As the next section shows, one of our main contentions is that a greater emphasis on the conscious element of ideology is necessary to locate these potentials. At this point, the important factor is that these theories demonstrate the great scope and efficiency of dominance in late capitalism, while reiterating its fundamental lack of closure. With their dialectical approach they cannot accept the existing totality as the limit of politics, either pessimistically, by resigning themselves to the impossibility of meaningful participation, or optimistically, by viewing the range of choices within consumer capitalist societies as meaningful. Rather, they contextualise the particular order against its potentials and contradictions, showing that there are always power relations to resist.

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<sup>49</sup> AF, p. 233.

As such, Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek also retain some concept of subjective agency that can potentially act beyond dominant social influences, and is not solely connected to material conditions.

The importance of even these slight theoretical potentials can first be marked against theories that present the logic of the existing totality as effectively inescapable. For example, Baudrillard's theory of 'simulation' in 'The Precession of Simulacra' is in many ways comparable to (or influences) Jameson's theory of postmodernism, but is more resigned to the logic it describes because it lacks an emphasis on dialectics. Baudrillard contrasts the current 'simulation' of a reality that no longer exists, and constitutes the effective real horizon, against 'dissimulation', or deliberate masking of reality through false representation.<sup>50</sup> Thus, there are no 'ideological' struggles, and today's scandals and conflicts only serve to hide that nothing is at stake. He explains that, 'all the holdups, airplane hijackings, etc. are now in some sense simulation holdups in that they are already inscribed in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in their presentation and their possible consequences'.<sup>51</sup> Conversely, we maintain that ideological analysis should reveal ideological limits even in 'simulation', because it serves existing power relations by repressing more meaningful struggle. In fact, assumptions that there are only superficial mediatised codes, or that nothing is at stake politically, are ideological, in that they posit the omnipotence of the existing order. Baudrillard claims that 'the only weapon of power' is 'to persuade us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production',<sup>52</sup> but the fact that there is still a 'power' that needs a 'weapon' to maintain itself indicates a challengeable reality. In effect, Baudrillard recognises capitalism as a particular system, but accepts the *universality* of this 'hyperreal' situation.

The opposite problem to be avoided is that of exaggerating subjective autonomy, and in this respect the concept of simulation shows how the field of consumerist choices and identities is heavily depoliticised. Here, we can contrast our position with the 'reconstituted radical politics' of Giddens, which valorises high 'social reflexivity' in today's societies, because individuals have greater access to information and are used to making decisions. For Giddens, although decisions are taken individually, such 'life politics' can have global impact because the market must react to

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<sup>50</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

them. He understands that social inequalities partially determine access to choices, and they are a 'market-governed freedom' that 'becomes an enveloping framework of individual self-expression',<sup>53</sup> but does not see these points as particularly limiting. Rather, he emphasises how people of all social levels can make empowering, life-determining decisions, which bring happiness.<sup>54</sup> However, the political impact from these choices is questionable, even if they force certain shifts in the market, because it is limited in scope and lacks direction. There is no notion of solidarity behind these choices, and while they involve conscious evaluation, life politics do not congeal into a common cause, but 'split into a multitude of individual and personal, strikingly similar but decidedly not complementary portmanteaus'.<sup>55</sup> In fact, if this low-level consumerist politics is seen as valid participation, it may replace forms of political organisation. As such, when Giddens recommends a general social development towards more ethical production, requiring intervention from states and big business,<sup>56</sup> it is not clear why these organisations would take such steps, without concerted pressure from oppositional movements.

The issue here is not simply that Giddens' politics is not 'radical' enough, as even theories that look beyond the existing totality can struggle to achieve a convincing balance between subjective and structural factors. For instance, Holloway's 'crack capitalism' thesis is clearly anti-capitalist, but similarly exaggerates the impact of fairly minor political activities. In it, any activity not shaped by capitalist production or consumption is politically meaningful, and helps create alternative, non-capitalist spaces, from 'the car worker who goes to his allotment in the evening [...] to the young man who goes to the jungle to devote his life to organising armed struggle'.<sup>57</sup> Seen in this way, anti-capitalism has such a broad meaning it includes many acts that are already commonplace in capitalist societies without causing disruption. Alternatively, theories that focus on explicit protest and resistance may assume too readily that they contain an underlying unifying logic. For example, Hardt and Negri's concept of 'multitude' emerges from the idea that, as production becomes more about information and communication, exploitative labour relations create a surplus of intelligence, experience, and desire that allow people to think beyond

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<sup>53</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 197.

<sup>54</sup> Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 181.

<sup>55</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 28.

<sup>56</sup> Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, pp. 247-248.

<sup>57</sup> John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), p. 6.

competitiveness and individualism. But, although Hardt and Negri recognise difficulties in challenging current power hierarchies, they focus too much on these transformative potentials, and not enough on how today's production methods are also structurally reinforcing, and primarily remain relations of business and profit. As such, it is not clear, as Hardt and Negri claim, that there is a 'common web' unifying the particular political struggles that emerge.<sup>58</sup> They identify this general connection as a demand for global democracy, or control by the multitude itself, but in many cases are merely *assuming* protest movements have this subtext, and are fundamentally compatible.<sup>59</sup> In this specific sense, Hardt and Negri resemble Giddens in that they also do not sufficiently analyse how dominant structures continue to affect various ideologies. Part of our approach, in contrast, is to consider how even forms of protest may represent ideologies that maintain the existing social relations more than they disrupt them, where they lack explicit declaration of more radical goals.

#### **4. Ideology always relies on conscious, contestable beliefs**

At this point we emphasise the conscious aspect of ideology as a bridge between dominant social influences and repressed potentials, which differs from the positions of Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek to some extent. Their theories tend to redefine ideology in consumer capitalist societies as something that no longer revolves around knowledge or contestable positive beliefs, and amplify the unconscious aspects of ideology so that behaviour and subject positions take priority. For us, however, conscious motivations behind politically significant acts can still be identified, and are still a significant factor. Thus, if people today are more aware that official values are corrupted and accept this situation cynically, or even if they follow norms without providing explicit reasons, some rationalisation or justification remains detectable. Or, where behaviour appears to clash with conscious values, beliefs and assumptions are evident in the way the subject rationalises the discrepancy. Moreover, in our view, although these conscious ideas may be considered the *effect* of unconscious attachment, or the way in which the subject represses the contingency of

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<sup>58</sup> Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 217.

<sup>59</sup> Saul Newman, *Unstable Universalities: Poststructuralism and Radical Politics* [ebook] (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), chapter 6. Or, as Dean puts it, the concept of the multitude 'includes too much — everyone in fact — and the cost of this inclusion is antagonism' (Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 78). For Dean, it is necessary to recognise fundamental differences between political ideas, and be more explicit about what constitutes radical politics.

attachment after the fact, we argue that they are also influential. Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek emphasise how the unconscious directly internalises dominant expectations (especially in late capitalism), so the conscious ideological content that emerges as individuals justify these expectations appears less important. Conversely, we see that, because content can change as individuals have experiences that contradict their beliefs, there may even be a point at which it becomes incompatible with the attachment and becomes susceptible to change.

As we have seen, Marcuse's notion of one-dimensionality presents an extreme form of ideological reification, which at times implies the total conditioning of consciousness. Yet there is ambiguity in Marcuse's work overall, in terms of whether one-dimensionality engenders affirmative beliefs, or conditions behaviour so that belief is irrelevant. On the one hand, he explains that people are generally ignorant of social mechanisms, or accept them on moral grounds, and that such factors are necessary to maintain the social order. On the other, he says that people recognise and accept social contradictions, either because there is material stability or because change seems impossible. We understand that all these positions may be variations of (one-dimensional) ideology within the same society, and it is important to analyse them all in terms of their conditional rationalisations, rather than as forms of automatic submission into labour and consumer roles. In fact, Marcuse also considers ideas such as how dominant media narratives unify internal political forces by justifying them against a 'common enemy'. If such narratives are really significant, it implies there are conscious ideological processes that are influenced by such information.

In Jameson's theory, the fragmentation of media imagery, and the psyche itself, blocks the formation of coherent narratives and rationalisations. The market is accepted by default, becoming a background which detaches subjects from traditional belief systems, and provides forms of identity expression through consumerist media codes. Jameson states that this total economic organisation dispels 'the last remnant of the older autonomous subject or ego', until what remains 'is no longer able to distinguish between external suggestion and internal desire', and is 'wholly delivered over to objective manipulation'.<sup>60</sup> But we can infer from Jameson's theory that subjects are also still inclined to seek coherent meaning in the fragmented reality, and that even consumer attitudes revolve around numerous cultural beliefs and assumptions. Moreover,

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<sup>60</sup> MF, p. 36.

acceptance of the market involves various rationalisations of its role, many of which appear to view it as an overall structuring system. We thus argue that Jameson's idea of a utopian politics that may prepare the ground for consideration of alternatives rests on communicating with such rationalisations.

With Žižek, it is quite clear that behaviour is far more representative of ideology than conscious belief, because it indicates subjects' deeper obedience to their basic symbolic attachment. For Žižek, ideology today is 'fetishistic', or 'disavows' this obedience by projecting it onto an external object, while consciously denying its own investment. Individuals are able to articulate that they do not believe, for example, that excessive consumerism is deeply fulfilling, but continue to consume excessively anyway, unaware that it really does provide them with a certain libidinal enjoyment in which they are heavily invested. Direct ideological criticism thus has little impact, and 'we can no longer subject the ideological text to "symptomatic reading", confronting it with its blank spots, with what it must repress',<sup>61</sup> because subjects already admit the contrast between their conscious values and behaviour. In effect, Žižek understands that ideological positions may be fully aware of social contradictions and factually true, so what remains significant is their point of enunciation, or political repercussions. However, we contend, the 'realism' of cynically aware forms of ideology should not be accepted at face value, and 'fetish' and 'symptom' are aspects of all ideology. In particular, fetishistic disavowal still entails justifying the contrast between behaviour and values with reasons that contain beliefs and assumptions which can be contested as symptoms (such as that excessive consumption is necessary for economic stability, or that it is unavoidable). Furthermore, different justifications may indicate varying levels of ideological certainty, behind similar behaviour.

This understanding of ideology can thus be applied to various ideological positions, to outline a range of beliefs that justify participation in today's capitalist societies. These beliefs do not simply moralise dominant political systems, but always contain certain ethical judgements, which view some forms of behaviour as acceptable and some as unacceptable. This notion opposes a common idea in ideology theory today, according to which dominant cynical ideologies, based on clear, realistic appraisals of the social situation, need no ethical rationalisation. For example, Fisher argues that the purpose of 'capitalist ideology' is 'to conceal

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<sup>61</sup> *SOI*, pp. 26-27.

the fact that the operations of capital do not depend on any sort of subjectively assumed belief'. He continues that, 'capitalism can proceed perfectly well [...] without anyone making a case for it'.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, Eagleton comments that, in 'a society in which everybody was either a cynic or a masochist, [...] there would be no need for ideology, in the sense of a set of discourses concealing or legitimating injustice'.<sup>63</sup> In the first case, we can note that there are always institutions in capitalist societies justifying the market, as good or necessary, and political measures that support it, from wars to austerity measures, so we do not know how capitalism would proceed without them. In the second case, to be a cynic or masochist — effectively the same thing from respective positions of privilege and deprivation — precisely requires finding ways to accept or deny the worst aspects of society, which is very much a matter of concealing or legitimating injustice. If, as Eagleton continues, 'cynics would feel no unease about inhabiting an exploitative social order',<sup>64</sup> we must still explain *how* they rationalise unease away. At the same time, our aim is not to see ideology merely in terms of conscious 'ruling class' dominance and 'false consciousness'. As Brown argues, we must escape 'a model of objective interests on one side and ideological obfuscation and manipulation on the other', because it 'eschews the more troubling possibility of an abject, unemancipatory, and anti-egalitarian subjective orientation'.<sup>65</sup> But we are also interested in the contestable assumptions and knowledge deficits of this latter subjective orientation, beyond what Brown describes as the transformation of systemic contradictions into individual problems and the juxtaposition of consumer freedom and strong administrative forces.

Such concepts of cynicism are also part of Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek's theories. In Marcuse's case it is less explicitly formulated, but implied in the idea that people are aware of, and accept, state brutality, as long as the economic situation remains stable. However, the dominant media narratives Marcuse identifies suggest that, for some, moral concepts are still significant, or that outside these narratives people accept brutality by appealing to human nature, or their own powerlessness. Jameson then connects cynicism to the 'market ideology' of the financial class, which valorises neoliberal economics *not* as just and equitable, but as preferable

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<sup>62</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: O Books, 2009), pp. 12-13.

<sup>63</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology*, p. 27.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>65</sup> Brown, 'American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism and De-democratization', *Political Theory*, 34 (2006), 690-714 (p. 703).

to any planned economy. Or, further down the social ladder, he sees cynicism as a resigned acceptance that simply participating in social expectations is the best way to stay afloat. Again, we insist that these positions imply clear beliefs, such as in an essential human nature that corrupts all social planning, or that the current system is permanent or invincible. For Žižek, finally, cynicism is *the* predominant ideology today, which comprehends how society functions and considers moral norms to be purely for the naïve. In this view, the only thing cynics do not know is that their informed appraisal of social circumstances is ‘displaced’ and actually represent a deep conformism. But we see that Žižek’s theory also introduces certain contestable assumptions into this high-level conscious awareness, such as the way that cynically demonising oppositional politics actually indicates a belief that radical change can only be to the detriment of society.<sup>66</sup> Similar to Jameson’s concept of market ideology, this cynicism implies a fear of change based on deeply-held ideas about the limits of human progress. For all three theorists, therefore, the notion that cynics fully accept the reality of social contradictions and how things work underplays the contestable assumptions behind these beliefs.

Viewed in this way, we can counter cynicism not only in its ‘disavowals’, but also in its assumptions. For example, Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* describes an ideological situation dominated by a general resigned cynicism, in which people are highly aware but see that such knowledge makes little difference to general corruption. For Sloterdijk, this cynicism should not be opposed by moral or intellectual argument, but by ‘kynicism’, which also recognises the absurdity of society’s proclaimed values, and creates immediate subversive enjoyment in taking ‘what is base, separated, and private out onto the street’.<sup>67</sup> Kynicism is moral, in the sense that it resists any grand purpose or instrumental reason, and insists on a negative self-determination that lacks *any* foundational ideas or specific political motivation.<sup>68</sup> We can identify a fetishistic disavowal here in that kynicism actually seems to involve little more than individualistic acting out, which, particularly in today’s permissive society, appears more as harmless escapist enjoyment. However, we can also identify the positive beliefs supporting this disavowal, such as that social rigidity is morally abhorrent, that it is possible to avoid taking a political stance, and that mockery and ridicule are powerful political tools. It also assumes that the resigned cynicism of the majority

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<sup>66</sup> *FT*, p. 28.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. by Michael Eldred (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 105.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

reflects a high level of social awareness against which political ideas are impotent, and as such does not consider whether there are limits to this resignation.<sup>69</sup> These notions maintain the disparity between an apparently subversive mentality and less subversive behaviour, and can be argued against, for example by considering the greater potential impact of a more directed political movement.

The most common cynical belief we encounter is one that justifies self-interest and self-preservation according to an essential destructiveness in human nature, and the impossibility of progressive change. Intellectually, this position is exemplified in Gray's *Straw Dogs*, which justifiably challenges notions of inevitable progress (from liberal humanism to traditional Marxism), but then reduces all ideologies to such beliefs, which effectively places its own position outside ideology. Gray's argument relies on a concept of human nature which claims that humans function instinctively in ways that focus on immediate needs and 'struggle to reckon profit and loss', or in desperate times, 'act to protect their offspring, to revenge themselves on enemies, or simply to give vent to their feelings'.<sup>70</sup> As such, he believes that ideals of progress are as endless and pointless as the toils of Sisyphus, and explains that most humans throughout history have not believed in remaking the world 'and a great many have had happy lives'.<sup>71</sup> Yet, if we consider that individuals also act altruistically, motivated by global concerns, it is not clear that instinct always dominates consciousness. We could also show that a great many people have *not* had happy lives, and that, even if progressive ideals are never fully realised, taking steps based on grand ideas can improve living conditions. Ultimately, Gray's assumptions justify a strongly conservative ideology that encourages people to accept their place in society, embracing spontaneous and instinctive action, rather than conceiving grand plans. It is, as Critchley points out, the stance of a 'passive nihilist', who 'simply focuses on himself and his particular pleasures', and as the world explodes 'closes his eyes and makes himself into an island'.<sup>72</sup> It is also an

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<sup>69</sup> As Lukes says, consent and resignation are insufficient terms to capture 'the range of [...] ideas and everyday commonsensical assumptions whose acceptance has served to make [...] conditions appear intelligible and tolerable, or less intolerable, or indeed desirable' (Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 132). Or, as Wright explains, 'resignation requires explanation, given human intelligence and problem-solving capacity. Something must be interfering with a response that would improve [people's] situation' (Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, p. 277).

<sup>70</sup> John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2002), p. 28.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>72</sup> Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 4-5.

attempt to engage in debate to change people's attitudes, and as such represents a positive set of political beliefs, despite the cynical distance.<sup>73</sup>

Following these arguments, a major implication of our theory in comparison to Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek is that it makes political change through a struggle of conscious ideas more plausible. That is, if ideologies are not devoid of contestable assumptions, challenges to the coherence of conscious beliefs may influence attachments and behaviour, if they become sufficiently widespread.<sup>74</sup> Dominant power cannot simply announce its domination, and the psyche cannot be fully compartmentalised, or accommodate any contradiction for the sake of enjoyment, without basic acceptance of the existing social order becoming strained. Eagleton makes a similar point here, despite his negative concept of cynicism, because he sees that many other forms of ideology do not simply accept serious injustices, which means that people 'must believe that these injustices are *en route* to being amended, or that they are counterbalanced by greater benefits, or that they are inevitable, or that they are not really injustices at all'.<sup>75</sup> These beliefs are positive rationalisations (some of which could also relate to cynicism), which imply conditions on people's acceptance of the status quo. Conversely, while Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek conceptualise excess or utopian desires in ideology, suggesting abstract potentials for transcendence, because each also accepts that ideology (now) is a matter of unconscious programming, or that it can be *de facto* acceptance of dominance without content, this theoretical potential can seem empty. Such conclusions can signify what Eagleton calls 'bad' utopianism, which offers 'an alternative with scant foundation in the given social order', as opposed to a 'good' utopianism, in which 'a degraded present must be patiently scanned for those tendencies which [...] may be seen to point beyond it'.<sup>76</sup> Thus, although Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek are politically committed, we assert that a concept of ideology which more fully considers the role of conscious belief is the necessary mediating factor to connect the unconscious obedience and potentials for change in their theories. In our understanding, the challenges to dominant ideology they

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<sup>73</sup> To quote Gramsci: 'if the sceptic takes part in the debate [...] he is no longer a sceptic, but represents a specific positive opinion, which is usually bad and can triumph only by convincing the community that other opinions are even worse' (Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart: 1971), p. 374).

<sup>74</sup> Our point is not, however, that being able to decipher contradictions or contingency in truth claims suggests the possibility of open discussion and mutual agreement. Rather, we are interested in how currently marginalised positions can potentially gain communicative ascendancy.

<sup>75</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology*, p. 27.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

describe, which emphasise reintroducing the negative into thought, or some sense of contingency and potential beyond what exists, only become effective through more direct confrontation of conscious ideological supports.

### **Ideology as a Two-tiered Concept**

Our concept of ideology thus applies equal weight to subjects' 'baseline' connection to the social order and their interpretation of that attachment, or appeals to certain values and ideas. Also, the class split in the social defines whether the baseline attachment is 'affirmative' (generally supporting existing power relations) or 'oppositional' (generally opposing existing power relations). As such, 'affirmative ideology' describes a whole range of positions and conscious beliefs, whose only common trait is that they do not significantly challenge the status quo. These positions are compatible at the systemic level but not necessarily in their content, and therefore comprise a structure of dominance that is both hugely powerful and internally contradictory. Furthermore, these positions are not only effects of the social order, but its supports, and must be maintained for social relations to remain as they are. For these reasons, ideological analysis should privilege neither the totality nor its elements, but accept their mutual influence, and that the contestable contents of the elements represent cracks in the supporting structure.

Aspects of this 'two-tiered' concept of ideology are drawn from the work of Marcuse and Jameson, and especially Žižek's use of Lacanian concepts, yet there are also important differences. With Marcuse and Jameson, the concept of a split between acceptance or rejection of the existing order is present in the contrast between one-dimensional thought and two-dimensional thought, or de-historicised fragments and historicised narrative. That is, despite the apparent weakening of the psyche under consumer capitalist structures, there remains, as Jameson says, 'an ensemble of human agents trained in specific ways and inventing original local tactics and practices according to the creativities of human freedom'.<sup>77</sup> However, while they recognise different ways in which individuals comprehend social relations, they do not really consider the more productive role of affirmative rationalisation. Thus, for Marcuse, although there are 'countervailing powers' in today's society, 'these forces cancel each other out in a higher

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<sup>77</sup> *PM*, p. 408.

unification', which seems to 'promote rather than counteract the fateful integration'.<sup>78</sup> In short, analysis of the conformism and systemic reinforcement in affirmative positions, overrides that of differences between them.

Žižek goes a stage further in this respect, because the imaginary 'fantasy' is precisely a level of rationalisation in contrast to symbolic attachment. In effect, the subject must attribute certain absolute justifications for its basic interpellation to an external source, to stabilise meaning, and the fantasy internalises certain social norms and adapts as necessary to maintain the attachment. Despite this two-level structure, however, in this Symbolic-fantasy relationship the fantasy becomes merely a reaction to symbolic attachment, and peripheral to the core obedience. Certainly, as Žižek says, fantasy cannot precede symbolic attachment, because subjects do not 'merely fill in, occupy, a preordained place', and 'it is the very subjective act of recognition' that makes it possible to posit an external meaning.<sup>79</sup> Yet, entry into the Symbolic also implies attachment to a particular Master-Signifier that overdetermines the subject position, which means that the external authority posited cannot be purely subjective, and is already based on social influences. While Žižek accepts this circuitous relationship, he still presents attachment as primary in ideology, in a way that renders positive ideas peripheral, and therefore focuses on change through an act that begins by negating the fantasy altogether. Conversely, as we see it, if such 'negation' is to mean a *political* shift between acceptance and rejection, it presupposes a new, self-reflexive ideological position, that emerges in advance through positive experiences and ideas, and already overdetermines how the subject reacts to recognising the contingency of the fantasy. As Laclau says, subjects are 'never in the position of the absolute chooser who, faced with the contingency of all possible courses of action, would have no reason to choose'.<sup>80</sup> As such, the baseline attachment that enables conscious rationalisation also depends on it, and contradictions encountered by the subject may alter the fantasy to the point it challenges the Master-Signifier itself.

One implication of this theory is that subjectivity rests on a paradox, according to which a 'cause' can be influenced by its own 'effects'. Essentially, it involves Althusser's notion that subjective interpellation has 'always-already' occurred, so that subjects neither enter into symbolic

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<sup>78</sup> ODM, p. 51.

<sup>79</sup> Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: Essays on Schelling and Related Matters*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Verso, 2007), p. 136.

<sup>80</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 27.

relations *and then* rationalise them, nor enter based on prior rationalisations, but are simply within the circuit.<sup>81</sup> Or, as Althusser explains in terms of 'principal' and 'secondary' social contradictions, the structure and the plurality of meanings *constitute each other*:

In plain terms this position implies [...] that the principal is not the essence and the secondaries so many of its phenomena, so much so that the principal contradiction might practically exist *without* the secondary contradictions, or without some of them, or might exist *before* or *after* them. On the contrary, it implies that the secondary contradictions are essential even to the existence of the principal contradiction, that they really constitute its condition of existence, just as the principal contradiction constitutes their condition of existence.<sup>82</sup>

In our terms, each secondary contradiction reflects the principal, *and* relates to other secondary contradictions, which together form the essential supports for the principal. There is *mutual* dependence between the 'principal' acceptance or rejection and its different 'secondary' manifestations or rationalisations.

Furthermore, this mutual dependence is not fully self-contained, because various external influences may contribute to its content (ideological beliefs), and in pluralist societies in particular, the range of different rationalisations mean that various potential influences are constantly present. Here, we consider the conflicting demands on subjects in consumer capitalism by synthesising Marcuse's concepts of 'performance principle' and 'repressive desublimation', which describe a dual social expectation of productivity and consumerist leisure, with Jameson and Žižek's focus on today's fragmented and bewildering social pressures. We thus show how a whole range of institutional demands function together according to logics of capitalist reproduction, but that these demands are also contradictory, and the way subjects prioritise particular demands over others causes tension. That is, different subjects are interpellated according to specific constellations of influences, which dominate perception, but that perception is also susceptible to other influences. As Therborn states in his concept of 'qualification', while 'those who have been subjected to a particular patterning of their capacities, to a particular discipline, qualify for the given roles and are capable of carrying them out', 'there is always an

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<sup>81</sup> Althusser, *On Ideology*, pp. 49-50

<sup>82</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 205.

inherent possibility that a contradiction may develop between the two'.<sup>83</sup> When rationalisation is confronted by alternative rationalisations, it may be forced to articulate its assumptions, and even meet its own limits. In that sense, following Butler, subjection is both 'a power *exerted on* a subject' and 'a power *assumed by* the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject's becoming'.<sup>84</sup> The power relations that constitute subjects do not completely define their scope of action, as the subject assumes a power of its own in interpellation, to rationalise its subjection, and the power of rationalisation may work 'against the power that made that assumption possible'.<sup>85</sup>

With this understanding of ideology, identifying different rationalisations that support ideological attachments allows us to consider the particular limits of affirmation subjects may have. To this end, we develop an ideology 'map', by analysing positions drawn from the works of Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek. We examine various aspects of each ideology, such as the beliefs and justifications that underpin them, the level of 'awareness' or knowledge of social disparity they demonstrate, their main institutional influences (law, education, media), and the psychological conditions that may accompany them (such as guilt, fear, or even optimism). These ideologies include a positive concept of cynicism, but also various other ways people internalise common propositions about the market, democracy, humanity, consumerist pleasures, and political alternatives, from versions of political liberalism and conservatism, to more 'apolitical' responses that may be equally significant in their social impact.

### **Ideology and Political Change**

In each of the following three chapters, we examine how each of Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek's theories defines ideology in the situation of consumer capitalism, and the contents of the ideologies themselves. Also, having established this base, we explore how our approach to ideology may alter the questions of political change that they consider, in particular how focusing on conscious aspects of ideology implies a more consequential battleground of ideas within the social. In the final three sections of each chapter in particular — examining themes of 'commodification', 'agency', and 'political action' — we both consider the powerful forces that

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<sup>83</sup> Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London: NLB, 1980), p. 17.

<sup>84</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 11.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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reproduce consumer capitalism, as described by Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek, and shift the emphasis of their conclusions by highlighting the importance of contestable beliefs. Thus, if the totality appears insurmountable, even given awareness of its contingency, it can be re-presented in terms of the specific mechanisms and conditions according to which its conscious supports are formed.

In our first theme, Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek identify various ways in which commodification as such reduces scope for ideological resistance. For example, mass commodification of information promotes certain ideas and marginalises others, or de-historicises oppositional politics, robbing them of their power. In this way, popular oppositional politics seem impossible, since mass communications channels function according to market demands, and if more radical ideas use commodified channels to reach a mass audience, they both reproduce the established structure and force their message to fit dominant media codes. Furthermore, symbolically rebellious acts lack impact in a permissive society that actively encourages and profits from subversion of taboo. Aesthetic expressions of resistance are simply not shocking, or are represented in terms of a monetary value, and lose any revolutionary context. As such, any contribution appears to be merely another form of participation in commodity relations, which adds to the circulation of information and the capitalist process. In fact, the transformation of individual expression into consumerist identities and activities can make commodification seem fulfilling in itself.

While these arguments are persuasive, we suggest limits and contradictions in commodity logic, by emphasising contrasts between ideological rationalisations. For example, Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek all note that capitalism has become reliant on mass consumerism, and needs people to buy excessively, which relies on an ideological association between satisfaction, fulfilment and consumption. Therefore, people do not simply invest in consumerist lifestyles without rationalising that investment, based on positive justifications. Moreover, if there is a correlation between common beliefs and dominant media codes, it implies that mass media *content* is still influential. It then follows that a greater quantity of radical content (which is not *programmatically* excluded by commodified mass media that obey market demand) could have an ideological and political impact. To use Mandel's example, the profitable business of publishing Marxist literature does not merely constitute 'an "integration" of Marxism into the "world of

commodities”, because ‘the bourgeois social order and the individual consumer by no means have a “value-free” or “neutral” attitude to the specific use-value of “Marxist literature”’.<sup>86</sup> This content adds to the structure of capitalist communications, and promotes the idea of free democratic participation,<sup>87</sup> but is also necessary if beliefs about participation and democracy are to change.

Our second theme considers agency, or the extent to which Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek’s theories of subjectivity suggest potentials for psychological resistance against dominant codes. In Marcuse’s case, the technologically rationalised system traps activity in logics of economic efficiency and productivity, and he argues that ‘subjective’ understanding that change is required has been separated from the ‘objective’ power of a unified work force, due to developments in production and consumption. For Jameson, political goals are fragmented into codes that never relate themselves to their constitutive mode of production. Rather, the complex global nature of the system makes it near impossible for individuals to identify their position, or locations of power, within it, leading to disempowerment and lack of direction. Žižek, meanwhile, defines the potential of a subjective ‘act’ that rejects the laws of the existing order. Here, the question that emerges is how this act is motivated or what makes subjects take such a decision, as well as how such acts may become politically powerful when revolutionary subjectivity is so fragmented. In effect, the overriding concept that ultimately dominates all three theorists’ work in this area is the necessity of somehow reinvigorating a ‘class consciousness’.

The extent to which Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek tend to present subjectivity as reified or fragmented by dominant forces and material circumstances makes it difficult to imagine how a conscious agency can contribute to such aims. Marcuse in particular identifies the paradox that social relations must change to develop class consciousness, and that class consciousness is the prerequisite to force this change. However, in our understanding, certain affirmative forms of consciousness are more committed to the existing order than others, so some positions suggest the possibility of gradually generating a more class focused interpretation, if contradictory arguments can achieve a high enough profile. Jameson especially explores the possibility of invigorating utopian ideals in ideologies in general, which we believe hints at a potential to

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<sup>86</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, trans. Joris De Bres (London: NLB, 1975), p. 507.

<sup>87</sup> Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 28.

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develop alternative political goals (although we do not assume any *intrinsically* socialist element to this potential). We also view oppositional agency as an 'act' in Žižek's terms, in which subjects take responsibility for their own 'decision' to accept social relations. But we emphasise that, if such acts are to be more than spontaneous and individual, they must emerge from challenges to belief via experience and knowledge that counter dominant assumptions. Concepts such as the act, or the ability to comprehend utopian thinking, effectively presuppose a prior shift in consciousness, which often implies awaiting some kind of social crisis to invalidate current thinking. In our view, while crisis is an important catalyst for widespread ideological change, the process of shifting consciousness begins beforehand, and the reaction to crisis is dependent on that preparatory work. In other words, a mass act of taking responsibility for the future, or imagining radically progressive change, is the result of challenging conscious justifications for acceptance in the present.

The final theme examines the kinds of political action that may be possible and effective today. Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek all attempt to envisage conditions for oppositional movements to emerge, refusing to accept that the current circumstances are permanent or insurmountable, at least in the long term. We consider the difficulties that any radical movement faces according to these theories, and attempt to extract their more 'optimistic' elements, as well as use our ideology theory to demonstrate how these may represent more concrete and ever-present potentials. With Marcuse, we focus on a shift in his perspective around the time of the 1968 protest movements, which showed that oppositional ideas could emerge within the reified conditions he had defined. Here he considers a 'step by step' approach to building radical politics, which involves gradual development of class consciousness and institutional change together, in a mutually reciprocal manner. A similar idea then returns in Jameson's theory of Utopia, which considers a need to combine far-reaching political goals with more accessible everyday politics. That is, revolutionary or utopian aims may not be directly communicable, so must be mediated by balancing global ideas with more 'local' politics, with both sides essential to meaningful change. Finally, with Žižek, we examine how political refusal, or withdrawal from political activity to create spaces for alternative thought, must also provide a positive political direction that questions capitalism and liberal democracy. *Against* some of Žižek's proposals, we emphasise that formal negation cannot precede positive content, but generally endorse his aim of

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gradually developing fragmented opposition into a larger movement that considers various notions of radical change. The common conclusion in all three chapters is thus this focus on gradual development, or a 'spiral' in which actions slowly change consciousness, which then slowly strengthen actions.<sup>88</sup> But central to our argument throughout is that these proposals are only meaningful if positive ideological rationalisation has some form of productive power.

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<sup>88</sup> David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (London: Profile, 2010), pp. 227-228.



## Chapter 2

### Herbert Marcuse

#### I. Introduction

Our analysis of Marcuse focuses on one-dimensionality, or the administrative conditioning of consciousness in post-war consumer capitalism, and the possibilities he considers for developing oppositional thinking within such circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Many of the features Marcuse identifies in what he calls 'advanced industrial society' or 'late industrial capitalism' remain relevant today and are echoed in the theories of Jameson and Žižek, especially the psychological pressures of consumerism and productivity, which obscure alternative potentials. Nevertheless, we argue against Marcuse's suggestion that these dominant social demands are automatically absorbed by individuals, with rationalisation being little more than an effect of conformity. Instead we explore how these demands are internalised based on specific beliefs and conditions. Marcuse's understanding affects consideration of social change, or his attempts to locate a minority 'two-dimensional' or dialectical thought, and potentials for its expansion. For the most part, in line with his concept of unconscious ideological internalisation, Marcuse explores possible crises that may appear due to intrinsic systemic contradictions, or ways to communicate that bypass consciousness. For us, such possibilities still rely on challenges to ideological rationalisation to become plausible, and emphasis on such challenges implies further opportunities for political change. Therefore, while aspects of Marcuse's political theory begin to move in this direction, they must still be reframed in terms of conscious rationalisations.

The first task is to examine the features of 'one-dimensionality', and some repressed potentials for transcendence Marcuse identifies, as well as possible catalysts for such change. In effect, one-dimensionality refers to ideology that works through social practices and administrative systems to reinforce general acceptance of existing social relations, making the particular appear universal, and social change appear unnecessary or dangerous. We accept the foundations of Marcuse's analysis of consumer capitalist society here, and the split his theory creates between affirmative and oppositional ideology, but question whether this 'total administration' really renders

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<sup>1</sup> To this end, the chapter mostly examines Marcuse's later works, from the 1950s to the 1970s, especially *EC* (first published 1955), *ODM* (1964), *EL* (1969), and *CRR* (1972).

consciousness as impervious to two-dimensional thinking as he suggests. Accordingly, Marcuse demonstrates a need for change, due to the way in which consumer capitalism artificially maintains levels of toil and scarcity, but his understanding of ideology indicates that direct political challenges are largely useless. He thus considers various alternative catalysts for progressive change, from intrinsic tendencies in capitalism, science and human nature, to the unconscious influence of autonomous culture. We argue that, while some of these potentials are convincing, their impact still relies on their recognition in mass consciousness, so any political change must also confront this conscious dimension.

Our next aim is to show how ideological rationalisation remains important, and identify possible contents of rationalisations. Marcuse stresses that individuals absorb institutional influences without contemplation, are unable to think outside dominant linguistic boundaries, or simply reproduce existing social relations through work and consumer behaviour. In our understanding, external influences cannot simply be absorbed, because they make different demands on individuals, and different attitudes reveal varied justifications and levels of commitment to the social order. Furthermore, the limits of language in mass media are not purely structural, but involve a conscious struggle to make certain narratives more influential than others. Media language thus includes a variety of affirmative interpretations that may highlight each other's inconsistencies, and leave a minimal space for oppositional ideas. We then identify specific ideological positions, by considering contrasting views Marcuse offers on the importance of knowledge to social reproduction. While he suggests in some cases that ideological acceptance is merely a reflection of economic conditions, at times his descriptions also imply elements of conscious justification. We expand this notion to demonstrate the importance of rationalisation and belief in all cases, and define their various forms.

With these main ideas established, the question is how our understanding of ideology may shift the emphasis on Marcuse's considerations of political change. The first issue is that of how mass consumerism and commodification influence aims and expectations, and obstruct development of oppositional ideas. In many ways, Marcuse pre-empts theories of postmodernism (such as those of Jameson and Žižek) by identifying how consumerism creates new concepts of fulfilment, through lifestyle choices and leisure activities, and incorporates previously subversive behaviour into mass entertainment. We accept these ideas, but our point is also to demonstrate

that people still rationalise consumerism and its downsides (waste, pre-defined freedoms), in ways that are crucial to their attachment to it, and may be indirect and conditional. Moreover, in regards to Marcuse's emphasis on 'autonomous' art, as a cultural catalyst to oppositional politics, we understand that, because autonomous cultural zones are increasingly less influential in mass consumerism, it is necessary to consider how oppositional ideas may function within mass media spaces. In particular, we argue, this potential rests less on the utopian *form* of high art and more on political *content* which challenges conscious ideological beliefs.

For Marcuse, another problem remains that individuals throughout society are channelled into cellular administrative roles, disconnected from their wider effects. Even leaders and elites, he claims, are not authors of the system so much as its functionaries. In addition, it is difficult to perceive from which particular social identities a revolutionary sensibility might emerge, since, Marcuse shows, the different conditions for a revolutionary subject previously embodied in the industrial proletariat are now separated between classes. In these conditions, it appears that the class consciousness of some middle-class intellectuals is the necessary catalyst to make connections between these groups. In response to these points, we believe it is important that people still rationalise structural compulsions, as it makes their adherence conditional (and flawed because it relates to inconsistent institutional demands). This rationalisation is then also crucial to the prospect of a class movement, since intellectual opposition can only be communicated effectively if there is a certain receptiveness in other groups, which implies that fragments of oppositional consciousness already exist within them.

Finally, we see that Marcuse's theory of ideology means that for the most part he cannot imagine a radical politics in terms of effective forms of action, and can only insist upon intrinsic social tendencies and contradictions, and a need to avoid defeatism. Also, because his concept of one-dimensional thinking precludes more direct confrontations to affirmative ideologies, it is often not clear what action these observations entail. An impasse emerges in which institutional change is the prerequisite for a change in consciousness, but the change in consciousness is needed for institutional change. However, Marcuse alters his thinking with the protest movements of the late 1960s, to suggest the possibility of greater political engagement, because he sees an existing consciousness that may be further developed through gradual radical education and institutional reform. As we perceive it, this initial emergence of such a consciousness reveals a

potential that was always within one-dimensional ideologies, and this politics of gradual development can theoretically begin in any social conditions. We then analyse some of Marcuse's strategies for developing change, with a focus on gradual development that must balance negation of dominant ideas with creating a positive alternative, and constitutional political action with extra-legal protests. In our view, Marcuse's emphasis on a politics of negation represents a commitment to mass self-determination, although it must also recognise its own specific assumptions, and may require support from established forms of political participation.

Overall, our analysis affirms many of the difficulties of changing dominant forms of consciousness in consumer capitalism that Marcuse identifies. Also, some of Marcuse's contributions to ideology theory remain particularly important, including the framing of 'true' and 'false' social needs, the social demand for both productivity and consumerist 'desublimation', and pluralist 'repressive tolerance' that allows intolerant views to thrive under a veil of neutrality. In some cases, we defend his more contentious positions against criticisms, which tend to either accuse him of being too politically dogmatic, or, conversely, of withdrawing from political commitment.<sup>2</sup> But at other points we agree with critics, particularly where they argue that the measures Marcuse suggests for political change often appear ineffective.<sup>3</sup> For the most part, these measures become plausible when we accentuate the role of conscious rationalisation, against concepts such as 'ego-weakness', which supposedly makes individuals more susceptible to institutional demands. We insist that it is unnecessary to focus so greatly on unconscious and external factors in envisaging change, and instead draw from Marcuse's theory a range of ideological rationalisations with conscious limits that may gradually be contested. In our view, such contestation can cause shifts in the unconscious acceptance of norms, by bringing contradictory assumptions to the surface that reveal its contingency.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In the first case, instances include the idea that Marcuse's notion of politicising science equates to top down political control (Feenberg); or that his opposition to repressive tolerance is a way of narrowing discussion (MacIntyre). In the second case, we refer, for example, to arguments that Marcuse's focus on art is a form of political withdrawal (Lukes, Reitz); or that the concept of counter education is purely negative and represents a retreat from actual political alternatives (Bernstein, Martineau).

<sup>3</sup> These points include: the way Marcuse privileges the socialising aspect of 'biological' instinct (Alford, Alway, Kellner), or some ideal state in historical recollection (Jay); his idea of progress based on a specific point of technological advancement (Alford, Feenberg); the value he places on heavily marginalised autonomous art (Bronner, Raulet, Kellner); his political focus on sudden revolution over gradual change (Bernstein, Geoghegan, Reitz); and the possibility of minority dictatorship (Lichtman).

<sup>4</sup> To reiterate, this process is not a question of unveiling 'false consciousness' to reveal a positive reality, but of highlighting forms of partiality, omissions and inconsistencies, and their political effects.

## II. Key Concepts

### i) One-Dimensionality

Our first objective is to establish the social conditions Marcuse defines around the central concept of one-dimensionality, and show how this notion establishes an ideological split between conformism and opposition to existing social relations, but also overemphasises automatic or unconscious ideological absorption. Marcuse identifies ways in which various material and cultural factors, from improvements in average living standards, to the reduction of language to a pragmatic or empirical common sense, create a new form of ideology that channels individuals into acceptance without explicit coercion. He also explains how these changes obscure a continued alienation and lack of self-determination, and rely on global oppression and destruction, which one-dimensional consciousness fails to critically evaluate. While we accept that such social changes have occurred, we question whether mass, one-dimensional consciousness is as impervious to opposition as Marcuse implies, and how minority two-dimensional thinking that considers potentials beyond the present reality manages to emerge in these conditions. At this point, the aim is merely to identify a lack of conscious rationalisation in Marcuse's ideology theory, and suggest that this lack problematizes concepts of political change.

One-dimensional or identity thinking, for Marcuse, is not propaganda, but a certain logic in late industrial capitalism, which often stems from the 'apolitical', instrumental reduction of objects and concepts to singular notions by repeated association. It leads to complete acceptance of what exists, as these particular interpretations are constantly affirmed throughout various aspects of everyday life, in a way that creates barriers to thought that 'appear as the limits of Reason itself'.<sup>5</sup> For example, Marcuse explains, a beautiful model advertising a cosmetic product is presented as beauty itself, implying that beauty requires and is that product. Sufficient reinforcement of such ideas throughout advertising then obscures the fact that an abstract noun (beauty) has far more scope for meaning than an adjective (beautiful) used to describe certain objects.<sup>6</sup> Marcuse also describes the issue as 'operationalism', or obsession with empiricism, which only considers problems within specific, local parameters, rather than as social questions. So, in the work place, a single employee's complaint about low wages is analysed in terms of that individual's current financial situation, not by considering the suitability of wages in general. Or,

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<sup>5</sup> *ODM*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

mental health treatment aims at an individual's 'adjustive success' in following social demands, not whether the demands are reasonable in themselves.<sup>7</sup> In both cases, a particular solution may be found that alleviates the individual issue, but only by blocking consideration of wider social causes. For Marcuse, such empiricist methodology is ideological, as it reinforces individualism and introduces 'a false concreteness' to reality that 'assumes a political function' by reaffirming the existing social order.<sup>8</sup>

The point, therefore, is that various notions can come to appear universal through mere adherence to empirical data, because unrealised potentials are repressed by the analysis. For Marcuse, ideas such as that social progress requires domination over nature, unpleasurable labour is a social necessity, or human experience is primarily one of oppression, obscure the historical dimension of scarcity, sacrifice and aggression. He argues that such views are in part consequences of scientific rationality, which is no longer concerned with the enlightenment and 'freedom from fear which it once promised', but with 'denouncing the notion of an earthly paradise',<sup>9</sup> through a 'neutral' authoritativeness that trivialises alternative thinking. It is instrumentalism that views reality via measurements and categorisations, and aims at control, and as such can ideologically reduce nature and people to tools or obstacles relating to specific goals. Within late industrial capitalism, this logic reproduces the priority of increased 'productivity', whose destructive effects then become normalised, and are absolved from moral censure. As such, despite revolving around knowledge and factual analysis, as opposed to mystic beliefs and moral absolutes, this ideology justifies acts that create waste, scarcity and conflict through an appeal to objective necessity. In political terms, for Marcuse, it permits validation of virtually any act without guilt, to the extent, he claims, 'one man can give the signal that liquidates hundreds and thousands of people, then declare himself free from all pangs of conscience'.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, an important aspect of ideological acceptance in this social formation is that it actually seems to enable upward mobility, and provides a relatively stable political system, against which there appears no immediate need to rebel. In fact, since dominant concepts of individual and social success rely heavily on one-dimensional thinking, transcendent ideas even seem counterproductive. As such, for Marcuse, the working class ceases to be antagonistic to

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<sup>7</sup> *EC*, p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> *ODM*, p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> *EC*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>10</sup> *ODM*, p. 79.

the system and instead becomes a consumer-producer with an interest in its maintenance. This consumer dimension also compensates for sacrifices made to enhance productivity, both satisfying basic needs and providing sources of pleasure to fill leisure time. Popular culture urges individuals to fill this time with entertainment, as opposed to critical reflection or political engagement, while offering promises of gratification that are never fully met and always demand more labour. In a sense, this cycle of work-leisure is *irrational*, but it is *rational* for individuals to invest in it because not conforming is either inconceivable, or appears too risky. Marcuse asks, if 'satisfying goods also include thoughts, feelings, aspirations, why should [people] wish to think, feel and imagine for themselves?'.<sup>11</sup>

This one-dimensionality is massively dominant, for Marcuse, but still contrastable against a two-dimensional or dialectical thought. Statements he makes that imply total reification, such as that today's 'culture is *more* ideological than its predecessor, inasmuch as today the ideology is in the process of production itself',<sup>12</sup> effectively exclude his own critical position, which represents a subordinate or socially-repressed minority consciousness within the same whole. As such, as Kellner says, Marcuse is not 'a theorist [...] who completely rejects contradiction, conflict, revolt and alternative thought and action'.<sup>13</sup> Rather, Marcuse is clear from his earlier work that there is always a general dialectical potential beyond what currently exists, or the 'interpretation of that-which-is in terms of that-which-is-not, confrontation of the given facts with that which they exclude', and explains how acceptance of 'that-which-is *repels* that-which-is-not and, in doing so, repels its own real possibilities'.<sup>14</sup> The one-dimensional absorption of individuals into dominant social goals can therefore always generate exceptions. Seen in this way, Marcuse's concept of ideology marks a baseline split between affirmative ideologies that accept these goals, and oppositional ideologies that reject them.

At the same time, this separation in itself does not explain how two-dimensional thinking emerges in the social circumstances, unless the unconscious ideological absorption of one-dimensional thinking is not as total as Marcuse claims. In fact, it may be that some of the features Marcuse identifies are not so specific to late industrial capitalism, but relate to all social forms. As

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984), p. 235.

<sup>14</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. x.

Laclau and Mouffe note, a particular (interpretation) becoming dominant and being elevated to the appearance of a universal is the central aspect of any hegemonic relation.<sup>15</sup> Or, there may be potentials for critical development specific to this social form that Marcuse does not recognise. As Habermas suggests, given the separation of communication from the specific 'value orientations' of more traditional (religious) societies, at least the *formal* possibility of critical thought should be greater today.<sup>16</sup> Marcuse instead emphasises the distinct qualities of ideological subjugation in existing social relations, which seems to reinforce the concept of one-dimensionality but leave no space for the two-dimensional excess. He acknowledges that dominant language is always one-dimensional in a sense, because it primarily 'expresses the given [...] form of reality', and adjusts individuals 'to the given universe of discourse and behavior'.<sup>17</sup> However, he feels that what is 'relatively new is the general acceptance of [...] lies by public and private opinion',<sup>18</sup> or the way self-contradicting terms are automatically validated by experts and authority figures. This reproduction of ideology through technical rationality then *decreases* critical capacity, but as such provides no clear reason why some people manage to resist the 'lies'.

Alternatively, since dialectical thinking indicates that people are capable of recognising contradictions, and ideological rationalisation still exists, we can consider whether those who accept contradictions also rationalise them, according to certain beliefs. In fact, it seems there is no way for two-dimensional thinking to develop within these circumstances if, as Marcuse claims, the 'people who speak and accept [dominant] language seem to be immune to everything — and susceptible to everything'.<sup>19</sup> As Reitz says, where Marcuse sees such 'an almost mechanical reflection of operational and functional material economic concerns in the ideological sphere', it indicates 'the integration of individual interests and a paralysis of criticism'.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, we understand one-dimensionality as a combination of social logics and conscious justifications, which involves the possibility of ideological shifts due to conscious recognition of alternative possibilities. For example, if people take seriously the idea that consumer goods provide

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<sup>15</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. xiii.

<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action Volume Two: The Critique of Functional Reason*, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 180.

<sup>17</sup> Marcuse, 'Beyond One-Dimensional Man', in *Towards a Critical Theory of Society: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse Volume Two*, ed. by Kellner (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 107-120 (p. 118).

<sup>18</sup> *ODM*, p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> Marcuse, 'Language and Technological Society', *Dissent*, 8 (1961), 66-74 (p. 71).

<sup>20</sup> Charles Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities: A Critical Engagement with Herbert Marcuse* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), p. 160.

fulfilment, that becomes a belief with certain limits; if they do not take it seriously, they are not really 'susceptible to everything', but have other reasons for accepting reified language. Ideology in consumer capitalist societies may be especially complex, but it thus involves varied and subtle considerations of fulfilment, risk and inadequacy, which go beyond automatic absorption. Since there is still a particular that becomes 'universal' and anchors justifications of social objectives, that particular can be identified and challenged.

### **ii) True Needs**

In Marcuse's terms, there is a repressed potential for qualitative social improvement, but the majority is incapable of thinking dialectically (or two-dimensionally) to perceive it. That is, they are unable to perceive the intrinsic contradictions in the existing system, or contrast what is with an imaginary future based on resolving these contradictions. For our purposes, it is important how Marcuse formulates this potential specifically, because it provides an oppositional narrative that can counter dominant thinking. In particular, Marcuse centres on possibilities of reducing toil, deprivation and scarcity, against ideas that such sacrifices are necessary to repress 'anti-social instincts', or maintain the material standards of the existing order. Here, we question Marcuse's theory of instincts, because he does not clearly demonstrate that more socialising instincts can be liberated while controlling aggression and selfishness, but argue that the potentials he identifies in modern production suggest clear avenues for social improvement for the majority, and identify a class divide (between those who benefit most from current conditions, and those who do not). However, in Marcuse's theory, the shift in consciousness required to recognise the need for social change can only emerge as an effect of tendencies within human nature and capitalist development, rather than conscious political interventions. As such, the theories he develops to accentuate such tendencies reduce the role of active agency in social change. In our view, conversely, the possibility of reducing repression is not purely dependent on particular conditions, as the needs Marcuse identifies can be part of a political message that counters dominant thinking.

The split between what is and what could be, for Marcuse, can be seen in terms of true and false needs. The latter are demands for excess productivity and consumerism that ensure dominance, self-repression and conformism, as opposed to critical self-determination. The truth

is then simply that these demands are unnecessary, and specifically employed towards maintaining the dominance of particular forces in the existing order. Marcuse explains that continuing deprivation, as well as repressive labour and environmental destruction, are only needed to maintain the *established* hierarchical dominance, not civilisation as such. Thus, if in the past 'the rationality of the repression organized in the capitalist mode of production was obvious', it is now 'losing its rationality'.<sup>21</sup> In that sense, Marcuse explains, 'The distinction between true and false consciousness, real and immediate interest still is meaningful. But this distinction itself must be validated.'<sup>22</sup> That is, true needs cannot be imposed, but are something individuals must comprehend by recognising their exploitation and the potentials it obscures.

Marcuse also links these potentials to a critique of the Freudian theory of drives. That is, where Freud sees that civilisation as *such* entails both physical and psychological repression (of the 'pleasure principle' into the 'reality principle' of delayed gratification and sacrifice), Marcuse sees this situation as historically conditioned, and based on a false assumption of inevitable scarcity in human society. The consequent primary focus on increased productivity, which Marcuse calls the 'performance principle', that may have been necessary historically in most social formations, should therefore not be taken for granted.<sup>23</sup> Marcuse notes how production and distribution methods have advanced to the point that they could make scarcity obsolete, and a non-repressive reality principle could emerge that revolved around 'rational exercise in authority [...] derived from knowledge and confined [to the administration of functions and arrangements necessary for the advancement of the whole]'.<sup>24</sup> The performance principle then embodies 'surplus-repression', because it demands sacrifice beyond what civilisation requires.

The conclusion Marcuse draws is that civilizational needs can even be compatible with certain 'instincts', which he draws from Freud's notion of Eros. According to Marcuse, the original nature of Eros is ascribed by Freud both an 'amoral and asocial, even anti-moral and anti-social' force of individual gratification, and a drive towards social bonds, or 'an erotic impulse to

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<sup>21</sup> *CRR*, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> *ODM*, p. xiii.

<sup>23</sup> Marcuse states that rejection of the performance principle strikes not only at capitalism but 'at any society which maintains the subjection of man to the instruments of his labor' (Marcuse, 'A Revolution in Values', in *Towards a Critical Theory*, pp. 193-201 (p. 197)).

<sup>24</sup> *EC*, p. 33.

civilization'.<sup>25</sup> This duality, for Marcuse, contradicts Freud's insistence that civilisation must repress instinctual satisfaction, because social bonding *in* civilisation can also meet instinctual demands. He states that Freud's analysis of the relationship between instinct and work contains the insupportable assumptions 'that free libidinal relations are essentially antagonistic to work relations, that energy has to be withdrawn from the former in order to institute the latter, that only the absence of full gratification sustains the societal organization of work'.<sup>26</sup> Instead, Marcuse says, the bonding instinct could harmonise with civilisation to eliminate surplus-repression, reducing scarcity, struggle and domination and leading to 'a non-repressive reality principle' with qualitatively different work relations. He argues that work can take the form of play if its 'purpose' is redirected towards gratification of (socialising) Eros. Such work would be done simply because it suited 'the free play of human abilities', fulfilling needs through activities that would shape society according to self-determined desires.<sup>27</sup> Marcuse calls this potential 'non-repressive sublimation', in contrast to the traditional *repressive* sublimation of performance, and the repressive *desublimation* of consumerism, which provides a narrow form of gratification that augments performance. The point is not that non-repressive sublimation merely obeys the pleasure principle, but that it combines social instinct with conscious rationality. As such, Marcuse does not expect it to create perfect social harmony, but a society in which 'conflicts would themselves have libidinal value', and 'be permeated with the rationality of gratification'.<sup>28</sup>

Marcuse's attempts to establish potentials for an alternative society are more convincing when he focuses on material factors than on human nature and instinct. On one hand, there is a clear logic that, since survival is easier in some locations and historical periods than others, if social toil and sacrifice is not reduced under more favourable circumstances, it is repurposed towards maintaining specific relations of domination. On the other, in terms of Eros, scarcity and repression are not only matters of material resources, ideological maturity and technological development. Rather, the duality in Eros signifies an internal contradiction that makes scarcity and repression inevitable, *because* it produces social and anti-social desires. That is, even if civilisation could satisfy the social aspect of Eros, it would repress the individual side, which is

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<sup>25</sup> Marcuse, 'Freedom and Freud's Theory of Instincts', in *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*, trans. by Shapiro and Shierry M. Weber (London: Allen Lane, 1970), pp. 1-27 (p. 19).

<sup>26</sup> *EC*, p. 140.

<sup>27</sup> Marcuse, 'Progress and Freud's Theory of Instincts', in *Five Lectures*, pp. 28-43 (p. 41).

<sup>28</sup> *EC*, p. 208.

psychological scarcity.<sup>29</sup> Marcuse in fact notes that 'jealousy, unhappy love, and violence [...] express the contradiction inherent in the libido between ubiquity and exclusiveness, between fulfillment in variation or change and fulfillment in constancy'.<sup>30</sup> But effectively, as Alway puts it, he 'recognizes the contradictory tendencies in Freud's theory of sexuality but chooses to stress its social, as opposed to the individualistic, elements'.<sup>31</sup> Non-repressive sublimation then depends on this privileging of one side of Eros over the other, or an understanding that satisfying one aspect is sufficiently fulfilling. Yet, as Žižek's Lacanian theory will show, it is more that necessarily partial gratification always leaves a surplus of dissatisfaction, regardless of which 'instinct' it serves.

This notion of fulfilment also contrasts with the idea of reducing surplus-repression relating to specific historical conditions. Here, Marcuse acknowledges that some repression is inevitable, because 'there can be no such thing as a total abolition of alienation', which indicates 'the inexorable struggle of man with nature confronting the human subject and limiting its freedom no matter in what form of society'.<sup>32</sup> But then, if the subject is always alienated, either not all activity can be socialising, or the content of certain labour remains ungratifying regardless of purpose. As Alford explains, all work curtails freedom to some extent, simply because it represses instant gratification and 'imposes objective demands upon individuals'.<sup>33</sup> It thus seems that, while *surplus*-repression may be eradicated through social restructuring, Freud's assumption stands that absence of *full gratification* is required to sustain the societal organisation of work. It is then a question of the extent to which existing social conditions allow for eradication of scarcity and toil, and Marcuse does not provide specifics here, such as quantifying global productivity and automated labour.<sup>34</sup> Rather, in one instance he explains that elimination of profitable waste is

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<sup>29</sup> In particular, the Oedipus complex represents scarcity of love, as desire for the mother is denied by the father. See C. Fred Alford, 'Marx, Marcuse and Psychoanalysis: Do They Still Fit after All These Years?', in *Marcuse: From the New Left to the Next Left*, ed. by John Bokina and Timothy J. Lukes (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), pp. 131-146 (pp. 135-136).

<sup>30</sup> Marcuse, 'The Failure of the New Left?', in *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse Volume Three*, ed. by Kellner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 183-191 (p. 186).

<sup>31</sup> Joan Alway, *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities: Conceptions of Emancipatory Politics in the Works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), p. 77.

<sup>32</sup> Marcuse, 'Revolution in Values', p. 197.

<sup>33</sup> Alford, *Science and the Revenge of Nature: Marcuse and Habermas* (Gainesville, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1985), p. 43.

<sup>34</sup> Apparently, however, Marcuse's university courses concentrated more on case studies and economic trends than his publications. See Barry Katz, *Herbert Marcuse and the Art of Liberation: an Intellectual Biography* (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 168-169.

sufficient for a universally high living standard that 'does not mean return to healthy and robust poverty',<sup>35</sup> and elsewhere says that material and mental resources 'are still so limited that there must be a vastly lower standard of living if social productivity were directed toward the universal gratification of individual needs'.<sup>36</sup> In any case, the repurposing of work as play is only a partial potential.

In our understanding, surplus-repression remains an important concept for considering change, if perceived as the form of exploitation in any social order. Yet Marcuse is not always clear on this point, such as when he asks 'whether a state of civilization can be reasonably envisaged in which human needs are fulfilled in such a manner and to such an extent that surplus-repression can be eliminated'.<sup>37</sup> That is, it is *always* possible to envisage such a civilisation, or question social needs and the physical and psychological repression that reproduces them, because *surplus*-repression is by definition eliminable. Marcuse explains that oppression in the past may have been necessary 'to win the struggle against economic lack, to hasten the mobilization of the workforce and the domination of nature'.<sup>38</sup> But that repression still involved a surplus where one group coerced another into labour and benefitted disproportionately from it, as 'the distinct modes of scarcity that prevailed at different points in the history of civilization have neither been distributed collectively nor organized to respond to individual needs'.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere, Marcuse implies as much as he explains that terrible living conditions in the industrial revolution were no less irrational due to the comparatively low level of technical productivity, because 'a reduction of toil and suffering [...] was a real possibility'.<sup>40</sup> Also, reducing scarcity is a matter of ideological 'maturity', for Marcuse, and the extent to which transcendent consciousness is suppressed. Nevertheless, any notion of self-determination is a response to specific historical conditions, so self-determination is not a fixed value that requires a certain level of maturity to realise, but an evolving concept defined against particular forms of surplus-repression.

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<sup>35</sup> ODM, p. 242.

<sup>36</sup> EC, p. 137.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>38</sup> Marcuse, 'Failure of New Left', p. 188.

<sup>39</sup> B. N. Ray, *Critical Theory: The Marx-Marcuse Encounter* (Delhi: Ajanta, 1998), p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> Marcuse, 'The Problem of Social Change in the Technological Society', in *Towards a Critical Theory*, pp. 35-57 (p. 40).

The distinction between true and false social needs, and the notion of surplus-repression, thus reveal the grounds of class struggle around which an oppositional ideology may form. However, because Marcuse sees ideology in terms of automatic practices, he does not consider how questions of true needs may develop between systemic contradictions and their rationalisation, and he instead focuses on external or trans-historical influences on subjectivity. His theory of Eros equates to a universal concept of human nature, in which 'prior to all ethical behaviour in accordance with specific social standards [...] morality is a "disposition" of the organism'.<sup>41</sup> He tries to avoid essentialism by explaining that this 'moral foundation' and 'biology' are themselves historical, because 'biological' needs include cultural needs that 'sink down' to become second nature. But, in that case, he cannot know that certain dispositions of the organism existed 'prior to all ethical behaviour'. Ultimately, the concept of socialising Eros appears to be an attempt to locate a basis for social change in the absence of any existing mass movement that can challenge capitalist relations,<sup>42</sup> which leaves him only with 'hope for the rebirth of rebellious subjectivity from a nature which is older than, and arises from below the level of, individuation and rationality'.<sup>43</sup> Our response is to focus on the possibility of influencing one-dimensional thinking through alternative forms of consciousness, using the evolving dialectical potential of true needs as a central argument.<sup>44</sup>

### iii) Realising Potentials

In accordance with his theory of ideology, many of the means Marcuse considers for realising political change assume it is impossible to confront ideological consciousness. However, we maintain that their plausibility still often relies on communication with one-dimensional thinking, which suggests we can also consider more direct forms of opposition. Besides his concept of Eros and human nature, the progressive possibilities Marcuse identifies tend towards one of two

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<sup>41</sup> *EL*, p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> Alford in: Andrew Feenberg and others, 'Commentaries on Marcuse and Ecology', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 3 (1992), 38-48 (p. 47).

<sup>43</sup> Habermas, 'Psychic Thermidor and the Rebirth of Rebellious Subjectivity', *Marcuse: Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia*, ed. by Robert Pippin, Andrew Feenberg and Charles P. Weibel (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), pp. 3-12 (p. 9).

<sup>44</sup> As Kellner says, 'a Marcusean conception of subjectivity can be produced without dependence on [...] the somewhat biologicistic notion of Eros that Marcuse draws from Freud' (Kellner, 'Marcuse and the Quest for Radical Subjectivity', in *Herbert Marcuse: A Critical Reader*, ed. by John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), pp. 81-99 (p. 96)).

categories: either a marginal domain of 'autonomous' production whose cultural expressions may influence the unconscious, or internal contradictions and developments in the mode of production itself. Here, we examine Marcuse's theory of cultural memory, which invigorates a sense of loss in the subject, and that of scientific and technological rationality, whose logics render toil and scarcity increasingly redundant. In our understanding, it seems that, in the case of cultural memory, only consciousness that already has some appreciation of potentials beyond what exists appear susceptible to unconscious forms. While with science, regardless of the extent of development, the forces of dominance do not give way to potentials for repurposing until there is a mass conscious challenge to their authority.

In a way that connects to his interpretation of Eros and historical struggle, Marcuse theorises that imagination and shared memory might motivate collective desires and reveal the falseness of existing social relations. This process involves a historical view which shows that any society emerges from particular economic and political forces overcoming a prior system, indicating that any society can also be superseded. For Marcuse, this view reveals the historical failure to transcend instinctual repression due to scarcity and immaturity, but also implies that, in all past revolutions, there was 'a historical moment when the struggle against domination might have been victorious',<sup>45</sup> and that seed of possibility can inspire more developed and plausible attempts today.<sup>46</sup> The question is then how subjects might 'remember' historical potentials when the current social formation militates against dialectical thinking. Marcuse proposes a socio-historical memory, incorporating Freud's stages of psychological development and concept of archaic heritage, or phylogenetic cultural inheritance, to consider the stimulation of revolutionary consciousness through historical recollection. He explains that we have an unconscious 'memory' of past gratification which 'generates the wish that the paradise be re-created on the basis of the achievements of civilization', but the 'truth value' of this memory is restrained by the performance principle. As such, the dissolution of the performance principle and surplus-

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<sup>45</sup> *EC*, p. 82.

<sup>46</sup> Marcuse's theory is not, however, one of messianic redemption, as in Benjamin's concept of history (see Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp.389-400). He states that, 'even the ultimate advent of freedom cannot redeem those who died in pain' (*EC*, p. 216).

repression should free 'the forbidden images and impulses of childhood', reacting against dominant reason and assuming 'a progressive function' through new critical standards.<sup>47</sup>

The issue with this theory, as with Eros, is that it takes a *historical* potential and interprets it in terms of a pre-civilizational state. Marcuse imagines a pre-existing condition of human gratification that can be 'realised' in certain conditions, which happens to be the current point of civilizational maturity. In doing so, he conflates *individual* pre-Oedipal memory with an *imaginary* memory of pre-civilizational fulfilment, which 'stresses the liberating potentialities of memory and recollection of pleasurable or euphoric experiences rather than the unpleasant or traumatic experiences stressed by Freud'.<sup>48</sup> On one hand, the actual pre-Oedipal experience is not some idyllic paradise, but a state of internal conflict that itself denies gratification. To put it in Žižek's Lacanian terms, the sense of a 'loss' of pre-subjective completeness is the way subjects represent to themselves the intrinsic 'lack' of subjectivity itself, because it is always only *partially* fulfilling. On the other hand, civilizational memory either recalls a purely imaginary state of harmony, or actual ambiguous potentials in human history, in which, as Bronner says, 'emancipatory moments of the past cannot simply reveal themselves since they will necessarily remain intertwined with historically regressive elements'.<sup>49</sup> This latter sense then requires certain ideological criteria to distinguish between what is emancipatory in history, and what is not.

Marcuse's theory is then more plausible when he focuses on the successes and failures of history, rather than any pre-civilizational or pre-Oedipal ideal. He later explains that 'recollection [...] is not remembrance of a Golden Past (which never existed)', but a process of 'reassembling the bits and fragments which can be found in the distorted humanity and distorted nature'.<sup>50</sup> In this case, 'pre-civilizational' memory becomes merely the truth that *something* is repressed in existing civilisation, which can only be perceived through historically constituted alternative desires and acts. As Jay explains, Marcuse realises here that 'what must be remembered are the actual historical experiences and desires of our ancestors, not some imagined prehistorical era of perfect bliss'.<sup>51</sup> In that sense, it does not matter that emancipatory

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse*, p. 159.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Eric Bronner, 'Between Art and Utopia: Rediscovering the Aesthetic Theory of Herbert Marcuse', in *Critical Theory and the Promise*, pp. 107-140 (p. 134).

<sup>50</sup> *CRR*, p. 70.

<sup>51</sup> Martin Jay, 'Reflections on Marcuse's Theory of Remembrance', in *Critical Theory and the Promise*, pp. 29-44 (p. 38).

moments intertwine with regression, because even terror and destruction demonstrate the difference between reality and potential. This historicising memory recalls surplus-repression, freedoms gained and moments of loss, which may combine with utopian ideas to facilitate political imagination.<sup>52</sup>

In taking this direction, however, the possibility of changing individuals' perspectives appears to rely on challenging their conscious knowledge and conceptions of history. In that sense, pre-civilizational memory makes more sense for Marcuse's theory, because it aims to avoid such conclusions, and instead attempts to develop utopian ideals through unconscious effects. That is, for Marcuse, historical memory can be provoked through means that both escape repression and communicate outside reified language. He finds the solution in 'phantasy', which 'preserves the archetypes of the genus, the perpetual but repressed ideas of the collective and individual memory, the tabooed images of freedom'.<sup>53</sup> Under the performance principle, phantasy is deemed useless but is tolerated within a marginalised realm, where desires can be indulged without encroaching on productivity. Marcuse emphasises that phantasy also represents an eternal reminder of the pleasure principle, or excess of the social order, which constantly nags at reality with what is repressed. This nurturing of phantasy must then for Marcuse involve an *autonomous* cultural catalyst, because commodified culture is normalising in a way that excludes phantasy. The problem here is that the utopian potential of autonomous art is simply unrecognisable to the one-dimensional thinking of the majority, even if they are exposed to it. As such, it still appears that some conscious rationalisation within one-dimensional thinking is a pre-requisite for art to have the effect Marcuse desires (we return to this point in Section IV).

The other major potential for change Marcuse imagines involves developments in internal systemic logic, exemplified in his theory of science and technology. As we have seen, for Marcuse, productivity as an end in itself based on manufactured demand means that society functions according to a range of unnecessary industries and labour. He then argues that, under this logic, science and technology tend towards wasteful and destructive goals, when instead they could be mobilised towards reducing alienation. Marcuse recognises that more advanced technology has historically led to greater destruction, but compares the current reality of technological use to its potential to be repurposed towards general human need. He explains that

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>53</sup> EC, pp. 127-128.

this potential is inherent in technological advancement, because when, in 'established societies', 'all socially necessary but individually repressive labour' is mechanised, the 'scientific rationality' reaches a limit in its aims of quantitative progression.<sup>54</sup> There is thus a point at which the only further advancement is change in the rationality itself, because productivity can only improve qualitatively. Therefore, Marcuse states, 'the completion of the technological reality would be not only the prerequisite, but also the rationale for *transcending* the technological reality'.<sup>55</sup>

The value of Marcuse's theory here is the implication that scientific rationality is not inherently destructive in its instrumentality, and is capable of transcendence. The point is neither that it functions independently of control by particular groups and industries and contains a dominating rationality within itself,<sup>56</sup> nor that it is simply subordinate to powerful interests in society which determine the aims of technological development, production and distribution.<sup>57</sup> Rather, although the operational logic of science is what 'experiences, comprehends, and shapes the world in terms of calculable, predictable relationships among exactly identifiable units', such science is also 'a specific, socio-historical project'.<sup>58</sup> Scientific rationality is 'neutral', but precisely *in* its neutrality, it cannot refuse collaboration with destructive forces, and 'becomes susceptible and subject to the objectives which predominate in the society in which science develops'.<sup>59</sup> Or, as Feenberg explains, 'formally neutral' scientific rationality is exploited by particular interests, *and* itself has an inherent bias, because its pure instrumentalism suits the technical aim of productivity, so Marcuse identifies 'the intrinsic bias in technical reason itself insofar as it emerges from the conditions and requirements of class society in general'.<sup>60</sup> As such, although productivity can be the primary aim of scientific rationality, it is not a universal feature of science.<sup>61</sup> Theoretically, if productivity for its own sake was replaced by alternative social goals, under a

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<sup>54</sup> ODM, p. 230.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>56</sup> Claus Offe, 'Technology and One-Dimensionality: A Version of the Technocracy Thesis?', trans. by Anne-Marie Feenberg, in *Critical Theory and the Promise*, pp. 215-224 (p. 216).

<sup>57</sup> Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse*, p. 266.

<sup>58</sup> ODM, p. 164.

<sup>59</sup> Marcuse, 'Remarks on a Redefinition of Culture', *Daedalus*, 94 (1965), 190-207 (pp. 202-203).

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Feenberg, 'The Bias of Technology', in *Critical Theory and the Promise*, pp. 225-256 (p. 242).

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Feenberg, 'The Critique of Technology: From Dystopia to Interaction', in *From New Left to Next Left*, pp. 208-226 (p. 213).

different rationality, science could adapt to new aims and practices. As Marcuse states, 'pure objectivity reveals itself as *object for a subjectivity* which provides the Telos, the ends'.<sup>62</sup>

For Marcuse, therefore, since science tends towards certain politics in its neutrality, it should be explicitly politicised towards desirable aims. Feenberg argues that this suggestion implies political control over science and a totalitarian turn, and that it should be 'scientists' own changing categories and perceptions in a radically new social environment', that spontaneously change scientific purpose.<sup>63</sup> Yet it seems to us, as Marcuse says, that if technical neutrality and operationalism cannot resist destructive efficiency, their liberation requires conscious redirection. Also, science cannot be removed from political contexts, so any attempt to avoid the politicisation of science would presume an ideological function that masks alternative potentialities.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Marcuse does not suggest direct political control over science, rather that science would find itself in 'an essentially different experimental context'<sup>65</sup> of meeting more self-determined social demands, which presupposes a political shift that influences scientific perceptions. The question then is whether, as Habermas argues, science is still an inherently instrumental approach to goals, so that Marcuse can only aim at political forms of technological revolution, in which 'the structure of scientific technical progress would be conserved, and only the governing values would be changed'.<sup>66</sup> If so, scientific potential would be the extent to which communicative reason could control instrumental rationality. Even in these terms, there remains a potential to make science less destructive in different social conditions, but it is also possible that Habermas' position presumes too much in this respect, and a science could emerge which considered waste and environmental destruction as part of its calculations.<sup>67</sup> As Weber Nichol森 notes, Marcuse's theory implies that 'a different attitude toward nature in the broadest sense could result from as well as facilitate different subjective experiences, which could in turn suggest

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<sup>62</sup> ODM, p. 168.

<sup>63</sup> Andrew Feenberg, 'Bias of Technology', p. 251.

<sup>64</sup> Terrell Carver, 'Marcuse and Analytical Marxism', in *From New Left to Next Left*, pp. 73-85 (p. 83).

<sup>65</sup> ODM, pp. 166-167.

<sup>66</sup> Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, trans. by Shapiro (London: Heinemann Educational, 1971), pp. 88-89.

<sup>67</sup> Alford, *Science and the Revenge of Nature*, p. 152.

different investigative methods and raise different questions for theorizing and for empirical examination'.<sup>68</sup>

Despite this potential, our issue with the development of scientific rationality is that Marcuse ties it to a specific point of technological advancement, rather than conscious recognition. To begin with, if some 'completion' point is the condition for science to transcend itself, it is *inherently* incapable of being repurposed up to that point. As Alford explains, since scarcity signifies humanity's incomplete dominance over nature, the 'new science' only emerges from 'the complete subordination of nature to human purposes', and Marcuse's position 'grants the aura of reconciliation with nature to what is actually projected to be humanity's final victory over it'.<sup>69</sup> As such, 'completion of the technological rationality' is incompatible with aims towards a 'more peaceful, joyful struggle with the inexorable resistance of society and nature'.<sup>70</sup> Elsewhere, Marcuse qualifies his idea by describing 'optimum conditions' in which 'the quantum of instinctual energy still to be diverted into necessary labor [...] would be so small that a large area of repressive constraints and modifications [...] would collapse'.<sup>71</sup> In this case, however, with no specific completion point, these tendencies never simply overcome the dominant use of science and technology because, as Marcuse tells us, elite interests falsely maintain current needs and obscure their irrationality. Marcuse also states that the use of science and technology for dominative ends 'becomes irrational when the success of these efforts opens new dimensions of human realization',<sup>72</sup> but in that sense science and technology *always* open new dimensions of human realisation, and could *always* be directed towards different goals. The 'optimum conditions' are then not a point at which technological advancement changes social aims,<sup>73</sup> but that at which a mass *consciousness* recognises potentials in whatever technology exists.

In effect, because Marcuse does not treat conscious rationalisation as significant, the potential in scientific rationality is disconnected from consciousness. Against this idea, we argue that there are ways in which the purpose of science can be questioned, and shifted ideologically, based on gradual challenges to dominant ideas. As Feenberg suggests, a technological

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<sup>68</sup> Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 'The Persistence of Passionate Subjectivity: Eros and Other in Marcuse, by Way of Adorno', in *From New Left to Next Left*, pp. 149-169 (p. 163).

<sup>69</sup> Alford, *Science and the Revenge of Nature*, p. 64.

<sup>70</sup> *CRR*, p. 71.

<sup>71</sup> *EC*, p. 139.

<sup>72</sup> *ODM*, p. 17.

<sup>73</sup> The issue with such an idea is that it implies we simply wait for automation to overcome capitalist relations of production. See Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, p. 570.

revolution must 'employ the existing scientific-technical rationality *transitionally* while awaiting a new cognitive dispensation'.<sup>74</sup> He explains the possibility of 'multiplying the contexts and technical systems that interact in any given application to take into account more and more of the essential features of the object'.<sup>75</sup> For us, this idea suggests that it is important to focus on harms caused by existing scientific development and the politics it supports, as well as considering uses of technology that exceed its prescribed purpose.<sup>76</sup> As with the question of true needs and the aim of remembering historical potentials, the possibilities of science and technology are a strong indication that we can imagine alternative social forms, but only to the extent that they can engage with consciousness, which means finding ways to communicate with one-dimensional ideologies.

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<sup>74</sup> Andrew Feenberg, 'Bias of Technology', p. 252.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>76</sup> At one point, Marcuse recognises such attempts, stating that the ecology movement 'may well become part of a radical theory and practice if it becomes [...] directed toward the abolition of the very institutions which perpetuate the capitalist environment' (Marcuse, 'Cultural Revolution', in *Towards a Critical Theory*, pp. 121-162 (pp. 156-157)).

### III. Internalisation

#### i) Ego Weakness

Having established this need for an oppositional politics to directly challenge forms of affirmative consciousness, we must define the contents of such positions. On one hand, Marcuse's notion of one-dimensionality does not obviously lend itself to identifying different rationalisations, because he does not closely examine people's beliefs, moral investments, and awareness of systemic contradictions. Notions such as that of 'ego weakness', which we highlight here, in fact reinforce the idea that individuals simply absorb dominant social influences. On the other, we can still draw certain potentials from which to develop our ideology theory from his work. In particular, Marcuse adapts his ideas to the different historical conditions he experiences, or the changing quantity and quality of alternative thinking apparent in society, and these theoretical shifts effectively point to distinct forms of consciousness. These variations, which we begin by examining in terms of different attitudes to employment, can then be seen as ideological beliefs with conditional rationalisations, with which it may be possible to engage. In interpreting Marcuse's theory in this way, these rationalisations contrast with the strict one-dimensionality defined by ego weakness, and suggest that people relate to social demands with varying degrees of commitment.

Marcuse explains that today's apparatus of production and consumption undermines the centrality of the family, and that despite the liberation associated with escaping rigid patriarchy, this process weakens individual autonomy because the ego does not properly develop. In the past, for Marcuse, the authority of the family in an individual's life meant a struggle for identity, particularly against the father, and a clear private sphere. Conflict with parents strengthened the ego against external influences, but now individuals cannot resist homogenised social imperatives.<sup>77</sup> As such, outside sources, such as 'gangs, radio and television set the pattern for conformity and rebellion', and failure to adhere to pressure from peers and mass media makes social success problematic.<sup>78</sup> The point here is thus *not* that 'Marcuse believed that the decline of the family was weakening the link between individuals and the performance principle'.<sup>79</sup> Rather, the father 'yields [his] function to younger father figures outside the family, [...] who all represent

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<sup>77</sup> Marcuse, 'The Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of Man', in *Five Lectures*, pp. 44-61 (p. 50).

<sup>78</sup> *EC*, p. 88.

<sup>79</sup> Vincent Geoghegan, *Reason and Eros: The Social Theory of Herbert Marcuse* (London: Pluto Press, 1981), p. 59.

the reality principle far better and far more effectively than the father did'.<sup>80</sup> The weakened ego is *more directly* influenced by the performance principle, through various institutional demands.

The important implications, from our perspective, are that if this ego weakness is a generalised condition, it completely undercuts conscious ideological rationalisation. It represents a mass psychology lacking internal conflict, which means, as Marcuse says, 'the interactions between ego, superego, and id congeal into automatic reactions' until consciousness is 'reduced to the task of regulating the coordination of the individual with the whole'.<sup>81</sup> This notion is not compatible with our theory of ideology, which implies a certain ego that only follows dominant social influences because it has justifications for doing so. These justifications are also influenced by social conditions, but because individuals effectively take ownership of them, they function as the conditions of their behaviour. To demonstrate this point, we can identify signs that individuals consciously process social demands in a way that is significant to their conformist actions, and we infer these signs from Marcuse's work.

One example of note is the contrasting attitudes to labour Marcuse describes in different texts. In *ODM*, he explains how workers have integrated their own interests with those of their employers, caring about the fortunes of the company, or even the economy as a whole, and investing in the idea of working harder to maintain overall growth.<sup>82</sup> Later, in *CRR*, he emphasises instead that indifference is rife among workers, explaining that it matters very little if the work force are committed, because 'a whole sector of the economy (agriculture) and a large sector of industry depend on government subsidies, [so] bankruptcy is no longer a threat'.<sup>83</sup> Around the same time he also identifies 'a general disintegration of worker morale' and that 'the overall breakdown of confidence in the priorities and hierarchies set by capitalism is apparent'.<sup>84</sup> Rather than taking an interest in the success of the business or economy as a direct reason for productivity, workers are interested purely in earning their living, and productivity is an indirect result.

The important point here is that, while in both these cases individuals reproduce relations of dominance and the performance principle, and do not obviously contemplate alternative

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<sup>80</sup> Marcuse, 'The Containment of Social Change in Industrial Society', in *Towards a Critical Theory*, pp. 81-93 (p. 89).

<sup>81</sup> *EC*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>82</sup> *ODM*, p. 30.

<sup>83</sup> *CRR*, p. 22.

<sup>84</sup> Marcuse, 'Failure of New Left', p. 187.

potentials, their rationalisations are different. The first example represents a moral justification of productivity, labour and sacrifice as a social good, and suggests that economic growth relies on such commitment. In the second example, the performance principle is reduced to a basic exchange — labour for money — with no real belief in productivity as an end. The first group's commitment is also for personal gain, in that they may work harder simply because it is the most profitable course of action, but the motivation is not constant between both groups. For example, it can be asked why one group believes in more aspirational needs, while the other is satisfied with less. Or, the less committed perspective could indicate possibilities such as that individuals feel they have little choice but to follow social demands, because alternative options appear to be lacking, or too risky to realise.

We can also assume that these varied forms of conscious rationalisation exist simultaneously, rather than separately relating to specific economic circumstances. That is, some people continue to believe in the morality of productivity even when the economy is weaker, while some never did, and as such all individuals encounter contrasting ideas that may force them to consider their justifications. In Marcuse's concept of ego weakness, to the extent such justification exists it is superfluous, as it merely coordinates the automatic absorption of social goals that functions at a deeper level. Yet this idea suggests that the various external influences on the individual are uniform to begin with. Conversely, we contend that because these influences include not only gangs, radio and television, but also employers, economists and the state (among others), there is always some inconsistency of demands which means individuals must prioritise certain goals over others. Thus, the dominant social expectations of productivity and consumerism are justified through different conditions, which can be contradicted by alternative knowledge and experience. In particular, the way that certain rationalisations seem to internalise social demands more indirectly, as in the second example of workers attitudes, suggests that their connection to these goals is less strong, and ego weakness is less total and less homogenous than Marcuse claims.

The implication of this point is that affirmative behaviour, such as labour, may represent a loose connection to affirmative belief in some instances, and does not clearly indicate that social demands have been absorbed. For example, some work within capitalist relations may already fulfil Marcuse's definition of 'play', in that it is fulfilling and helps social bonding. Marcuse says

that pleasure taken from alienated labour 'has nothing to do with primary instinctual gratification',<sup>85</sup> but such a statement seems to undermine aspects of various forms of work, including his own. As Hyman asks, 'Are we to understand his *oeuvre* as a manifestation of repressive sublimation?' Or, if not, 'How is it, then, that non-repressive sublimation can exist under the rule of the reality principle?'<sup>86</sup> Effectively, Marcuse's work was wage labour facilitated by authoritative institutions that also caused friction in the system, suggesting that the way individuals approach their labour is not a matter of ego-free conformism. This notion may then also be relevant to other forms of work that simultaneously contribute to systemic reproduction and undermine identity thinking. At one point, Marcuse even sees some modern forms of productivity as potentials in themselves, in that they 'transform the work process into a technical process in which the human agent of production plays increasingly the role of a supervisor, inventor and experimenter'. In such cases, 'the work process itself [...] becomes, in its rationality, subject to the free play of the mind'.<sup>87</sup> In short, participation and absorption in the process of production does not sufficiently explain affirmative ideology, and we can consider the limits of the different beliefs involved, and the levels of commitment they represent.

### ii) Language and Media

If people have conditional rationalisations of social aims, it seems that maintaining the social order relies partly on how convincingly dominant narratives make sense of existing conditions. However, in Marcuse's terms, it is more that the propagation of such narratives through mass media completely defines the limits of thought, and individuals do not care about their actual content. Against this idea, we argue that aspects of Marcuse's work also indicate various conscious justifications of social conditions, in particular economic disparity, and that narrative content remains relevant. On one hand, even where people recognise partiality and inconsistency in media coverage, it suggests a conscious processing of these ideas and a form of rationalisation. On the other, the existence of different narratives suggests a variety of vocabularies, which cannot be entirely compatible with each other or allow concepts to be

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<sup>85</sup> *EC*, p. 201.

<sup>86</sup> Edward Hyman, 'Eros and Freedom: The Critical Psychology of Herbert Marcuse', in *Critical Theory and the Promise*, pp. 143-166 (p. 161).

<sup>87</sup> Marcuse, 'The Realm of Freedom and the Realm of Necessity: A Reconsideration', *Praxis*, 5 (1969), 20-25 (p. 23).

reduced to singular interpretations. It is then a question of how certain narratives become dominant in commodified media, which we maintain is not merely a matter of media forms, but one of conscious propaganda and struggle over media language that suggests its content is an important part of social reproduction.

For Marcuse, the way particular representations assume universal status in mass communications today is a result of its capitalist structure. He explains that there are no formal blocks on content, as advanced industrial society is not actually fascist,<sup>88</sup> but the pluralist framework subsumes different ideas under dominant interpretations, creating an *illusion* of freedom. In this way, contrast between ideas is cancelled out in their 'higher unification', which promotes pluralist integration.<sup>89</sup> As with scientific rationality, the logic of neutrality puts minority ideas at a disadvantage, so although any oppositional group is formally 'free to deliberate and discuss, to speak and to assemble', it is 'left harmless and helpless in the face of the overwhelming majority, which militates against qualitative social change'.<sup>90</sup> Against dominant ideas, non-conformist thought either seems incomprehensible or is compromised as it is interpreted and evaluated according to a reduced 'public language'.<sup>91</sup> Opposing ideas are incorporated into that which they oppose (a demand for peace is countered by the idea that the war aims to create peace), and tolerance is merely this incorporation.

Furthermore, Marcuse claims, there is a political bias inherent to the forms of mass media. In particular, an emotional distance is reinforced through the formatting and presentational style of programmes and publications, which undercuts the gravity of certain events. On one hand, newspapers break information into small pieces, meaning 'vital information' is 'interspersed between extraneous material, irrelevant items, [or relegated] to an obscure place',<sup>92</sup> while advertisements are juxtaposed against horrific news, or interrupt serious broadcasts. On the other, a simple consistency of tone, such as a news reader 'neutrally' announcing torture and murder in the same manner as stock market fluctuations or the weather, drains any anger or accusatory context from the former. In this way, Marcuse explains, even state brutality is no longer praised as heroic, but reduced 'to the level of natural events and

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<sup>88</sup> *CRR*, p. 24.

<sup>89</sup> *ODM*, p. 51.

<sup>90</sup> *RT*, p. 108.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

contingencies of daily life'.<sup>93</sup> The idea of balance then appears absurd, because it effectively tolerates support for destruction by granting it the same validity as its criticism. The way to counter such repressive tolerance, therefore, would be through politicisation that takes a more emotional stance and maintains connective links between individual 'stories'.

Marcuse's observations suggest deep systemic restrictions of form and content in media language, and extreme consequences. He explains that, 'the total mobilization of all media for the defense of the established reality has coordinated the means of expression to the point where communication of transcending contents becomes technically impossible'.<sup>94</sup> In this way, the terms available to the majority actually cannot express dissatisfaction with the social order as such, and people cannot avoid speaking 'the language of their masters, benefactors, advertisers', which 'merges with what they really think and see and feel'.<sup>95</sup> Marcuse is aware that concepts are never fully reduced to a single meaning, and that reification remains an illusion which obscures actual social contradictions. He also continues to note the existence of two-dimensional thinking, especially in the realm of philosophy, in which concepts still in some way 'transcend their particular realizations as something that is to be surpassed, overcome'.<sup>96</sup> Yet, he says, even though 'ordinary language still is haunted by the big words of higher culture', and concepts such as rights and democracy, in commercialised consumption and production people 'speak a different language, and for the time being they seem to have the last word'.<sup>97</sup> As such, when individuals enter mass media zones, their words are robbed of all depth.

Conversely, other points Marcuse makes render these observations less clear, and even suggest that people consciously articulate different ideas and interpretations. For example, he states, 'It seems unwarranted to assume that the recipients [of dominant language] believe, or are made to believe, what they are being told.' Instead, 'people don't believe it, or don't care, and yet act accordingly'.<sup>98</sup> For us, this lack of belief requires some alternative notion of what is true, and the ability to contrast the falseness of a narrative against this notion. If people do not believe dominant narratives, they believe something else. Furthermore, 'not believing' and 'not caring' are different reactions, even if the behavioural outcome may be similar, because there are

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<sup>93</sup> Marcuse, 'Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Societies', in *Negations*, pp. 187-202 (p. 195).

<sup>94</sup> *ODM*, p. 68.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>97</sup> Marcuse, 'Language and Technological Society', p. 67.

<sup>98</sup> *ODM*, p. 103.

different conscious rationalisations in tuning out, trivialising, or cynically justifying contradictions. It therefore seems that affirmative language does not always capture public imagination, and that ideological acceptance still involves people analysing and judging terms and their meanings.

Moreover, structural and tonal neutrality do not fully explain how certain political narratives gain ascendancy, and in fact Marcuse describes a particular media discourse that accentuates the idea of a 'common enemy' to unify different opinions 'inside' society against those 'outside' (although this outside element is effectively the marginalised and exploited part *within* society overall). Here, an outside threat, such as international communism, allows political parties to converge on policy, leading to a politics that sees *any* opposition, regardless of aim, as an enemy because it jeopardises this unity. As Marcuse says, 'it is not so much Communism, a highly complex and "abstract" social system' that is threatening; rather, the idea of communism invokes a general hostility, as needs arise, and the concept of the enemy 'can assimilate many familiar hated impersonations, such as pinks, intellectuals, beards, foreigners, Jews'.<sup>99</sup> In our theory, to the extent this narrative represents the 'public language', it indicates an important conscious justification of social disparity, for those who believe it. Also, it does not emerge from tonal neutrality, so much as from a passionate, moralistic emphasis on fear, hatred and revenge. Marcuse even notes how a full range of discourses is rarely tolerated in the media, and states that in 'the administered language [...] a specific vocabulary of hate, resentment, and defamation is reserved for opposition to the aggressive policies and for the enemy'.<sup>100</sup> He explains, for example, how the word 'violence' is used selectively to describe anti-establishment protests, rather than police or army actions, which 'is a typical example of political linguistics, utilized as a weapon by the established society'.<sup>101</sup> These points then suggest that the enemy narrative is not merely the result of information losing its context in media formatting, but conscious, propagandistic manipulation of language and emotion to suit certain interests.

The common enemy narrative is thus a particular (dominant) part of media discourse that is really believed in some cases, but not in others, and therefore not fully unifying. On one hand, it is a view that suits populist right-wing positions that seek to blame foreigners and marginalised groups for social problems. It also supports ideas that the current society is a place of tolerance

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<sup>99</sup> Marcuse, 'Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept', p. 55.

<sup>100</sup> Marcuse, 'Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Societies', p. 196.

<sup>101</sup> Marcuse, 'Marcuse Defines his New Left Line', in *The New Left and the 1960s*, pp. 100-117 (p. 108).

and 'cultural superiority' that assimilates differences, by depicting the non-consumerist world as a completely separate realm in which intolerance reigns.<sup>102</sup> Yet, both of these positions fail to recognise the way this interior integration and the 'backwardness' of the other are connected, through relations of exploitation. On the other hand, some affirmative rationalisations may recognise such connections, and their justifications for supporting the existing order then require different media narratives. As such, mass communications structures service various ideologies that may contrast at all but the baseline level, and if their 'higher unification' strengthens the appearance of pluralist freedom, the concepts in any interpretation remain particular because they contrast with others. Furthermore, since media structures are formally open, even though certain discourses are barely represented, the boundaries of permissibility are not solidly defined. It is not always obvious what language is oppositional, and dominant one-dimensional discourses do not necessarily have the tools to incorporate or dismiss all dissent.

### iii) Awareness

With these notions of media narratives and justifications for everyday social participation, we have already begun to identify certain beliefs and contradictions. Our aim is now to identify other forms of rationalisation and connect them to ideological positions, including those that supposedly demonstrate unconscious or automatic acceptance. Marcuse's work provides us with various possibilities in this respect, in that, even though he sometimes says that it simply does not matter what people believe, at other points he suggests that positive ideas or moral investments *are* necessary to sustain society. We interpret these theoretical shifts as indications that different people accept the social order in different ways, and argue that conscious rationalisation is crucial in all cases, including those in which belief appears insignificant. The higher unity (social affirmation) between positions indicates that most people still do not engage with human potentials or critically evaluate social structures, but the differences between rationalisations suggest specific limits, reliant on images of society that reflect particular levels of awareness. Specifically, the ways people justify disparity relate to the information they receive and its plausibility in regards to their own experiences. In analysing these justifications, we take the first step towards identifying central points in our ideology map.

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<sup>102</sup> ODM, pp. 84-85.

The different ways Marcuse approaches conscious awareness, or people's knowledge of social corruption and exploitation, and the importance of that knowledge, provide us with a range of contrasting notions about ideological function and content. First, in *EC*, he states that 'the individual does not really know what is going on', due to the 'the overpowering machine of education and entertainment', and that, 'since knowledge of the whole truth is hardly conducive to happiness, such general anaesthesia makes individuals happy'.<sup>103</sup> Here, a more traditional ideological mystification and ignorance seems to hold society together. Later, in *EL*, Marcuse also points to the need for moral investment in the system, explaining that technocratic administration still 'demands to a considerable extent, belief in one's beliefs [...]; belief in the operative value of society's values'.<sup>104</sup> Between and after these texts, however, such ideas are lost. For example, Marcuse suggests that people are aware of destructive social tendencies, but they 'are not comprehended as long as they appear merely as more or less inevitable by-products [...] of growth and progress'.<sup>105</sup> He also says that it 'is *not* that [people] are not aware of what is going on, [...] but that, being aware and informed, they do not and cannot respond and react'.<sup>106</sup> In these cases, oppression and suffering are recognised, but seem necessary, natural, or insurmountable. Elsewhere, Marcuse goes even further, stating that society has translated ideology 'into the reality of its political institutions, suburban homes, nuclear plants, supermarkets, drug-stores and psychiatric offices.' Therefore, 'the ideas of reason, equality, happiness, personality etc. have obtained their value in practicable social relations'.<sup>107</sup> In *CRR* he then describes a situation of counterrevolution, in which 'the power structure is no longer "sublimated" in the style of a liberalistic culture, no longer even hypocritical [...], but brutal, throwing off all pretensions of truth and justice'.<sup>108</sup> At these points, affirmation appears conditional only on material satisfaction, regardless of how it is achieved, so belief and awareness are irrelevant.

These quotes thus represent a range of ideas in Marcuse's work, from a social order that thrives on ignorance in the general public or needs to maintain moral support for social norms, to one which functions despite knowledge of its destructive side. In fact, these fluctuations make it unclear what ideology actually is, for Marcuse, or how it is reproduced, as some of his arguments

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<sup>103</sup> *EC*, p. 94.

<sup>104</sup> *EL*, p. 84.

<sup>105</sup> *ODM*, p. 225.

<sup>106</sup> Marcuse, 'Cultural Revolution', p. 137.

<sup>107</sup> Marcuse, 'Problem of Social Change', p. 41.

<sup>108</sup> *CRR*, p. 14.

appear to rely on the dominance of particular beliefs, while others are purely reflections of social conditions.<sup>109</sup> In the latter cases, ideology is effectively located outside of consciousness, in the 'real abstraction' of commodity exchanges.<sup>110</sup> Here, as long as exchange relations continue to function, in terms of enabling fulfilment of material needs, ideology is reproduced through behaviour, regardless of the conscious investment Marcuse alludes to elsewhere. In our terms, then, Marcuse *switches between* considering the ideological baseline and its rationalisations without recognising this distinction, as opposed to our approach of identifying ideology as an interconnected circuit of unconscious acceptance and conscious justification. However, if we take the ideas that Marcuse expresses as a whole, and combine them, he effectively considers ideology through a range of influences, from economics, to political power and doctrine, to psychology. It is not then that his theory of ideology 'credits a psychic factor with causal power far greater than that of economic, social or political factors',<sup>111</sup> or that it 'is too much given to subjective and irrational influences to be relied on'.<sup>112</sup> Some of his statements even indicate the exact opposite, in that they effectively reduce affirmation to economic conditions. In these cases, our aim is to also identify the psychological factors, or combine the implications of Marcuse's different positions towards an ideology theory that considers material circumstances and the beliefs that emerge within them.

The first question here is how material factors influence 'low awareness' rationalisations, or ideologies which explicitly understand the existing social organisation as morally right or potentially fulfilling. As in Marcuse's consideration that workers may invest in the success of their companies and the economy, some individuals may perceive productivity, hard work and even consumerism as good in themselves, in terms of providing opportunities and maintaining social prosperity. This moral position represses knowledge of the downsides of increased capitalist productivity, such as excessive waste and social disparity. Alternatively, as Marcuse explains, individuals may internalise consumerist goals as needs, to the point 'they find their soul in their

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<sup>109</sup> Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse*, p. 255.

<sup>110</sup> We take this term from Alfred Sohn-Rethel, who distinguishes between abstractions in thought and those produced by activity. He explains that, 'The essence of commodity abstraction [...] is that it is not thought-induced; it does not originate in men's minds but in their actions.' Thus, 'the commodity or value abstraction revealed [by Marx] must be viewed as a *real abstraction* resulting from spatio-temporal activity' (Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (London: MacMillan, 1978), p. 20).

<sup>111</sup> Geoghegan, *Reason and Eros*, p. 50.

<sup>112</sup> Bernard Susser, *The Grammar of Modern Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 405.

automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment'.<sup>113</sup> In this case, the demands of consumerism are prioritised over those of productivity, but the result is still investment in the cycle of labour and leisure. This ideology is apparently apathetic to politics and wider social goals, but indirectly supports the existing order, because it contributes to reproducing the economy and does not consider alternatives or unrealised potentials outside consumerism. It involves belief that it is acceptable to focus on the pleasure, enthusiasm and comfort of consuming, and that such endeavours are harmless and not connected to major social problems.

Second, we can consider how moral justification and lacks in knowledge are still part of positions that appear to recognise and accept corruption of official values, or are motivated by self-interest. Certain narratives, such as the common enemy and the backwardness of foreigners, or even the misfortune of natural disasters, may justify 'the way things are' as a force outside control, based on reasonable knowledge of world politics and events. Yet such narratives function by precluding fuller awareness of connections between external events and advanced industrial countries (such as how powerful capitalist governments support oppressive ruling classes in 'backward' countries, or how the resulting lack of development exacerbates the impact of natural disasters). Alternatively, if such connections are recognised, they may be deemed inevitable according to pessimistic concepts of human nature. Marcuse mentions that a common objection to the idea of a revolution in values is 'that this goal is incompatible with the nature of man', which 'testifies to the degree to which this objection has succumbed to a conformist ideology'.<sup>114</sup> Or, more knowledgeable individuals may not confront imperialism and systemic oppression because it appears so overwhelmingly powerful. In that sense, government and mass media narratives remain useful to reinforce this idea of insurmountable dominance, or simply to provide forms of escapism. But even in these latter cases, awareness deficiency remains, in that individuals either fail to historicise their concepts of human nature, or do not consider the possibility of systemic weaknesses.

There are hints of this last position in Marcuse's theory itself, precisely because he focuses on the 'higher unification' of ideologies, rather than differences between them. As such, his mode of thinking groups affirmative ideologies into a single unmovable block, which effectively

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<sup>113</sup> ODM, p. 9.

<sup>114</sup> Marcuse, 'Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 3 (1992), 29-38 (p. 38).

testifies to the all-encompassing nature of the economic and political system. Thus, where he says that the brutality of the outside must be 'taken for granted or forgotten or repressed or unknown',<sup>115</sup> to allow individuals to internalise the social order, he does not consider how 'taken for granted' 'forgotten/repressed' and 'unknown' imply different limits of rationalisation. In our view, these notions suggest that some individuals use universal concepts to justify social contradictions, while others try to deny their relevance, or fail to notice them altogether, and each of these positions involves conditional beliefs. In that sense, the strength of ideological plurality is also its weakness, because the system cannot reproduce itself according to a single authoritative ideology but must rely on varied rationalisations with internal frictions, whose contingent beliefs can be exposed.

Based on the rationalisations we have drawn from Marcuse's work, we can propose five preliminary positions for a 'map' of affirmative ideological internalisation. They each suggest, but are not limited to, particular awareness levels, as well as compatibility with certain social identities or political beliefs rather than others. Also, each implies a different possibility of negation, although they are not entirely discrete categories. The positions are: (1) moralistic internalisation of productivity (apologist); (2) internalisation of fulfilment through consumerism (hedonist); (3) internalisation of consumer freedoms, and separation between 'inside' and 'outside' (pluralist); (4) internalisation of social demands for personal gain, using pessimistic concepts of human nature (cynic); (5) internalisation of disempowerment due to systemic omnipotence (defeatist). It should also be apparent that these positions are not ideologies in the sense of explicit political beliefs. Among them, the apologist and pluralist are closest to traditional political ideologies (conservative and liberal, respectively), but are not exact fits, and are outnumbered by more apparently pragmatic or 'apolitical' positions.

The existence of this range of conscious positions does not stop them being one-dimensional, in the sense that they are affirmative and do not imagine potentials to radically change the social formation. Yet their co-existence both strengthens the system and creates points of contradiction and contestability from which such potentials can be imagined. In particular, most of these positions justify the performance principle indirectly, rather than through its demand for sacrifice and toil, which means that performance is reliant on the beliefs behind

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<sup>115</sup> *ODM*, p. 180.

these contingent factors. For example, most hedonists still need wage labour to afford consumer pleasures, but it is the promise of fulfilment, not productivity, that is its driving force. As such there is a certain repressed potential in hedonism, which Marcuse in fact notes where he distinguishes between its affirmative and negative forms. Affirmative hedonism is individualistic, accepts the goals of happiness prescribed by society, and does not distinguish 'between true and false enjoyment',<sup>116</sup> while negative or radical hedonism recognises that labour and happiness are incompatible, and that consumerist opportunity is stratified by class disparity. In this latter sense, hedonism is a generalised belief in realising happiness, and has always 'been right precisely in its falsehood insofar as it has preserved the demand for happiness against every idealization of unhappiness'.<sup>117</sup> Affirmative hedonism then also contains that potential, if the link between fulfilment and consumerism is not maintained, because it is primarily a commitment to happiness rather than capitalist productivity. In this way, certain conditions are then applicable to all the positions we have identified, if the beliefs that attach them to the existing system can be challenged.

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<sup>116</sup> Marcuse, 'On Hedonism', in *Negations*, pp. 119-149 (p. 126).

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130.

#### **IV. The Commodity Form**

##### **i) Consumerism**

Our understanding of ideology as it contrasts with Marcuse's has various repercussions for envisaging how oppositional ideology may increase its presence in consumer capitalist societies. We thus apply this understanding to some of the difficulties Marcuse identifies for political change in existing social conditions, to show that more direct challenges to consciousness may be more fruitful than certain aspects of his theory of ideology suggest. In this section, we expand on themes introduced in the previous section regarding mass media, which suggest that the very structures of commodification generate conformist desires and repress alternatives. Our initial point of focus here is consumerism, which, as already noted, is the main social demand alongside productivity in late industrial capitalism, around which higher ideological unification revolves. Marcuse shows that individuals absorb consumerist goals due to actual benefits they confer (convenience, pleasure) and their pseudo-utopian promises, all of which obscure the toil and destruction required to maintain them. He also notes that, because individuals become dependent on these benefits, the system is contingent on its ability to continually create new, enticing goods that promise increasingly greater fulfilment. However, in Marcuse's terms, the effects of a systemic failure to supply the demand it has created may be disastrous, as consumer needs have become so deeply ingrained. From our perspective, it is more a question of seeing that people are attached to consumerism in various ways and to various degrees, and identifying how their expectations are connected to these beliefs.

According to Marcuse, consumerism is a part of capitalist total administration which represses potential by creating apparent needs that demand mindless continuation of dominant forms of production. It offers pre-packaged, temporary pleasures as rewards for obeying the performance principle, whose promises of satisfaction fix individuals in the cycle of exploitation, and direct practical rationality away from alternative forms. For Marcuse, these consumer demands become biological, in his historical sense, and he explains that the 'consumer economy and the politics of corporate capitalism have created a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form'.<sup>118</sup> It is not the goods themselves that are repressive, but their existence as commodities within the existing order. In fact, because

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<sup>118</sup> *EL*, p. 11.

*everything*, including politicians, is promoted and sold as a commodity in markets dominated by major corporations, 'the "inherent" quality of the merchandise ceases to be a decisive factor in its marketability'.<sup>119</sup> Desirability and participation become paramount, and individuals knowingly make decisions based on the images and rhetoric connected to products.

Furthermore, for Marcuse, since consumerism partially fulfils the needs it creates, it genuinely grants a sense of inclusion and appears as a rational social goal. In this sense, modern life can seem compatible with instinctual desires for libidinal gratification, which 'makes the very notion of alienation questionable'.<sup>120</sup> Yet, Marcuse explains, this fulfilment is 'repressive desublimation' that permits only a particular sexual gratification that actually *contracts* the libido. It is also still constrained by the performance principle, that is, it is not that 'the "reality principle" [...] is daily compelled to retreat, self-limit, and compromise in the face of renewed assaults by the "pleasure principle"';<sup>121</sup> rather, the reality principle now involves a regulated allowance of pleasure. This satisfaction replaces consideration of alternative forms of fulfilment, such as may come from reducing toil and waste, or increasing connections of solidarity between people. As Marcuse says, 'innumerable gadgets [...] divert [people's] attention from the real issue — which is the awareness that they could both work less and determine their own needs and satisfactions'.<sup>122</sup> As such, people are still alienated from certain drives and potentials by consumerism, but do not *experience* this alienation, because they instead experience specific pleasures and a higher standard of living compared to any visible alternative. Class antagonism is then repressed (not erased), because 'the needs and satisfactions that serve the preservation of the Establishment are shared by the underlying population'.<sup>123</sup>

In this basic form, Marcuse's theory suggests mass acceptance of consumer goals based on economic realities and libidinal promises, as opposed to any ideological rationalisations. However, Marcuse also makes observations that imply more conscious involvement or that people internalise consumer demands differently and conditionally. First, actual belief in the libidinal fulfilment of consumerism relates particularly to Marcuse's concept of 'hedonism' mentioned previously. Specifically, it suggests a position of lower awareness that must maintain

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<sup>119</sup> *CRR*, p. 15.

<sup>120</sup> *ODM*, p. 9.

<sup>121</sup> Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance*, p. 50.

<sup>122</sup> *EC*, p. 91.

<sup>123</sup> *ODM*, p. 8.

belief that individual happiness is an acceptable life goal, and that consumerist gratification is the best way to realise it. Any other rationalisations then seem to require additional or alternative beliefs. For example, Marcuse explains that the partial gratification granted by repressive desublimation also causes aggression that requires an outlet. Thus, 'merchandise [...] is made into objects of the libido; and the national Enemy [...] is distorted and inflated to such an extent that he can activate and satisfy aggressiveness'.<sup>124</sup> Here, ideological affirmation involves a combination of consumerist fulfilment and propaganda, which resembles our 'pluralist' position. At other points, Marcuse even claims that 'the fetishism of the commodity world is wearing thin: people see the power structure behind the alleged technocracy and its blessings',<sup>125</sup> as well as that the higher living standard relies on 'misery, frustration, and resentment', and that the waste, inhuman working conditions, and 'constant slaughter' required to maintain it 'is too obvious to be effectively repressed'.<sup>126</sup> These comments, from around 1972, indicate a higher awareness of contradictions in capitalism and consumerist living during economic crisis. Yet, despite the inefficiency and waste, the system reproduces itself regardless (through state subsidies, military expansion and 'counterrevolutionary' oppression of opposition). Here, for Marcuse, the values of efficient performance in work are gone, sometimes leading to protests as jobs are lost and wages decline, but not to a radical movement. In this sense, while the economic structures that manipulate social relations become visible, the concepts of value and the commodity form itself remain largely unquestioned. If commodity fetishism is 'wearing thin', it is not worn out altogether for the majority, as they continue to participate in exchange relations.<sup>127</sup> The result is affirmative ideology that understands the downsides of consumerism, but finds ways to justify them. This ideology may take the form of a 'cynical' acceptance that continues to affirm the status quo because any change risks making things worse (for the cynic), or a 'defeatist' rationality in which people may even block the contradictions of consumerism from consciousness *by consuming*, because they feel powerless in the global system and apparent dead end of history. But, at the

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<sup>124</sup> Marcuse, 'Political Preface to *Eros and Civilization*, 1966', in *Towards a Critical Theory*, pp. 95-105 (p. 98).

<sup>125</sup> *CRR*, p. 21.

<sup>126</sup> Marcuse, 'The Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy', in *Towards a Critical Theory*, pp. 163-186 (p. 169).

<sup>127</sup> Social relations are still expressed in terms of value, which functions as an objective property in commodity exchanges. As Marx puts it, 'the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things' (Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, trans. by B. Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 164-165).

same time, it seems that as awareness of capitalist contradictions increases in times of crisis, people start to think about political change more. Therefore, as the notion of counterrevolution implies, it requires a greater effort of propaganda to repress alternatives and defend even these cynical and defeatist narratives from a revolutionary consciousness. In this sense, even value-based exchange relations could be threatened, if the majority became aware that the commodity form itself is at the heart of the crisis.

Despite introducing these different possible forms of ideology, Marcuse does not suggest that conscious rationalisation can affect investment in consumerist demands. Again, any potentials for change in his theory come from intrinsic material contradictions in the consumerist system. On one hand, these ideas demonstrate the dependency of the social order on certain structural and ideological elements. Marcuse explains that the economy depends on consumers investing in manufactured needs, which makes promises and expectations continuously rise, and that, while greater demand should increase production, systemic fluctuations and automation cause cutbacks and job losses, which decrease purchasing power.<sup>128</sup> He thus argues that disparity between wages and demand could foster '*transcending* needs which cannot be satisfied without abolishing the capitalist mode of production'.<sup>129</sup> On the other hand, his own theory of ideological absorption appears to undercut such possibilities, if 'mutilated experience', 'false consciousness' and 'false needs' are second nature, because failure to satisfy manufactured demand may provoke aggression at targets that 'seem to be different, and to represent an alternative'.<sup>130</sup> In effect, the danger is that repressive desublimation may escape performance principle control, and that, 'precisely through the spread of [the] commodity form, the repressive social morality which sustains the system is being weakened'.<sup>131</sup> As such, a lack of satisfaction through consumerism may lead to aggression that can only be repressed by authoritarian means.

In our terms, it is possible instead to interpret the material potentials in various ways, according to which the scenario Marcuse describes is only one prospect among many, based on the most extreme and direct investment in consumer goals. In other words, it does not consider that many people may internalise consumerism less directly, through justifications such as

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<sup>128</sup> *EL*, p. 82. In actuality, state welfare, cheaper manufacturing, and consumer debt have made cutbacks less potent than Marcuse expected, although it is not clear that such measures represent long term solutions.

<sup>129</sup> *CRR*, p. 16.

<sup>130</sup> *EL*, p. 51.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

escapism, freedom, necessity, or moral good. In Marcuse's perspective, repressive desublimation equates to mere acceptance of immediate gratification, and he therefore does not imagine that one-dimensional consciousness could develop in different ways in reaction to crisis and economic shifts, or even to information that connects mass production to deprivation, freedom of choice to oppression, and individualism to social fragmentation. For example, the beginnings of such rationalisations are visible in concepts of consumer ethics which have developed in recent times (mainly after Marcuse's work), and indicate that pleasure and material satisfaction are not people's sole concerns. Although this ethics is still often reduced to operational individual consumer responsibility, such as the 'choice' of eco-friendly or organic brands, or may act as a way to assuage guilt, it shows that people in some sense consider the downsides of consumerism. Thus, while this understanding is usually not politicised, and does not question the apparently objective properties of value (and in fact reproduces exchange and value relations as a form of consumer behaviour), it indicates moral expectations that may be expanded further into a more general critique. In particular, it may be possible to redirect the notion of ethical consumerism away from choice towards reduction, by introducing ideas about the overall excess of production and the waste it entails. Then, since consumerist capitalism relies on people's investment in excess consumption (and the associated waste and violence) to maintain growth, it is to an extent vulnerable to these ideological pressures. Ultimately, a mass opposition to consumerism may only develop fully in a time of major economic crisis, but to do so it requires a political movement to begin beforehand, and gradually grow into a significant force.

### **ii) Art**

The other major question surrounding commodification is the extent to which oppositional ideas can find space within forms of commodified mass communication, and whether their message retains any power in such conditions. This question arises because if we accept that consumer capitalism seeks to commodify all areas of social life, then any counter-ideology would need to work within these processes, to intervene in the existing system. As we have seen, for Marcuse it is important to seek autonomous cultural expression, which retains radical or two-dimensional sentiment precisely by avoiding mainstream channels. He further argues that this autonomous expression cannot simply attempt to shock in a way that actually functions in line with consumer

permissiveness, but must maintain an intellectualised form that invigorates alternative thinking. We contend that Marcuse's theory of art demonstrates a strong political aim, but it seems that commitment to autonomy and more abstract communication cannot expand beyond an already-established intellectual sphere. It is therefore necessary to imagine ways in which commodified media may be used to convey more radical messages, which becomes more plausible when we consider the possibility of challenging conscious beliefs. Specifically, it suggests that not only the utopian forms of art but also the political content of culture is significant, and that such content can retain some power even when commodified.

Marcuse emphasises the need for cultural autonomy because oppositional cultural forms produced or communicated within mainstream spaces become commodities themselves, and reproduce the whole. He explains that high bourgeois art has revolutionary value in that it militates against the assimilation of social norms, because its 'transcendence of immediate reality shatters the reified objectivity of established social relations and opens a new dimension of experience'.<sup>132</sup> Such transcendence negates the appearance of a closed totality, because its estranging *form* (rather than overt political content) goes beyond language to an 'aesthetic dimension' that renders everything contingent, into a world in which there is 'no more conformity and no more rebellion — only sorrow and joy'.<sup>133</sup> But the power of this art depends on its existence outside the realm of profit, so it can contradict society from without, even though, historically, such an autonomous position has been enabled by social inequality and minority privilege.<sup>134</sup> Conversely, for Marcuse, when they are commodified, even the highest works of culture are normalised, reduced to the realities of advertising and exchange value. Such works lose power by being marketed as classics, and strengthen the image of permissive consumer pluralism. Thus, Marcuse states, although 'the words, tone, colours, shapes of the perennial works remain the same, [...] that which they expressed is losing its truth, its validity' because they no longer stand 'shockingly apart from and against the established reality'.<sup>135</sup> In short, the sense of estrangement is gone.

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<sup>132</sup> Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), p. 7.

<sup>133</sup> *CRR*, p. 100.

<sup>134</sup> *ODM*, p. 65.

<sup>135</sup> Marcuse, 'Remarks on a Redefinition', p. 197.

There are still cases in which Marcuse does concede that art's utopian value survives commodification in some way. For example, he states that even bourgeois works were 'created as commodities for sale on the market', which 'by itself does not change their substance, their truth'.<sup>136</sup> He also says that bourgeois estranging works remain 'authentic' as they indict 'the totality of a society which draws everything, even the estranging works, into its purview', and adds that economic structures 'determine the use value (and with it the exchange value) of the works but not what they are and what they say'.<sup>137</sup> Here, however, Marcuse also explains that the messages and ideas that such works provide cannot become popular, because popularity by definition means appealing to mass tastes formed by anti-intellectual culture, or using dominant language that cannot create a sense of estrangement. As such, even if the power of art is retained when it is commodified, it is only to the extent it remains a niche interest.

Meanwhile, for autonomous culture to have an estranging effect, it is equally important for Marcuse that it has an intellectual dimension, to avoid becoming harmlessly incorporated into consumerist pluralism. In this respect, he criticises 'cultural revolution' as a form of mindless acting out, and explains that it 'diverts mental and physical energy from [...] the political arena', because it 'transfigures economic and social into cultural conditions'.<sup>138</sup> Its hip, anti-conservative expressions mimic an anti-intellectualism, overt sexualisation, and onus on individual liberty within the current system, that accord with consumer culture. Its shock tactics based around offence and obscenity no longer separate it from various forms of mass entertainment, and therefore it only really opposes the traditional elite — including high art — and is mostly absorbed with approval or indifference. Even when it is more critical, Marcuse argues, it is more a way of expressing frustrations that reveals the misery of life but not its potential transcendence, and thus represents performance of catharsis or 'group therapy', bringing temporary relief before restoring normal relations.<sup>139</sup> Overall, this anti-art autonomous culture is weaker politically than high art itself. That is, it is also only tolerated within the realm of phantasy, yet lacks the potential of art to transcend these circumstances, because 'the gap which separates Art from reality [...] can be

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<sup>136</sup> *CRR*, p. 88.

<sup>137</sup> Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 31.

<sup>138</sup> Marcuse, 'Cultural Revolution', p. 158.

<sup>139</sup> *CRR*, p. 115.

reduced', only if '*reality itself* tends towards Art as reality's own Form'.<sup>140</sup> Without these revolutionary tendencies, anti-art remains an inconsequential appendage of the dominant order.

At the same time, Marcuse is not entirely dismissive of these cultural expressions, because they also indicate alternative sensibilities. In fact, *because* the movement is cultural and creative it seeks new forms and language that may cause dissonance in dominant concepts. Hence, Marcuse says, whilst it explicitly calls for private liberation, it contains seeds of social liberation, or qualitatively different needs. In *EL*, he states that 'satire, irony, and laughing provocation become a necessary dimension of the new politics', and that 'the cynical defiance of the fool' is a means of 'demasking the deeds of the serious ones who govern the whole'.<sup>141</sup> He also highlights forms of slang and linguistic deformation emerging from marginalised peoples, which suggest estrangement and a differentiated consciousness and identity. However, he still argues that the potential of such culture is dependent on it avoiding incorporation into mass consumerism by becoming intellectualised, or 'subjecting the new sensibility (the private, individual liberation) to the rigorous discipline of the mind'.<sup>142</sup> Marcuse does not then see the 'cynical defiance of the fool' as a *replacement* for politics, and is not, as Lukes says, 'asking one to oppose undesirable reality by retreating into the world of the fool', which cannot combat powerful forces, and 'only makes their position of dominance more secure'.<sup>143</sup> Rather, Marcuse explains with his concept of the fool that when opposition lacks mass support, 'concentrated power can afford to tolerate (perhaps even defend) radical dissent', so such 'opposition is [...] sucked into the very world which it opposes'.<sup>144</sup> Elsewhere, he also says that if resistance *only* satirises or mocks the establishment, 'the fun falls flat, becomes silly in any terms because it testifies to political impotence'.<sup>145</sup> The fool simply represents an alternative sensibility that may, at best, *help inspire* political organisation.

We can thus agree with Marcuse's aim in this aesthetic turn, which is to reinvigorate oppositional politics rather than escape from it, as critics such as Reitz and Lukes suggest. Reitz explains that Marcuse postpones 'an end to the cultural alienation of the artist and intellectual

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<sup>140</sup> Marcuse, 'Art as a Form of Reality', in *Art and Liberation: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse Volume Four*, ed. by Kellner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 140-148 (pp. 145-146).

<sup>141</sup> *EL*, p. 64.

<sup>142</sup> *CRR*, p. 131.

<sup>143</sup> Timothy Lukes, *The Flight into Inwardness: An Exposition and Critique of Herbert Marcuse's Theory of Liberative Aesthetics* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1985), p. 141.

<sup>144</sup> *EL*, p. 64.

<sup>145</sup> *CRR*, p. 50.

“until the millennium which will never be”, and since this ‘paradox is taken to express permanent opposition, rather than real (historically surmountable) contradiction, it is not dialectical at all’.<sup>146</sup> But Marcuse actually says that, ‘since the tension between idea and reality, between the universal and the particular, is likely to persist until the millennium which will never be, art must remain *alienation*’.<sup>147</sup> That is, ‘authentic’ art reveals a beauty that is not realised in *any* social reality, or the necessary excess of totality as such, and a constant potential for change. In this sense, art and the critical intellectual *are* always alienated from existing social norms, by definition, and that alienation *makes them* dialectical. For Lukes, meanwhile, Marcuse’s ‘inward’ turn is problematic because art’s *negative* potential does not necessarily lead to progressive politics. Therefore, he concludes, ‘affirmative art [...] must remain until a safer environment is created for the “aestheticization of politics”, ‘because the visions of authentic art cannot be trusted’.<sup>148</sup> He adds that any ‘integration of politics and aesthetics [...] will owe its chance to “politicians” who ‘retained an obligation to instrumental interests’.<sup>149</sup> Yet, for Marcuse, aesthetic negation equates to non-repressive *sublimation*, which already implies a politics of increased socialisation. It is not then purely negating, and does not require the response Lukes recommends, which effectively implies a more oppressive version of the status quo, that somehow enforces the affirmative role of art.

The problem in Marcuse’s theory, we argue, is rather that autonomous and estranging art seems unable to escape its dominant designation as harmless fantasy, separate from serious concerns. Its marginal or distant position reinforces its own externality, and limits its potential to act on affirmative ideology. It is thus unclear how the utopian potentials of art or subcultures can be heard from their autonomous zones, or how such zones may expand. Indeed, Marcuse explains that consumer demand ‘expresses the lawful and even organized effort to reject the Other in his own right, to prevent autonomy even in a small, reserved sphere of existence’.<sup>150</sup> But if the spread of commodification reduces autonomy, it can only become less significant, until the already distant potential of estranging art vanishes almost entirely. As such, by emphasising autonomy, Marcuse retains oppositional culture in an easily segregated and shrinking ‘special reservation’. As Bronner says, if ‘art estranges itself from society and its reality principle, it also

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<sup>146</sup> Reitz, *Art, Alienation*, p. 227.

<sup>147</sup> *CRR*, p. 103.

<sup>148</sup> Timothy Lukes, *Flight into Inwardness*, pp. 163-164.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>150</sup> *ODM*, p. 245.

alienates itself from the very possibility of a discourse to determine its emancipatory potential'.<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, Marcuse's concept of one-dimensional consciousness implies that any intellectualised culture would simply be ignored by the majority, because 'society has been closing the mental and physical space in which this culture could be understood in its *cognitive* substance'.<sup>152</sup> He even demonstrates that intellectual considerations of art can be 'affirmative', where art's alternative realm is perceived as a temporary reprieve from the inevitable suffering of reality, rather than an indication of actual potential.<sup>153</sup> It is not then surprising when he states that, 'in the present, the subject to which authentic art appeals is socially anonymous'.<sup>154</sup> In that case, however, the only political value of art is to show the openness of alternatives to those radicals who have already decided an alternative is required, so Marcuse 'succeeds in establishing the unique nature of the aesthetic only at the cost of renouncing its basis and effectiveness in reality'.<sup>155</sup>

From this perspective, any political potential in oppositional culture appears to rest on its ability to resist total determination by market forces while also escaping its autonomous enclosure, to communicate in a way that takes it beyond 'an attuned sensibility' or 'a higher truth available only to the happy few'.<sup>156</sup> In other words, culture must somehow bring its negating qualities to the commodified sphere, despite the major obstacles such a move entails. As we have seen, Marcuse suggests that utopian elements in art are not completely destroyed in commodification, although it is counterproductive to make them appeal to a mass audience, by translating them into everyday terms. He also considers that even one-dimensional prescriptions of attitudes and habits, and promises of consumer fulfilment, may contain a certain utopian element of their own. For example, he explains, when the human body is used in advertising, 'the plastic beauty may not be the real thing, but they stimulate aesthetic-sensuous needs which, in their development, must become incompatible with the body as instrument of alienated labor'.<sup>157</sup> The idealised images appeal directly to the senses, stimulating aspirations that the advertised

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<sup>151</sup> Bronner, 'Between Art and Utopia', p. 127.

<sup>152</sup> Marcuse, 'Remarks on a Redefinition', p. 195.

<sup>153</sup> Marcuse, 'Affirmative Character of Culture', pp. 80-81.

<sup>154</sup> Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 32.

<sup>155</sup> Gérard Raulet, 'Marcuse's Negative Dialectics of Imagination', in *Marcuse: A Critical Reader*, pp. 114-127 (p. 123).

<sup>156</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), p. 94.

<sup>157</sup> *CRR*, p. 76.

products actually fail to satisfy. The outcome may still be frustration, or even an obsessive focus on the object, and, unlike high art, these desires do not inspire the limitlessness of creativity and imagination. But the implication is the capability of reified consciousness to do more than simply absorb explicit consumerist messages.

From this starting point, we can take these possibilities further. In particular, Marcuse's suggestion that what cultural works 'say' is not fully determined by their position in commodified production, is still only concerned with the estrangement of form, rather than the possible impact of alternative political content. As Kellner says, in focusing on form, 'Marcuse seems to underemphasize [...] conservative-ideological elements in high culture' and 'underestimates the political potentiality of art which is part of a process of cultural revolution'.<sup>158</sup> That is, he assumes that even in high art that has reactionary political content the estranging form is more potent,<sup>159</sup> and that more familiar cultural forms that express progressive ideas are effectively nullified. Against this idea, we can consider that it is not only (deliberate or unintentional) formal estrangements that can communicate against the grain, but also content, because ideology is not only a matter of unconscious absorption. Specifically, not only sensual imagery, but also spoken and written language, can invigorate alternative thinking, if oppositional ideas can increase their presence in commodified media to the extent they disrupt beliefs that cement affirmative rationalisations.

The issue that remains to be addressed is that such content cannot become popular without being diluted, because it must be translated into everyday terms. However, rather than insist on autonomy, it appears more worthwhile to try and gradually increase radical ideas in commodified media, by challenging conscious narratives. As Geoghegan argues, Marcuse 'underestimated the power of works of art not simply despite but even because of their mass diffusion'.<sup>160</sup> That is, even if only the minority of an audience receives a transcendental or progressive political message from commodified culture, that diffusion is politically useful. Commodified media is still manufactured according to sales potentials, and for the most part

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<sup>158</sup> Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse*, p. 358.

<sup>159</sup> Against this point it is possible, for example, that utopian religious art may be more likely to affirm ideas of happiness in the afterlife than inspire ideas of material emancipation. See Ray, *Critical Theory*, p. 291.

<sup>160</sup> Geoghegan, *Reason and Eros*, p. 77.

remains familiar and de-intellectualised,<sup>161</sup> but there are no hard rules governing creative expression or interpretation. Marcuse says that any chance of change in consciousness 'is fatally reduced by the fact that the leftist minority does not possess the large funds required for equal access to the mass media'.<sup>162</sup> This point suggests that the problem for radical ideas is primarily one of access and presence, which means that such ideas could have an impact if they could slowly become more prominent. In fact, Marcuse continues here that 'without the continuous effort of persuasion, of reducing, one by one, the hostile majority, the prospects of the opposition would be still darker than they are'.<sup>163</sup> These words, which embody Marcuse's optimism in the late 1960s, imply an accumulative value in continual criticism of existing relations. For us, they should be understood in terms of the possibility of challenging conscious rationalisations, due to individuals' need for narratives that explain social conditions.

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<sup>161</sup> Carol Becker, 'Surveying *The Aesthetic Dimension* at the Death of Postmodernism', *From New Left to Next Left*, pp. 170-186 (p. 181).

<sup>162</sup> *EL*, p. 65.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

## V. Agency

### i) Administration and Responsibility

For an oppositional politics to potentially make a difference to the social order, it must be established that existing institutions function in part *because* people invest in them ideologically, and that this investment may be challenged. Yet, as Marcuse explains it, people throughout society are effectively given responsibilities according to their jobs, based on narrow or operational demands, which they then simply perform in a daily routine. Even leaders are effectively administrators whose task is to maintain social and economic stability, and are expected to fulfil the duties of the role regardless of any detrimental effects. Our point here is that, no matter how natural or routine such administrative behaviour appears, rationalisation means that limits exist in the relationship between practices and justifications, and consciousness may shift from affirmative behaviour to refusal. We therefore examine how certain rationalisations deny systemic contradictions, with notions of personal responsibility that attribute social problems to personal failures, obscuring that the demands of performance are contradictory in themselves. As such, challenging these ideas by focusing on structural issues, while also relating them to everyday problems, offers a way of developing oppositional consciousness. Without such a focus, the operational processes Marcuse describes can appear so ingrained that even the radical minority may be seen to merely fulfil a certain function *within* existing social relations.

Marcuse describes various ways in which late industrial capitalism largely functions by itself, based on individual goals. The operationalism of administrative society effectively represses all global ideas, whether those of revolution, or calculated plans of exploitation by a ruling class. Instead, each person has a specific administrative role to fulfil, so that even the elite is not a group that propagates a superior culture or morality, but a number of individuals who oversee and promote productivity. As Marcuse puts it, the standardisation of production and consumption 'are not a conspiracy, [...] centralized in any agency or group of agencies' but 'diffused throughout the society', from local community and peer groups, to media, corporations, and government.<sup>164</sup> Processes are compartmentalised by operational rationality, and the people who make decisions, 'if they are identifiable at all, do so not as these individuals but as "representatives" of the Nation, the Corporation, the University', and are often unaware of the

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<sup>164</sup> Marcuse, 'Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Societies', p. 191.

'institutions, influences, interests embodied in organizations'.<sup>165</sup> Society functions according to the combined result of many singular technical judgements, which follow demands for maximum efficiency and productivity.

In this structure, Marcuse also explains that people no longer view authorities as leader figures, in the Freudian sense, in which either a person or an idea, such as nationalism, is essential to organise civilisation and control aggression (a symbolic representation of the 'primal father'). That is, because individuals no longer live in thrall to a particular ethos enforced by a specific power, leaders are akin to functionaries, valued as competent supervisors of productivity, and people identify with them to the extent they 'still deliver the goods'.<sup>166</sup> In fact, Marcuse claims, as the populace in advanced industrial society grows more aggressive, it actually *wants* leaders to execute the systemic violence that sustains false needs, and pressures governments into destructive acts beyond those deemed necessary for performance.<sup>167</sup> More generally, leaders and elites must conform to the same instrumentalist measures of fitting in, or 'adjustive success', as everyone else. One-dimensional thinking makes individuals responsible for their success or failure in their administrative roles, according to dominant social demands, or for seeking the expert advice that enables them to improve. As such, when leaders fail, it is likewise due to their personal inadequacy to maintain dominant structures.

These concepts of operational demands and systemic administration suggest that ethical reasons for doing jobs are generally unimportant. Individuals do not behave in accordance with their administrative roles due to moral or political pressures. Rather, 'Duty, work, and discipline [...] serve as ends in themselves, no longer dependent on rational justification in terms of their actual necessity'.<sup>168</sup> As Marcuse puts it, if there is any wider justification of the technical rationality that directs conformist behaviour, it is merely that ends and means 'are determined by the requirements of maintaining, enlarging, and protecting the apparatus'.<sup>169</sup> However, we maintain that individuals must also justify the existing apparatus and their participation in these ends and means. Even the simplest of reasons such as 'just doing my job' without questioning how it affects others (with all its parallels to 'only following orders'), are supported by ethical

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<sup>165</sup> *ODM*, p. 205.

<sup>166</sup> *CRR*, p. 131.

<sup>167</sup> Marcuse, 'Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept', pp. 58-59.

<sup>168</sup> Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 262-263.

<sup>169</sup> Marcuse, 'Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept', p. 54.

assumptions that allow individuals to prioritise their employment over other concerns, and are not merely a matter of executing objective processes. It is also not clear that leader figures are only treated as efficient administrators, given the way they are presented as fulfilling consumer choices. As Marcuse says, 'In its emphasis on the sensuous "image", on the "sex appeal" of the political leader, the American system has mastered [...] the depth dimension of satisfactory submission beneath the political dimension.'<sup>170</sup> As such, there is still a *libidinal* investment in the image of the leader, and some aspirational ideal, or desire that goes beyond maintaining the stability of the existing course.

We may also consider that the operational demands of jobs are not always consistent, and therefore administrators have to consciously decide how to prioritise certain tasks over others. Especially in socially influential spheres such as politics or finance, choices must be made that are not clearly decidable purely on questions of efficiency and profit (for example, short term gains may counteract long term growth). Therefore, the interests of the leaders and elites themselves may still affect social development, or redefine the meaning of dominant social goals, whether in ways that attempt to ensure elite privilege, or according to other beliefs. It is then the case that both operational imperatives direct the behaviour of individuals, and that the interests and beliefs of individuals direct the demands of the system. In other words, there is an excess of rationalisation over operationalism that makes it possible for individuals to execute demands in different ways, and it may even be that certain rationalisations can lead to refusal, or decisions that go beyond operational expectations.

At the same time, the neutral logics of instrumentalism and operationalism effectively contain their own ideological justifications, in the sense that they enable individuals to deflect from inconsistent systemic demands by blaming human error and corruption for problems that arise. These rationalisations are then susceptible to analysis precisely because of this blind spot around such inconsistencies. For example, in the economic crisis of 2007-2008, it is possible to identify two main narratives. The first depicted the global crisis as a kind of natural disaster that just happened, which is a form of defeatism that accepts the universality of the system and the impossibility of controlling its fluctuations, while the second focused on individuals, particularly the actions of greedy bankers or incompetent economists. As Žižek explains, this blaming narrative

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<sup>170</sup> Marcuse, 'Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy', p. 170.

was often genuine, as opposed to a cynical attempt to redirect blame away from the system, and it was 'truly surprising [...] how easily the idea was accepted that its happening was an unpredictable surprise which hit the markets out of the blue', and that 'those who promised continuous growth did not really understand what was going on'.<sup>171</sup> But where people really accept ineptitude or dishonesty as the main cause, they miss how operational rationality itself allowed agents to destabilise the financial system for their personal gain.<sup>172</sup> That is, whether this narrative is constructed from a moralistic defence of the system (in which capitalism and liberalism *do* still function as leader substitutes, albeit corrupted by incompetency and selfishness), or a cynical interpretation (the bankers' behaviour only becomes undesirable when it threatens economic growth), it does not consider that the crisis happened largely because the demands of the performance principle itself are contradictory, and any options the bankers had within their limited purview were flawed in some respect. In other words, the system is inherently problematic in the sense that the greater efficiency of profitmaking it requires gradually undermines its own stability. Therefore, these affirmative ideologies must rationalise the effects of this contradiction according to some more superficial cause, through contestable beliefs and assumptions that obscure the deeper issue.

Moreover, if Marcuse places too much emphasis on structural causation, these ideologies effectively do the opposite and exaggerate individual agency. As such, even cynical affirmation does not simply accept existing relations, but actively tries to enforce them, under the belief that any oppositional idea could really corrupt the stability of the market. In this sense, both apologists and cynics are conscious agents of maintaining the social order, committed to ensuring that any complaints against the status quo merely aim at minor improvements in efficiency. In contrast, Marcuse shows us that the systemic organisation of individuals is the problem, and revolutionary consciousness is a matter of adjusting the focus of politics to the overall exploitative demands of capitalist production. Yet, with Marcuse's understanding of ideology, it seems that only systemic failure can create change, because people otherwise continue to execute operational demands without contemplation. As he says, the material basis of 'a rupture with the continuum of domination and exploitation' is 'in the aggravating economic stresses of the global system of

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<sup>171</sup> *FT*, p. 9.

<sup>172</sup> Žižek explains how Alan Greenspan reacted with 'shocked disbelief' on discovering the behaviour of financial institutions employees, having apparently overlooked 'the financial speculators' quite rational expectation that the risks would be worth taking' (*Ibid.*, p. 30).

corporate capitalism', which include inflation, crises, intensified competition, waste and destruction.<sup>173</sup> In our view, although such conditions are ultimately necessary for major social change, they do not so much cause oppositional thinking to emerge as amplify whatever forms of oppositional ideology have already been developed. If a radical political direction is to be taken at the point of crisis, it depends on the potential in the present for individuals to begin to consciously accept notions of more systemic contradictions underlying social problems. Marcuse is aware that any revolutionary transition involves not only technological advancement and internal contradictions, but also 'the growth of the political organization of the laboring classes', who must act 'as a class-conscious force'.<sup>174</sup> As such, it must be possible for an oppositional politics to construct a discourse that mediates between individual responsibility and systemic contradictions, and can communicate with conscious agents who are capable of evolving rationalisations.

### **ii) Revolutionary Classes**

The question of how to develop such a discourse is also a matter of identifying where in society oppositional thinking already exists, and where it is most likely to emerge. It is to a great extent a question of class consciousness, but, Marcuse explains, there is no longer an industrial working class that represents a revolutionary subject, and the elements of such a subject (central role in production, consciousness, material need) are now split between classes. It thus appears necessary to create an inter-class movement, which appears difficult because of this clear separation of factors, and where Marcuse attempts to locate common ground between groups it is unconvincing (for example, the middle-class need for change lacks the immediacy as that of the marginalised underclass). While we use Marcuse's class categories as a guideline, then, it becomes important to find potentials for class consciousness in small sections of each class, and even in the exploited classes outside consumer capitalist societies, based on the possibility of confronting affirmative rationalisations. That is, since there is no potential for any particular subordinate class to take power, any possibility of radical change involves establishing a cross-class political movement which recognises and opposes systemic class disparity as the core social problem.

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<sup>173</sup> Marcuse, 'Beyond One-Dimensional Man', p. 114.

<sup>174</sup> Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, p. 19.

At various points, Marcuse tries to identify a class-based subject of revolution that could recognise its alienation and unify in a struggle for progressive change. Traditionally, this revolutionary class would be the mass of overworked, undernourished labourers within the centres of power, whose material existence could lead to its self-awareness as a class with universal interests. However, this class has become ideologically conservative — integrated into a society that satisfies its immediate needs, and unable to develop consciousness of its alienation. Therefore, while the working class remains for Marcuse ‘the objective factor’ of revolution, because it represents a critical mass of people within production, even despite the reduction of industry in advanced capitalist countries, it lacks both the ‘subjective factor’ of political consciousness and the experience of vital, material need for change. The ‘subjective factor’ instead currently only exists among a minority of ‘nonconformist young intelligentsia’, or individuals emerging from inside the system, who gain a universal view because they have greater access to education. Vital need, meanwhile, is found in ‘the ghetto population’ and ‘the “underprivileged” sections of the laboring classes in backward capitalist countries’.<sup>175</sup> Such groups exist in late industrial capitalism because it still relies on poverty-wage labour and creates an increasing excess of non-labourers. Marcuse describes such people as ‘the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable’. Because of their rejection by the system, they have an immediate need for better living standards, and ‘thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not’.<sup>176</sup>

The clear problem here is that none of these revolutionary factors (power, consciousness, need) currently coincide in a single subject. Only a major working-class movement has the power to challenge the status quo, but without material deprivation or revolutionary consciousness, could only make demands within the existing order. But, without this power, the middle-class intelligentsia cannot replace the working class as revolutionary subject, despite its radical demands. Marcuse states that the working class is ‘the only class which, by virtue of its function in the productive process, is capable of arresting this process, and of redirecting it’.<sup>177</sup> The intelligentsia thus provides a ‘preparatory function’, that is, ‘it is not and cannot be a revolutionary

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<sup>175</sup> *EL*, p. 56.

<sup>176</sup> *ODM*, p. 256.

<sup>177</sup> Marcuse, ‘Revolutionary Subject and Self-Government’, *Praxis*, 5 (1969), 326-329 (p. 327).

class, but it can become the catalyst'.<sup>178</sup> It can only demonstrate that alternatives are possible and non-conformism is an option, to inspire a larger force. Marcuse points to the 1960s student movement as an example, in that it made connections with labour movements, and through total refusal brought 'to the fore the new historical Subject of change, responding to the new objective conditions, with qualitatively different needs and aspirations'.<sup>179</sup> It is also has a certain power to resist the authorities, because they cannot react too violently to an intellectual or student class that is supposed to be a central component of society's future,<sup>180</sup> or the next generation of administrators. But as such it remains distinct from the unemployed underclass, which is operationally expendable because of its lack of role in the production process, and therefore subject to violence, imprisonment and further ghettoisation.

Marcuse thus sees that an oppositional politics based on class struggle cannot merely focus on a particular group, and must aim at connecting potentials in each class into a larger movement. The difficulty is how to make such connections, if there is a lack of oppositional consciousness outside the intellectual class. For Marcuse, 'the forces of emancipation cannot be identified with any social class which, by virtue of its material condition, is free from false consciousness.' But, he adds, 'they are hopelessly dispersed throughout the society'.<sup>181</sup> In our understanding, the point to make here is that, while the separation of revolutionary factors Marcuse identifies provides a useful outline of the social situation, there may be greater fluidity between classes than this description allows. That is, the revolutionary elements *within* each class may be more ambiguous than he suggests, which appears to reduce their power, but the *potential* for class consciousness is more evenly distributed throughout the social spectrum, which implies greater opportunity for interconnection.

In the first case, it is not clear that the characteristics Marcuse associates with each class represent clear potentials to be connected. For example, the very privilege of middle-class intellectuals may also dilute their commitment and reintegrate them into the establishment in the medium term. As such, it is not as Marcuse says that students are as invested as the underclass in terms of 'the depth of the Refusal', which 'makes them reject the rules of the game that is

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<sup>178</sup> Marcuse, 'Liberation from the Affluent Society', in *The New Left and the 1960s*, pp. 76-86 (p. 84).

<sup>179</sup> *EL*, p. 52.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>181</sup> *RT*, p. 125.

rigged against them'.<sup>182</sup> In short, the rules are not rigged against students and intellectuals to the same degree, and the access to information and education that defines the intelligentsia splits it between conformism and rejection. In that sense, the intelligentsia is either not a class, or is a class with two mutually exclusive interests, one of which is maintaining its privileged position. At the same time, the vital needs of the underclass are also not necessarily revolutionary, because in some cases they may be met operationally within the existing system. Since late industrial capitalism can adapt to include (or exclude) different identity groups, and formally allows social mobility, the needs of individual underclass members remain ambiguous. Marcuse explains of working-class interests that they 'do not crave a new order but a larger share in the prevailing one', and that 'their uniformity is in the competitive self-interest they all manifest'.<sup>183</sup> Yet this interest could also apply for elements of the underclass, to the extent that individualistic desires to belong, or come inside, may be realistic in some sense.

Similarly, even the power of the working class is uncertain, because the concept does not define a clear group with a specific potential. Marcuse recognises that the working class has expanded to include white-collar professionals and technicians, taking it beyond purely physical production. He explains that a revolutionary working class now will be one 'in which the blue collar labor will only be a minority, a class which will include large strata of middle classes, and in which intellectual work will play an increasing role'.<sup>184</sup> In that case, however, the working class is not defined by its type of labour, level of wealth, or even education, but purely by being employed. It is not a class, as Alway says, in terms of a group with a 'unity of interests and experiences that once at least theoretically resulted from sharing the same position within the production process'.<sup>185</sup> It is not distinct from elements of the intelligentsia, and their 'subjective factor', or even from administrative elites. As Marcuse states, 'the managers are thoroughly tied up with the vested interests, and as performers of necessary productive functions they do not constitute a separate "class" at all'.<sup>186</sup> With this expanded definition of the working class, Marcuse then shifts

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<sup>182</sup> *EL*, p. 6.

<sup>183</sup> Marcuse, 'Some Social Implications of Modern Technology', in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. by Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York, NY: Continuum, 1982), pp. 138-162 (p. 151).

<sup>184</sup> Marcuse, 'Revolution in Values', p. 200.

<sup>185</sup> Alway, *Critical Theory*, p. 88.

<sup>186</sup> Marcuse, 'Some Social Implications', p. 156.

'the basis of revolutionary agency from the economic to the political sphere'.<sup>187</sup> The 'objective factor' of revolution becomes not a class, but a general majority.

These points appear to fragment revolutionary potentials further, as even the particular characteristics of each class become less clear. However, in our view, the loss of discrete distinctions may also make it easier to envisage connections between groups in each class that could form an oppositional political movement. Such a movement would still be a class politics in the sense that it would organise to eradicate the relationships of domination and subordination inherent to the capitalist mode of production. This idea highlights the need to understand the different forms of rationalisation within each class, including those that may already have certain oppositional tendencies. In effect, the dispersal of oppositional thinking is not completely 'hopeless', but a way in which political ideas may span class boundaries. The situation, as it stands, is surely that individuals within each class group are mostly affirmative in their thinking — even the majority of the educated class are resigned, in their awareness, to the existing situation. Nevertheless, the affirmative ideologies in these groups are susceptible (to varying extents) to contradictory ideas and experiences, which may affect beliefs and assumptions. In these terms, the class consciousness of the educated can only be a catalyst if there are forms of affirmative consciousness that are susceptible to it, having in some sense already articulated their deprivation or lack of fulfilment. Kellner in fact criticises Marcuse for associating revolutionary consciousness only with the intelligentsia, and designating it as the driving force, because 'it is a mistake to ascribe to *any* class or group a privileged role as conveyor of revolutionary consciousness, force or leadership'.<sup>188</sup> For us, Marcuse recognises that this consciousness is only the necessary beginning of a collaborative movement, but he must also recognise the potentials in different rationalisations in all classes, which are developed by, and can develop, radical consciousness.

A final point to consider here is that an interclass movement cannot be internal to a single nation in late industrial capitalism, but must connect with external movements that resist the negative effects of domination. In this respect, Marcuse analysed the anti-colonialist movements of his time, and in particular identified their connective potential due to their more traditional working-class sensibility. As he explains, for such movements, the proletariat was still 'the human

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<sup>187</sup> Alway, *Critical Theory*, p. 87.

<sup>188</sup> Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse*, p. 315.

basis of the social process of production', and provided 'the popular support for the national liberation fronts'.<sup>189</sup> He also saw that external resistance in general could affect imperialist expansion, by reducing the flow of wealth to the centres of capitalism, leading to disarray and dissatisfaction within. In *CRR*, he notes how the US, as representative of capitalism, increasingly enforces its power abroad through militaristic means, 'where indigenous ruling groups are not doing the job of liquidating popular liberation movements, [...] because the system is no longer capable of reproducing itself by virtue of its own economic mechanisms'.<sup>190</sup> As such, anti-war sentiment grows, causing protests which are countered through curtailment of freedoms, and more aggressive propaganda. All these measures create further economic strain, and even overstretch of power, which undermines official ideological goals and the supply of consumer comforts.

Marcuse effectively describes two separate issues in these processes. On one hand, he shows how economic disruption can be caused by any sufficiently large resistance, and on the other, that only certain forms can connect with oppositional politics in late industrial capitalist countries. Marcuse does not make this distinction, perhaps because he saw grounds for solidarity with the anti-colonial liberation movements he analysed. But, as Geoghegan says, he therefore did not really consider generally what 'could possibly unite the disparate elements of the Great Refusal in political activity', nor 'precisely how these forces were to be co-ordinated both prior to and during a revolutionary upsurge'.<sup>191</sup> That is, to form significant opposition, the local and global outside cannot merely share an adversary, or simply be disruptive. Also, it is not clear how, in Marcuse's terms, resistance movements from 'developing' nations could embody a transcendent revolutionary consciousness, given his claim that only late industrial society enables civilizational maturity. As Offe puts it, with such thinking it would be contradictory to identify 'the starting points for a "post-technical" culture and society [...] precisely in those Third World countries that have been spared the process of industrialization'.<sup>192</sup> Marcuse is clear that neo-colonialist resistance must find 'support in the "affluent society" itself',<sup>193</sup> and is not merely a means to help overstretch established powers. Yet, for there to be support, local and global

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<sup>189</sup> Marcuse, 'Re-examination of the Concept of Revolution', *New Left Review*, 1/56 (1969), 27-34 (p. 31).

<sup>190</sup> *CRR*, p. 13.

<sup>191</sup> Geoghegan, *Reason and Eros*, p. 91.

<sup>192</sup> Offe, 'Technology and One-Dimensionality', p. 219.

<sup>193</sup> Marcuse, 'The Question of Revolution', *New Left Review*, 1/45 (1967), 3-7 (p. 4).

## Consciousness and the Limits of Social Conformity

movements must connect ideologically, over an inclusive form of class consciousness. It is a question of combining the political needs of different marginalised groups where aims overlap, which assumes a certain ideological flexibility.

## VI. Political Action

### i) Motivating Change

With this concept of a conscious agency in all ideology, and the possibility of using mass communications for oppositional messages, it remains necessary to theorise the practical details of a radical politics, especially in terms of how it can expand oppositional consciousness. Marcuse demonstrates a commitment to envisaging political approaches that may realise dialectical potentials in existing historical conditions. But, without a theoretical focus on conscious ideological rationalisation, he often considers potentials for a sudden revolutionary upheaval, or a major shift in production or consciousness that does not appear to be on the horizon. In line with such ideas, he recommends a form of withdrawal into intellectual preparation, which tends to reduce political change to formal necessity, without effective content. However, there is a contrast in this area of Marcuse's work in the more optimistic politics he develops around the time of the 1968 protests in the US and parts of Europe. This contrast hints at an approach to revolutionary politics that accepts a gradual and reciprocal shifting of sensibilities and structures, and escapes the impasse he reaches elsewhere. It also allows Marcuse to formulate a concept of 'negative education', which suggests that dialectical thinking can have an impact on existing subversive potentials. We argue that our theory of ideology can function in line with this approach, at least to the extent it is explicitly reinterpreted as the possibility of challenging conscious aspects of affirmative ideologies.

For Marcuse, revolutionary politics is necessary because it is possible, in that people are actually deprived and potentially need not be, and first requires that people believe in that possibility. Marcuse follows Bloch's concept of concrete Utopia,<sup>194</sup> stressing that the notion of utopian possibilities defines a conceivable reality based on technological advances that 'deprives "utopia" of its traditional unreal content', so that 'what is denounced as "utopian" is no longer that which has "no place" [...] but rather that which is blocked from coming about by the power of the established societies'.<sup>195</sup> The pejorative meaning of Utopia — that qualitative social improvement is unreachable, and any alternative is regressive — is maintained only by affirmative ideology. Failure to resist these dominant ideas, and imagine utopian potentials, then only strengthens the

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<sup>194</sup> See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume One*, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

<sup>195</sup> *EL*, pp. 3-4.

current reality over possible alternatives. According to Marcuse, a specific programme of resistance is required that is 'free of all illusion but also of all defeatism, for through its mere existence defeatism betrays the possibility of freedom to the status quo'.<sup>196</sup> He also says that, even if no road to success is visible, leaving only a politically impotent refusal of conformist behaviour, it is better than 'defeatism and quietism', and 'even if we see no transformation, we must fight on'.<sup>197</sup>

The importance to oppositional politics of refusing to accept the limits of existing reality is clear, but the question then is what it actually means to 'fight on' in particularly difficult circumstances. Marcuse recommends a 'great refusal' and isolation from forms of political participation such as the anti-intellectual cultural revolution, to avoid co-option back into affirmative thinking. At one point, he justifies withdrawal as a tactic, claiming that although it 'may indeed lead to an "ivory tower"', it 'may also [...] lead to something that the Establishment is increasingly incapable of tolerating, namely, independent thinking and feeling'.<sup>198</sup> He adds that, 'Where radical mass action is absent, and the Left is incomparably weaker, its actions must be self-limiting'.<sup>199</sup> The problem is that this 'ivory tower' of alternative thought is similar in status to marginalised autonomous art, and as tolerable to the performance principle as the designated zone of phantasy. It is not that political refusal is problematic as such (as we will see, Žižek's concept of refusal is more a rejection of binary political choices to create space for alternative thought *and* action), but that, put in terms of self-isolation, it further reduces the limited profile of resistance, and therefore loses any momentum. As Reitz says, it seems 'that the dialectics of nature, society, and thought [become] an academic rather than a transformative practice'.<sup>200</sup> Also, if utopian belief is merely an abstract hope without a plausible means for development, it may seem less relevant or desirable.<sup>201</sup>

At such moments, Marcuse effectively cedes the possibility of connecting existing sentiments of dissatisfaction together into the beginnings of a movement. This approach may then discourage and undermine ongoing efforts rather than engage with them, as Marcuse does

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<sup>196</sup> Marcuse, 'The End of Utopia', in *Five Lectures*, pp. 62-82 (p. 69).

<sup>197</sup> Marcuse, 'The Problem of Violence and the Radical Opposition', in *Five Lectures*, pp. 83-108 (p. 94).

<sup>198</sup> *CRR*, p. 129.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>200</sup> Reitz, *Art, Alienation*, p. 242.

<sup>201</sup> Stephan Bundschuh, 'The Theoretical Place of Utopia: Some Remarks on Marcuse's Dual Anthropology', in *Marcuse: A Critical Reader*, pp. 152-162 (p. 157).

not consider that demand for total revolution must grow slowly as more minor concerns accumulate and communicate in similar terms. In fact, with Marcuse's concept of ideology, it does not seem possible to gradually alter people's consciousness, so some monumental social shift is required. Instead, it seems that certain conditions make revolutionary change possible, and until those conditions arrive people can only prepare for them, by withdrawing to theory. As such, *any* attempt to act beforehand will fall short of revolutionary aims, and Marcuse's call may create a 'growing sense of total impotence'.<sup>202</sup> As Geoghegan puts it, in the face of such transcendent demand, 'the selling of newspapers and participation in industrial action, for example, will seem pathetically inadequate'.<sup>203</sup> Marcuse notes the problems of withdrawal when it comes to withdrawing *from* theory, explaining how New Left countercultures 'destroyed themselves when they forfeited their political impetus in favor of withdrawal into [...] abstract anti-authoritarianism and a contempt for theory as a directive for praxis'.<sup>204</sup> But he does not recognise the issues in the reverse situation, in which theory must also communicate with existing forms of practice.

Marcuse alters his position in his work of the late 1960s (notably *EL*), in which, not long after his thesis on one-dimensional man, many people demonstrated in various political and cultural movements that they were capable of thinking and acting beyond dominant expectations. Here, Marcuse identifies forms of progressive activism and ideas of a light, pretty and playful society with an emphasis on freedom, imagination and alternative sensibility. He explains that if such demands could grow until they could not be ignored, they may trigger a wider change in consciousness leading to further demands that connect the aesthetic dimension of imagination and concrete politics. In this case, he says, 'the needs and faculties of freedom [...] emerge only in the collective *practice of creating an environment*: level by level, step by step'.<sup>205</sup> The focus is on making political connections between existing groups (where they already show signs of alternative sensibilities), and organic development.

This politics of gradual, reciprocal development is more pertinent to our theory of ideology, in that it suggests the possibility of gradually changing consciousness based on

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<sup>202</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, 'Negativity: Theme and Variations', in *Critical Theory and the Promise*, pp. 13-28 (p. 26).

<sup>203</sup> Geoghegan, *Reason and Eros*, p. 37.

<sup>204</sup> Marcuse, 'Failure of New Left', p. 185.

<sup>205</sup> *EL*, p. 31.

oppositional political activities. Elsewhere, Marcuse tends to stress the paradox that institutions and consciousness both need to change first, because dominant institutions stop consciousness from developing, and the lack of alternative consciousness stops institutional change. The step by step approach appears to tackle both sides of the equation at once, to make gradual advances in all areas. For Marcuse, this potential relates to specific circumstances, or social conditions in which oppositional sentiment had already emerged, and could develop into a political movement. Conversely, we view it as a general possibility that contrasts with notions of automatic ideological absorption. In this sense, it can be seen as a way of maintaining the commitment to radical politics that Marcuse demands in a more concrete form, avoiding the danger of viewing such possibilities nostalgically, as a product of a specific time that is no longer relevant.<sup>206</sup> In particular, it may be asked how this new sensibility emerged to begin with, in the sense that it must have developed from one-dimensional thinking, and the implication is that the potential for it was already, and is thus always, present. It then becomes a question of working with this potential, and (as Jameson shows) of balancing transcendental ideas with everyday language. Seen in this way, this step by step politics can be repurposed towards a theory in which conscious limits can always be contradicted, even if development is slow. At one point, Marcuse says that, 'unless the recognition of what is being done and what is being prevented subverts the consciousness and the behavior of man, not even a catastrophe will bring about the change'.<sup>207</sup> In such a statement, our concept of ideology focuses on this 'unless', or the vague implication that a combination of awareness and imagination could have an impact on social acceptance.

Meanwhile, in terms of the practicalities of gradually developing a movement, Marcuse envisions a need for intellectual leadership around 'utopian possibilities', as opposed to disorganised or 'spontaneous' uprising. That is, if instinctive personal desires and excesses of affirmative thought are to actually shift towards revolutionary sensibilities, they require direction by two-dimensional thinking that highlights real potentials for an alternative social order. Marcuse frames this organisation as a kind of education, but one which is negative in the sense that it reveals the contingency of existing relations and the inherent possibility of imagining new ones. This 'counter-education' can then be distinguished from the reifying doctrines of educational institutions that 'serve to enclose the mind within the established universe of discourse and

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<sup>206</sup> Angela Davis, 'Marcuse's Legacies', in *Marcuse: A Critical Reader*, pp. 43-50 (p. 43).

<sup>207</sup> *ODM*, p. xv.

behavior'.<sup>208</sup> The aim is that, from this negative teaching, 'The distinction between rational and irrational authority, between repression and surplus-repression, can be made and verified by the individuals themselves.'<sup>209</sup>

In many ways, this education is precisely the kind of dialectical approach necessary to challenge the beliefs of conscious rationalisations. Marcuse's focus on negation makes it an attempt to disrupt assumptions not merely to replace them with other absolute ideas, but to invigorate various desires and notions of self-determination. We therefore insist that such negation represents a relatively open form of engagement that cannot simply be understood, as some critics believe, as a retreat from politics. For example, according to Reitz, Marcuse 'reduces social and educational philosophy to aesthetic philosophy',<sup>210</sup> and it is necessary 'to compensate for critical theory's aestheticist deficits through renewed inquiry into class structure and material social forces'.<sup>211</sup> Yet, for Marcuse, negative education aims to generate political alternatives by revealing potentials in existing social relations or possible reversals of actual social problems. As such, it involves criticism of mass media discourses, promotion of normally suppressed information, distrust of politicians, and organising protest and refusal.<sup>212</sup> Marcuse is then not, as Martineau suggests, 'taking refuge in revolutionism',<sup>213</sup> or only interested in subversion, or disruption, rather than actually taking power. While Marcuse claims that we must negate the current order without knowing in advance exactly what would replace it, the point is that 'the question as to which are "real" needs must be answered by the individuals themselves', but only when they can fully consider alternatives, because otherwise 'their answer to this question cannot be taken as their own'.<sup>214</sup> The goal is thus to create a more organic opposition, which must first disrupt one-dimensional institutions *so that* it can develop further, but is not purely destructive because its goals and values 'must be visible already in our actions'.<sup>215</sup> In other words, the new sensibility that would govern is expressed in the methods used to create an alternative social formation. There is thus no concept of liberation without political goals here,

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<sup>208</sup> *RT*, p. 114.

<sup>209</sup> *EC*, p. 206.

<sup>210</sup> Reitz, *Art, Alienation*, p. 234.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>212</sup> Marcuse, 'The Individual in the Great Society', in *Towards a Critical Theory*, pp. 59-80 (p. 77-78).

<sup>213</sup> Alain Martineau, *Herbert Marcuse's Utopia*, trans. by J. Brierley (Montreal: Harvest House, 1986), p. 97.

<sup>214</sup> Marcuse, 'Problem of Social Change', p. 52.

<sup>215</sup> Marcuse, 'On the New Left', in *The New Left and the 1960s*, pp. 122-127 (p. 123).

which avoids 'the hard questions of how institutions and practices [...] are to embody Reason, Freedom and Happiness'.<sup>216</sup> Rather, Marcuse makes such questions a collective responsibility.<sup>217</sup>

The issue with the concept of negative education, in our view, is that it does not clearly acknowledge its own 'positive' role, or that revealing social potentials inevitably means suggesting certain content for alternatives, so it may dictate the desires of those it educates. In this sense, it may be necessary to emphasise a more reciprocal relationship between educator and student than Marcuse tends to allow. It is not quite, as Kellner says, that Marcuse is an intellectual elitist, whose idea of educator conforms to 'the traditional concept of the intellectual defined as someone who possesses special knowledge by virtue of their education, high level of culture and cognitive talents',<sup>218</sup> which means their insights should be followed. Marcuse does not respect education and intellectualism as such, as he recognises it often has affirmative bias, and is clear that radical educators could come from all classes.<sup>219</sup> But, the point stands, as Balbus also claims, that Marcuse effectively sees students as 'sensuous social actors' and educators as 'rational social theorists', which overlooks the alternative ideas students must already have to be receptive to (re-)education.<sup>220</sup> As such, educators have positive ideas about the kinds of 'real needs' that should emerge from critical thinking, which unavoidably intertwine with their approaches to negative education, and may go unrecognised and be unconsciously forced onto the student. By the same token, teachers may not consider that some needs expressed by students are also already 'real', as they define when students are sufficiently liberated from dominant thinking that their ideas become 'their own' and can be taken seriously. We thus suggest that, rather than the one-directional implications of 'education', there could be a 'conversation' between teacher and student. That is, it seems important that teachers properly consider students' desires from the start, to recognise and develop their own assumptions about political change. It is not strictly that teachers provide a form which students then fill with content, but one in which certain content is implied by the form itself and must adapt to the new content. If negation in consumer capitalism

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<sup>216</sup> Bernstein, 'Negativity', p. 25.

<sup>217</sup> As Carver explains, 'Perception for Marcuse is contextual, and his discursive accounts promote a reconceptualization of politics, society, and economy, such that the reader begins to perceive anew. Moreover, it is clear what the result of theorization is supposed to be: judgment and action' (Carver, 'Marcuse and Analytical Marxism', p. 76).

<sup>218</sup> Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse*, p. 314.

<sup>219</sup> Marcuse, 'Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy', p. 178.

<sup>220</sup> Isaac D. Balbus, 'The Missing Dimension: Self-reflexivity and the "New Sensibility"', in *From the New Left to the Next Left*, pp. 106-117 (p. 111).

ultimately focuses on class disparity and the mode of production, the range of social problems experienced by students may expand teachers' understanding of the manifestations of disparity and the kinds of solutions they require.

## **ii) Points of Contestation**

With these ideas of how a movement may develop structurally, we can also envisage the different forms of political participation that may contribute. Again, in this respect, there is a split in Marcuse's work between a focus on sudden revolutionary change, and a commitment to longer term accumulative processes. In the first case, Marcuse struggles to identify likely causes for change, and although we understand that the difficulties he identifies for oppositional politics cannot be ignored, it is his particular approach that restricts him to suggestions for change that appear merely hopeful. For example, his brief consideration of minority 'dictatorship' to break the deadlock of affirmative consciousness and institutions ultimately does not appear plausible. We therefore turn to parts of Marcuse's work in which he considers forms of political participation that are more in tune with a gradual development of oppositional ideology. Here, while it is never a case of simply working within established political structures, there is a certain possibility that a combination of internal and external strategies may have a mutually reinforcing effect. In fact, it may be less likely that a radical movement is violently crushed by the state, if such activism has already established sympathetic connections within major political and cultural organisations. Yet, as ever, these prospects rest on a concept of conditional ideological consciousness, rather than automatic ideological absorption.

Marcuse's work shows us that the difficulty for any genuinely disruptive oppositional politics (regardless of the approach to ideology), is how it can survive the inevitable ideological and legal backlash against it. Marcuse argues that such a politics must exceed the bounds of established political participation, if it is to represent any kind of transformed sensibility. That is, for the most part he sees that political parties cannot be transformed from within, and that everyday political activities such as voting, writing to politicians and joining officially sanctioned protests only testify 'to the existence of democratic liberties which, in reality, have changed their content and lost their effectiveness'.<sup>221</sup> Thus, it is necessary to employ unauthorised measures to

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<sup>221</sup> *RT*, p. 98.

create effective protest, which mean that 'confrontations with state power, with institutionalized violence, seem inevitable — unless opposition becomes a harmless ritual, a pacifier of conscience, and a star witness for the rights and freedoms available under the status quo'.<sup>222</sup> In these terms, opposition cannot concern itself with keeping resistance legal, because part of what it resists is the established law, but if mass consciousness does not recognise the right to illegal resistance through civil disobedience, the state retains widespread support. Radical protest movements must somehow reverse the understanding that systemic violence reflects the general interest, while oppositional disruption reflects particular interest.

A major problem in reaching this goal is that a minority movement cannot control the terms of its own representation in commodified media. As such, many forms of affirmative ideology may still welcome a legal violent response by the establishment, particularly those that prioritise performance, stability and enjoyment, or lash out against opposition because it makes them feel guilty. Then, once there is a more brutal counterattack, a minority movement would have difficulty organising at all. Marcuse warns that 'once fascism is installed, it may well destroy any revolutionary potential for an indefinite time'.<sup>223</sup> This not unrealistic fear appears to lead radical opposition into a dead end, since it seems that any protest that is not a 'harmless ritual' provokes disproportionate response that quickly suppresses it. Even the non-defeatist must accept that any radical political strategy is a gamble with slim chance of success. However, Marcuse explains, 'All militant opposition takes the risk of increasing repression. This has never been a reason to stop the opposition. Otherwise, all progress would be impossible'.<sup>224</sup> He adds that what might be called 'adventurism, romanticism, imagination [...] is an element necessary to all revolution'.<sup>225</sup> Nevertheless, if this attitude of defiance is necessary for any revolution, on its own it is not a solution to the difficulties Marcuse identifies.

In much of his work, Marcuse is unable to move beyond this point, and the reason for this impasse, in our understanding, is only partly because these difficulties are so severe, and also partly because he does not consider the possibility of causing gradual shifts in conscious ideological rationalisations. Instead, he returns to the paradox that both social structures and one-dimensional mass consciousness cannot change without change in the other, and explains

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<sup>222</sup> Marcuse, 'Problem of Violence', p. 89.

<sup>223</sup> *CRR*, p. 29.

<sup>224</sup> Marcuse, 'Marcuse Defines', p. 103.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

that, 'In order for the mechanisms to be abolished, there must first be a need to abolish them. That is the circle in which we are placed, and I do not know how to get out of it.'<sup>226</sup> In these conditions, because Marcuse cannot see how 'the emergence of these new needs can be conceived at all as a radical development out of existing ones' he asks whether, 'in order to set free these needs, a dictatorship appears necessary'.<sup>227</sup> With such total indoctrination, it seems only a systemic failure or *enforced* revolution can make people question their needs. This move may be justified, for Marcuse, because as long as some people are denied rights, they cannot gain them through official democratic channels, and their need 'presupposes the withdrawal of civil rights from those who prevent their exercise'.<sup>228</sup> In that sense, dictatorship is the expansion of rights to those currently excluded, opposing the 'repressive tolerance' of existing society, whose formal neutrality in a situation of inequality 'protects the already established machinery of discrimination'.<sup>229</sup> It is a realisation that a more substantial tolerance requires intolerance, or a decision about what to tolerate, because no society can tolerate both transcendent and repressive ideas.

Despite the aims behind this concept of dictatorship, it is ultimately not a plausible means of escape from the paradox of change. In terms of content, even though the point is not, as MacIntyre suggests, that 'to foreclose on tolerance is precisely to cut oneself off from [...] criticism and refutation',<sup>230</sup> Marcuse still again effectively privileges the educator's ideas over the student's, with a minority defining the bounds of tolerance. Marcuse suggests that the distinction 'between progress and regression can be made rationally on empirical grounds', based on 'the real possibilities of human freedom [...] relative to the attained stage of civilization'.<sup>231</sup> For example, he says elsewhere, tolerance of Hitler by the Weimar Republic led to the Second World War and the Holocaust, and 'the definition of this movement as not deserving democratic tolerance is more than a personal value judgment'.<sup>232</sup> But not all judgements about tolerance are confronted with such outwardly aggressive ideologies, and in many cases the particular interests of those judging tolerance would be more prevalent. Also, in practical terms, there are simply no means for a

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<sup>226</sup> Marcuse, 'End of Utopia', p. 80.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>228</sup> *RT*, p. 124.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>230</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marcuse* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1970), p. 91.

<sup>231</sup> *RT*, p. 119.

<sup>232</sup> Marcuse, 'Democracy Has/Hasn't a Future . . . a Present', in *The New Left and the 1960s*, pp. 87-99 (p. 89).

dictatorship of the minority to impose itself in the social conditions Marcuse describes. As Lichtman asks, 'How can any such minority make a revolution? If it were possible, wouldn't it be unnecessary; if necessary, impossible?'<sup>233</sup> Marcuse later recognises that 'the systematic withdrawal of tolerance toward regressive and repressive opinions and movements could only be envisaged as results of large scale pressure', which would 'presuppose that which is still to be accomplished'.<sup>234</sup> He also says that smaller scale movements could only prepare the ground, and subsequently that, despite its theoretical justification, 'the alternative to the established semi-democratic process is *not* a dictatorship or elite, no matter how intellectual and intelligent, but the struggle for a real democracy'.<sup>235</sup> That is, the imposition of a new politics still requires a popular will, and is then not dictatorship but a different form of democracy.

If we are to take this concept of 'real democracy' seriously, it implies breaking the impasse in a different way, which does not attempt to force sudden major changes in either institutions or consciousness, and can somehow confront the ideological and legal difficulties that any oppositional movement faces. Such potentials appear realistic, we assert, only to the extent that the gap between one-dimensional and two-dimensional thinking can be bridged by confronting and developing conscious ideological beliefs. In fact, Marcuse proposes some possible justifications for non-legal protest that may convince people of its legitimacy. First, he explains there is 'a universal higher law' that 'goes beyond the self-defined right and privilege of a particular group.' As such, oppositional movements can 'appeal to humanity's right to peace, to humanity's right to abolish exploitation and oppression', which are 'demonstrable as universal rights'.<sup>236</sup> Or, another alternative is 'to assert that actually we are the ones who are defending existing positive laws', that is, if 'we defend civil liberties, we are in fact defending the laws of the Establishment'.<sup>237</sup> Here, protest consciously breaks laws to *protect* the *values* those laws were meant to uphold. The first of these suggestions is problematic, since even the most brutal resistance groups could theoretically invoke a 'higher law' to justify their actions, so there is no reason why a particular claim to represent universal interests should be treated seriously. The second idea of defending positive law by breaking it represents a more dialectical development of

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<sup>233</sup> Richard Lichtman, 'Repressive Tolerance', in *Critical Theory and the Promise*, pp. 189-211 (p. 205).

<sup>234</sup> *RT*, p. 115.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>236</sup> Marcuse, 'Problem of Violence', p. 105.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

alternative ideas, based on contradictions between official values and lived experience. However, as Marcuse, says, it is pitted against established forms of positive law, which we understand indicates that its effectiveness depends on the possibility of causing conscious dissonance in individuals by appealing to strong beliefs and values that condition their affirmation of the social order.

Marcuse also suggests courses of action that may contribute towards a more gradually developing political movement, which begins from an oppositional minority, and implies the need for different forms of political participation and communication to increase numbers. For example, at points in his later work he considers political participation through official channels, which may make minor institutional changes first. He explains that, for socialism to become possible, it first requires 'a radical transformation of bourgeois democracy [...] *within* the framework of monopolistic state capitalism'. Therefore, even if opposition can manage nothing but 'the smallest and most discredited means of protest: demonstrations, pickets, even [writing] letters', they count because 'the larger the number, the quantity, the more difficult to disregard this kind of protest'.<sup>238</sup> He also recommends a 'long march through the institutions', which involves working within the system to learn the techniques of education, media, and economics while retaining resistant consciousness,<sup>239</sup> and states that actions usually condemned 'as reformist, economic, bourgeois-liberal politics can have a positive importance', because 'late capitalism boasts a diminished tolerance threshold'.<sup>240</sup> Marcuse does not clarify *why* at these specific points the tolerance of late capitalism is diminished, or letters and protests around particular issues are more effective. But, taken more generally, we can consider that such strategies may temper some of the problems that more radical protest confronts, by granting it more legitimacy, and reducing ideological support for state violence.

To summarise our argument, when Marcuse considers political change from the perspective of ideology as automatic, unconscious absorption, it exacerbates the already major problems of how an oppositional politics may emerge in current material realities. It is when we introduce the possibility of viewing ideology not only in terms of its baseline unification, but also through its various rationalisations, and consider the aspects of Marcuse's work that are

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<sup>238</sup> Marcuse, 'Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy', p. 174.

<sup>239</sup> *CRR*, p. 55. This latter again suggests ideology is not merely a matter of systemic practices, if individuals can retain oppositional consciousness while operating within them.

<sup>240</sup> Marcuse, 'Failure of New Left', p. 189.

compatible with this theory, that the development of oppositional politics becomes more plausible. In particular, it seems necessary to combine numerous legal and illegal means, based on a narrative that, initially, attempts to demonstrate the system's radical incompatibility with its professed values. For example, dominant notions of work which demand that individuals have jobs and pay taxes, or that promote concepts of meritocracy and social mobility, can be contrasted with a reality in which there is not sufficient work for all and social advancement is very difficult for the majority. The important point here is to present this critique as a systemic issue (which draws on Marcuse's arguments about automation and the increasing irrationality of alienated labour), or a contradiction whose resolution implies dramatic change to the system itself. This approach may challenge mass consciousness by exposing beliefs to alternative, historicised information and ideas, even using commodified channels that cannot fully eradicate its message, attempting to slowly reach higher levels of saturation. Such a multi-faceted, gradual concept of change does not rely on any single moment of success or failure, but is a continual project based on ever present potentials.

## VII. Conclusion

In many ways, Marcuse's theory of consumer capitalism remains highly relevant, and various threads that we have examined continue into the work of Jameson and Žižek. In particular, he identifies a combination of pressures on individuals in the form of the performance principle and repressive desublimation, or productivity and consumer pleasure, and highlights how both these aspects are crucial to the background of expectation in late industrial capitalism, with performance remaining the dominant factor. He reveals the contingency of these demands and transcendent potentials through a concept of needs, not by prescribing specific alternatives, but by encouraging radical imagination based on material possibilities. For our purposes, one of the most important elements of his approach is his critique of neutrality in its various forms, which demonstrates the need for conscious politicisation to avoid a particular politics that hides behind objective or open processes. Through this understanding, it is apparent that many forms of ideology in consumer capitalism are not explicitly political, or appear as formal freedoms or scientific logics, but as such lead to 'repressive tolerance' and justifications of waste and destruction.

The main issue we have identified with this theory is the way in which, for Marcuse, these forms of technical rationality are absorbed into consciousness as a 'second nature'. This reified one-dimensionality and concepts such as ego weakness effectively create an unbridgeable gap between ideological affirmation and opposition, with each unable to communicate with the other. In some cases, Marcuse even reduces one-dimensional ideology to a reflex of economic conditions and consumer satisfaction, and it becomes difficult to understand how two-dimensional thinking emerges, or could ever expand. These difficulties often lead Marcuse to an impasse in which neither consciousness nor the system can change without the other changing first, and he therefore generally considers change in ways that ground potentials outside consciousness, from human nature and aesthetics to intrinsic tendencies in economics and technological advancement. The problem then is that, although some of these ideas appear plausible, they remain abstract potentials with no clear basis for active development according to the concept of ideology Marcuse provides.

At the same time, despite the dominance of this thinking in Marcuse's theory, there are elements that indicate a different approach to political change. To begin with, Marcuse also mentions more explicit political interests and psychological reactions that may contribute to

affirmative ideology, and may be developed to form part of a theory of ideological rationalisations (especially when we consider that dominant social demands may be contradictory and require conscious prioritisation). In short, these ideas imply that the performance principle is not absorbed directly in many cases, but according to beliefs that represent partial or indirect commitment. From here, we can then imagine an oppositional politics that expands gradually by confronting these rationalisations. Marcuse suggests a similar approach when he sees that alternative sensibilities are already emerging, through a concept of negation which, we believe, is essential to create a politics based on sensibilities of openness and self-determination. It must, however, remain a reciprocal development between leaders and students, and communicate in ways that challenge affirmative ideologies. Understood in this way, we can envisage tactics of persuasion and co-operation with parts of all class groups, balancing narratives of systemic and individual responsibility, and using both established and alternative communications channels.



## Chapter 3

### Fredric Jameson

#### I. Introduction

This chapter focuses on Jameson's concept of postmodernism as a 'cultural logic' corresponding to 'late capitalism' and his attempts to reinvigorate the historical, dialectical perspective repressed by that logic.<sup>1</sup> As Jameson describes it, while postmodernism does not fully erase the historical dimension from culture, for many it is impossible to imagine anything beyond what exists, because representation and perception is fragmented and depthless. Consequently, various ways in which he considers re-politicising commodified culture aim not at creating an oppositional movement in the present, but at demonstrating the continued existence of dialectical thought, in the hope that it will be more widely recognisable in some unforeseeable future. Overall, we affirm Jameson's dialectical view of postmodernism as a particular 'totality' within history, and his aim of maintaining tensions between synchronic and diachronic perspectives to reinvigorate a sense of the temporal. However, Jameson's concept of ideology in postmodernism is one in which beliefs, forms of rationalisation, and awareness are irrelevant, because 'conscious ideologies and political opinions' have 'ceased to be functional in perpetuating and reproducing the system'.<sup>2</sup> Against this idea, we argue that the various political identities in postmodern society remain functioning ideologies in some sense. As such, aspects of Jameson's theory, such as his consideration of Utopia, appear more able to conceive the potential for gradual political change in the present. In effect, our approach to postmodernism considers the subordinate elements of consciousness throughout, whereas Jameson recognises these but does not sufficiently factor them into his analysis of political potentials.

The first section of this chapter examines Jameson's use of periodisation to analyse current social norms, or identify synchronic totalities situated within a diachronic series of modes of production, culminating in postmodernism and late capitalism. In many ways, Jameson's theory of postmodernism continues from Marcuse's concept of one-dimensionality, describing

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<sup>1</sup> We thus concentrate on his works on postmodernism from the 1980s, especially those collected in *PM* (1991), but also his earlier and later theories of history, narrative and Utopia, particularly *PU* (first published 1981), *AF* (2005) and *VOD* (2009).

<sup>2</sup> *PM*, p. 398.

how objects are reduced to immediate meanings, but with more 'fragmentation' and even less space for autonomous expression. Jameson emphasises the system behind the apparent randomness of cultural production, or the dominant logic that obscures alternative potentials. As with Marcuse, this understanding effectively splits the social according to affirmative and oppositional (dialectical) consciousness. However, because the unique characteristic of postmodern logic is that it flattens all historical representation into mere style or image, there appears to be no way for subordinate logics to communicate. The repercussions of this point are expanded upon as we examine Jameson's concepts of History and Utopia, which aim at reinstating the 'temporal' dimension to flattened images, by contextualising the present in terms of the past, or potential alternatives. These notions demonstrate ways of revealing the contingency of the social order and imagining social change, and are thus central to developing oppositional thinking. Nonetheless, we contend, they appear effective only to the extent that radical ideas can communicate with affirmative ideological narratives, which in Jameson's theory no longer exist in a meaningful form.

Following these arguments, our aim is to show how narrative, belief and rationalisation are important aspects of consciousness in late capitalism. For Jameson, disconnected and superficial imagery replace conscious ideology, as if the fragmented presentation of discourse within the media is reflected in the psyche itself. Conversely, we maintain that media representations still appeal to people's particular values, and that recipients always attempt to construct coherent narratives around their experience which can exceed prescribed ideas and even influence the system in return. From this idea, we define particular affirmative ideologies (with which oppositional politics must interact) from various aspects of Jameson's work. These ideologies can generally be seen as ways that people react to the market as the background reality of the late capitalist totality, or how they respond to the cultural expectations of postmodern difference and pluralism. For Jameson, such positions are more de-historicised images that merely reproduce consumer participation, or forms of cynicism that (tacitly) accept the existing order without illusion. For us, on the contrary, late capitalism relies on the conscious justifications in these positions, which often represent indirect or conditional forms of commitment.

The issue is then how oppositional forms of ideology that can challenge these affirmative forms may develop. First, we turn to the state of generalised commodification and superficial

image culture that Jameson defines. We examine the dichotomy he establishes between modernism and postmodernism to highlight the dominant features of the present, and how the ubiquity of commodified cultural production makes the expression and reception of oppositional political ideas problematic. While we understand the importance of mass commodification in these respects, we consider whether 'modernist' processes are still part of postmodernism to a degree that is obscured by Jameson's defining them in contrast to each other. As such, it is unclear that the forms and content of postmodern culture are necessarily 'depthless', and instead they may contain utopian or political ideas in a similar way to modern art, even if substantially obscured by their distribution as commodities. From this point, through our understanding that ideologies tend to exceed de-politicised media representations, we suggest ways in which people might receive these ideas, or otherwise develop oppositional political thinking even through commodity culture.

The implication of our theory is thus that subjectivity in postmodernism is more than a collection of depthless identities, and involves an active consciousness. Jameson explains that such agency exists, and subjectivity should not be reduced to systemic factors, but his focus on structure and mediated images of social groups means that he rarely considers the potential of such agency. This problem is also present in his concept of 'cognitive mapping', which suggests a way of reintroducing the temporal dimension to 'spatialized' postmodern logic. From our perspective, cognitive mapping is important for social change if we understand affirmative ideologies as active sets of beliefs that attempt to produce coherent narratives of the system, in that it reinterprets them in terms of class consciousness. Without this notion of functioning ideology, as in Jameson's theory, the potential for historical thinking is reduced to its recognition by a marginal element in society, and there is no (present) way for such recognition to escape depthless representation and develop dialectically.

It is still possible to draw some political potentials from Jameson's theory, although he pays less attention to actual political efforts than either Marcuse or Žižek. On one hand, the style and cultural focus of Jameson's work has certain advantages, such as unifying intellectual fields that may otherwise be separated, or allowing him to use a writing style that evokes dialectical openness. These factors point to the value of cultural critique, but in our view also suggest a greater need to balance it with political ideas to make it more widely accessible. On the other

hand, there are some instances where Jameson does consider politics, and the implications of this relatively minor aspect of his work may be expanded into our overall theory. Specifically, Jameson describes how 'new social movements' represent ideologies that exceed consumerist logic and represent a kind of agency, but the particularised nature of these movements make it difficult to imagine how they could connect into a class consciousness. We argue that this agency is a general feature of ideology, and revolves around social contradictions common to the experience of many ideologies, which provide a basis for connection.

As with our analysis of Marcuse's work, we attempt to show, by applying our theory of ideology to notions such as historicising, utopian politics, commodified media and fragmented perception, that Jameson's theories already imply potential for an oppositional political movement. As such, we support Jameson's commitment to a Marxist dialectics and his concepts of History and Utopia as ways of revealing political possibilities against dominant representations of the present.<sup>3</sup> However, at the same time, we concur with criticisms that highlight Jameson's over-emphasis of dominant aspects of the totality.<sup>4</sup> The point to emphasise is both that there are still 'functioning' ideologies which rationalise the capitalist system in different ways, according to their own beliefs and contradictions, and that these ideologies indicate that culture is not merely experienced in fragments, so a general capacity to produce and receive historically situated concepts remains. Our aim is then to shift the balance in Jameson's work slightly from the logic of the system to its supports, or the way in which ideas and knowledge remain crucial to its survival.

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<sup>3</sup> In particular, we argue against notions such as that Jameson's totalising reduces the scope of political thought or claims to represent a historical referent (LaCapra, Roberts); that his focus on Marxism implies the exclusion of other progressive discourses (Best); or that Jameson's call for temporal politics ignores spatial politics (Homer, Massey).

<sup>4</sup> For example, we generally affirm ideas that Jameson's concept of totality closes off space for oppositional ideas to emerge (Best and Kellner, Homer); that he focuses too exclusively on higher level dominant trends, such as fragmented cultural form, rather than specific phenomena (Eagleton, Said); that he is overly selective and generalising with the texts he analyses (Callinicos, Homer, Nicholls); and therefore that he does not fully consider forms of politics that may already exist in postmodern culture (Burnham, Hutcheon, Spivak).

## II. Key Concepts

### i) Postmodernism

We begin by examining Jameson's definition of postmodernism according to his theory of periodisation and totalising. Jameson identifies the current 'postmodern' cultural logic and 'late capitalism' (a term borrowed from Mandel to describe the phase of capitalism that succeeds its monopoly or imperial form) as a homogenising global totality that erases historical experience and absorbs other cultural logics and autonomous space. For Jameson, this logic is a cultural dominant, in the sense that it also contains remnants of previous and anticipatory cultures, and any 'totality' includes its own contradictions. This concept of totality therefore considers what is excluded from it, or the contingent assumptions that support it. However, in our understanding, Jameson's definition of postmodernism as a particular period within a series of historically developing modes of production is overly totalising, in that it appears to leave no space outside it, and the remnants of other cultures are powerless to escape absorption into its logic. As with Marcuse's concept of one-dimensionality, oppositional forces are present, but it is not clear how they emerge in the conditions Jameson describes, and the dialectical movement of history appears (temporarily) frozen. We thus emphasise that analysis of postmodernism should include its limitations, gaps and contradictions within definitions of the dominant logic.

Postmodernism, for Jameson, is a cultural logic relating to a particular phase of capitalism that is distinct from modernism in various ways. He identifies its 'constitutive features' as 'a new depthlessness', based in 'a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum', plus 'a consequent weakening of historicity', and 'a whole new type of emotional ground tone [...] which can best be grasped by a return to older theories of the sublime', and relates all these notions to 'a whole new technology, which is itself a figure for a whole new economic world system'.<sup>5</sup> In effect, a de-historicising culture of the image turns experience into a string of disconnected present moments, which reflects a hugely complex economic system that separates objects from their conditions of production, and eradicates traditional ways of life to a previously unimaginable extent. Jameson thus explains that postmodernism is a 'spatial' logic, in which temporal experience is reduced to manufactured consumerist cycles, such as the seasons of sport or

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<sup>5</sup> *PM*, p. 6.

fashion, which 'simulate formerly natural rhythms for commercial convenience'.<sup>6</sup> Outside these cycles, the present is merely updated through mass media with disembodied 'events' that fade away as the next occurs. In this sense, everything becomes 'cultural', so even politics is disconnected from history, and, as with Marcuse, artistic expression loses its connection with the sublime, becoming mere exchange value and sensual experience. Postmodern culture creates spectacle and 'intensities' of feeling, whose absence of context causes a 'waning of effect', so images do not evoke emotion or social and existential anxieties, and the autonomous modern subject fragments into superficial group identities.

All these features Jameson defines correspond to a particular economic structure, with the expansion of the spatial reflecting the geographical expansion of capitalism. As he puts it, postmodernism is 'the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world', and 'the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and terror'.<sup>7</sup> The image of cultural and aesthetic freedom, and the everyday practices, social norms and mental habits associated with it, are all part of this domination, and represent a paradox in postmodernism 'between an unparalleled rate of change on all the levels of social life and an unparalleled standardization of everything — feelings along with consumer goods, language along with built space'.<sup>8</sup> Nothing produced in this system is really new, in the sense of changing the system itself, but simply a mass of consumer styles that emerge from its stability. Jameson contrasts his approach with 'postmodern theory' that effectively accepts postmodernism as non-systematic production of difference, because he sees that a theoretical focus on language and arbitrariness of meaning 'is closely linked with the emergence of these phenomena as relatively autonomous and opaque objects in their own right in the new distribution mechanisms of industrial capitalism'.<sup>9</sup> That is, it is a feature of late capitalist logic to not view itself as a system at all, which obscures that even 'a system that constitutively produces differences remains a system', and need not resemble the object it produces.<sup>10</sup>

In many ways, Jameson's view of postmodern culture reflects an advanced form of the social and economic conditions identified by Marcuse. Mass consumption, planned

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<sup>6</sup> Jameson, 'The Antinomies of Postmodernity', in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 50-72 (p. 59).

<sup>7</sup> *PM*, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Jameson, 'Antinomies of Postmodernity', pp. 57-58.

<sup>9</sup> Jameson, 'The Ideology of the Text', in *Ideologies of Theory*, pp. 20-76 (p. 22).

<sup>10</sup> *PM*, p. 343.

obsolescence, visual technologies, global communications, and general standardisation of life, are epiphenomena of a broader change — a redistributed prosperity in centres of capitalism afforded by global expansion. In these terms, the system becomes increasingly complex and creates an ever deeper disconnect between local lived experience and globally outsourced exploitation and oppression. As Jameson explains, experience started to become locally authentic but false overall during imperialist times, as the total system escaped individual understanding,<sup>11</sup> but today multiple levels of abstraction between production and consumption make the system a sublime, whose partial unveiling through criticism still does not provide real comprehension. Jameson in fact identifies within Marcuse's work the central point that 'the consumer's society [...] has lost the experience of the negative in all its forms', and that without that contrast, a 'genuinely human existence' is impossible.<sup>12</sup> But, like Marcuse, Jameson also still views late capitalism in terms of class division, so while a certain cultural democratisation in postmodernism 'dismantles many of the barriers to cultural consumption that seemed implicit in modernism', marginalised groups still exist that 'repudiate the very concept of a postmodernism as the universalizing cover story for what is essentially a much narrower class-cultural operation'.<sup>13</sup> Postmodern notions of cultural democracy, and power politics based on identity recognition, repress questions of wealth distribution and ownership of production that refuse to disappear, given the realities of economic deprivation.

Jameson's concept of postmodernism reveals clear differences in the culture of today's dominant capitalist societies (and even globally in some respects)<sup>14</sup> compared to their earlier forms. The array of fragmented, image-focused styles appears to reflect important social shifts, such as globalised manufacturing, mass consumerism, identity politics and new media technologies, which go beyond mere stylistic shifts within art.<sup>15</sup> It is not necessarily the case that postmodernism is so different that it represents 'a whole new economic world system', but such

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 411.

<sup>12</sup> *MF*, p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> *PM*, p. 318.

<sup>14</sup> Postmodernism is a global dominant in the sense that increasing market penetration into popular cultures worldwide, especially through new media technologies, gives it an overall predominance, if not necessarily dominance in each individual nation. See Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 122-123.

<sup>15</sup> Shumway defines postmodernism in this more limited, cultural form. See David Shumway, 'Jameson/Hermeneutics/Postmodernism', in *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, ed. by Kellner (Washington, DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1989), pp. 172-202 (p. 189).

rhetoric is not meant to be taken literally, and Jameson is more attempting to define the present as a synchronic totality, so that cultural dominants are clearly perceived. He explains that defining the current cultural paradigm in contrast to a past paradigm requires an 'inaugural narrative act that grounds the perception and interpretation of the events to be narrated.' He also claims to 'have pretended to believe that the postmodern is as unusual as it thinks it is',<sup>16</sup> so that it can be viewed as a distinct historical moment. Thus, there is no sudden and clean break between modernism and postmodernism, as various causal factors at different historical points (mass consumerism and television in the 1950s, a psychological shift in the 1960s) contribute to the present situation.<sup>17</sup> As Jameson says, all social formations contain 'several modes of production all at once, including vestiges and survivals of older modes of production [...] as well as anticipatory tendencies'.<sup>18</sup> It is therefore necessary to 'respect both the methodological imperative implicit in the concept of totality or totalization, and the quite different attention of a "symptomal" analysis to discontinuities, rifts, actions at distance, within a merely apparently unified cultural text'.<sup>19</sup> In that sense, the qualities of postmodernism have developed from an anticipatory position, and retain other subordinate cultural logics.

The concept of totalising is useful to our understanding of a social split, in the sense that it aims to analyse society as a particular system to identify its points of exclusion and intolerance. In Jameson's sense, it connects different social levels, such as economics, culture and politics, by assuming a 'semi-autonomy' between them, which accepts a certain analytical value in considering them separately, but also the mutual influence between them. For Jameson, this interconnected view is not 'purely symbolic', since the levels cannot be separate in any absolute sense,<sup>20</sup> but it remains an abstraction, which is 'as false as it is true',<sup>21</sup> because there is no actual specific form of connection either.<sup>22</sup> As such, totalising promotes a particular interpretation of

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<sup>16</sup> *PM*, p. xiii.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xx. We may add that other factors may have made society 'more postmodern' since Jameson's definition, from further capitalist expansion facilitated by the end of the Cold War, to a greater cultural fragmentation due to the growth of the internet.

<sup>18</sup> *PU*, p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 87.

<sup>22</sup> In this sense, the point is not that totalising represents reality as it is, or that Jameson's 'mediation of criticism [...] is not symbolic at all [...] because the totality is real' and 'the fragmentation [...] is illusory' (Adam Roberts, *Fredric Jameson* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 79). Rather, even if any representation of History is not 'genuinely symbolic', it still does not point towards a 'precise referent' (Thomas Huhn, 'The

social conditions over others, but it does not then mean that it may undermine an alliance politics, because 'the quest for totalization functions to regenerate structures of domination'.<sup>23</sup> First, Jameson distinguishes totalising from totalitarian absolutes, or any effort to annul the gap between subject and object. He explains it never involves a 'privileged bird's-eye view of the whole', and his project 'implies exactly the opposite and takes as its premise the impossibility for individual and biological human subjects to conceive of such a position, let alone to adopt or achieve it'.<sup>24</sup> Second, some form of dominating assumption is inevitable in any social theory, even if it takes an 'anti-totality' view, because it must still exclude certain forms of politics to create an alliance or shared vision. The question for a totalising theory is then how it represents the whole, and for Jameson the aim of showing capitalism as a totality is 'to demonstrate that it cannot be reformed, and that its repairs [...] necessarily end up strengthening and enlarging it'.<sup>25</sup> An alliance politics could then be built on such ideas.

From our perspective, the issue with Jameson's theory of postmodernism is rather that, despite his insistence that it is as a kind of ideal theory, or a cultural dominant with various 'symptomal' rifts and discontinuities, he often focuses purely on its dominant qualities over its contingency and thereby limits the scope for imagining deep political change. He explains that, while not all cultural production is postmodern, 'The postmodern is [...] the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses [...] must make their way'.<sup>26</sup> It then seems that, although all historical dominants create such a 'force field', the postmodern version is one that can engulf all subordinate culture in its de-historicising logic, and has, as Marcuse feared, annihilated the autonomous sphere. The globalisation of capitalism also means there is no geographical outside, and thus no existing alternative social form. Jameson states that today's capitalism 'eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated and exploited', leading to 'a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious'.<sup>27</sup> The commodity form has expanded to the point that even the natural environment is considered in terms of its exchange value, and these relations of value are reproduced unconsciously through

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Postmodern Return, With a Vengeance, of Subjectivity', in *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, pp. 228-248 (p. 231)).

<sup>23</sup> Dominick LaCapra, 'Review Essay: *The Political Unconscious*', *History and Theory*, 21 (1982), 83-106 (p. 90).

<sup>24</sup> *PM*, p. 332.

<sup>25</sup> Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Commentary on Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 146-147.

<sup>26</sup> *PM*, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

everyday behaviour, The 'force field' is the capitalist mode of production, represented by commodification that is more deeply and widely embedded in social relations than ever before. It appears that dominant culture colonises the physical and psychological areas from which non-dominated expression could emerge, and the 'vestiges' and 'anticipatory tendencies' are interpreted according to its logic.<sup>28</sup> These statements then seem to be more than mere rhetorical devices that establish the particular dominant features of the totality, and form the basis of Jameson's approaches to political change.

In our understanding, the point is that even to the extent oppositional ideas are either repressed or incorporated by the commodity form, they retain content that may affect how people understand commodification and the social problems it engenders. In Jameson's terms, conversely, the diachronic, uneven movement of history itself has reached a point (for the foreseeable future) at which it reabsorbs its own contradictions. If, in general, a dominant cultural logic must represent itself as universal to maintain dominance, it seems that the postmodern logic rooted in globalised commodification, really defuses oppositional thinking and becomes universal by default. It is true, as Jameson says, that the lack of any existing major alternatives to late capitalism means that it is theoretically problematic to provide any 'solution' to its dominance, since then 'the statement of the problem will seem to have failed, by underestimating the problem'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, overstating the conditions of postmodernism may have important political effects, in that without it very little 'historical understanding' finds a way into critical analysis.<sup>30</sup> But it should still be possible to historicise even the conditions of late capitalism without depicting them as so fully colonising, and without needing to claim that some oppositional force is ready to replace them, according to the dialectical concept of totality.<sup>31</sup> Jameson warns that it is problematic to propose a closed system, because it creates a 'winner loses' logic, in which the successful theorist finds there is no purpose left for critical negation.<sup>32</sup> Yet, because he presents

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<sup>28</sup> Sean Homer, *Fredric Jameson: Marxism, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 109.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Helmling, *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson: Writing, the Sublime, and the Dialectic of Critique* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Evan Watkins, 'Generally Historicizing', in *On Jameson: From Postmodernism to Globalization*, ed. by Caren Irr and Ian Buchanan (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006), pp. 15-25 (p. 25).

<sup>31</sup> Buchanan, *Fredric Jameson: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> *PM*, p. 5.

a 'too totalizing' dominance,<sup>33</sup> his analysis effectively succumbs to this logic, rendering inconceivable any space that postmodern logic fails to absorb, or any conscious means for instigating a subsequent dialectical step.<sup>34</sup> The caveats about synchronic periodisation that Jameson introduces are not integral to the bulk of his analysis, so he often does not fully consider the obstacles and limits to the phenomena he identifies. In contrast, we perceive that if a radical political opposition is to become plausible, cultural dominants should be assessed *throughout* in terms of how they negatively affect postmodern dominance and the conditions of its acceptance.

## ii) History and Narrative

Re-contextualising the present in relation to history, or as part of a narrative which views society in terms of fluctuation, contingency and latent potentials, is then a major part of Jameson's project. For Jameson, the point is not that this perspective reveals some absolute form of history, but that it is a specific interpretation that allows us to question existing norms, by showing them as dominant particulars and revealing subordinate potentials beyond them. We agree with Jameson here that the 'truth', in effect, is the constant possibility of historicising, and that the particular narrative he employs is valuable because it reveals experiences of deprivation and oppression. The problem is how this historicising can be useful in postmodernism, if mass culture flattens out all narrative into disconnected images, and, for Jameson, it is a case of deciphering how narrative may be reintroduced at all in these conditions. But if we consider his theories of textual analysis, which involve reading different levels of political unconscious in ideological expression, we can understand that culture still functions through explanatory narratives and a continuing struggle between different beliefs, each with limitations that a commitment to historicising helps expose.

Jameson's concept of Marxist historicising is a specific aim not simply to construct a chain of empirical events, but to form a narrative of 'the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity'.<sup>35</sup> In these terms, the concept of Necessity has parallels with scarcity in Marcuse's theory, in its widest sense as the cultural, psychological, and technological limits on humanity at any historical point. These limits prevent Freedom, but Freedom itself is a response to Necessity, or a desire for transcendence articulated based on experienced limits. History is

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<sup>33</sup> Steven Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1991), p. 274.

<sup>34</sup> Kellner, 'Jameson, Marxism, and Postmodernism', in *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, pp. 1-42 (p. 29).

<sup>35</sup> *PU*, p. 3.

then not an objective reality, but that which structures people's understanding of the past and their future potentials, based on the endless contrast between what is and what could be. As Jameson puts it, 'history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise', but 'an absent cause, [...] inaccessible to us except in textual form'.<sup>36</sup> It can only ever be represented, and in a way that is dependent on the particular concepts and expressions available to a society.<sup>37</sup>

The aim is then to analyse texts to gain insight into the historical limits and desires behind their ideological expressions. It is not a matter of explaining what texts mean, but of 'metacommentary', or identifying in an interpretation 'a particular narrative trait, or seme, as a function of its social, historical, or political context'.<sup>38</sup> Different interpretations are not wrong, for Jameson, but always contain ideological assumptions that they do not fully recognise, and which can be revealed. As such, he says, a Marxist method of historicising that avoids final meaning is 'the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation',<sup>39</sup> and exists within other methods as a repressed reality of their relationship to 'collective struggle'. It shows the 'political unconscious' behind all expression, which can be read at three different levels — those 'of the political (immediate historic events), of the social (class and class consciousness), and of the economic (the mode of production)'.<sup>40</sup> As Jameson explains it, the first level involves reading the text as a symbolic act which confronts a political issue without being able to consciously express it, or 'the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*',<sup>41</sup> that retrospectively becomes observable as an 'absent cause'. At the second level, a wider collective or class discourse is expressed in the text, which is viewed as a single ideological utterance, or 'ideologeme', in a larger dialogic range of voices, perceivable through its oppositional relationships.<sup>42</sup> In the final level, the dynamics of several modes of production are identified within the text, and 'make up what can be termed *the ideology of form*, that is, the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the various sign systems which coexist in a

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> As Homer describes this idea, History is 'a structural limit on consciousness and agency, a limit we constantly come up against whether or not we intend it' (Homer, 'Narratives of History, Narratives of Time', in *On Jameson*, pp. 71-91 (p. 78)).

<sup>38</sup> Jameson, 'Symbolic Inference; or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis', in *Ideologies of Theory*, pp. 144-160 (p. 147).

<sup>39</sup> *PU*, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> *PU*, p. 66.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp.72-73.

given artistic process as well as in its general social formation'.<sup>43</sup> Here, the text is contextualised as an expression of a moment within an overall history of changing and overlapping master narratives, not merely within the context of a single social order.

Jameson's method is important for imagining radical political potentials because it understands ideology within relationships of dominance and subordination that are contingent and temporary, and therefore questions the Necessity that maintains such dominance. In our view, it is also possible for this method to be the horizon of interpretation while representing a form of interpretation itself, or 'always situation-specific and singular',<sup>44</sup> rather than some metaphysical principle. On the surface, as Boer explains, it may seem difficult to maintain these ideas together, because either Jameson 'allows that Marxism must jostle for position in the theoretical marketplace', or 'he asserts the superiority of Marxism', which suggests 'there is less room to be open to the possibilities of other methods'.<sup>45</sup> But the point, as Boer concludes, is that if a range of possible interpretations is viewed as a plurality of equal positions (or even choices), Marxist dialectics can always then analyse the historical conditions of that plurality. As such, narrative *is* always ideological representation, and Marxism *is* another master code, but one that can always de-finalise any particular interpretation.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, it is not only this ability to historicise that is important in Jameson's method, but the particular narrative of history it constructs. That is, the concept of History as Freedom versus Necessity appears evident at a basic level (as the clash of natural/social limits and natural/social desires), but also represents a specific aim to conceive social struggles and desires in a way that exposes contradictions in the present through actual forms of marginalisation, deprivation and oppression. In this sense, for Jameson, 'History as ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular theoretical justification', because 'its alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them'.<sup>47</sup> It remains the case that, because

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>44</sup> Jameson, *Representing Capital*, p. 19.

<sup>45</sup> Roland Boer, 'A Level Playing Field? Metacommentary and Marxism', in *On Jameson*, pp. 51-69 (p. 64).

<sup>46</sup> Even so, Jameson distinguishes between Marxism as a method and its actual realisations which can 'be submitted to just such a critique of their own local ideological limits' (*PU*, p. 38). Moreover, the method itself can be historicised; it is not that 'any historicism must include at least one precept — "always historicize!" — which is axiomatic, and as such exempt' (Eagleton, 'Jameson and Form', *New Left Review*, 59 (2009), 123-137 (p. 135)). That is, the injunction to historicise is historical, but could only be invalidated by an absolute that somehow resists historicising.

<sup>47</sup> *PU*, p. 88.

Necessity and Freedom are only meaningful in their (ideological) representation, Marxism inevitably highlights certain types of Freedom and Necessity over others.<sup>48</sup> Yet, Jameson recognises both that the narrative of class struggle is an idealised abstraction through which he *chooses* to construct a dialectical history, because interpretation must contextualise its object within 'a social field dominated by some central contradiction',<sup>49</sup> *and* that this choice is not purely subjective, because categories such as class and wage labour are 'symptoms' of social reality.<sup>50</sup>

The difference between this method and other narratives is then in the *extent* it reveals potentials for political Freedom from particular existing forms of Necessity. It is *not*, as Best claims, that Jameson's focus is reductive, because it cannot be decided in advance that 'Marxism assigns the ultimate place of other discourses', and it may be 'that a feminist or psychoanalytic reading of a text is more appropriate and more powerful in some cases'.<sup>51</sup> Jameson's Marxism does not *replace* these readings, so that we must choose the most appropriate to each situation. Rather, it relates them to class struggle in a way that resists a narrower contextualisation (such as within identity politics), and retains the human factor of social organisation.<sup>52</sup> This narrative is restrictive in the sense that its contextualisation precludes other overall contexts, but any approach, including one that attempts to critique the limits of narrative in general, has the same result. For example, Spivak notes that postmodern art can historicise the past, rather than effacing it, as Jameson claims, because its appropriation and juxtaposition of past styles 'can be read as a questioning of the identification of continuist narratives of history with History as such', or a reminder that History is not 'a transcendental signifier for the weight of authority (or the authoritative explanation)', and 'has no literal referent'.<sup>53</sup> What is intrinsic to Jameson's method, however, is not only that it already avoids presenting class struggle as a literal referent of history, but also that it asks *why* we should view history in this way. In other words, it accepts that its attempt to disrupt theoretical hierarchies is a means towards a specific end, and implies that any similar approach must also have a purpose. More specifically, it shows that such theories must effectively choose between a narrative that focuses on deep structural causes of social disparity,

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<sup>48</sup> Homer, *Marxism, Hermeneutics*, pp. 65-67.

<sup>49</sup> Jameson, 'The State of the Subject (III)', *Critical Quarterly*, 29 (1987), 16-25 (p. 20).

<sup>50</sup> *VOD*, p. 277.

<sup>51</sup> Best, 'Jameson, Totality, and the Poststructuralist Critique', in *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, pp. 333-368 (p. 365).

<sup>52</sup> *MF*, p. 74.

<sup>53</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 331.

a narrative that focuses on inequalities within established structures, and a kind of anti-narrative that merely emphasises the falsity of all ideological positions, but therefore tacitly affirms the system by ignoring its disparities.<sup>54</sup> None of these approaches are right or wrong, but they have different political effects, and the context of class struggle functions as a rallying point for more radical change. As Jameson says, we should not conclude that 'since it is unrepresentable, capitalism is ineffable and a kind of mystery beyond language or thought; but rather that one must redouble one's efforts to express the inexpressible in this respect'.<sup>55</sup>

One area of contention in Jameson's theory of historicising is the way he contrasts his structural analysis against moral judgement, which distances it from subjective belief. He explains, for example, how Marx saw that 'collective forms' of political change 'are not merely desirable (or ethical), not even possible, but also and above all inevitable, provided we understand the bringing to emergence of that inevitability as a collective human task and project'.<sup>56</sup> But if a concept such as Freedom versus Necessity suggests the existing social order is tested against historical potentials and our ability to realise them, rather than moral standards, Jameson demonstrates ethical suppositions in the will to see these potentials come to fruition. His idea that History is 'a text-to-be-(re)-constructed', and there is 'an obligation to do so',<sup>57</sup> can only imply a moral obligation, which assumes that a collective project is *right*. As Eagleton argues, Jameson's analysis includes morally judgemental language, which he uses to explain why he 'should object to poverty or unemployment, or [...] why he finds the utopian impulse so precious'.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, there is no absolute reason why we should seek to deliberately further the cause of Freedom over Necessity. In fact, as with Eros, aspects of Freedom may even work against civilizational ties, and Jameson avoids these aspects precisely by defining Freedom according to certain values. It is still important to criticise the moralising of particular *symptoms* of capitalism, rather than the system itself, but structural analysis does not indicate a lack of moral judgement. Thus, where Jameson explains that 'violence pornography' in action films 'is not to be seen as a form of immorality at all but rather as a structural effect of the temporality of our

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<sup>54</sup> Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 27.

<sup>55</sup> Jameson, *Representing Capital*, p. 7.

<sup>56</sup> *AF*, p. 250.

<sup>57</sup> Jameson, 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan', in *Ideologies of Theory*, pp. 77-124 (p. 110).

<sup>58</sup> Eagleton, 'Making a Break', *London Review of Books*, 28 (2006) <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n05/terry-eagleton/making-a-break>> [accessed August 10 2016] (para. 10 of 17)

socioeconomic system',<sup>59</sup> it is not clear how a purely structural analysis could turn that mere observation into a *critique* of capitalism.

To a great extent, Jameson's theory of historicising is then central to our theoretical assumptions, but the question remains how it can function in postmodernism. In Jameson's terms, historical representation becomes doubly problematic in postmodern culture, in that not only is History an absent cause, but its representation in narrative is fragmented into individual images, and this postmodern logic has penetrated the general unconscious. It is already necessary, as Jameson explains, to represent the global society allegorically, which 'happens when you know you cannot represent something but you also cannot not do it'.<sup>60</sup> Yet, as with art in Marcuse's theory, such allegory is effectively a code that only the un-colonised might recognise, and is beyond the understanding of the masses. For a historicising approach to be widely effective, therefore, it seems that it must be able to communicate with elements of narrative that remain in the colonised unconscious. In this sense, the concept of political unconscious that Jameson introduces prior to his postmodern theory suggests that *all* texts are narrative, ideological resolutions to unconscious social issues, so it should also be possible to read postmodern texts in terms of the specific beliefs and rationalisations with which they interpret the social situation. Although Jameson may recognise this possibility, his analysis of postmodern texts focuses on their *repression* of history, rather than detecting narratives in apparent fragmentation to be contrasted with notions of class struggle.<sup>61</sup>

The different levels of political unconscious that Jameson defines are useful in this respect, if we emphasise the mediation between them, as different aspects of ideology. As in *PU*, all levels are detectable in any given text or ideology, but our aim is to focus on the mutual influence between them, whereas Jameson tends to treat the three levels separately.<sup>62</sup> In particular, for Jameson, the third level of modes of production and the general contingency of ideology takes precedence, rather than specific ideological resolutions. However, we can compare the first level, which produces 'aesthetic or narrative form' to create 'imaginary or formal

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<sup>59</sup> Jameson, 'The End of Temporality', *Critical Inquiry*, 29 (2003), 695-718 (p. 718).

<sup>60</sup> Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*, ed. by Buchanan (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 196.

<sup>61</sup> In other words, it is not a matter of distinguishing 'between those who historicize and those who do not, but between different conceptions of history', including 'those who hold that, like many a postmodern text, there is no plot to it at all' (Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 34).

<sup>62</sup> Homer, *Marxism, Hermeneutics*, p. 55.

“solutions” to unresolvable social contradictions’,<sup>63</sup> to individual rationalisations of social experience. At this level, specific beliefs and justifications may be analysed, to understand more fully how they affirm or reject existing class relations. As such, the first level contributes to class struggle through the rationalisation of social contradictions, just as the historical development of class struggle overdetermines the narratives themselves. In effect, multiple ideologies pull the dominant logic in different directions, and act as its supports, while the logic influences the nature of those supports. In terms of postmodernism, ‘depthlessness’ is then itself an ideological resolution, which obscures how ideologies continually mediate between the levels of political unconscious, and reconcile global ideas with individual experience through narratives.

### **iii) Utopia**

As Jameson’s theory of History considers dialectical temporality in terms of the past, its counterpart is the future of political struggle as understood through the concept of Utopia. Or, as historicising points to the contingency of the present, Utopia implies the impossibility of social stasis by actually imagining alternative futures. The central issue Jameson identifies is that of how to communicate the utopian notion of a radically different future in terms of everyday political ideas. Ostensibly, the problem here is again that of invigorating two-dimensional thought through one-dimensional language, but Jameson confronts the challenge more directly than Marcuse. He sees the tension between the two sides as the necessary condition to develop utopian thought, by introducing comprehensible political concepts that, if thought through, enable critical reflection on existing social relations. This approach supports the possibility of gradual ideological change, as it suggests a level of openness to new concepts even in affirmative ideologies. However, it is not clear, as Jameson argues, that this potential indicates a ‘utopian impulse’ which privileges socialist collective politics. Instead, we emphasise that there is only a clash of utopian visions, represented by different ideologies, and that alternative thought must be directed towards specific political ends. We also note that the development of utopian alternatives Jameson suggests implies a level of ideological rationalisation that is not present in his theories of postmodernism.

The concept of Utopia as Jameson presents it is a way of reinvigorating thought about alternative social formations that is otherwise largely discredited. Jameson explains that ‘Utopian

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<sup>63</sup> *PU*, p. 64.

form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality',<sup>64</sup> which effectively imagines Freedom from the perceived Necessities of that totality. As with History, it views the present as contingent, but from the perspective of an alternative future, based on existing potentials and the social changes required. Utopia is 'another word for the socialist project',<sup>65</sup> for Jameson, which, similar to Marcuse, demonstrates repressed structural tendencies, and counters pejorative definitions that either stress the impossibility of qualitative change or its empty idealism. Jameson in fact sees that Utopia should be especially central to political considerations when social alternatives do not seem viable (such as late capitalism), because trying to imagine something beyond what exists sparks the re-evaluation of current limits. Focusing on Utopia does not mean 'the outlines of a new and effective practical politics [...] will at once become visible; but only that we will never come to one without it'.<sup>66</sup>

It is then a question of identifying utopian ideals and understanding where they are located. Jameson distinguishes between discrete utopian political programmes and an underlying utopian impulse in cultural expression. The first represents an explicit politics that attempts to correct a particular wrong seen as the root problem in a social order, according to a certain project. The second is an ever-present abstract ideal or proto-political desire in the psyche, whose lack of fulfilment is compensated for by particular ideological goals, such as liberal reform, market fundamentalism, or consumer pleasure.<sup>67</sup> Psychologically, Jameson explains, this impulse may represent some felt lack of collectivity or deep-rooted longing to become a 'people', even though such a collective has no real historical precedent,<sup>68</sup> which dissipates if not revitalised by utopian thinking. The problem with trying to connect these two forms into a radical politics is that the abstract ideal can only be developed by ideas that exceed existing political activities and social norms, while a political project must ultimately communicate with a population through these norms. There is an incompatibility between Utopia and any actual politics, and Jameson explains that although Utopia 'inevitably arouses political passions', it seems 'to avoid or to

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<sup>64</sup> AF, p. xii.

<sup>65</sup> Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (1986), 65-88 (p. 80).

<sup>66</sup> Jameson, 'The Politics of Utopia', *New Left Review*, 25 (2004), 35-54 (p. 36).

<sup>67</sup> AF, p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> Jameson, 'On "Cultural Studies"', in *Ideologies of Theory*, pp. 598-635 (p. 625).

abolish the political altogether'.<sup>69</sup> Thus, utopian politics must be subjected to current social concepts, which reduce its radical dimension, else it remains an unknown transcendence that appears to cancel humanity itself, and can 'reawaken all the most classical fears of Utopia as such'.<sup>70</sup>

The important point here, for Jameson, is not that this paradox is terminal for utopian politics, but that it signifies a dialectical tension which represents the mechanism of utopian possibility. The solution is precisely to accept this tension, and walk a line between the radically different and ordinary communication. Then, in attempting to represent the utopian impulse symbolically or allegorically, imagining how this symbolisation is possible can slowly alter the limits of representation. As Jameson explains, debates around the issue of utopian representation itself may 'find themselves drawn inside the Utopian text, thereby becoming occasions for further Utopian productivity'.<sup>71</sup> In short, defining and communicating the impossible produces conditions of possibility and gratification.<sup>72</sup> Thus if, for Marcuse, the obstacle for utopian art is that it must somehow remain autonomous *and* become less marginal, for Jameson, the antagonism between marginalisation and established politics is the engine of utopian thinking. There is even a common ground of understanding between the apparently contradictory poles, since individual wish-fulfilment is based on social influences, including deeply internalised taboos that affect imaginative constructs.<sup>73</sup> In other words, the autonomous utopian wish is shaped by society, and can never represent a total break from what exists.

Jameson also describes the tension in utopian politics through the concepts of 'Imagination' — an overall utopian vision and commitment to change — and 'Fancy' — the micro processes and details of change — which alternately take precedence depending on social conditions. So, historically, for Jameson, industrial capitalism simplified the task of Imagination because the only alternative option was to abolish the single mode of production, but

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<sup>69</sup> *AF*, p. 37.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>72</sup> As Leslie puts it, in a way that also follows Marcuse, the aim is to show that 'Revolution is possibility; and revolution is possible.' That is, revolution is not inevitable, according to some determinist notion of progress, but the idea that it is possible is necessary because it 'swims against the current, and is the minimal performative utterance that must be voiced as insurance for the future' (Esther Leslie, 'Jameson, Brecht, Lenin and Spectral Possibilities', in *Fredric Jameson: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Homer and Kellner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 195-209 (p. 207)).

<sup>73</sup> *AF*, p. 53.

subsequently capitalism and socialism dominated Imagination to the point that only the practical politics and details (Fancy) remained. At this point, Jameson explains, the utopian impulse wanes and 'the function of Imagination slowly atrophies for want of use', leaving us 'in the helpless position of passive accomplices and impotent handwringers'.<sup>74</sup> However, if it seems that late capitalism offers the worst of both worlds, with the single, global system leaving no space for Imagination, and Fancy being incorporated into individual 'life-style' fantasies, the utopian impulse can be reborn, according to Jameson, *because* there are no other political potentials. That is, when political change seems near, utopian imagination and speculation give way to concrete programmes, whereas in de-politicised conditions, radical politics is separated from daily experience and 'allows us to take hitherto unimaginable mental liberties with structures whose actual modification or abolition scarcely seem on the cards'.<sup>75</sup>

More specifically, Jameson believes it may be possible to reinvigorate Imagination by fully considering forms of Fancy. The idea is that thinking through a notion such as the abolition of money 'unexpectedly foregrounds all kinds of new individual, social and ontological relationships', and revives something of the utopian impulse.<sup>76</sup> There is no specific vision of an alternative future here, but questioning such an important social element at least makes people imagine the possibility of alternatives. In this sense, Jameson says, 'Utopian is no longer the invention and defense of a specific floorplan, but rather the story of all the arguments about how Utopia should be constructed in the first place.'<sup>77</sup> The result is a gradual development that effectively avoids Marcuse's impasse between changes in social structures and consciousness, because the mention of the ideal 'returns upon our present to play a diagnostic and a critical-substantive role'.<sup>78</sup> In this sense, the paradox between the conditions needed for the break and the break needed to create those conditions is, for Jameson, 'a rhetorical and political strength', because it is the attempt to think what a social break would look like, rather than what would come after, that enables change.<sup>79</sup>

Jameson's utopian theory thus suggests that a conversation between utopian political notions and everyday politics can begin even in late capitalism. It imagines changes that could be

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>75</sup> Jameson, 'Politics of Utopia', p. 45.

<sup>76</sup> AF, p. 230.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., pp. 232.

made to an apparently insurmountable system, and, by thinking through such changes, identifies the obstacles that block them. In terms of our ideology theory, it represents a clear approach to communications between affirmative and oppositional thinking, through specific ideas that are comprehensible in everyday language, but may lead to imaginative social critique. However, it is less clear why these considerations should necessarily invigorate a utopian impulse, rather than potentially instigate different forms of ideological change. Jameson notes that, with any particular utopian project, 'No matter how comprehensive and trans-class or post-ideological the inventory of reality's flaws and defects, the imagined resolution necessarily remains wedded to this or that ideological perspective.'<sup>80</sup> But as such, any 'impulse' to transcend existing social relations is not intrinsically utopian in the sense of desiring a classless collective, only where it is understood as such through specific ideologies. There is then no obvious distinction between a utopian political project and a sublimated utopian impulse, because there are only different interpretations of an ideal society, each with their own political goals and ideas of a harmonious collective. Jameson explains that any future Utopia must have some association with socialism, in terms of 'the values of social and economic equality and the universal right to food, lodging, medicine, education and work', and provides 'proof' that these socialist goals are necessary to Utopia, in that 'even neo-conservative fundamentalisms of the day continue to promise eventual satisfaction in all these areas'.<sup>81</sup> In contrast, we would argue here that such ideologies show how universal provision is not only a socialist ideal, and, for some, utopian visions can remain committed to capitalism.

In this sense, any project which aims at major political change is 'utopian' in its striving for a social ideal that currently does not exist, and no particular ideals are more utopian than others. It is then not a question of reinvigorating a utopian impulse (or, in Marcuse's terms, the socialising side of Eros) so much as inspiring and redirecting political ideals according to certain values that demand radical change. Thus, even fascist ideologies with ideals based on segregation and exclusion are utopian in their own way, and it is not, as Jameson understands, that 'the destructive passions' of extreme right movements simply 'spring from rage and bitter disappointment at the failures of Utopian aspirations'.<sup>82</sup> Jameson effectively places a particular notion of utopian aspiration prior to ideology, so, even if it is meant allegorically, it allows him to

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<sup>80</sup> Jameson, 'Politics of Utopia', p. 47.

<sup>81</sup> *AF*, p. 197.

<sup>82</sup> *VOD*, p. 387.

define a 'true' expression of utopian impulse from a 'false' one. But, as Homer puts it, there is no absolute distinction between compensatory and anticipatory ideal projections, and if 'Jameson may interpret a racist rally as compensatory, [...] the racists themselves would see it as being anticipatory'.<sup>83</sup> As such, the possibility of reinvigorating Imagination through Fancy in a way that leads to socialist radical alternatives depends on considering forms of Fancy that not only reveal the notion of alternatives, but already imply socialist solutions. The utopian impulse is better viewed as a pure 'lack' (in Žižek's Lacanian terms) that is always filled by some ideological object,<sup>84</sup> but which can be re-determined if subjects take responsibility for it.

Finally, the idea of a utopian politics developing through Fancy seems to contrast with the extent of de-politicisation suggested in Jameson's theory of postmodernism. For example, Jameson explains that consumer culture taps into 'powerful sources of collective fantasy', and 'not only provides itself with an energy power but also puts itself in a position to manipulate and to control such energies as well'.<sup>85</sup> In this case, it is not a specific political ideal that stands in for the degraded utopian impulse, but consumer desire itself, and the potential for developing utopian thinking then begins from this weak abstract impulse, preparing for a time in which politics becomes possible again. For us, however, it is only feasible that particular questions about abolishing money, full employment and so on can be comprehensively considered and spark bigger political ideas if they communicate with different forms of conscious rationalisation. Either it is a way of challenging existing beliefs by confronting them with their own limits, as well as developing an alternative from various perspectives, or it cannot expand beyond an intellectual minority. As such, it relies on the presence of ideological justifications even in consumerist attitudes, which are then not entirely depthless. In short, it is less a case of injecting a question into a political vacuum to connect with a lost impulse, and more of entering it into a field consisting of numerous political positions.

In a more recent essay, 'An American Utopia', Jameson appears to grant a more significant role to this kind of conscious challenge, but the issue remains. He explains that 'it

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<sup>83</sup> Homer, *Marxism, Hermeneutics*, p. 97.

<sup>84</sup> According to this idea, any sense of community is 'retroactively constituted' to fill in the lack, through attachment to a particular object or notion of authoritative other. See Ian Parker, 'Žižek's Sublime Objects Now', in *Žižek Now: Current Perspectives in Žižek Studies*, ed. by Jamil Khader, and Molly Anne Rothenberg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), pp. 16-28 (p. 26).

<sup>85</sup> Jameson, 'Introduction/Prospectus: To Reconsider the Relationship of Marxism to Utopian Thought', *Minnesota Review*, 6 (1976), 53-58 (p. 58).

would be incumbent on our otherwise impotent social-democratic parties to “talk socialism”, to (re)introduce concepts such as nationalising industry, state control of energy sources, taxation of corporate wealth, economic redistribution, and free education and healthcare.<sup>86</sup> For Jameson, political parties in the current system ‘can never accomplish any of these things, but they can talk about them, they can make them thinkable and conceivable once again’.<sup>87</sup> Actually realising major change requires instead the establishment of ‘dual power’, in which a collective and classless social space exists alongside, and gradually erodes, the state. Jameson identifies the army as the possible location of this alternative, through a mass draft that effectively creates socialised healthcare and education, and forces people to work according to collective demands. The question then is how this monumental shift in the role of the army might occur. Žižek tells us that, when ‘Jameson was asked how he imagines the eventual implementation of his utopia of universal militarization, he evoked an emergency state caused by a large ecological catastrophe’.<sup>88</sup> While we understand the importance of crisis for major change, it is not clear here *why*, even after the catastrophe, the existing government would demand this specific change. In fact, for there to be sufficient political impetus to introduce the military draft, socialist ideals must have already become prominent, which implies a significant socialist movement had formed before the catastrophe. Jameson’s utopian theory, however, is split too neatly between potential changes in consciousness in the present that are unable to construct an oppositional politics, and a future catastrophe that brings this politics into being. For us, this gap is impossible to bridge without considering the ways in which changes in consciousness begin to cause a political shift in the present. As Dean puts it, ‘Jameson’s military model of collectivity directs us away from the dual power with actual political potential: crowds and party’.<sup>89</sup> Or, in our terms, dual power grows organically from conscious challenges to dominant ideas and subsequent shifts in behaviour that reject consumerist fulfilment. Some kind of social crisis is undoubtedly necessary for an oppositional politics to fully flourish, but the utopian project is reliant on tangible political gains being made beforehand.

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<sup>86</sup> Jameson, ‘An American Utopia’, in *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* [ebook], ed. by Žižek (London: Verso, 2016).

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Žižek, ‘The Seeds of Imagination’, in *An American Utopia*.

<sup>89</sup> Dean, ‘Dual Power Redux’, in *An American Utopia*.

### III. Internalisation

#### i) Perception and Fragmentation

As we understand it, ideology does not function in Jameson's theory of postmodernism in a way that might enable his concepts of History and Utopia to be politically effective. It is thus necessary to examine more closely how our theory of ideology differs from the postmodern ideology Jameson defines, in a way that suggests potentials for political engagement that is not *purely* preparatory (it not only gradually challenges *how* people think, but also *what* they think). The idea of reintroducing historical and utopian thinking is then a matter of identifying the conditions and beliefs of different ideological positions. To this end, we first show how Jameson highlights the fragmentation of experience, through a form of perception that identifies with postmodern codes without conditions of acceptance, and by 'compartmentalising' them so that contradictions remain unnoticed. Yet, according to other parts of Jameson's theory some form of connecting narrative seems inescapable, and this idea should apply to the reception of fragmented culture, which then requires ordering beliefs and values. These forms of ideological rationalisation are then part of the psychic internalisation of the socio-economic system, and part of late capitalist production itself, in the sense that it requires their support for its legitimisation.

Jameson's concept of the psyche in late capitalism is again based on a contrast between modernism and postmodernism. He identifies a 'shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology' from the modernist monadic subject to today's situation, 'in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation'.<sup>90</sup> As with Marcuse's technological rationality, 'psychic fragmentation' is a development that corresponds with systematic quantification and instrumentalism in capitalism. Historically, it follows the notion of autonomous individualism, as production increasingly becomes a series of micro tasks within an unseen larger process, rather than the self-contained activity of an individual. For Jameson, the point is not necessarily that there really was an 'autonomous' modern subject, but that even the *perception* of autonomy encouraged critical thinking and reinforced the *image* of unique subjective experience. At the same time, even if fragmentation is only a matter of perception, because no unified self is apparent, individual feeling and transcendence are harder to comprehend.

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<sup>90</sup> *PM*, p. 14.

This psychic fragmentation appears to present an effective non-subject for whom signifiers lose any concrete relationship and experience is immediately meaningful, or a 'schizophrenic', in Deleuze and Guattari's terminology.<sup>91</sup> Jameson explains that conceiving the schizophrenic or 'psychic subject who "perceives" by way of difference and differentiation alone', is only 'the construction of an ideal' (by Deleuze and Guattari), as an ethical and political task.<sup>92</sup> That is, there is no total fragmentation, and the postmodern reduction to the present is a 'historical tendency' that is 'unrealizable', since 'human beings cannot revert to the immediacy of the animal kingdom'.<sup>93</sup> However, the way Jameson uses concepts such as depthlessness defines a political reality that resembles this schizophrenic ideal. For example, he explains that a narrative fragment in the past would be meaningless without its overall context, but can now emit 'a complete narrative message in its own right', based on a 'newly acquired capacity to soak up content and to project it in a kind of instant reflex'.<sup>94</sup> Or, he describes psychic compartmentalisation, in which 'the separation of subsystems and topics in various unrelated parts of the mind',<sup>95</sup> keep apart contradictory discourses, which are activated in specific contexts. In this psyche, attention span decreases, and history and narrative become alien — any notion of the present coming into being is repressed, to the point that classic texts simply appear boring or irrelevant.<sup>96</sup> Perception is so fragmented and purely sensual, for Jameson, that individuals may become temporarily unable to distinguish between art and life. He explains how 'urban squalor' can become 'a delight to the eyes when expressed in commodification', meaning 'the alienation of daily life in the city can now be experienced in the form of a strange new hallucinatory exhilaration'.<sup>97</sup> If social disparity can be perceived purely as aesthetic variation, even suffering can seem excitingly new, and there is no historical context against which to contrast such understanding.

Jameson's definition of the postmodernism psyche thus often goes further than observing that cultural difference and ephemerality are a major part of today's society, or that fragmentation

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<sup>91</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983)

<sup>92</sup> *PM*, p. 345

<sup>93</sup> Jameson, 'End of Temporality', p. 717.

<sup>94</sup> Jameson, 'Culture and Finance Capital', in *The Cultural Turn*, pp. 136-161 (p. 160).

<sup>95</sup> *PM*, p. 375.

<sup>96</sup> For Jameson, even 'big ideological issues' connected to Communism are mainly avoided not because of 'the memory of deaths and violence', but 'because such topics now appear boring' (Jameson, 'Sandblasting Marx', *New Left Review*, 55 (2009), 134-142 (p. 134)).

<sup>97</sup> *PM*, p. 33.

is connected to structures of production and consumption in late capitalism. It appears that, although depth and alternative meaning are not eradicated by the fragmentation of imagery and the psyche, they are so heavily repressed and dominated that they become completely inaccessible. Jameson then explains that, while cultural modernism corresponds to semi-autonomy of language and the possibility of utopian negation, in postmodern texts 'reification penetrates the sign itself and disjoins the signifier from the signified', leaving a 'pure and random play of signifiers'.<sup>98</sup> Against this idea, it can be asked whether media language and imagery really is so totally fragmented, and whether the postmodern psyche really absorbs fragments with no connecting narrative. Similar to Marcuse, Jameson notes how media forms such as newspapers present stories as equivalent but discrete units, so 'two events activate altogether different and unrelated mental zones of reference and associative fields',<sup>99</sup> and any connections or common root causes are obscured. Furthermore, he states, ideologies are transformed in the media 'into images of themselves and caricatures in which identifiable slogans substitute for traditional beliefs'.<sup>100</sup> Yet, as we see it, there is no obvious way to distinguish between cynical sloganeering and traditional belief, and, because publications maintain specific political positions, the choice of stories falls within an overall logic. Although the different stories in a newspaper are not all perfectly in tune ideologically, 'they depend on, and also in some ways express, unities of thought and consciousness', and it is not simply that mass media 'have created an autonomous realm of "hyperreality" where the sign or image is everything'.<sup>101</sup>

Similarly, from the receiver's perspective, while individuals may now be accustomed to quickly switching their attention between different content, they do not necessarily compartmentalise it without some unifying logic. In fact, at points in his theory Jameson alludes to a basic psychological need to understand experience through patterns and narrative forms. For example, he considers how people always try to make narrative connections when reading literary fiction, even with complex plots, because they get a sense of relief from coherence. For Jameson, plots have become less coherent as societies have become more differentiated. Thus, the pre-modern novel of plot, drawing on well-worn proverbs and social conventions, is

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 374.

<sup>100</sup> Jameson, *The Seeds of Time: The Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 15.

<sup>101</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, pp. 26-27.

superseded by the modernist psychological novel with its individual viewpoints,<sup>102</sup> and then by postmodern forms which have no plot, unity of action and character, or even subjective coherence. However, Jameson claims that, rather than simply reflect this incoherence, 'the mind blows its fuses, and its abstract, pattern-making functions reappear underground', because unconscious reason 'is unable to cease making those intricate cross-references and interconnections that the surface of the work seems to deny'.<sup>103</sup> Elsewhere he says that the basic categories of narrative 'are fundamental tropes or forms by which we understand human events and realities'.<sup>104</sup> It therefore follows that the psyche retains this need for coherence, or continues to demand some ordering ideology. As such, even though 'it becomes increasingly difficult to construct a narrative which does justice to [...] the situation of individuals in ever more horrendously complex social matrices',<sup>105</sup> the psyche cannot simply accept fragmented difference, or a lack of interpretation, and the appearance of these latter obscure narrative structures.

This understanding suggests a tension between fragmented media logics and ideologies, but Jameson's analysis of postmodernism still assumes a lack of psychic narrative connections. In particular, he focuses on the *forms* of cultural objects to comprehend the cultural logic, but as such pays little attention to elements such as 'the subjective, empirical and psychological',<sup>106</sup> and does not fully examine how fragmented media representation is structured and received according to conscious ideological processes. In this sense, the postmodern psyche resembles Marcuse's extreme formulations of ego weakness, so that images are received and immediately generate an identity-appropriate response. In analysing Marcuse, Jameson even reiterates 'the collapse of the family, the disappearance of the authoritarian father', according to which 'the Oedipus complex and the superego themselves are greatly weakened'.<sup>107</sup> But, if the subject's perception is fragmented to the extent of having no sense of self, then it is not clear what there is to emancipate any longer, or why it would be worthwhile.<sup>108</sup>

Furthermore, in Marcuse's theory the superego is not necessarily weakened so much as transferred to new authority figures, because the performance principle and repressive

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<sup>102</sup> Jameson, 'Ideology of the Text', p. 37.

<sup>103</sup> Jameson, 'Metacommentary', p. 12.

<sup>104</sup> Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson*, p. 158.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>106</sup> Eagleton, 'Jameson and Form', p. 137

<sup>107</sup> *MF*, p. 109.

<sup>108</sup> Homer, *Marxism, Hermeneutics*, p. 79; Best, 'Jameson, Totality', p. 364.

desublimation imply a certain direction behind fragmentation. Seen in this way, it is not only that fragmentation is produced by a system, but that certain ideological forces within the system maintain the *illusion* of fragmentation. It is then not merely that most mass media productions 'distract their readers and viewers from any genuine thinking about the nature of their own lives and the relationship of the latter to the socioeconomic system'.<sup>109</sup> Jameson points to something more like repressive desublimation when he describes mass cultural manipulation as 'repression and wish-fulfillment together', as a mechanism which 'strategically arouses fantasy content within careful symbolic containment structures', and gratifies 'desires only to the degree to which they can be momentarily stilled'.<sup>110</sup> Here, manipulation is neither empty distraction nor false consciousness, but a way of indulging fantasies within the confines of the system, even creating an image of social harmony. But in that case, the way individuals perceive their social and individual goals, and how those perceptions are maintained ideologically, remain important. It is necessary to analyse how the economic structure is supported culturally, through 'competing ideological *and practical* narratives and objects that bring economic life into view'.<sup>111</sup> This idea moves us away from Jameson's notion that fragmentation confronts us like a huge panel of TV screens, and that to transcend it would be to 'do the impossible, namely, to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference', to the point that 'the vivid perception of radical difference is in and of itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship'.<sup>112</sup> We would contend instead that relationship is what allows the psyche to accept these screens as reality, so it is still possible to question that relationship to reveal the power source behind the screens.

## ii) Market Ideology

To demonstrate the role of different narratives in the social order, we must further identify the kinds of ideologies that justify and contribute to its reproduction. Jameson tends to present postmodern ideology as an acceptance of economic conditions that does not require positive beliefs in specific values. He explains that the two dominant ideologies today are those of the

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<sup>109</sup> Jameson, 'Introduction/Prospectus', p. 57. Generally, Jameson accepts the Frankfurt School concept of the Culture Industry, in which mass media culture leads to 'the commodification of the mind' (Jameson, 'Architecture and the Critique of Ideology', in *Ideologies of Theory*, pp. 344-371 (p. 356)).

<sup>110</sup> Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), p. 25.

<sup>111</sup> Christian A. Gregory, 'Stranded Economies', in *Jameson: A Critical Reader*, pp. 77-93 (p. 86).

<sup>112</sup> *PM*, p. 31.

market and of consumption, the first of which involves a cynical reason 'that knows and accepts everything about itself', and the second of which assures society through practices rather than beliefs.<sup>113</sup> Jameson also cites Adorno on numerous occasions with the idea that today 'the commodity is its own ideology', and that 'consumption and consumerism [...] themselves are enough to reproduce and legitimate the system, no matter what "ideology" you happen to be committed to'.<sup>114</sup> On one hand, understanding society's economic demands defines a common baseline of acceptance for affirmative ideologies, which we can connect to our notion of a background ideology, towards which different rationalisations must relate. On the other, Jameson's concept of a neoliberal 'market ideology', and other ways in which he conceives acceptance, also indicate a variety of ideological positions, and these positions all rely on functioning ideological beliefs and assumptions.

Market ideology, for Jameson, involves an acceptance of dominant neoliberalism and a need to maintain the economic apparatus. He associates this position with elites who understand market functioning, and who affirm the market as it is, without illusion that it actually creates growth and choice, or that market freedom creates personal freedom. Rather, these people recognise the reality of oligopolies of multinational companies, inconsequential consumer choices, and limited personal opportunity. As Jameson says, 'in the view of many neoliberals, not only do we not yet have a free market, but what we have in its place' is 'absolutely inimical to the real free market and its establishment'.<sup>115</sup> He contrasts this position with liberal 'political philosophy' that disconnects analysis of social problems and the choice of solutions from the structuring mechanism of the market. This deliberation assumes the market is a legitimate and preferable form of social ordering, even though it understands that the *current form* of the market contradicts liberal values. But, as such, it does not analyse the intrinsic contradictions of the market or its role in shaping the political options under consideration, whereas market ideology sees these contradictions and accepts them.

At the same time, Jameson claims that market ideology still depends on certain metaphysical concepts, especially that of a universal human nature. That is, it naturalises human behaviour that focuses on economic efficiency and productivity, or calculating rationality aimed at

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<sup>113</sup> *VOD*, p. 285.

<sup>114</sup> Jameson, 'Architecture and the Critique', pp. 363-364. See also 'Ideology, Narrative Analysis, and Popular Culture', *Theory and Society*, 4 (1977), 543-559 (p. 558); *Seeds of Time*, p. 40.

<sup>115</sup> *PM*, p. 266.

maximising value. For Jameson, the problem here is not merely viewing human behaviour in terms of rational calculation, but that comparison between this behaviour and business enterprise becomes prescriptive, as rationality is associated with maintaining current economic productivity. It also does not account for a postmodern culture in which consumerism itself becomes an object of consumption,<sup>116</sup> since market ideology understands human behaviour as *productive*, and cannot rationalise consumption for its own sake. The focus of market ideology is then on opposition to planned economies, based on belief that humans always fail when trying to control societies, so that the market is essential as ‘interpersonal mechanism’ to ‘substitute for human hubris and planning and replace human decisions altogether’.<sup>117</sup> For Jameson, this view is connected to the historical failure of planned economies, particularly the Soviet Union, and constitutes ‘cynical reason’ in which ‘profound disillusionment with political praxis’ has led to a popular ‘rhetoric of market abnegation and the surrender of human freedom’.<sup>118</sup>

This cynical reason, as Jameson describes it through neoliberal market ideology, resembles the cynicism defined in the previous chapter in its allusion to a pessimistic, absolute concept of human nature. However, there appear to be conflicting beliefs here, if neoliberals are both sincerely against economic planning and fully aware that the market is heavily controlled according to elite interests. Market ideology presumably recognises, as Jameson says elsewhere, that multinational corporations effectively ensure the economy develops only in particular ways, and that private business in a sense becomes ‘a visible “subject of history” and a visible actor on the world stage’.<sup>119</sup> As such, there may be a deeper cynicism at work that supports the market simply because it is dominant and provides relatively stable conditions (for the elite). For this cynical individual, the problems of human nature imply that all societies are corrupted by greed and individualism, so it is better to maintain whatever situation provides the individual with a privileged position. Such a perspective even absolves these cynics of responsibility for their actions, and encourages them to indulge their individual desires.<sup>120</sup> The

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 274. For Jameson, cynicism constitutes progress from liberal ideologies with naive ideals of altruistic human nature, because it ‘forces us into a more complicated conception of interest’ and ‘rethinking collective interest in new ways’ (Jameson, ‘How Not to Historicize Theory’, in *Ideologies of Theory*, pp. 286-303 (p. 301)).

<sup>119</sup> Jameson, ‘Periodizing the 60s’, in *Ideologies of Theory*, pp. 483-515 (p. 510).

<sup>120</sup> Buchanan, *Jameson: Live Theory*, p. 38.

fear is less of social degradation, as in Jameson's cynical realism, and more of personal misfortune.

Elsewhere, Jameson defines a cynical reason that appears more individualistic in this sense, but relates to people lower down the economic scale, who perceive only the system's 'permanence'. This cynicism is an 'empty ideology that accompanies the practices of profit and money making, and that has (and needs) no content to disguise itself'. Rather, it 'exists in the pure present, without the requirement of some great ideological project for the future'.<sup>121</sup> It is a position that recalls the 'dull economic compulsion' of Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, according to which people simply act in ways that help them make money and survive within the system. In *PM*, Jameson also explains how individuals must now function in less stable and secure economic conditions, in which market fluctuations mean the 'entire system is [...] subject to reshuffling without warning',<sup>122</sup> especially if it is questioned. This concept implies strong tones of what we have previously called defeatism, which we can redefine in Jameson's terms as a form of cynical acceptance, but still distinct from the cynical opportunism connected with neoliberalism. This position also particularly embodies Jameson's observation that 'it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism', and 'perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations'.<sup>123</sup> In effect, capitalism is experienced simply as an omnipotent power that may lead to an unstoppable destruction. Defeatism thus reveals an inability 'to conceive how "delinking" from the world economy could possibly be a feasible political and economic project'.<sup>124</sup> We can add that this inability, along with commitments to short term survival and making money, are still based on certain beliefs about the market system, and a pessimistic view of political organisation.

It thus already seems that Jameson's theory points to different forms of (cynical) market acceptance that have clear beliefs, and in our view it is possible to identify more. For example, he mentions an essentialist notion of human nature that is more celebratory than pessimistic, in that it promotes toil, productivity and competitiveness as goods in themselves, ideally suited to capitalism. He describes a market rhetoric according to which the destructive (Erotic) excesses of these elements combine with the elements themselves leading to 'a conception of the sinfulness

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<sup>121</sup> *AF*, p. 229.

<sup>122</sup> *PM*, p. 350.

<sup>123</sup> Jameson, 'Antinomies of Postmodernity', p. 50.

<sup>124</sup> Jameson, 'Globalization and Political Strategy', *New Left Review*, 4 (2000), 49-68 (p. 56).

and aggressivity of human nature that can alone be balanced and tamed by an equally natural propensity of human beings to do business and to make money'.<sup>125</sup> This statement contrasts with Jameson's notion of cynicism, we believe, because the cynic is pessimistic and resigned to the flaws of capitalism, whereas this commitment to capitalist productivity as manifestation of a universal truth either shades into traditional liberalism, by connecting the instrumental rationality in human behaviour to that of capitalism, or into a neo-conservatism that defends individualistic nature both against economic planning and the excesses of the market itself, based on a strong moral (religious) doctrine.<sup>126</sup>

Also, based on aspects of Jameson's theory, it seems that some people actually believe the rhetoric of market freedom and opportunity, or consumerist fulfilment. For example, Jameson describes the deregulation and privatisation drives of Reagan and Thatcher as 'utopias of immense investments and increases in production to come', and states that because 'it has become customary to identify political freedom with market freedom, the motivations behind ideology no longer seem to need an elaborate machinery of decoding'.<sup>127</sup> Yet, the celebration of small government, lower taxes and open markets still represents itself as a general social good, and may be accepted on those grounds. Therefore, if the neoliberal sees free market rhetoric as a noble lie, the neoconservative believes that lower taxes improve individual opportunity, and even for those who experience *diminished* opportunities as government services shrink, it may be understood as a short term sacrifice, or worthwhile due to the consumer pleasures granted by the expanding market. Jameson explains that such pleasures are 'the ideological fantasy consequences available for ideological consumers who buy into the market theory, of which they are not themselves a part'.<sup>128</sup> In that sense, the free market becomes an ideal for hedonistic consumption, rather than production or entrepreneurialism.<sup>129</sup>

Interpreted in this way, neoliberal 'market ideology' is one form of acceptance among many, none of which are clearly dominant, and most of the five ideological positions we have

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<sup>125</sup> Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 51.

<sup>126</sup> Jameson notes that the concept of human nature as sinful is 'a peculiarly moralizing and religious' ideology. *VOD*, p. 387.

<sup>127</sup> Jameson, 'Culture and Finance Capital', p. 137.

<sup>128</sup> *PM*, p. 271.

<sup>129</sup> Postmodern hedonism may even take certain pleasure in the market itself, or fetishizing technology and business, according to Jameson's point that consumption goes 'above and beyond its content', and there is 'a kind of technological bonus of pleasure afforded by the new machinery' gained in the process of consumption itself (*Ibid.*, p. 276).

already identified are represented or even developed further by Jameson's observations. In particular, the moral apologist position splits between liberalism and neo-conservatism, oriented in different traditions, and defeatism can be seen as a form of cynicism. For Jameson, however, the different responses he identifies are less aspects of specific ideological positions, and more symptoms of the lack of meaningful beliefs. That is, either the *practices* of consumer choice reproduce the system, so that ideologies are politically irrelevant images and media codes, or elite justifications of free market economics are transparent about their self-interested aims, to the point that 'the unmasking of [ideological] rationalizations, the primordial gesture of debunking and of exposure, no longer seems necessary'.<sup>130</sup> Yet, in the first case, while political identities are often successfully reduced to commodity choices, people's beliefs are not necessarily limited by these images, and the images themselves do not explain why people make specific choices, or what hopes they invest in them. In the second case, cynical reason still involves the promotion of mystifying and manipulative narratives which obscure its intentions, and Jameson makes various statements that point to such a conclusion. For example, he says that 'cynical reason is a positivism with a mission, with a politics or even a metaphysics', and involves 'a whole program for justifying this view of things'.<sup>131</sup> More specifically, it works to systematically redirect anti-institutional energies 'against fantasies of "big government" and "bureaucracy"',<sup>132</sup> and this 'repression of the concept of society and the social system has a vital part to play in perpetuating its domination'.<sup>133</sup> These comments describe a cynicism that attempts to manipulate consciousness based on a belief that it matters what people think about the system, and it is therefore not clear that society can function without such rhetoric. As Cevasco maintains, for example, it has been one of 'the ideological victories of the Right' to implant 'the word "irrevocability" in contemporary discourse', implying that 'it is impossible to have a better world' than that provided by the globalised market, to an extent that has 'repressed critical knowledge of the actual functioning of the system'.<sup>134</sup> In such manoeuvres, we can perceive deeply embedded assumptions in cynical reason itself, regarding human nature and the need to maintain existing power structures, which show that it does not 'know and accept everything about itself'.

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<sup>130</sup> *VOD*, p. 413.

<sup>131</sup> Jameson, 'How Not to Historicize', p. 300.

<sup>132</sup> Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 63.

<sup>133</sup> Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 40.

<sup>134</sup> Maria Elisa Cevasco, 'The Political Unconscious of Globalization: Notes from the Periphery', in *Jameson: A Critical Reader*, pp. 94-111 (p. 110).

In 'Ideological Analysis: A Handbook', Jameson suggests a more multi-layered approach to ideology which hints at the previous analysis of the political unconscious. He explains that it is useful 'to measure the analytic or diagnostic value of various competing conceptions of ideology',<sup>135</sup> which include levels of the individual mind, group consciousness, and the system, and it is only at this third level that the ideological is located in the organisation and practices of daily life.<sup>136</sup> The implication here is that all of these forms of analysis are advantageous for understanding how ideology functions, and Jameson recognises that viewing ideology in terms of practices alone can 'elide the conceptual and social dimensions of ideology altogether', and remove its connection to 'the historical function of ideology in class struggle'.<sup>137</sup> What we must then do, however, is apply this approach to Jameson's theory of postmodernism, to show that the individual and group levels of ideology remain significant, and that the various ideas he associates with market acceptance represent beliefs within different examples of those ideologies.

### **iii) Awareness and Culture**

If acceptance of the market is the baseline of affirmative ideology, we can already see that its rationalisations are not only economic, but also revolve around various cultural factors, from religious moralising to consumerist notions of happiness. It is then apparent that affirming the mode of production requires conscious investment in certain cultural norms, which allows us to develop our ideological positions further. Jameson's analyses of postmodern culture and different responses to the expectations it creates provide a useful framework for this discussion, and indicate numerous ways in which people relate to the whole. For our purposes, however, these responses are not merely mediated images or simulacra, as Jameson suggests, but functioning ideologies that people follow based on conditional beliefs and justifications, which are indirectly connected to the general aims of consumer capitalism.

One important position that did not arise in discussing reactions to the market is that of pluralism, partly because it denies the notion of capitalism as system. More than any other position, it is a celebration of postmodern fragmentation, and of difference and lack of system as

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<sup>135</sup> *VOD*, p. 315.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 331-332.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.

good in themselves, in terms of the freedom of choice they promote. This denial of systemic logics, for Jameson, makes pluralist politics 'at best a refusal to go about the principal critical business of our time, which is to forge a kind of methodological synthesis from the multiplicity of critical codes', and at worst a 'veiled assault on the nonpluralistic (read, "totalitarian") critical systems — Marxism, for example'.<sup>138</sup> Pluralism constructs a binary opposition between heterogeneity and homogeneity, or unfettered cultural difference and totalitarian conformity, and assumes that qualitative comparison of difference is intrinsically oppressive. As such, Jameson explains, its purpose is 'to forestall that systematic articulation and totalization of interpretive results which can only lead to embarrassing questions about the relationship between them and in particular the place of history'.<sup>139</sup> Nothing would undermine pluralism more than identifying it as the expression of a specific totality, so it must maintain the illusion of a non-system. It therefore does not consider that pluralist difference is structured by the market, according to which certain identities dominate over others. Anti-authoritarian pluralism thus submits to the increasingly hegemonic and homogenous authority of exchange value, which determines the conditions of cultural inclusion.

For Jameson, there is also an inconsistency with anti-essentialist pluralism in that its proponents can also accept essentialist ideas, such as that of universal human nature.<sup>140</sup> He reads this contradiction in terms of psychological compartmentalisation, in which 'we postmodern people are capable of entertaining both these attitudes [...] simultaneously, with no sense of their incongruity, let alone their logical incompatibility'.<sup>141</sup> Conversely, it appears to us that pluralist attitudes are only compatible with certain essentialisms, and not others, which is less a matter of compartmentalising and more an indication that pluralism itself involves specific beliefs. In particular, pluralism can function alongside other ideologies to the extent they promote production of cultural difference (and therefore the system). Thus, if it should firmly reject traditional liberalism and cynical neoliberalism, for their respective essentialist concepts of enlightenment values or human nature, it also supports the liberal notion of autonomous, rational agents, as opposed to systemic overdetermination, and neoliberalism's resistance to collective politics and economic planning. Furthermore, the pluralist concept of an external 'common enemy', or

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<sup>138</sup> Jameson, 'Ideology of the Text', p. 63.

<sup>139</sup> *PU*, p. 16.

<sup>140</sup> *AF*, p. 163.

<sup>141</sup> Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 52.

homogeneous alternative, shares with neoliberalism the need to maintain the present against an undesirable other. In this respect, the economic supports for pluralism become more visible, as well as the cultural supports for neoliberal economics.

Other ideological positions may affirm pluralist difference less directly, or vary in how they interpret postmodern concepts of identity recognition and freedom of choice. Hedonism is perhaps the only other fully celebratory response, and merely requires a continued supply of commodified pleasures and belief in the association between pleasure and consumerism to invest in difference. With other positions, even those that invest in consumer behaviour, the relationship is more complex. For example, we have already mentioned how cynical resignation or defeatism may accept consumerist pleasures as escapism, and this idea also emerges in Jameson's work, although not specifically tied to this position. Jameson describes consumption as a bonus, and its excesses 'a way of talking yourself into it and making [...] a genuine pleasure and jouissance out of necessity, turning resignation into excitement'.<sup>142</sup> In our terms, this statement suggests that defeatism may lead to genuine enjoyment of consumerism, but that it is more aware of the destructive conditions that produce the choices on offer. As such, it indicates a pessimistic inversion of the celebratory pluralist 'end of history' (the point at which capitalism has become a single dominant),<sup>143</sup> into an experience of involuntary political stasis, or a dead end of history that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy due to this escapist behaviour.

In *PM*, Jameson also describes a straightforward *rejection* of fragmentation and anti-essentialism, based on a psychological inability to handle subjective indeterminacy and relativism. He explains that the expectation pluralist culture places on the individual to constantly recognise new identity groups may put great strain on the sense of consciousness or self. As individuals recognise others in their difference, they panic and 'are led to anticipate the imminent collapse of all [their] inward conceptual defense mechanisms, and in particular the rationalizations of privilege and the well-nigh natural formations [...] of narcissism and self-love'.<sup>144</sup> This idea resembles the Freudian concept in which a social demand to love the neighbour, even the stranger, conflicts with love for the core family,<sup>145</sup> yet here the individual fears that recognising everyone comes at

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<sup>142</sup> *PM*, p. 321.

<sup>143</sup> Jameson, "'End of Art" or "End of History"?' , in *The Cultural Turn*, pp. 73-92 (pp. 90-91).

<sup>144</sup> *PM*, p. 358.

<sup>145</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and Its Discontents', in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 722-772 (pp. 747-748).

the expense of the ego itself, or any sense of its own uniqueness. This 'terror of anonymity', for Jameson, can lead to 'a self-deception that does not want to know and tries to sink ever deeper into a willful involuntarity, a directed distraction'.<sup>146</sup> Put this way, this response also appears to be a kind of defeatism, but one which refuses even to imagine the system behind the dominant demand. It fears self-examination, in the belief there may be nothing to examine, and instead focuses on immediate needs and achievements.<sup>147</sup>

The inability to accept cultural relativism may also lead to more hostile opposition, or a moral resistance to difference. In the 'Ideology' chapter of *PM*, Jameson describes a range of 'moral' intellectual approaches to postmodernism, through all the possible combinations of anti- or pro- modernism and postmodernism, that judge these periods rather than consider them dialectically. In particular, we are interested here in the two variations of pro-modernism, anti-postmodernism which embody this more moralistic rejection, and correspond with neoconservative and liberal ideologies. First, Jameson identifies a position that contrasts 'the moral responsibility of the "masterpieces" and monuments of classical modernism with the fundamental irresponsibility and superficiality of [...] postmodernism',<sup>148</sup> and that recommends aesthetic responsibility and defence of traditional values, against a 'social breakdown' associated with 1960s counter culture. Second, he describes a position that views postmodernism as politically reactionary, and a distraction from the modernist project based on Enlightenment values. For Jameson, both these 'traditional' positions emerge within postmodernism itself. Thus, liberalism is an ideology that wants to reclaim 'ethics' from postmodern relativism, as if the latter was an appeal to 'anything goes' hedonism and violence,<sup>149</sup> but represents mere hand-wringing without any positive alternative, due to its 'belief that the "system" is not really total [...], that we can ameliorate it, reorganize it, and regulate it in such a way that it becomes tolerable'.<sup>150</sup> Meanwhile, neoconservative 'fundamentalist' positions reaffirm some traditional absolute that has been supposedly marginalised by pluralism, but have 'a simulated relationship to the past'. For example, Jameson says, fundamentalist Christianity involves 'the denial of any fundamental

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<sup>146</sup> *PM*, p. 358.

<sup>147</sup> Jameson's description here implies that fragmentation is experienced as an authoritative demand with which the psyche struggles. As such, it does not seem that psyche itself is fragmented; rather there is 'a subject in a postmodern hyperspace where it *feels* that old-fashioned thing: a loss of identity' (Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 320).

<sup>148</sup> *PM*, p. 57.

<sup>149</sup> Jameson, 'Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity', in *The Cultural Turn*, pp. 93-135 (p. 95).

<sup>150</sup> *PM*, p. 207.

social or cultural difference between postmodern subjects of late capitalism and the Middle-Eastern subjects of the early Roman Empire'.<sup>151</sup> Such fundamentalism is part of de-historicised postmodern culture, as one of many discourses, even though it opposes heterogeneity and espouses an explicit 'truth'.

Jameson's work thus allows us to identify a range of reactions to postmodern cultural pluralism. However, where he considers positions such as liberalism and fundamentalism, it is only as simulacra of an imaginary past that merely add to pluralist choices, rather than as ideologies whose beliefs may affect social reproduction. He states, for instance, that liberalism has little political relevance anymore, because generally modern realities such as 'counterinsurgency warfare and neocolonialism' are understood 'as deeper and more ominous structural necessities of the American system'.<sup>152</sup> In fact, we can assume that Jameson would view all of the ideologies we have identified as these images or caricatures of themselves, merely creating an appearance of political meaning. In contrast, we understand that there is something too complete or enclosed about viewing ideologies in this way, in that they lack consideration of belief and awareness that help explain why people take particular positions, and the limits of their adherence. For example, religious and nationalist fundamentalisms may centre on de-historicised postmodern images *and* involve real political beliefs, in the sense that they rely on the ability to maintain certain truth claims, and their reaction against pluralist culture can create (local) obstacles for capitalist reproduction. It is therefore important to register the tension within such positions, and the conditions of their compatibility with the system.

From this perspective, there is no qualitative distinction between cynical self-awareness and the images of traditional beliefs, as their support for the status quo is equally based on particular assumptions. Ideologies that accept the status quo in all its pluralist and individualist volatility are maintained according to beliefs about human nature, the status of capitalism, and the potential for alternatives. Neoliberal cynical reason contains metaphysical assumptions, and defeatist cynicism tacitly supports the market by asserting its absolute power. These positions do not only understand how the social system functions; they also include particular ideas that justify that system (as necessary, inevitable or irreplaceable), structured by the capitalist mode of production. Such ideas do not constitute a lack of belief, in contrast to traditional ideologies, but

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 390.

<sup>152</sup> Jameson, 'Criticism in History', in *Ideologies of Theory*, pp. 125-143 (p. 139).

themselves contain beliefs that can also be challenged, Furthermore, although the mediated images in postmodern mass media are especially widespread and sophisticated, the use of de-historicised representations to legitimise beliefs is not new, and does not necessarily mean that beliefs are identical to their media images, or that consumer choices have 'replaced the resolute taking of a stand and the full-throated endorsement of a political opinion'.<sup>153</sup> Thus, all the ideological positions that form our map at this point (liberal moralism, neoconservative moralism, hedonism, pluralism, neoliberal cynicism, defeatist cynicism) are ideologies that mediate between individual and society, and continue to develop and fluctuate inside and outside the media.

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<sup>153</sup> *PM*, p. 398.

#### **IV. The Commodity Form**

##### **i) Postmodernism vs. Modernism**

Understanding the postmodern psyche in terms of different ideological rationalisations allows us to imagine development of 'utopian' thinking through communication with their limits, conditions and ideals. We must then consider how this communication can happen, or what channels it can use, and how it may resist dominant media narratives. In this respect, Jameson's contrast between modernism and postmodernism returns us to the question of cultural autonomy versus commodification, and the difficulties of producing and disseminating oppositional ideas without losing the radicalness of their form or content. Our argument is that, the way Jameson defines postmodernism in terms of this contrast effectively excludes 'modernist' features from his analysis of the present, even though he recognises there is no clear split between periods. When Jameson links modernism to modernisation, for example, he does not fully consider the ongoing processes of modernisation in many countries, which suggests that they remain in a modernist state of change. As we see it, this continued unevenness between and within societies indicates a constant antagonism and politicisation that is not fully lost in the commodification of expression, and is not a dwindling 'remnant' of modernism, but an intrinsic aspect of postmodernism itself.

Jameson's description of the shift from modernism to postmodernism recalls the issues Marcuse identified around commodification of cultural production. That is, postmodernism creates more widespread literacy and access to information, and a sense of democratisation, but at the same time signifies a loss of autonomy, which made utopian thinking possible despite its reliance on social disparity. The result is that postmodernism provides greater opportunity for cultural expression to a larger number of people, yet at the cost of its power, making further democratisation more difficult to imagine. Commodification erodes the divide between 'high' and 'low' culture, bringing more artistic credibility to the latter, but turns both into depthless images that merely appeal to different groups, which represses any negating and critical value.<sup>154</sup> High culture is reduced to particular contexts (such as classical music in advertising), so that any 'complete and continuous discourse has become an indistinguishable blur intermittently illuminated by vulgar theme songs, motifs that have crystallized into objects and tokens, like

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., pp. 63-64.

clichés in speech'.<sup>155</sup> Classic works are rewritten via new discourses and identity groups, so 'historical monuments, now all cleaned up, become glittering simulacra of the past, and not its survival'.<sup>156</sup>

As Jameson sees it, the last really political art was made in the 1960s, where counter cultural innovations were protests, following modernist experimentation. Here, he explains, the idea of the 'end of art' was a reaction to the perceived complicity of institutions, including those of high art and academia, in the dominant political structures of the time. The postmodern equivalent, the 'end of history', is its de-politicisation, or an attempt to subvert a cultural dominant that fails because the dominant now accepts previously subversive modernist styles. For example, Jameson says, as modernist styles of architecture are absorbed into the system and 'become stamped with [...] bureaucratic connotation', their supersession by other styles 'radically produces some feeling of "relief", even though what replaces it is neither Utopia nor democracy'.<sup>157</sup> Since experimentation is now the norm, the power to shock by negating established boundaries has been lost, and the main difference between modern and postmodern art is not form or content, but historical situation. In a *post*-modern world, new styles and interpretations are welcomed by industries that constantly try to renew desire, so rather than oppose market rationalisation, postmodern culture seems to 'at least share a resonant affirmation, when not an outright celebration, of the market as such'.<sup>158</sup>

Modernism also represents, for Jameson, a period of social modernisation, in which alternative realities coexisted, and there was a state of flux. He explains that modern artists and philosophers 'still lived in two distinct worlds simultaneously', moving between the rural past and urban modernity, and their 'sensitivity to deep time [...] then registers this comparatist perception of the two socioeconomic temporalities'.<sup>159</sup> Conversely, in postmodernism, 'Everything is now organized and planned; nature has been triumphantly blotted out, along with peasants, petit-bourgeois commerce, handicraft, feudal aristocracies and imperial bureaucracies'.<sup>160</sup> These elements remain merely as simulacra, as postmodernism is modernisation completed, with no visible past or development towards a different future. This change is exemplified in Jameson's

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<sup>155</sup> *MF*, p. 24.

<sup>156</sup> *PM*, p. 311.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>159</sup> Jameson, 'End of Temporality', p. 699.

<sup>160</sup> *PM*, pp. 309-310.

distinction between modernist parody, in which stylistic imitation reveals the contradictions in a linguistic norm, creating a satirical effect, and postmodern pastiche, for which there is no linguistic norm, only private group codes, and thus no possibility of putting styles into relief. Representations of history in commodified culture become nostalgic attempts to relive the past, which merely create a depthless image that illustrates the postmodern perception of the past in the de-historicised present. Thus, according to Jameson, if there is any sense of 'realism' left in representation, it can only derive from 'slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history'.<sup>161</sup>

The synchronic method of defining contrasting periods (modernist change and postmodernist stasis) that Jameson employs is effective in illustrating the social impact of expanded commodification. Yet, despite caveats about uneven development, Jameson treats the distinct definition of postmodernism as more than an idealised analytical category, because he does not pay sufficient attention to 'modernist' processes that remain intrinsic to postmodern logic. For example, modernisation exceeds its correlation with cultural modernism, especially as many regions are far less modernised than the USA, and are even kept from modernising in many ways precisely due to uneven investment and development engendered by global capitalism.<sup>162</sup> Jameson says that the level of commodification is not the same everywhere, but 'the tendency toward global commodification is far more visible and imaginable than it was in the modern period'.<sup>163</sup> He also states that the struggle in third world cultures connected to first world cultural imperialism is 'a reflexion of the economic situation of such areas in their penetration by various stages of capital, or as it is sometimes euphemistically termed, of modernization'.<sup>164</sup> But as such, the particular media technology that engenders de-historicised imagery is far from global, and very few places are postmodern in terms of experiencing a lack of contrast between old and new, so that modernisation, and its sense of temporality, should remain dominant. At another point, Jameson says that incomplete commodification in certain parts of the world is what enables us to understand what completeness looks like.<sup>165</sup> If so, it suggests that we still experience contrast

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>162</sup> Gregory, 'Stranded Economies', pp. 84-85.

<sup>163</sup> Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 27.

<sup>164</sup> Jameson, 'Third-World Literature', p. 68.

<sup>165</sup> Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson*, p. 166.

that need not only be an image, and can envisage what is at stake in the struggles involved. Jameson's insistence on postmodern stasis shifts focus from considering *how* dominant narratives represent contrast, to the impossibility of its representation.

Similarly, when Jameson identifies hints of political meaning in postmodern culture he tends not to develop their implications further, and continues to emphasise their fragmentation and depthlessness. For example, he states that music 'remains a fundamental class marker', and that 'highbrow and lowbrow, or elite and mass, musical tastes' still arouse passions, because music 'includes history in a more thoroughgoing and irrevocable fashion' that 'can scarcely be woven out of the memory'.<sup>166</sup> Yet he does not then consider that other cultural forms have such class markers, which might indicate limits of cultural democratisation. Burnham suggests, for instance, that poetry as 'an elite art form' lacks economic (commodity) prestige and has 'no popular equivalent', which means that 'interest in poetry immediately marks the aesthete off from the masses'.<sup>167</sup> Even if we add that types of 'street poetry' contrast this elite, they are also heavily class marked. It can then be extrapolated from Burnham's point that other cultural forms retain class markers to greater or lesser extents. However, Jameson generally accentuates the lack of markers, such as by comparing postmodern society to *Blade Runner* with its 'interfusion of crowds of people among a high technological bazaar [...], all of it sealed into an inside without an outside', which becomes 'the unmappable system of late capitalism itself'.<sup>168</sup> This analogy suppresses continued experiences of disparity and segregation, or the difficulties of upward social mobility, and does not account for the way such experiences may exceed the branding of commodified cultural codes. Jameson asks whether in de-historicised postmodernism 'some deeper memory of history still faintly stirs', or if nostalgia denotes 'the incompleteness of the postmodern process, the survival within it of remnants of the past'.<sup>169</sup> For us, this memory is implicit in the definition of postmodernism, and should be treated as part of the ideologies that support the cultural dominant.

In our understanding, while postmodernism involves a greater quantity and scope of de-politicised culture than previous eras, a disconnect between cultural images and history is nothing

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<sup>166</sup> *PM*, p. 299.

<sup>167</sup> Clint Burnham, *The Jamesonian Unconscious: The Aesthetics of Marxist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 239.

<sup>168</sup> Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 157.

<sup>169</sup> Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, p. 229.

new, and different, even oppositional, interpretations still exceed the dominant logic. It is not, as Jameson states, that what characterises postmodern culture 'is the supersession of everything outside of commercial culture', to the extent that the 'image is the commodity', and 'it is vain to expect a negation of the logic of commodity production from it'.<sup>170</sup> Rather, as Hutcheon argues, although postmodern culture lacks autonomy and has to work within the commodified field, it may also recognise its commodity status and exploit 'its "insider" position in order to begin a subversion from within'.<sup>171</sup> In this sense, postmodernism is 'the name given to cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it'.<sup>172</sup> From our perspective, the point here is simply that culture which contributes to the system by being a commodity, can also criticise its own role in the system as well as various dominant ideologies. As Hutcheon says, it also implies that parody remains possible, not merely blank or nostalgic co-option of other styles, and 'signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference'.<sup>173</sup> It highlights particular connotations of styles by placing them against others to reveal that all representation is political, and does not then reflect Jameson's contrast between a simpler past and the fragmented present (which is itself nostalgic, for Hutcheon).

At the same time, while Hutcheon's position demonstrates that politics is communicable within commodified culture, her notion of critical postmodern culture still lacks the 'modern' quality of a negation that points towards some alternative potential reality, or mediates with utopian political projects.<sup>174</sup> As such, this valorisation of criticism itself leads less to a political catalyst than a kind of self-depoliticising loop that feeds back into postmodern logic. In other words, because this postmodern art depends on commodification, it can offer no alternative, and becomes a tacit form of affirmation. Hutcheon states that postmodern artists 'know that their interrogations of culture themselves form an ideology',<sup>175</sup> but suggests that this art avoids the answers and totalising replies Jameson seeks, 'which postmodernism cannot and will not offer'.<sup>176</sup> Yet trying to avoid 'totalising' becomes a totalising logic in itself, because there is no way to take a

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<sup>170</sup> Jameson, 'Transformations of the Image', p. 135.

<sup>171</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 114.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>174</sup> Hutcheon in fact points out that postmodern culture lacks a theory of agency, and is caught in negativity (*Ibid.*, p. 23).

<sup>175</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 209.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

specific position against what exists, or against a 'norm' of discourse. Thus, while we argue against Jameson's idea that no ideological norms remain, and agree with Hutcheon that serious parody remains possible, it is still, as Jameson suggests, that parody becomes pastiche without consistent 'totalising' political direction.

The question that emerges from this point is how to identify the norms to parody, and according to what political aims. From Jameson's definition of postmodernism, it seems that the lack of any norm is the issue, but he also identifies how that lack is structured by late capitalism. We can then conclude that the *appearance* of the lack of structuring, and concepts of mutually tolerant difference that obscure the market logic behind them, are the norm. Therefore, if pastiche is the play of styles *inside* the bounds of market acceptance and pluralist tolerance, parody focuses on what the market excludes or does not tolerate, so it is the supposed disappearance of history and class struggle (which Jameson effectively identifies as the norms of postmodernism), that keep parody possible. If, as Hutcheon says, postmodern culture can criticise the whole from within, it is then also possible that a more directed political criticism can function within commodified spaces, based around opposition to these norms of disparity and exclusion. It is not only critique of capitalism and the commodification of art that is possible, but also its contrast against potential alternative social forms that target the contradictions of the commodity form as such. This criticism constitutes a specific political aim, which focuses on the marginalisation of elements within the existing system as symptoms of class struggle. Indeed, if Jameson's utopian project of reintroducing radical alternatives to politics is to be effective, it seems crucial to us that its message retains some power even within commodified cultural fields.

### **ii) Politics and Postmodern Art**

This possibility of radical political content within postmodern culture rests on a consciousness that attempts to create political art even while considering the demands of the market, and a consciousness that can receive political messages despite their distribution through commodified mass media. Here, we theorise the continued presence of the first of these forms, with the contention that the form and content of postmodern art is not depthless in itself, but, as with classic modern texts, de-contextualised to a degree by its commodification. Thus, although commodity logic influences artistic production, an expression of political depth remains possible

that is often suppressed by Jameson's choice of cultural objects for analysis. This depth is then as much part of postmodern cultural expression as flexibility of meaning, rather than a side-effect of the dominant logic that occurs in spite itself. As such, while presentation of culture as commodity promotes superficial and ephemeral interpretations, it does not repress politically meaningful ideas within culture to the point they become inaccessible.

At times, Jameson identifies certain forms of art that could fit Hutcheon's definition of self-reflexive and socially critical postmodern culture, but he mostly perceives them as rare hints of a degraded utopian unconscious, rather than political intent. For example, in certain fictional dystopian futures and post-apocalyptic societies, he identifies a consumerist proto-utopian vision, in the way survivors of such catastrophes are left free to consume without limitations. The apocalypse thus 'includes both catastrophe and fulfillment', or 'Utopia and the extinction of the human race all at once'.<sup>177</sup> Or, he describes how magical realism and fantasy history novels effectively blur the lines between real historical accounts and fiction, reinvigorating the possibility of imagination and offering a relationship to praxis missing from more literal representations. That is, if historical study has become socially impotent, these novels' 'inventiveness endorses a creative freedom with respect to events it cannot control' and agency 'steps out of the historical record itself into the process of devising it'.<sup>178</sup> At one point, he also describes a more explicitly utopian sentiment in a particular collaborative art installation, which conveys a demand to contemplate the relationship in its composition of objects, and the cooperative agency behind it that contrasts with the modern work of the individual. In this way, the installation 'does not compute within the paradigm and does not seem to have been theoretically foreseen by it'.<sup>179</sup> For Jameson, this particular text represents a politics of resistance through postmodernism itself, rather than a remnant of modernism, at least to the extent it is interpreted as such. He even adds here that, 'one finds everywhere today — not least among artists and writers — something like an unacknowledged "party of Utopia"'.<sup>180</sup> It may not be widely recognised, and therefore inspire an oppositional political programme, but represents an underground movement within postmodern art.

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<sup>177</sup> *AF*, p. 199.

<sup>178</sup> *PM*, p. 369.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

If this 'party of Utopia' is everywhere, however, Jameson rarely perceives it in his treatment of postmodern art, because he mostly considers only the superficiality of its forms. For example, in comparing Van Gogh's modernist *Peasant Shoes* and Warhol's postmodern *Diamond Dust Shoes*, Jameson explains that while Van Gogh's piece contains utopian colour that transforms the landscape of peasant life, in Warhol's piece, the colour is replaced by the monochrome form of the photographic negative, so its flat, disembodied items exist in space but not time, and the image 'does not really speak to us at all'.<sup>181</sup> However, in our interpretation, the use of the photographic negative may also point beyond existing reality — it both 'negates' its depicted (consumer) object, and represents something to be 'developed' — and therefore indicates a 'utopian' element in a different way to Van Gogh's piece.<sup>182</sup> Furthermore, other statements Jameson makes imply that it is not the form itself or any lack of critical intent behind it that is at issue, but the context in which works such as Warhol's are often embedded. He explains that, while Warhol's works (in general) are 'obviously representations of commodity or consumer fetishism [they] do not seem to function as critical or political statements'.<sup>183</sup> But in this respect, the *appearance* of a lack of critical function also applies to Van Gogh's work in the postmodern context. As Jameson says, if Van Gogh's 'copiously reproduced image is not to sink to the level of sheer decoration, it requires us to reconstruct some initial situation out of which the finished work emerges'.<sup>184</sup> It then seems that we could also reconstruct such a situation for Warhol, rather than focusing on its depthless style, and there is a certain relationship of identity through such a hermeneutic reading.<sup>185</sup>

In this and other comparisons, it is unclear whether the lack of postmodern political art is purely due to its *presentation* as a commodity, or whether its commodified *production* leads to forms that intrinsically have less depth than modernist forms. In his analysis, Jameson often implies the latter, but also tends to select examples that best fit such an interpretation,<sup>186</sup> or forces

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>182</sup> Similarly, for Spivak, the negative 'inversion (like a reversal) belongs to the same theoretical space' as Van Gogh's work, and if postmodernism in part contrasts with modernism, 'it is also a repetition' (Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 317).

<sup>183</sup> *PM*, p. 158.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>185</sup> Shumway, 'Jameson/Hermeneutics/Postmodernism', p. 198.

<sup>186</sup> Some critics, for example, note that Jameson's theory of postmodern novels omits authors who focus on narrative and memory. See Homer, *Marxism, Hermeneutics*, p. 117; Hutcheon, *Poetics of*

'into a single mould a diversity of cultural phenomena which do not obviously belong together'.<sup>187</sup> Thus, Jameson contrasts the literally depthless visual style of *Diamond Dust Shoes* with *Peasant Shoes* to show how it exemplifies postmodernism, whereas he considers the untitled installation mentioned previously as an exception. In this way, for Jameson, where forms of modernist depth are detectable in postmodern art, they are accidental, inevitable 'failures' of depthless expression 'that inscribe the particular postmodern project back into its context',<sup>188</sup> rather than critical aspects of cultural expressions showing through despite their commodification. For example, he explains that video art as a form blocks final interpretations, and connections made between the fragmented images are 'provisional', and 'subject to change without notice', so contextualisation is quickly rewritten.<sup>189</sup> He then says that sometimes a single theme can dominate long enough to become an overall interpretation, but then 'whatever a good [...] videotext might be, it will be bad or flawed whenever such interpretation proves possible'.<sup>190</sup> Yet it is only Jameson's definition of postmodernism and video art that makes such meaning a flaw or 'bad' excess, and not simply part of the medium and its aims.<sup>191</sup>

At the same time, Jameson also explains that the examples of postmodern art he examines are not meant to exemplify the features of postmodernism. Rather, the point of postmodernism is that there are no 'works' with clear meanings to be interpreted, only 'texts' that deny interpretation, so viewing texts as *representations* of postmodernism means failing to appreciate their textuality.<sup>192</sup> For this reason, Jameson emphasises the relationship over the individual, so that 'the cultural production process [...] is the object of study and no longer the individual masterpiece', which 'shifts our methodological practice [...] from individual textual analysis to [...] mode-of-production analysis'.<sup>193</sup> In our view, however, Jameson *does* use particular texts to illustrate the characteristics of postmodernism, which is only problematic because he emphasises certain characteristics over others. In fact, individual analysis is necessary to construct a theory of 'cultural logic' relating to a mode of production, if it does not

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*Postmodernism*, p. 212; and Peter Nicholls, 'Divergences: Modernism, Postmodernism, Jameson and Lyotard', *Critical Quarterly*, 33 (1991), 1-18 (p. 3).

<sup>187</sup> Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 131.

<sup>188</sup> *PM*, p. xvi.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>191</sup> Homer, *Marxism, Hermeneutics*, pp. 115.

<sup>192</sup> *PM*, p. xvii.

<sup>193</sup> Jameson, 'Symptoms of Theory or Symptoms for Theory?', *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), 403-408 (p. 408).

simply accept randomness and difference as a (lack of) logic. Texts must be treated as 'works' to understand the particular social conditions and ideological ties that influence postmodern forms, and this process does not imply some 'modernist' failure of textuality, because it shows that the logic of difference itself emerges from a certain range of political ideals. The appearance of depthlessness or immediate, shifting meanings is then to a great extent the result of commodified context, which does not indicate a lack of depth or more durable meaning in form itself.

It remains that case that postmodern art is doubly depoliticised to a degree, because it is not only received as a commodity but produced as one, within an ideological climate in which utopian social alternatives are rarely considered. However, such a notion does not exhaust the political possibilities in cultural production, or the way ideological beliefs can exceed commodified media presentation and even express themselves through it. In this respect, Jameson's theory often does not consider the 'political unconscious' of postmodern works other than as an expression of late capitalist cultural fragmentation. His goal is 'to reawaken [...] some sense of the ineradicable drive towards collectivity that can be detected, no matter how faintly and feebly, in the most degraded works of mass culture',<sup>194</sup> and he explains that criticism which highlights the lack of meaning in a form may better reveal the dominant logic than seeking meaning within texts themselves.<sup>195</sup> But in focusing *only* on the lack of fixed meaning, we may miss expressions of political ideas and concepts in various media. It is then a question of examining postmodern culture for beliefs or utopian ideals that are not as faint or degraded as Jameson suggests, through ideological analysis, and considering how these sentiments might further expand given the restraints of commodification.

### iii) Consumer Culture

If it remains possible to express depth of meaning in conditions of commodification, it is also necessary to consider how that depth and any utopian ideas may be received. Here, we argue that, despite the commodification process, various people can experience an excess of meaning in media codes and images, and interpret cultural objects in non-prescribed ways, so that a space remains within commodified culture for alternative political ideas to develop. In Jameson's portrayal of the situation, the relationship between culture and economics is 'dedifferentiated', so

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<sup>194</sup> Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, p. 34.

<sup>195</sup> *PM*, p. 71.

that culture is now economic right down to its core, and many apparent oppositional positions are reduced to consumer choices. While we agree with this idea to an extent, it is our contention that people do not merely understand the culture they consume purely in accordance with consumer identity images, or that their disconnection from the conditions of mass production stops them perceiving exploitation.

According to Jameson, economic and cultural logics have effectively colonised each other. As he puts it, 'the market has become [...] fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself', while 'postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process'.<sup>196</sup> Mass media are then platforms for distributing commodities, while the market is glamorised through the lifestyles of celebrity entrepreneurs. Free trade agreements and organisations even ensure the global dominance of US popular culture, undermining national protectionist policies from agriculture to film industries, and connecting mass culture, economic aims and political policy.<sup>197</sup> Meanwhile, the economic forces that drive consumer culture are fetishised, whether in the enjoyment of shopping, celebration of films based on their budgets, or focus on forms of media technology rather than available content. Commodification, Jameson explains, has exploded throughout the whole of the social 'to the point at which everything in our social life — from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself — can be said to have become "cultural" in some original and yet untheorized sense'.<sup>198</sup>

Under these conditions, it seems that political opposition and cultural subversion cannot gain critical distance due to the explosion of culture into all social spheres. Opposition is distributed through mass media images completely intertwined with consumerist values, so the message becomes inseparable from its presentation, imbedded between advertisements or even in news organs that are largely publicity machines. This distribution also validates the sense of freedom that consumer choice allows, in that it appears to welcome all kinds of views into the field of consumer fulfilment, with new identity groups accepted by the market to create something for everyone. Almost any belief or taste is represented by an appropriate form of consuming, including niche cultures that are defined against the mainstream. As Jameson says, for example,

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. x.

<sup>197</sup> Jameson, 'Globalization and Political Strategy', pp. 54-55.

<sup>198</sup> *PM*, p. 48.

highbrow French film is part of the international film market alongside the dominant Hollywood against which it defines itself, and therefore strengthens inclusive pluralism.<sup>199</sup> Even so, it is not that *anything* can become a consumer option, as certain ideas exceed the ideological limits of pluralism, and some cultural groups lack the means to consume. But such people are either near-invisible in the marketised media or vilified according to 'enemy' narratives that portray outsiders as anti-pluralist fundamentalists, or their victims.

The economics of culture also help to render the conditions of its production more opaque. Jameson states that, for all the complexities of consumerism, the effacement of the object's production is 'the indispensable precondition on which all the rest can be constructed'.<sup>200</sup> In other words, because western consumers only experience the final object of consumption, disconnected from the history of its production, they 'inhabit a dream world of artificial stimuli and televised experience', in which 'the fundamental questions of being and of the meaning of life [seem] utterly remote and pointless'.<sup>201</sup> In previous forms of capitalism, Jameson explains, the bourgeois was similarly detached from production, but the worker could perceive 'the finished product as little more than a moment in the process of production itself' and understand the world in terms of interrelated processes.<sup>202</sup> Today, conversely, few consumers have this perspective, and escapist resignation means that enjoying consumer goods may further repress knowledge of their origin. Also, the complexity of the system makes it difficult even for those who are interested to comprehend the multifaceted processes of production, or connections between consumerism and global poverty. There is a certain rationality in disconnecting and 'forgetting' how objects are produced.

When the situation is described in this way, there does not seem to be much potential for consciousness to develop in the processes of consumerism beyond the absorption of de-historicised products according to particular identity requirements. As with Marcuse, Jameson mentions some intrinsic tendencies in the system itself that may produce strain. On one hand, he notes that difficulties may arise with maintaining mass purchasing power, but adds that such an issue will only become significant when relatively high employment cannot be maintained.<sup>203</sup> On

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<sup>199</sup> Jameson, 'Transformations of the Image', p. 132.

<sup>200</sup> *PM*, p. 315.

<sup>201</sup> *MF*, p. xviii.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>203</sup> Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson*, p. 166.

the other, he acknowledges a more immediate pressure in manufacturing libidinal investment in consumerism, since the latter must create actual pleasure, rather than being a mere commodity 'fix' that satisfies addiction. Here, Jameson states that, despite the promotion of consumer goods as needs, deep down the individual is 'naggingly aware' that is not the case.<sup>204</sup> This idea is similar to Marcuse's that consumer pleasures provide *partial* fulfilment, so individuals experience other desires, and must be continually convinced that these desires can also be met by consumer choices.

We argue that it is possible to expand this concept of nagging awareness further, to suggest ways in which individuals still develop ideas from consumer culture that exceed the de-historicised products and identities presented. First, people's beliefs do not necessarily match the media identity image with which they are associated, particularly because they do not share its superficiality. For example, as Jameson says, an interest in independent or arthouse cinema may be a way of rejecting the vapidness and reactionary politics of mainstream culture that itself becomes merely another commodified choice. However, it does not mean that opposition to the dominant strain is exhausted by making this choice, or that it replaces more substantive political ideas, and in fact the culture chosen may also develop these ideas. That is, because the range of available identities presented in the media includes radical positions, not merely styles branded as rebellious, the messages of these positions remain intact in some sense even in their commodified diffusion. Despite the relatively small presence of these positions compared to others, due to the demands of the market, they still transmit alternative ideas. In other words, it is not only that individuals may become 'naggingly aware' that their consumption is not completely fulfilling, but also that what they consume contains ideas that may develop their consciousness towards a critique of consumerism itself. Culture that is critical of dominant ideas, and even politicised in a way that suggests radical alternatives, is still more likely to cause individuals to subsequently reduce their consumerism as a political act than is mainstream 'conformist' culture.

Second, nagging awareness may also relate back to the production conditions of consumer goods, or that the lack of fulfilment is in part due to a certain guilt that creeps into postmodern living. In this respect, issues surrounding methods of manufacture and the providence of goods have become more prominent in recent times, in brands such as 'Fair trade'

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<sup>204</sup> Jameson, 'Pleasure: A Political Issue', in *Ideologies of Theory*, pp. 372-385 (pp. 374-375).

and laws aimed at holding multinationals to certain labour standards, which indicate that consumerism has not been delinked from production in people's minds. It thus seems less that 'the materiality of the object itself is summoned to veil the human relationship and to give it the appearance of a relation between things'.<sup>205</sup> For the most part, these changes are not radical, in that multinationals can still find loopholes in laws through subcontracting, and Fair trade remains an individual ethical choice within consumerism. As Jameson says, consumerism 'individualizes and atomizes', and ethical consumerism blocks consideration of collective responses to social issues.<sup>206</sup> But such developments do not occur without significant public understanding of and concern towards production processes, and may not fully placate those concerns. As such, ideological values are not repressed by the reduction of identities to consumer choices, or by the reified appearance of consumer goods, and some trace of economic processes and political concepts remains *within* consumer culture. Thus, although Fair Trade does not yet move beyond the concept of value, it potentially represents a first step towards recognition that exchange-value is not an immutable property. It shows that people still recognise the human relationships in production and consumption, and oppose exploitation in these relations. From this position, it seems more likely that radical ideas can penetrate, and relate the concept of exploitation to the commodity form itself, rather than the situation Jameson describes in which the relations of production are effaced by the fully de-historicised consumer product. We cannot then focus only on how commodity relations create obstacles, because doing so 'links the economical to the experiential only at the cost of displacing the political'.<sup>207</sup> Although the majority of products are superficial, it remains possible both to produce politically charged commodified culture, and for that politics to be received, helping to develop oppositional ideologies and challenging affirmative ones.

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<sup>205</sup> *AF*, p. 158.

<sup>206</sup> Jameson, 'Globalization and Political Strategy', p. 57.

<sup>207</sup> Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 75.

## V. Agency

### i) Subjectivity and Group Identity

This final point about the way people receive and develop ideas that exceed production or reception of mediatised images, along with ideas such as the psychic reliance on narrative patterns, suggest a kind of active subject in postmodernism that does not merely reflect the dominant logic. In our attempt to demonstrate potentials for enlarging oppositional sensibilities in fragmented social conditions, we thus aim to build on this concept further, to understand how people may retain a capacity for ideological change. Jameson's definition of postmodernism tends to assign such qualities to modernism, whose concept of a monadic, autonomous subject has been superseded by subject-positions. Yet he also claims there is agency in the present, or choices that are structured by social conditions without being reducible to them, and argues that neither the system nor agency should take analytical precedence, because it means either the system appears 'so total that it is overpowering, and [...] the individuals caught up in it have little power to do anything', or 'agents and actors appear who are somehow stronger than the most inhuman system'.<sup>208</sup> Such statements provide important supports for our theory of ideology, but we argue that overall Jameson *does* give precedence to systemic analysis, and mainly considers individuals as adherents to pluralist group identities.

For the most part, the postmodern subject in Jameson's theory is (or functions as) more a composition of mediatised 'subject-positions'. These unstable identity markers and their communicative codes are not viewed as ideologies by Jameson, but 'a kind of storehouse of older ideological fragments that can be appealed to now and then for a digression or an acceptable justification for some necessary move in narrative strategy'.<sup>209</sup> Thus, he claims, even in fundamentalist positions, 'dogmatic insistence on things is not a characteristic of belief, but [...] of the way the group enforces its cohesion and its membership and excludes the nonmembers'.<sup>210</sup> In such statements, codes and subject-positions reduce meaning to arguments and styles that individuals can call upon as fragments to maintain their support for the system, regardless of coherence. If individuals believe anything it is only that they must maintain their identities, and if there is any agency involved it is only that of selecting the codes to follow. It does not appear that

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<sup>208</sup> Jameson, *Representing Capital*, p. 144.

<sup>209</sup> Jameson, 'Ideology of the Text', p. 32.

<sup>210</sup> Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson*, pp 221-222.

the reasons for selection and commitment to codes are important, or that people may not be fully satisfied by the codes themselves.

The process Jameson describes then causes individuals to disavow cultural antagonisms, by reducing these to variations of opinion and style under concepts of pluralist difference. The repression of history in these subject-positions means they lack conception of their origins, and are sociological categories with certain characteristics, not political class desires. For Jameson, group identities represent a form of 'liberal tolerance', which is the 'result of social homogenization and standardization and the obliteration of genuine social difference in the first place'.<sup>211</sup> He explains that there has been 'a transformation of the Other and of otherness, in which paradoxically the recognition of the Other entails the waning or disappearance of otherness, and in which a politics of difference becomes a politics of identity'.<sup>212</sup> This postmodern Other of alternative identity contrasts the historical antagonism with the Other as alien culture, in which an observer recognises another culture as the opposite of what is known, but then comes to recognise its knowledge as cultural through the Other's impression of it.<sup>213</sup> The mutually exclusive practices or antagonisms between cultures are what define them as cultures in the first place, and postmodern pluralism is then a false resolution of this cultural antagonism, which reduces substantial differences under a singular dominant, but remains antagonistic to cultures that retain their sense of history and otherness. The dominant cultural politics is thus not a universal collectiveness, because it eradicates difference in a way that continues to represent one group's domination over (or isolation from) others. It represents a sublimation of the original 'ethnic' antagonism, for Jameson, but contrasts with the alternative sublimation into class struggle, which 'has as its aim and outcome not the triumph of one class over another but the abolition of the very category of class'.<sup>214</sup>

The way Jameson understands postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, and pluralism as a continuation of social hierarchies, means that subject-positions are still structured by social inequalities. As such, it is possible to detect certain limits in the free play of arguments and opinions, and compatibility issues between codes. As Jameson explains, subject-positions are 'interpellated roles' that emerge from existing social groups, and a specific

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<sup>211</sup> *PM*, p. 341.

<sup>212</sup> Jameson, 'A New Reading of Capital', *Mediations*, 25 (2010), 5-14 (p. 12).

<sup>213</sup> Jameson, 'On "Cultural Studies"', p. 615

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 619.

constellation of subject-positions can only function if it reflects 'some more concrete truce or alliance between the various real social groups thereby entailed'.<sup>215</sup> In other words, de-politicised identities remain irreconcilable in some sense, even when they become mere difference of opinion or culture that lack any notion of their historical emergence as antagonistic opposites (for example, the way racial markers such as black and white are embedded with notions of superiority and inferiority). We believe that this point also indicates a certain depth of belief in subject-positions, based on narrative limitations that go beyond compartmentalisation and contradictory arguments that lack binding justifications. For instance, if some individuals are able to hold a belief in environmental responsibility alongside a lifestyle of excessive consumerism, others cannot, and the difference between the two is not intrinsic to the codes or social positions of the individuals, but in the way this combination is encountered through different values and awareness levels. There is also a sense here of the antagonistic relationship between ideologies, despite their pluralist existence, which shows they are not experienced as merely different.

In Jameson's theory of subject-positions and postmodern identity formation, it thus generally appears that the scope for subjective agency is severely limited. Nevertheless, he maintains that his aim is not to discount agency, and that he emphasises structural influences also to counterbalance a more individual focus. That is, although we can examine postmodern culture through the conscious aims of artists, audiences, and institutions, we must also understand the synchronic and diachronic cultural influences on those entities. Jameson reiterates that people make history but not in circumstances of their choosing, and his focus on modes of production does not override that various agents can create different forms of political tactics. He also notes that the idea of collective consciousness, or even class consciousness, is problematic if it simply views individual consciousness as a reflection of group dynamics and structures, because it cannot consider any new conceptual categories that emerge from it. But, at the same time, understanding class dynamics is still essential, for Jameson, to theorise the relationships between individuals, so what is required 'is a whole new logic of collective dynamics, with categories that escape the taint of some mere application of terms drawn from individual experience'.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> *PM*, p. 345.

<sup>216</sup> *PU*, p. 284.

When speaking in these terms, Jameson appears to espouse the kind of dialectical mediation between the system and individual for which we have argued. However, it is still the case that, in establishing a systemic focus, the conclusions of Jameson's theory do not sufficiently consider aspects of individual consciousness. As such, the forms of active, functioning ideology that we have identified as an important part of the postmodern situation, and necessary for conceiving political change, remain absent from his theory of subject-positions. For the most part, Jameson explores only the shift from modernist autonomous subjects to postmodern fragmented subject-positions, rather than any existing excess of oppositional ideologies or their potential development. Thus, where he introduces 'a third term' of subjectivity besides autonomy and fragmentation, he describes it as 'the non-centered subject that is a part of an organic group or collective',<sup>217</sup> or 'the subject at the other end of historical time, in a social order that has put behind it class organization, commodity production and the market, alienated labor, and the implacable determinism of a historical logic beyond the control of humanity'.<sup>218</sup> In other words, it is a subject yet to come, which leaves the question of what kind of agency is required in the present to nurture this form. For us, a class consciousness that can challenge the dominant individualist perspective can only expand due to both the critical distance of a minority *and* the possibility of gradually influencing the conscious beliefs of the majority. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how the consciousness of different individuals within identity groups can be challenged, by interrogating the beliefs people use to justify conformist behaviour, which structure and support apparently fragmented subject-positions.

### ii) Cognitive Mapping

In our understanding, agency thus emerges from the social narratives that all individuals have, based on experience, knowledge and interests, and the possibility of changes in behaviour relating to those contributing factors. A dialectical concept of totalising then reveals each narrative to be a contingent acceptance of the system, which allows us to question whether the system should be accepted at all. The problem is how to introduce this concept of totality to (fragmented) mass consciousness, with the intent of encouraging a greater oppositional agency. One of Jameson's important contributions here is the concept of 'cognitive mapping', or an

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<sup>217</sup> *PM*, p. 345.

<sup>218</sup> Jameson, 'Imaginary and Symbolic', p. 113.

attempt to somehow envisage the social as a totality in history, against postmodern logic. As we understand it, cognitive mapping demonstrates a plausible way of promoting class consciousness to individuals and groups throughout society, by revealing connections between political events and social conditions. However, Jameson emphasises that, while some repressed temporal dimension remains in postmodernism, people are incapable of perceiving it, unless something changes their forms of perception first, which suggests cognitive mapping would currently be ineffective in inspiring a new politics. Against this point, we argue that the potential for temporal understanding and shifts towards oppositional agency is already present in ideological forms, as it is not the lack of narrative that is the issue, but the particular narratives people follow, which may be susceptible to change.

Jameson defines cognitive mapping as an effectively 'modernist' method that 'retains an impossible concept of totality'.<sup>219</sup> It emerges from the idea that postmodern society is too complex for individuals to get a firm ideological footing and understand their position within it, so they must somehow locate their positions in an overall structure, to shatter the image of disconnected fragments. The scope of the system and partial view of any particular individual means that cognitive mapping requires a collective rather than individual perspective, and Jameson equates it to the development of class consciousness, albeit of a type that has not previously been encountered. In effect, it is impossible to know what form it can take, for Jameson, because the complexity of the global system and its de-historicising culture make mapping difficult to conceive. For example, a class view of society is rendered problematic in that, although certain individuals are responsible for economic strategies, there is no clear ruling class that forcefully assimilates the masses to its own language or cultural norms. As with Marcuse's understanding that upper management is another administrative role in the technical rationality, Jameson says that 'what's systemic about it is not due to anybody's agency', and norms are imposed on the elite as much as anyone else.<sup>220</sup> Thus, although there remains a social divide, in the sense that only a few have the knowledge and social position to actually affect the economy, and generally do not 'tolerate any questions about why it should be like that, or even worth knowing in the first place',<sup>221</sup> the elite is not easily viewed as a class because it is internally fragmented throughout various interests in

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<sup>219</sup> *PM*, p. 409.

<sup>220</sup> Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson*, p. 114.

<sup>221</sup> *PM*, p. 352.

the production process.<sup>222</sup> Considering such difficulties, Jameson states that the aim of cognitive mapping is not so much to actually represent the system, but 'to see whether by systematizing something that is resolutely unsystematic, and historicizing something that is resolutely ahistorical, one couldn't outflank it and force a historical way at least of thinking about that'.<sup>223</sup>

Cognitive mapping is then a matter of narrative, rather than a literal mapping of a physical space, or an attempt to bring the temporal back into the spatial, to imagine some kind of politics in postmodernism. As we perceive it, the important point here is not that Jameson somehow privileges the temporal over the spatial, but that spatial relations should be *also* viewed historically. This idea contrasts Homer's argument that Jameson's focus on the narrative aspect of politics abstracts too much from everyday spatial experience or potential spatial politics, and misses that today's more globalised politics and economics are significantly spatial. For example, he says, trade agreements such as NAFTA mean that 'North America is now free to export grain to Mexico, potentially destroying the local economies, yet the citizens of California can erect barriers to keep Mexican migrants out'.<sup>224</sup> In our view, on the contrary, spatial politics is precisely what disconnects issues surrounding the Mexican economy and Mexican migration to California *from* NAFTA, and renders them as separate concerns. It is the 'defragmenting' influence of temporality that reconnects these ever expanding spaces. The other danger, as Massey explains, is that a singular concept of the temporal (which Massey connects to Jameson's modernist fear of postmodern disorder) may be applied too rigidly, creating a 'Grand Narrative' that ignores the spatial diversity required for a wide-ranging political movement.<sup>225</sup> In this case, Jameson appears to be aware of the problem, when he describes 'the unresolvable [...] dilemma of the transfer of curved space to flat charts', so 'there can be no true maps', only 'scientific progress, or better still, a dialectical advance, in the various historical moments of mapmaking'.<sup>226</sup> In other words, rather than some final 'grand narrative' into which all particular phenomena must fit, the processes of mapping develop with knowledge, and, in this case, spatial politics brings necessary diversity to the temporal formulation.

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<sup>222</sup> In a later text, Jameson points to a revitalisation of class difference, and states that viewing the system as impersonal or as 'the combined wills and intentions of an elite' involves 'choices based on a narrative strategy which is essentially ideological in nature' (*VOD*, p. 609).

<sup>223</sup> *PM*, p. 418.

<sup>224</sup> Homer, *Marxism, Hermeneutics*, p. 151.

<sup>225</sup> Doreen Massey, 'Politics and Space/Time', *New Left Review*, 1/196 (1992), 65-84 (p. 83).

<sup>226</sup> *PM*, p. 52.

The problem with cognitive mapping as Jameson presents it is then not the concept of reintroducing temporality, but a paradox (not dissimilar to Marcuse's political impasse) that the very thing it is supposed to address — postmodern de-historicisation — renders it ineffective. In other words, there seems to be no way for cognitive mapping to develop in the social conditions Jameson defines, and as such there is something 'insufficiently dialectical' about his approach.<sup>227</sup> On one hand, the temporal is still in some sense detectable in the spatialized postmodernism, for Jameson, as the categories of time and space are ultimately inseparable, and even the idealised notion of the schizophrenic 'marks the impossible effort to imagine something like a pure experience of the spatial present'.<sup>228</sup> On this basis, cognitive mapping represents 'most clearly Jameson's refusal to accept the apparent closures and ahistoricity of the postmodern that he outlines elsewhere'.<sup>229</sup> On the other hand, Jameson cannot envisage any dialectical relationship between cognitive mapping and spatial politics in the present. Thus, its potential 'may well be dependent on some prior political opening, which its task would then be to enlarge culturally', but until then, 'if we cannot imagine the productions of such an aesthetic, there may [...] be something positive in the attempt to keep alive the possibility of imagining such a thing'.<sup>230</sup> In the present, the mapping process finds itself spatialized again, into a mere image, and Jameson points to 'the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network'.<sup>231</sup> In this view, insisting that the temporal is ineradicable in present conditions seems superfluous, as it is also completely inaccessible (bar some vague hope for a future change in sensibility), and it remains 'precisely space's ability to absolutely repress temporality that is the issue'.<sup>232</sup> The temporal is less a marginalised element still somehow identifiable within postmodernism, and more a missing dimension that modernist cognitive mapping cannot locate.

At certain points, Jameson identifies degraded forms of ideological mapping in postmodern culture that imply a sublimated need, but does not consider these as narratives with potential to appreciate temporal concepts. For example, he explains, technological development

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<sup>227</sup> Homer, *Marxism, Hermeneutics*, p. 146.

<sup>228</sup> *PM*, p. 154.

<sup>229</sup> Philip E. Wegner, 'Periodizing Jameson, or, Notes toward a Cultural Logic of Globalization', in *On Jameson*, pp. 241-279 (p. 267).

<sup>230</sup> Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', p. 287.

<sup>231</sup> *PM*, p. 44.

<sup>232</sup> Homer, *Marxism, Hermeneutics*, p. 148.

may be seen as the focal point of alienation and end of Nature, which effectively stands in for capitalism itself. Here, modern technology 'seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp'.<sup>233</sup> Or, paranoia and conspiracy fiction may be seen as an attempt to totalise, and Jameson states that, even if 'nothing is gained by having been persuaded of the definitive verisimilitude of this or that conspiratorial hypothesis', at least 'in the intent to hypothesize [...] lies the beginning of wisdom'.<sup>234</sup> Conspiracy theories do not connect explanatory narratives to the background of social and economic institutions, but such perception at least achieves a kind of 'closure-effect', which resembles how cognitive mapping triangulates, 'rather than perceiving or representing, a totality'.<sup>235</sup> According to our aims, it is then necessary to expand on these attempts at imagining a coherent logic to social functioning, to show that they are part of postmodern ideologies in general, which are not then closed to temporal considerations.

In our terms, cognitive mapping is therefore a way to develop class consciousness from ideologies in postmodernism, by redefining their narratives through a systemic perspective. As such, it contrasts Jameson's idea that 'the production of functioning and living ideologies' may be 'not possible at all' in certain historical moments, and that 'this would seem to be our situation in the current crisis'.<sup>236</sup> That is, rather than aim at reintroducing the concept of historical totality to people who can no longer comprehend their individual experience in terms of some consistent meaning, it challenges the range of narratives and meanings, or 'living ideologies' that already explain the current situation. Jameson says that 'ideology, as such, attempts to span or coordinate, to map, by means of conscious and unconscious representations'.<sup>237</sup> We would argue that this concept of ideology remains in postmodernism, as a necessity for social functioning,<sup>238</sup> and represents the capacity to make connections between social phenomena. Analysing, combining and contrasting these positions according to a dialectical notion of totality is then a possibility that can begin in the present, and may also help us recognise which ideological

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<sup>233</sup> *PM*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>234</sup> Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>236</sup> *PM*, p. 53.

<sup>237</sup> Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', p. 283.

<sup>238</sup> Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Adventure: Science, Technology, and Cultural Studies at the Third Millennium* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 8.

elements are emergent and which are residual against the dominant cultural logic as part of a wider focus for cognitive mapping.<sup>239</sup> As Harvey puts it, through the renewal of historical materialism we can 'launch a counter-attack of narrative against the image, of ethics against aesthetics, of a project of Becoming rather than Being, and to search for unity within difference', without denying the power of the postmodern logic.<sup>240</sup> In this sense, as with Jameson's utopian theory, cognitive mapping can mediate between totalising class consciousness and existing politics to inspire alternative thinking. A form of agency then becomes clearer in postmodernism in the active battle between ideological beliefs and power structures.

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<sup>239</sup> Carolyn Lesjak, 'History, Narrative, and Realism: Jameson's Search for a Method', in *On Jameson*, pp. 27-50 (p. 40).

<sup>240</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), p. 359.

## VI. Political Action

### i) Politics and Cultural Criticism

Jameson's focus on preparing the ground for future developments when defining cognitive mapping and utopian thinking, and his general approach to postmodernism, suggest a lack of any existing oppositional politics that can avoid incorporation into consumer culture. As such, he devotes less of his work to examining political strategies than either Marcuse or Žižek, and concentrates more on the cultural conditions that repress oppositional thinking, and forms of cultural expression that somehow keep such thinking alive. The question then is what political effect Jameson's particular disciplinary can have, to the extent that it concentrates on aesthetic form and style. Here, we examine some critical analyses of Jameson's work that consider this issue from various perspectives, and which overall suggest that Jameson's approach creates a kind of indirect reflection on political possibilities, but in a way that marginalises it from politics itself. The important point, we contend, is that mediation between theory and practice, which Jameson reiterates as necessary for social change, requires a more even balance of cultural and political theorising.

For some theorists, Jameson's continuous examination of cultural forms, and even his own writing style, have important political effects. Irr and Buchanan, for example, explain how the wide range of his cultural analyses and emphasis on historicising rather than judging is inclusive, because he draws out and combines different qualities from a huge variety of texts, and moves between different aesthetic fields, thus reaching new audiences.<sup>241</sup> Therefore, if there is a tendency towards separation of disciplines in academia, and a lack of conversation between them,<sup>242</sup> Jameson contributes to reversing that trend, by linking literature, architecture, film studies and so on. For Helmling, meanwhile, there are dialectical qualities within the aesthetic form of Jameson's writing, which act as an antidote to familiarity and closure, and work together with the content to reveal the contingency of conventions. In this view, the form creates a certain ambition and energy, which appeals to 'a minority audience that hungers to see the challenges of its own time written about in relevantly challenging ways'.<sup>243</sup> There is a depth of reward and satisfaction

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<sup>241</sup> Irr and Buchanan, 'Introduction', in *On Jameson*, pp. 1-11 (p. 4).

<sup>242</sup> Edward Said, 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community', in *The Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 135-159 (p. 146).

<sup>243</sup> Helmling, *Success and Failure*, p. 147.

in understanding Jameson's texts than cannot be gained from more 'accessible' texts, which also implies a greater comprehension of the existing totality.

More critical views of Jameson's work point to a lack of explicit political engagement, or suggest that his totalising and historicising approach excludes existing politics. For example, Eagleton explains that 'what appears wrong with the world', in Jameson's work, 'is not so much this or that phenomenon but the fact that we cannot see all these phenomena together and see them whole'.<sup>244</sup> As such, totalising becomes a hermeneutics which explains the world but does not try to change it. Jameson in fact still emphasises the unity of theory and practice, in the sense that 'discovering the truth and elaborating it is inseparable from action, from changing ourselves and the society from which our illusions sprang'.<sup>245</sup> Yet, for Eagleton, it is not enough for such a unity that Jameson simply discovers and elaborates aspects of the social reality. Similarly, Homer accuses Jameson of an all-or-nothing logic in regards to mapping the totality, and considers that, while we cannot merely deal with disconnected, reformist micro-politics, it is debilitating 'to be faced with the task of conceiving of a completely new form of global politics'.<sup>246</sup> This criticism effectively aligns cognitive mapping with Marcuse's demand to withdraw politically to prepare for social conditions more conducive to change, or disconnect from existing political practices until the (impossible) task of formulating the whole is complete. Said also questions whether there is a need to distinguish between everyday politics and more global theory at all, and criticises Jameson for paying little attention to the former, or how the two connect (in *PU*). For Said, Jameson's distinction and emphasis on totality advocates 'a strong hermeneutic globalism which will have the effect of subsuming the local in the synchronic'.<sup>247</sup> In all these examples, the description of the totality appears to override the influence of specific parts within it, and the task of mapping postpones consideration of political action in the present.

From our perspective, there are important points to consider in both sides of these arguments. First, Jameson's work demonstrates the kind of alternative and unifying thinking necessary to consider political alternatives. The lack of resolution in the form of his writing maintains dialectical tension in contrasts such as that between synchronic and diachronic, and even within postmodernism. Even though, at the level of content, Jameson emphasises the

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<sup>244</sup> Eagleton, *Against the Grain*, p. 76.

<sup>245</sup> *VOD*, p. 322.

<sup>246</sup> Homer, *Marxism, Hermeneutics*, p. 186.

<sup>247</sup> Said, 'Opponents, Audiences', p. 147.

dominating logic over its particulars (as Said says), his style suggests this lack of completeness and closure. Furthermore, Jameson provides a particularly far-reaching analysis of cultural commodification, without which any radical politics would be less well-equipped to deal with this major influence in late capitalism. In that sense, it is important that *someone* focuses mainly on culture, rather than directly on politics, and Jameson's historicising and non-judgemental method is a useful alternative to more final interpretations. Also, in postmodernism, it may be necessary to approach politics via culture, because fields such as politics and economics are mostly one-dimensional considerations of existing relations, to reintroduce more transcendent forms of thought. Ultimately, although social problems are political or economic in some deeper sense, any resistance must find a way to exceed cultural incorporation, and Jameson's work represents a commitment to such issues.

Conversely, there is also validity in the criticisms of Jameson's approach regarding the need to fully understand the totality, or know *exactly* where we stand in relation to the mechanisms of a global system, before political resistance can be effective. The idea of unifying theory and practice appears to involve concentrating fully on theory in the hope that some new form of practice develops from it, rather than combining theory with existing practices, which are understood as commodified and disconnected images. But, as Osborne argues, 'if we take seriously the reference to social classes [...] then this retreat becomes unnecessary, and not only "negative" theory but some kind of more "positive" form of dialectical theorizing should be possible'.<sup>248</sup> For us, the issue with Jameson here is not that he sees a need to fully theorise a global politics prior to political action (as Homer suggests), because he recognises the inevitable failure of cognitive mapping to envisage a system fully, and aims rather at reinvigorating dialectical thinking through the exercise itself. However, even the attempted mapping must develop in conversation with living, politically engaged ideologies from the start, even if they are not transcendent,<sup>249</sup> without reducing them to images and expressions of the dominant logic. In that sense, mapping the totality is not a theoretical exercise that can inspire a form of practice; it is a practical involvement with fragmented political groups to understand the uneven and partially antagonistic relationships between the whole and its parts.

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<sup>248</sup> Peter Osborne, 'A Marxism for the Postmodern? Jameson's Adorno', *New German Critique*, 56 (1992), pp. 171-192 (p. 191).

<sup>249</sup> Philip Goldstein, 'The Politics of Fredric Jameson's Literary Theory: A Critique', in *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, pp. 249-267 (p. 257).

The dialectical tensions in Jameson's work also create their own tension in terms of its political value, reflecting the conflict Jameson identifies in his theory of Utopia between radical ideals and recognised politics. That is, formulating a strong, focused contribution to cultural and aesthetic theory inevitably means losing some connection to the specific social problems that people encounter. Or, a challenging writing style that helps us understand that the system is incredibly complex, and points to dialectical potentials, is insufficient to connect with non-intellectuals, or even academics from more empirical fields.<sup>250</sup> In this respect, a focus on aesthetics and its commodification seems to be a particularly postmodern choice in itself, which reflects an emphasis on culture within society that obscures the politics of continuing struggles (even though Jameson's point is to re-politicise the whole according to its historical context). As Eagleton puts it, 'The question of appropriation has to do with politics, not with culture; it is a question of who is winning at any particular time.'<sup>251</sup> According to this idea, art and culture are not fields which gain or lose the power to create political change, so much as reflections of political dominance and resistance, whose particular content indicates possible directions for political change. Our point here is not that Jameson should 'change sides' and merely address political matters, rather that his work does not mediate enough between opposition to the whole and political realities, as his theory of Utopia recommends. In our understanding, this kind of mediation is what enables us to envisage the development of a political movement beginning in the present, attempting to connect existing forms of resistance together through more radical notions of change.

## ii) Groups and Classes

Despite this general tendency in Jameson's work to suggest an absence of meaningful political activity in late capitalism, there are times when he considers the potential of existing forms of resistance, such as 'new social movements'. At these points, for Jameson, although singular identity-based movements are not class struggle (or replacements for class struggle) it seems that they represent more than simply media codes. The problem is how these movements might expand into more universal opposition, or include more economic notions of change. Jameson highlights various difficulties in connecting different issues, and with local movements attempting

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<sup>250</sup> Homer, *Marxism, Hermeneutics*, p. 184.

<sup>251</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990), p. 372.

to increase their scope. These ideas raise valid points that must be considered in any attempt to link together forms of political resistance, but we also see a potential common ground for opposition within them, in that social disparity and deprivation are still part of everyday existence. In short, because these material realities remain visible in our societies, the ways people of all classes justify or accept them may be challenged by historicising and utopian narratives. From this perspective, it is possible to envisage a political movement developing from meaningful ideological struggles that continue in late capitalist societies.

For Jameson, 'new social movements' and single-issue identity politics are representative of the dominant paradigm of subject-positions and pluralism, which sees antagonisms as questions of tolerance, rather than contradictions central to the social logic. As such, these movements do not emerge *instead of* class struggle, but are signs of the latter's repression by the postmodern logic, and are expressions of capitalist differentiation. However, Jameson claims, these movements also exceed the prescribed values of consumerism, and are therefore politically meaningful even though they fall short of being new agents of history emerging as a real antithesis. They represent neither determinism nor voluntarism, but political activity that results from and retrospectively confirms objective circumstances, as well as a free individual choice to act or not in the face of historical Necessity. Here, Jameson recognises 'the simultaneous possibility of active political commitment along with disabused systemic realism and contemplation, and not some sterile choice between those two things'.<sup>252</sup> In these terms, there is a conscious decision-making process to resist aspects of the social order, which implies openness to change, even if it is formulated within the dominant logic.

The task for a class-based politics is then to connect the notions of change within these movements through utopian ideas, which, as Jameson shows, faces major difficulties. To begin with, a combination of strategies is required that adapts to the realities of the present while holding the structure of capital in mind,<sup>253</sup> but no specific political group can represent a revolutionary subject of history, and even uniting around common interests with temporary overlaps does not confront underlying systemic contradictions. Thus, for Jameson, such movements must somehow make the economic central to their aims, to enable a politics that can attend 'to the ideological resistance to the concept of totality, and to that epistemological razor of

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<sup>252</sup> *PM*, p. 330

<sup>253</sup> Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson*, p. 19.

postmodern nominalism which shears away such apparent abstractions as the economic system and the social totality themselves'.<sup>254</sup> However, Jameson does not seek a *purely* economic focus, and if an economic demand is necessary because political domination and democratic programmes can be incorporated back into the capitalist state, he explains that it 'must always be in some sense a figure for a more total revolutionary transformation, unless it is to fall back into economism'.<sup>255</sup> He therefore sees that different forms of political or cultural antagonism can be compatible with economic critique, and it is not a question of one taking priority over the other, but of the aims of cultural change being sufficiently radical to include liberation from economic exploitation.<sup>256</sup>

The issue remains that group politics appear to have fundamental incompatibilities with the economic focus of class politics. For example, Jameson explains, new social movements are more prone to incorporation than class struggles — turned into media images, stripped of their history — and even the more marginalised remain part of the plurality of groups and cannot fulfil a 'structural role'.<sup>257</sup> Conversely, while concepts of class structure help systemic understanding, they lack immediate appeal and relevance, as they define individuals according to abstractions outside experience, such as production processes. It is then easier to identify with groups *because* they are more locally relevant, and predicated on visible institutions. Jameson also questions whether the apparently puritanical revolutionary Left demands to think, recognise exploitation, and accommodate myriad political desires, can remain relevant when so dramatically opposed to consumer enjoyment, and thus whether it is possible to combine ideas of revolution and pleasure. In this sense, he says, a notion such as sexual liberation is problematic, especially regarding 'working-class' attitudes to gender and sexuality, or 'the programmed habits of subalternity, obedience, and the like, which cultural revolution seeks to dissolve'.<sup>258</sup> In effect, the

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<sup>254</sup> *PM*, p. 330.

<sup>255</sup> Jameson, 'Pleasure: A Political Issue', p. 384.

<sup>256</sup> *PU*, pp. 85-86. Jameson makes a similar point regarding international resistance against US cultural and political imperialism. He explains that a nationalistic (particular) focus is insufficient to oppose the universal of capitalism, and the result is often another kind of traditionalist protectionism, such as anti-western Islamism. Because they are not universal oppositions, such movements do not offer answers to the complexities of global capitalism and economic exploitation, but, Jameson claims, 'pre-existing forms of social cohesion [...] are necessarily the indispensable precondition for any effective and long-lasting political struggle'. It is a question of existing communities with specific political grievances taking a utopian view of a 'collective life to come' (Jameson, 'Globalization and Political Strategy', p. 66).

<sup>257</sup> *PM*, p. 348.

<sup>258</sup> 'Pleasure: A Political Issue', p. 377.

sexual revolutionary may appear to many as a patronising middle-class outsider, trying to impose unwanted connections. Or, Jameson argues, the male view of sexual politics and feminism is an existential issue, compared to the female view of feminist group struggle, so male defence of sexual liberation may even facilitate sexual exploitation. Furthermore, if it is possible to promote aims of realising a deeper libidinal pleasure, or pure feeling unmediated by language, these aims are likely to appear frivolous, or insufficiently political. Yet, Jameson states, integration between pleasure and radical change is not unfeasible, if it can connect cultural liberations to a wider politics, or maintain 'a dual focus, in which the local issue is meaningful and desirable in and of itself, but is also at *one and the same time* taken as the *figure* for Utopia in general'.<sup>259</sup>

There is also still the issue of commodification, and mass media that reduce politically charged language to identity-specific codes. Jameson describes how the League of Black Revolutionary Workers in Detroit in the 1960s, after a number of city wide political successes, had a problem of representation when the movement tried to expand its cause and area of operations. According to Jameson, they found it difficult to explain the local issue in a way that resonated with other particular situations, and, in the process of networking, the leaders became media figures, which caused the original base to crumble. When the movement became a media image — a book, a film, a story — it was separated from its social connections. The use of commodified space as a communication channel robbed the message of its political content, and the end of the movement simply revealed 'some ultimate dialectical barrier or invisible limit' of the system in relief against it.<sup>260</sup> In fact, for Jameson, the limits of political practice beyond local causes in postmodernism seem to be these moments of rendering the system visible, which implies any attempt to construct a deeper politics from new social movements will be diffused by mass media communication.

In Jameson's terms, therefore, despite the hints of agency in existing political movements, they either remain local campaigns that do not disrupt pluralist narratives, or are reduced to images if they try to communicate more widely. There is then effectively only the hope that, if we attempt to make narrative connections, the concept of narrative connection itself may be slowly revived. However, in our view of ideology, the excesses of consciousness over depthless media representation are more general, and already reveal narratives of social contradiction that may

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., p. 384.

<sup>260</sup> *PM*, p. 415.

connect with more radical conceptions. In many cases, as Jameson notes, people's material realities include experience of deprivation alongside the celebration of difference and tolerance, which therefore must be rationalised. Yet, as such, acceptance of these conditions is not fully explained by postmodern depthlessness, or poverty as an aesthetic quality. Jameson tells us that the 'visibility and continuity of the class model, from the daily experience in the home and on the street all the way up to total mobilization itself, [...] is no longer available today'.<sup>261</sup> But, while it is undeniable that the globalisation of class relations makes it difficult to envisage or organise class politics, the situation is not invisible so much as rationalised, whether through liberal representations of helpless victims, cynical fear of change, or the hidden intolerance of pluralism that views outsiders as dropouts, parasites and totalitarians. Any political aims thus enter this ideological arena, and must make a mark within it.

It remains the case that class consciousness is marginal, since connecting local problems to systemic structures requires an understanding of history and global capital that affirmative ideologies obscure. As we have seen with Marcuse, a class politics can no longer look towards a particular class that manifests economic contradictions to rise up and take control. Rather, class politics entails a process in which the inequalities of the existing system are gradually better understood by individuals and groups within each class, leading to an oppositional movement. Moreover, the important point in terms of producing radical alternatives is that this movement focuses on the way social disparity is intrinsic to contradictions in capitalism, but can be overcome if the mode of production itself is transformed. Jameson's theories of History and Utopia offer viable approaches to developing a collective political movement, in the sense that they can define empowerment and freedom in ways that are both locally and generally meaningful, by mediating between various political dynamics and notions of class. However, the important point as we perceive it is that such a method may have an impact *within* the current cultural logic, not only in some unforeseeable alternative future. Jameson's theory of Utopia comes closest to this idea, and even resembles Marcuse's step by step approach in that it does not seem to 'rest on the debilitating prospect of representing an unrepresentable totality, but rather on the articulation of a formal tension between local difference and global totality'.<sup>262</sup> There are even moments (in his later work) at which Jameson considers actual political issues, in ways that appear to override

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<sup>261</sup> *MF*, p. xvii.

<sup>262</sup> Homer, *Marxism, Hermeneutics*, p. 172.

questions of how politics is possible. For example, he makes specific recommendations, such as to defend the welfare state against the onslaught of market rhetoric, while also naming the system and its alternative.<sup>263</sup> He also explains how current left-leaning governments offer potentials, despite feelings of powerlessness, and the long term failures of many oppositional movements, in that 'Left electoral victories are neither hollow social-democratic exercises nor occasions in which power passes hands definitively', but 'signals for the gradual unfolding of democratic demands', or 'increasingly radical claims on a sympathetic government' that will 'be radicalized in its turn, unless it sells out to the appeal for order'.<sup>264</sup> We maintain that this effort to establish radical claims describes precisely a battle between active ideologies, with something at stake beyond the media images and codes.

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<sup>263</sup> *VOD*, p. 382.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

## VII. Conclusion

In our understanding, Jameson's descriptions of postmodern or globalised capitalist society are largely plausible, in terms of the dominance of commodity logic over life in many parts of the world. As such, there is no obvious progressive alternative to a US-centred late capitalism that incorporates many ideas into its form of pluralism, and condemns the remainder to marginalisation. To counter this dominance, Jameson shows that it is essential to understand late capitalism as a system, or the present culmination of continuing historical developments, which allow us to view its gaps and contradictions. Thus, even though he does not fully acknowledge the moral assumptions in his concepts of History and totalising, their view of the present remains politically important. As with that of Marcuse, Jameson's work remains committed to revealing the gap between reality and its potential, in a way that effectively divides ideology between affirmative and oppositional forms of consciousness, and removes us from the immediacy of the present.

Our main issue with Jameson's work is that, in defining the postmodern logic as one that even colonises the unconsciousness (the very excess of experienced reality), ideological rationalisation becomes less apparent, if not absent or superfluous. The 'modernist' dialectic that can hold *any* dominant cultural logic in tension with its subordinate features is rendered ineffective by commodified forms of representation, and it appears that it cannot overcome this barrier. In our view, Jameson's method is prone to a form of totalising that does not sufficiently account for the excesses of the dominant logic when considering political potentials. The point is then that 'modernist' methods can still identify limits to postmodernism, because dialectics and functioning ideologies inevitably remain part of it. The notion that postmodernism assimilates consciousness to media codes without rationalisation, or reproduces itself regardless of what people think, based on the global presence of capitalism and the scope of commodification, is still only an appearance that obscures its own ideological supports. It is then not so much that a new concept of politics is required that cannot yet be envisaged, but that the task is still one of identifying ideologies, and understanding their limits or conditions of affirmation, and deeper ideals that may connect with more radical projects. The tendencies and dominance of commodified postmodern culture make such a difficult task even harder, but seeing these ideological positions as different totalising narratives allows us to better understand the whole, and some possible conditions for its transcendence.

## Consciousness and the Limits of Social Conformity

Within Jameson's work, various concepts suggest the possibility of developing an oppositional politics in current circumstances through gradual, dialectical development. In particular, his notion of Utopia provides a theoretical basis for gradually forming such a movement, in the way it mediates between different discourses, even if we understand the 'utopian impulse' as a general negative excess of subjectivity. However, with his understanding of ideology as cynical reason or reproduction of the system through practices, this potential remains an exercise in maintaining a marginalised concept of dialectical thinking in the hope that some future consciousness may perceive its value, rather than communication with living ideologies. Throughout this chapter we have therefore tried to demonstrate that such ideologies exist, and exceed fragmented perception, commodified images, and identity politics, so that this approach to Utopia, and ideas such as cognitive mapping, may be seen as more politically powerful tools.



## Chapter 4

### Slavoj Žižek

#### I. Introduction

Our analysis of Žižek examines how he structures ideology through Lacanian categories of the subject, and the implications of that approach.<sup>1</sup> Through these categories, Žižek's theory goes beyond those of Marcuse and Jameson in that it not only splits ideology between affirmative and oppositional positions, centred on class struggle, but also distinguishes between unconscious ideological attachment and a conscious 'fantasy' that allows the subject to justify that attachment (in our terms, a form of rationalisation). The way consciousness functions to block recognition of the 'irrationality' of attachment is then a central concern in Žižek's work, more so than we have seen with Marcuse and Jameson. Moreover, it delineates a dialectic within subjectivity itself that, as we see it, suggests an intrinsic potential for ideological change. However, Žižek's theory does not endow rationalisation with the level of influence required for such potential, and defines it more as a way of justifying ideological attachment at all costs. In other words, the conscious aspect of ideology is subservient to unconscious belief or obedience, for Žižek, against our understanding that rationalisation can be forced to adapt to contrary ideas in a way that affects core attachment. Žižek's own concept of ideological change focuses more on negation, or revealing to subjects the contingency of their attachments. Here, while we accept that radically progressive ideological change requires subjects to recognise the contingency of what they have taken for reality, we stress that this realisation must still occur through challenges to *conscious* beliefs, so negation involves expanding the presence of specific oppositional ideologies.

We begin by introducing the main Lacanian terms that Žižek uses to define ideology and subjectivity. First, the central categories of Imaginary, Symbolic and Real provide the tools to define a subject that is constitutively attached to the social through language, but in a way that is necessarily 'incomplete' because there is no external reason for that attachment, causing the subject to imagine reasons retrospectively through consciousness. This terminology also enables

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<sup>1</sup> In this case, our literary focus is spread quite evenly between Žižek's major works in English from 1989 to the present, most notably: *SOI* (first published 1989), *FTKN* (first published 1991), *TS* (first published 1999), *PV* (2006) and *IDLC* (2008).

us to split symbolic attachment according to our concepts of ideological 'affirmation' and 'opposition', so we can draw from it our two-tiered notion of ideology. We then examine the complexity of the subject's relationship to ideological attachment through the concepts of drive, desire, fantasy and superego. According to these terms, the possibilities of transcendence implied by the lack of ideological closure are effectively blocked by an endless circuit that revolves around obedience to attachment. Therefore, for Žižek, ideological change is a matter of 'traversing the fantasy', or subjects recognising that there is no external reason for their symbolic attachment. In contrast, we suggest that contradictory experience and knowledge may affect the ideological fantasy to the point it shifts symbolic attachment. In other words, there is some limit point at which the fantasy can no longer find a way to justify the subject's particular symbolic attachment, and the only remaining possibility is to change behaviour itself. Furthermore, in terms of traversing the fantasy, we argue that Žižek does not sufficiently emphasise how specific oppositional ideological beliefs and values are necessary in advance to cause negation, and thus already influence how the subject reacts to recognising the lack in subjectivity. To identify with the fantasy and the 'irrationality' of the attachment, the subject must go through an ideological shift based on challenges to its assumptions and beliefs.

To reinforce our arguments, we analyse how Žižek prioritises the unconscious over the conscious in his treatment of ideologies. In Žižek's theory, the central feature of ideology (today) is that it is 'fetishistic', or uses conscious justifications to 'displace' underlying beliefs. He contrasts this form against 'symptomal' concepts of ideology, which highlight false beliefs or lack of awareness. For Žižek, subjects behave in ways that contradict their conscious values, and rationalise this discrepancy by transferring belief elsewhere, but the behaviour itself is what indicates their (unconscious) ideological attachment. Consequently, ideology critique seems ineffective because people already know that their behaviour is contradictory in some sense. Against this point, we insist that the ways in which discrepancies are justified still involves assumptions and beliefs that can be analysed and challenged, and therefore even the most cynical fetishism is susceptible to a 'symptomal' ideology critique. That is, while we agree with Žižek that beliefs are not false in some absolute sense, because all notions of reality are ideological, the fetish does not simply displace conscious belief, as it justifies displacement through other beliefs. With this idea, it is then possible to examine various ideologies described

by Žižek, both in the way they relate to the positions we have outlined in previous chapters, and the particular beliefs and assumptions they contain.

In the remaining sections, we explore how Žižek theorises potentials for ideological change in line with a radical politics in consumerist neoliberal capitalism. While many of the strategies and obstacles he identifies are pertinent to this endeavour, we reconsider them in terms of the reciprocal connection between ideological levels, and the need for a negation that emerges from particular ideals. To begin with, Žižek identifies various ways in which capitalism itself obstructs and diffuses radical politics. He explains that the commodity form represents a fetish in practice which reproduces capitalism through behaviour; that consumerism creates a general demand to enjoy which replaces any specific authority figure; and that cultural protest and opposition are inadequate because, in becoming commodified, they lack a sufficiently radical political critique. From our perspective, the focus on fetishistic behaviour can obscure how different ideological rationalisations commit to commodity fetishism to different extents. Also, we contend, there is still a general authoritative principle in society to which ideologies are connected. The different attachments to capitalism may then be contested by oppositional ideas, and we maintain that such ideas can even survive within commodified cultural channels, because radical messages exceed depoliticised forms of presentation.

In terms of radical political agency, our main point of interest is in Žižek's treatment of the Lacanian 'act', or a point at which a subject does something unsanctioned within the existing symbolic horizon, and causes a shift in what is deemed possible. In this way, the act indicates a certain potential for self-determination, in which the subject obliterates its previous perspective and adopts a new one. Our focus here is on what motivates a subject to act in a way that may lead to radical political change. Specifically, we see that if an act is to be more than spontaneous voluntarism, it has to have been already rationalised according to a symbolically articulated idea, which implies that conscious experience has already caused an ideological shift. In our view, Žižek does not fully confront the repercussion that the new symbolic order reflects the causes of the act, so that the outcome results from its specific form. We then connect this idea of radical agency to Žižek's emphasis on class struggle, in which he constructs a theory of universal social antagonism based around 'included' and 'excluded' elements in society. For us, any act which

negates the current order to inspire such principles must be formulated in these class terms in advance.

In considering the form and content of a politics which attempts to eradicate existing forms of exclusion, Žižek's approach also focuses on negative refusals that may open up understanding of alternative possibilities. In this sense, we argue, his resistance to democracy works as a way of marking the distinction between politics within the current symbolic horizon and a class politics of the excluded, but the question remains how to develop this latter. Here, Žižek views non-participation, at least in widely recognised forms of activism, as especially productive. We assert that, while there is a certain power in refusal, it is necessary to define more clearly ways in which it may be combined with recognised forms of political participation for maximum effect, especially if radical politics is to bridge a gap between everyday thinking and transcendent ideals. This form of mediation is more evident in Žižek's vision of 'the Party' as an organising force for radical change, in that he emphasises cooperation between radical leadership and a wider political movement. As with Marcuse's concept of education, we reiterate that the Party already implies a certain political direction, rather than the more fully negative role of revealing contingency that Žižek suggests. Even so, it functions as a form of mediation between everyday politics and radical ideals, and the ideological direction it represents may be essential to challenging conscious affirmative beliefs.

These considerations of political negation and rejection connect back to Žižek's concept of ideology, as they imply that affirmative ideologies attach themselves to capitalism regardless of conscious experience. Our aim is to stress the role of particular ideological direction in facilitating negation and the possibility that affirmative ideologies are still susceptible to change precisely through challenges to their beliefs. In terms of the type of radical political challenge desired, these aims coincide with Žižek's, and we generally defend him from accusations that his politics is overly narrow and exclusive, or lacks specific goals.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, we understand some criticisms in this respect, especially against Žižek's implications that a more *indeterminate* form of

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<sup>2</sup> For example, we oppose ideas such as that Žižek would prefer to reintroduce a singular dominant discourse in opposition to pluralist politics (Boucher, Samuels, Sharpe); that the Real is an a priori category (Butler), and focusing on universal antinomy undermines analysis of specific political antagonisms (Devenney, Sharpe); or that Žižek's commitment to radical politics is too vague or passive (Laclau, Ramey).

negation is the first step to realising social change.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this issue of the balance between negation and oppositional ideological content returns throughout, as we understand that certain radical ideologies and movements are the condition for rendering affirmative ideologies contingent in a way that points towards class consciousness.

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<sup>3</sup> The arguments here include that: Žižek's concept of a pre-symbolic subject suggests the possibility of ideological negation *prior to* re-entering the symbolic (Boucher, Johnston); the act never simply negates but is already politicised or implies alternative content (Grigg, Marchart, Stavrakakis); Žižek's approach to political refusal may initially be more destructive than constructive (Dean); it is not always clear how the leader and the Party function without being dogmatic (Sharpe and Boucher).

## II. Key Concepts

### i) Symbolic, Real and Imaginary

Žižek's use of Lacanian theory in many ways provides a structure for our concept of ideology, in the way that the main elements of the psyche — Imaginary, Symbolic and Real — create a central dialectical relationship within subjectivity. As previously mentioned, notions such as repressed erotic instinct (Marcuse) or utopian impulse (Jameson) become, in Žižek's terms, an indeterminable 'lack' in the subject, or simply the excess of interpellation into symbolic life (linguistic consciousness). The constitutive gap formed by this Real remainder of any particular Symbolic order then implies that ideology is always present and always contingent, because symbolic representation cannot be identical to its object. Furthermore, the connection between the Symbolic and the Imaginary establishes our two different levels of ideological attachment, in the sense that entry into the Symbolic links the subject to the social order, and the Imaginary 'fantasy' structures rationalisations of that connection. We also maintain that Žižek's notion of capitalism as 'symbolic Real' (which resembles absent History in Jameson's theory) effectively represents the split between affirmative and oppositional ideologies.

The relationship between the Symbolic and the Real is one of the most important in Žižek's theory. The Symbolic is the horizon of linguistic representation, within which all consciousness functions, and therefore forms the boundaries of experienced reality. It is the structure which enables explanation, or the 'Other Scene external to the thought whereby the form of the thought is already articulated in advance',<sup>4</sup> and the stability of our reality thus relies on stability of meaning within the Symbolic. The Real is the remainder of symbolisation, or that which resists symbolisation absolutely. It is not an actual reality beyond the Symbolic, but the unnameable negative excess of representation itself, which emerges as an effect of language. In short, whatever meaning the Symbolic provides, the Real is that which points to its contingency, but can only be embodied in contradictions in the symbolic reality. There is then *only* symbolic reality and the negative gap between symbolic representation and its object, so ideology is not an escape from reality into mystification, but the *creation of* reality to escape absence of meaning. More specifically, the Symbolic needs ideology to hide its lack (of totality), or to suture the symbolic field with a 'Master-Signifier' that acts as a guarantor of meaning. This Master-Signifier

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<sup>4</sup> *SOI*, p. 13.

is ultimately tautological (follow God's word because it is God's word), and ideology is structured around it, to keep the subject from confronting its emptiness. In this way, the purpose of ideological analysis is 'to detect, behind the dazzling splendour of the element which holds it together [...] this self-referential, tautological, performative operation'.<sup>5</sup>

The particular forms of ideology that obscure the lack are part of the Imaginary, which is also within the realm of the signifier, but more specific to the individual ego. With imaginary identification the subject creates the ideal image of itself (ideal ego), as opposed to symbolic identification, in which the subject views itself from the perspective of an (imagined) authority figure (ego ideal). However, symbolic identification overdetermines the Imaginary, so the ideal ego falls under the gaze of the Symbolic, and is structured through the ego ideal. Žižek explains that 'the subject must identify himself with the imaginary other', that is, imagine his identity as that of an external perception, and this 'imaginary self-experience is for the subject the way to misrecognize his radical dependence on [...] the symbolic order as his decentred cause'.<sup>6</sup> Subjects then formulate an imaginary 'fantasy' that structures their experience of reality and enables them to rationalise their position in the social order. The subject's entry into symbolic meaning must be anchored in some external reason, to avoid confronting the contingency of the Symbolic. Thus, the fantasy fills in the imaginary desire of the Other, so that the subject 'is loaded with a symbolic mandate', and 'given a place in the intersubjective network of symbolic relations'.<sup>7</sup>

From these basic definitions, ideology can be seen as both necessary and incomplete, because there is no objective reality, and representation is always unequal to its object. These concepts also indicate two levels of ideology, which comprise an initial base attachment to the Symbolic and the fantasy structure which retroactively provides a reason for that attachment. The Real, meanwhile, signifies a certain instability in all ideology, or a limit of the Symbolic that the fantasy must repress. For our purposes, the other question here is whether these concepts can register a difference between 'affirmative' and 'oppositional' symbolic attachments, as it seems that subjects must already have accepted or rejected the social order prior to any rationalisations. In this sense it appears important to view the Symbolic both as an overall limit of representation,

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.

contrasted only by negativity, and according to the horizons of specific fantasies or subject positions, which relate in different ways to the Master-Signifier.

The first significant point here is that Žižek recognises certain 'empty' or shared Master-Signifiers which act as central points in the (affirmative) ideological field. These signifiers suture the Symbolic at a higher level than individual ego ideals, and make ideological struggle a matter of attempting to 'fill' the empty Master-Signifiers with specific meanings.<sup>8</sup> For example, the empty Master-Signifier 'democracy' is central to many ideologies in late capitalist societies, but each accords it a particular content, and the symbolic order overall includes these competing claims to authority. Žižek thus distinguishes between the symbolic order and the ego ideal, or between the Symbolic as horizon of common language, and ego ideals as different sets of values within it.<sup>9</sup> He explains that 'the ego ideal is symbolic, the point of my symbolic identification, the point in the big Other from which I observe (and judge) myself'.<sup>10</sup> It is not that the ego ideal *is* the symbolic order, but it is *of* the symbolic order, and the point of identification *within* it.

If this distinction points to a variety of 'affirmative' ideologies, we can assume there are also 'oppositional' ideologies that resist the authority of the empty Master-Signifier, yet still operate within the Symbolic. For example, some ideologies may not see 'democracy' as a Master-Signifier, but remain ideologies, and indicate that democracy is 'only' a dominant idea, and non-democracy remains symbolically representable. In such ideologies, a sense of the Real is encountered, although they are not real in a completely negative sense, and what Žižek calls the 'symbolic Real' becomes significant. Žižek pairs all the terms in the Lacanian trinity in their different permutations to create six different positions (real Real, symbolic Real, imaginary Real, symbolic Symbolic, imaginary Symbolic and imaginary Imaginary). In this schema, both imaginary Real and symbolic Real describe points at which subjects confront the limits of symbolisation, as opposed to the real Real of absolute negativity. The imaginary Real is the thing that annoys us in the Other that we can never identify, while the symbolic Real is a field of symbolisation beyond the ego ideal, which can be identified in some sense, but not included in any symbolic position, such as meaningless scientific formulae in quantum physics, where

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<sup>8</sup> *PF*, p. 119.

<sup>9</sup> It is not, as Sharpe and Boucher claim, that Žižek fails to distinguish between the Ego Ideal and the overall symbolic order, or therefore that his 'call for a renewal of the Symbolic Order must necessarily lead to the call for a new Ego Ideal, and for this Ego Ideal to be universally shared' (Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 163).

<sup>10</sup> *IDLC*, p. 89.

concepts are identified that affect reality but do not seem to fit within it.<sup>11</sup> Most importantly, Žižek's other common example of the symbolic Real is capitalism itself, which, he explains, 'remains the same in all possible symbolization', and exists beyond the multitude of cultures as the 'neutral meaningless underlying structure'.<sup>12</sup> This point effectively splits the Symbolic around capitalism as an absent Master-Signifier, which defines a point of differentiation between affirmative and negative ideologies.

This association between capitalism and the Real can thus be integrated into our concept of ideology, although the exact definition of the relationship requires further clarification (especially since Žižek does not always specify that capitalism is the *symbolic* Real, rather than the Real as such). First, it may seem that placing capitalism into the Real implies it cannot be theorised positively. For example, Sharpe asks how Žižek can make this equivalence in the name of 'critique of capitalism', when, 'logically, it can *only* mean the collapse into one-dimensionality',<sup>13</sup> where capitalism becomes an effective background that cannot be outmanoeuvred. Alternatively, rather than raising capitalism to the absolute, the opposite issue is that the Real is lowered to the level of the particular. Butler, for example, argues that either the Real is some ahistorical principle, or it indicates specific needs for immanent critique that require no general term. She states that the Real as ahistorical principle misses specific 'failures and discontinuities produced by social relations that invariably exceed the signifier and whose exclusions are necessary for the stabilization of the signifier'.<sup>14</sup> But then, if capitalism is the Real, 'the absences that structure discourse, [...] are defined in relation to the discourse itself', not 'in every instance from an ahistorical "bar"'.<sup>15</sup> In the first case, however, although Žižek sees that capitalism has a universality, because it does not relate to a particular civilisation, it is not 'the entire empirical reality of capitalism' that is real, but 'the underlying matrix of its functioning'.<sup>16</sup> That is, capitalism goes beyond any single culture or language, and cannot be fully symbolised, but cuts across cultures, rather than structuring *everything* in them, and non-capitalist symbolisations remain possible. In the second case, capitalism is *an example* of the impossibility

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<sup>11</sup> As Žižek explains in: Žižek and Glen Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), pp. 68-69.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

<sup>13</sup> Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real* (London: Ashgate, 2004), p. 202.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, 'Dynamic Conclusions', in *Contingency, Hegemony*, pp. 263-280 (p. 277).

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, 'Concesso Non Dato', in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, ed. by Boucher, Glynnos and Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 219-255 (p. 241).

of a symbolic order without a lack, for Žižek, but that impossibility is only inferred from particular antagonisms, so does not precede them. As Žižek states, 'the political struggle for hegemony [...], and the "non-historical" bar or impossibility are thus strictly correlative'.<sup>17</sup> Every particular struggle is sustained by the impossibility of non-antagonistic totality, and capitalism describes an especially expansive instance of such struggle.

In this way, capitalism as Real is neither an untouchable ideological background, nor an embodiment of an eternal principle. However, it is still not clear why we should try to resolve the antagonisms in capitalism, if all societies are inevitably antagonistic. Thus, Butler wonders whether anything really new could be 'produced from an analysis of the social field that remains restricted to inversions, aporias and reversals that work regardless of time and place', and whether 'these reversals produce something other than their own structurally identical repetitions'.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Sharpe criticises Žižek for focusing on 'antinomy', or irresolvable antagonism, rather than particular 'contradictions', because it facilitates an escape from empirical political analysis,<sup>19</sup> and normative values that tell us 'whether our future acts will bring about a "better" or "worse" Other'.<sup>20</sup> But, for Žižek, radical oppositional politics revolves around the actual needs of subjects excluded from rights and opportunities in society. As such, empirical examples are *the way in which* 'antinomy' is recognised and opposed, and Žižek does *not* suggest that the failure of representation makes it irrelevant which symbolic order is dominant. Rather, the subjects who embody contradiction make change necessary, and while there is a sense of structural repetition, as Butler says, because contradictions always emerge, it does not render all forms of exclusion equal.

The concept of the symbolic Real and its association with capitalism therefore remains valid in our understanding, and suggests a radically oppositional form of ideology defined around it. This association is itself an ideological construct, because, even if market fluctuations really affect people's lives, to define them as an 'underlying matrix' is to symbolise them, and subjectively project a structure or narrative. As in Jameson's concept of history, it is only an alternative to ideologies that posit a different organising logic, or treat fields such as the cultural

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<sup>17</sup> Žižek, 'Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, please!', in *Contingency, Hegemony*, pp. 90-135 (p. 111).

<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, 'Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism', in *Contingency, Hegemony*, pp. 11-43 (p. 29).

<sup>19</sup> Sharpe, 'What's Left in Žižek? The Antinomies of Žižek's Sociopolitical Reason', in *Traversing the Fantasy*, pp. 147-168 (p. 165).

<sup>20</sup> Sharpe, *A Little Piece of the Real*, p. 216.

and the economic as distinct entities. But consequently, as with Jameson, there are important political ramifications, because the symbolic Real allows us not only to understand that the Symbolic is contingent, but also to see *what* this contingency excludes. Laclau makes the point that capitalism cannot be the Real, since 'capitalism as such is dislocated by the Real, and it is open to contingent hegemonic retotalizations'.<sup>21</sup> But, Žižek is effectively 're-totalising' capitalism as the (symbolic) Real, so as to represent the hidden split in the Symbolic that causes social exclusion. Although the forces are never transparent, capitalism can act as a point of contention within the Symbolic, to reveal socially excluded subjects.

## ii) Subjectivity

One implication of the gap within the Symbolic is that of an inherent potential in subjectivity to transcend its own ideological boundaries, if the subject can recognise the contingency of the Master-Signifier. In our theory of ideology, this potential seems to represent precisely the possibility of alternative thinking confronting the limits of belief that each individual holds. However, in other aspects of Žižek's Lacanian theory, any subjective recognition of this gap becomes problematic. Specifically, despite a constant drive to exceed symbolic boundaries, desire, fantasy and superego function to block recognition of contingency, and maintain subjective identity. As Žižek presents it, the subject's irrational 'enjoyment' of its basic symbolic attachment renders the fantasy's actual content superfluous, and political change does not appear plausible as a result of counter-ideological claims, or contradictory knowledge and experience. Conversely, we argue, it is important to recognise a mutual dependency and influence between base attachment and coherent rationalisation, to establish grounds for change through consciousness.

As we have seen, the symbolic or conscious subject is necessarily incomplete due to the failure of representation, and imagines an external reason for its particular attachment to hide its fundamental contingency. The circuit of subjectivity has further complications, however, described by Žižek as 'the square of desire, fantasy, lack in the Other and drive pulsating around some unbearable surplus-enjoyment'.<sup>22</sup> The first point here is that drive is not a biological instinct, but a raw sense of lack, or incompleteness, emerging from symbolic subjectivity. As Žižek puts it, 'drive is quite literally the very "drive" to *break* the All of continuity in which we are embedded, to

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<sup>21</sup> Laclau, 'Constructing Universality', p. 291.

<sup>22</sup> *SOI*, p. 139.

introduce a radical imbalance into it'.<sup>23</sup> To pursue this negative excess of subjectivity would then involve exiting the symbolic order altogether, so *within* subjectivity drive is sublimated into desire through the fantasy. In this process, 'lack' is represented as the apparent 'loss' of some object (*objet petit a*), which is then paradoxically 'the object causing our desire and at the same time [...] posed retroactively by this desire'.<sup>24</sup> That is, the desire seems always-already present, but is the *result* of sublimating the drive created by symbolic subjectivity. Drive is therefore focused on an object it can never reach, because doing so would reveal that the object is not the lost 'Thing' after all. But even so, the consequent repetition of circling the object partially satisfies drive, and to that extent its 'aim is realized in its very repeated failure to realize its goal'.<sup>25</sup>

In this schema, the fantasy's role is to bestow fetishistic value on *objet petit a*, and protect it from contradiction by ensuring it is never attained or fulfilled. It also presents desire as the desire of some Other, to ground it in an absolute external source. From our perspective, the task is then to seek the limits of the fantasy and its ability to enable the subject to represent itself to itself coherently according to a specific desire, against potentially contradictory experiences. However, in Žižek's terms, the particular content of the fantasy is less relevant, because it is not really susceptible to such contradiction. First, he explains, where social antagonisms cannot be denied, the fantasy must posit some other external agent as cause of these problems. In other words, the '*fantasy is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance*'.<sup>26</sup> For example, Žižek says, in fascism the Jews are held responsible for all social antagonisms, and are the way the fantasy displaces the intrinsic impossibility of its utopian vision. Moreover, since symbolic attachment precedes the fantasy, it is ultimately held firm by the partial *jouissance* or enjoyment the subject receives from being within its circuit, so symbolic law is *primarily* obeyed not through justification based on the Other's desire, but due to this basic unconscious acceptance. It does not then seem that the fantasy has to be clear or consistent. Rather, it merely has to keep deflecting or distorting information and experiences that might otherwise point to its contingency, and the irrationality of the core obedience.

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<sup>23</sup> Žižek, 'Ideology II: Competition Is a Sin', *Lacan.com*, 4 January 2008  
<<http://www.lacan.com/zizdesolationroad.html>> [accessed 10 August 2016] (para. 26 of 36)

<sup>24</sup> *SOI*, p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> *TS*, p. 93.

<sup>26</sup> *SOI*, p. 142.

In fact, Žižek states, the 'stain' of irrationality, or surplus over the symbolic identification, 'far from hindering the full submission of the subject to the ideological command, is the very condition of it'.<sup>27</sup> Specifically, as drive fulfils its aim, and the subject obeys attachment, the 'superego' emerges as 'an unethical moral Law [...] in which an obscene enjoyment sticks to obedience to the moral norms'.<sup>28</sup> This superego commands subjects to obey ideology purely for the enjoyment, rather than their fantasy 'rationalisation'. For example, Žižek explains how Nazi soldiers and officers in the Holocaust had an '*imaginary* screen of satisfactions, myths, and so on', that allowed them to maintain a 'human' distance from their actions, or claim they were merely doing a job. But, because this job permitted sadism, in that duty itself involved inflicting suffering, the participants would also have experienced 'the *real* of the perverse (sadistic) *jouissance* in what they were doing'.<sup>29</sup> The subject denies responsibility for the sadistic action, because it is duty or 'objective necessity', but is in fact still 'deriving *enjoyment* from what is imposed on him'.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the superego actually inflicts guilt on the subject *because* of symbolic rationality. For Žižek, 'the true superego injunction' is a general prohibitive 'You shall not!', without particular content, which explains that, 'you yourself should know or guess what you should not do, so that you are put in an impossible position of always and a priori being under suspicion of violating some (unknown) prohibition'.<sup>31</sup> Guilt comes from symbolic subjectivity itself, because the superego is a reminder that symbolically mediated action marks a 'loss' of subjective wholeness, or pure enjoyment. The superego command to simply enjoy is the obverse of the attempt to justify behaviour through the fantasy of the Other, and marks the strength of the subject's libidinal attachment.<sup>32</sup>

Our issue with this structure of fantasy, enjoyment and superego is that it appears to block any way for the subject to recognise its own lack, and symbolic contingency. In Žižek's

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>28</sup> Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 67.

<sup>29</sup> PF, p. 69. What Žižek describes, in terms of the imaginary fantasy, is very much in line with our notion of rationalisation. His examples here include the Nazi soldiers 'telling themselves that Jews are only being transported to some new Eastern camps; claiming that just a small number of them were actually killed', which for us demonstrate how subjects rationalise behaviour with justificatory beliefs.

<sup>30</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions on the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> FTKN, p. lxxv.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek says, however, that while this superego demand represents a 'mad' alternative law, we should 'neither glorify it as subversive nor dismiss it as a false transgression which stabilizes the power edifice [...], but insist on its *undecidable* character' (PF, p. 93).

terms, the fantasy is flexible enough to cover flaws in rationalisations to the point that, when ‘an ideology is really “holding us” [...] we do not feel any opposition between it and reality’, even when an apparent contradiction is encountered, so ‘the ideology succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself’.<sup>33</sup> Also, the subject is hooked onto the Symbolic through an irrational enjoyment of interpellation as such, or the drive’s partial satisfaction according to a certain Master-Signifier. It therefore seems that the subject can easily change symbolic identity within the scope of this Master-Signifier, by interpreting it in different ways, but is unable to go beyond it, because what remains is ‘the “irrational” fixation on some symbolic Cause’, to which ‘we stick regardless of the consequences’.<sup>34</sup> In such notions, there is no potential for dissonance between fantasy and experience, and a line is drawn between experience and knowledge changing *how* the subject affirms the Master-Signifier, and the impossibility of changing the Master-Signifier itself.

As we see it, this concept of subjectivity in Žižek’s theory, whether relating to the definition of ideology or questions of political agency, disconnects rationalisation from ideological commitment, and denies any mutual influence between belief and attachment. Yet, in our understanding, if the fantasy has to adapt as the subject experiences social antagonism and the contradiction of its rationalised values, then experience affects the subject, and it is not obvious that the Master-Signifier represents the limit of such effect. In other words, if the fantasy must emerge ‘after’ attachment as a way of structuring it, that structure may subsequently influence the conditions of attachment themselves, and adaptations of the fantasy may require a different Master-Signifier. There are circumstances in which the fantasy can no longer deflect the contradictions, and, while at the core of the subject there is always that libidinal attachment and partial enjoyment, the forms of that attachment in terms of the behaviour it engenders can change at such points. Here, we can follow Butler’s description of the ‘interrelation’ between interpellation and fantasy, which means they are not separate levels but fully intertwined. As she explains, social norms are ‘incorporated and interpreted features of existence that are sustained by the idealizations furnished by fantasy’.<sup>35</sup> If we equate symbolic attachment to social norms here, the point is that fantasy itself conditions whether the same norms can still be accepted.

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<sup>33</sup> *SOI*, p. 49.

<sup>34</sup> *PF*, p. 120.

<sup>35</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Competing Universalities’, in *Contingency, Hegemony*, pp. 136-181 (p. 152).

### iii) Traversing the Fantasy

Žižek's approach to ideological change is thus different from our own, in that it focuses on negation, or attempting to reveal the irrationality of fantasy as such, rather than irrationalities in the content of the fantasy. In Žižek's Lacanian terms, subjects must 'traverse the fantasy' and recognise that there is no big Other, or external symbolic mandate. At this point, subjects become conscious of the contingency of the Symbolic, and this recognition changes their attachment to it. In our view, while recognising contingency is important to radical ideological change, the only plausible route to this recognition is still that of challenging the particular content of the fantasy through contradictory knowledge and experience. Without this understanding, traversal becomes either a matter of seemingly random voluntarism, or of subjective disintegration. We argue that, while Žižek does not ultimately view traversing the fantasy in such terms, he maintains a concept of negation that does not always indicate how alternative positive beliefs are the necessary catalyst for change. In particular, with political change, as opposed to psychoanalytic treatment, traversing the fantasy implies ideological guidance through specific political values, and the impossibility of a total break, as the new ideology (which recognises the general contingency of ideology) develops within the old.

Žižek explains, via Lacan, that 'traversing the fantasy' is the way the subject recognises that there is no 'big Other', and that all beliefs are contingent. In the fantasy, the big Other is 'the subject presumed to know' how things really are, whose desire creates a sense of an external mandate. Lacanian psychoanalysis then aims at getting the analysand to stop positing what the big Other wants, and accept the lack of any absolute reason for subjectivity. As Žižek says, 'the "dissolution of transference" takes place when the analysand renounces filling out the void, the lack in the Other'.<sup>36</sup> At this point, there is no guarantee of meaning from the Symbolic, and all that remains is the terrifying realisation for the subject that it is solely responsible for its next move. This position is that of 'absolute knowledge' in Hegelian dialectics, for Žižek, which recognises that meaning always falls short and totalisations consistently fail, and thus implies a 'system' of failures in which 'the breakdown of a totalization itself begets another totalization'.<sup>37</sup> Absolute knowledge is a subjective understanding that contradiction is at the heart of identity, or the idea

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<sup>36</sup> *SOI*, p. 132.

<sup>37</sup> *FTKN*, p. 99.

that symbolic suturing is contingent, and that the contingency of a particular symbolic order is only grasped from the position of another. It is therefore a kind of truth, in the sense that it recognises the distortion of perspective as such, meaning that 'what appears to us as our inability to know the thing indicates a crack in the thing itself, so that our very failure to reach the full truth is the indicator of truth'.<sup>38</sup>

In terms of *how* to traverse the fantasy, Žižek states that subjects must first identify with it, or act fully in accordance with its dictates, rather than employing cynical or politically correct criticism. In other words, it is necessary to make the fantasy appear in all its absurdity and incoherence by following it literally, against the unwritten rules (enjoyment) that support it, instead of allowing it to adapt in accordance with the basic symbolic attachment. For example, he describes a satirical TV show broadcast in Sarajevo during the Bosnian War that, 'instead of bemoaning the tragic fate of the Bosnians, [...] daringly mobilised all the clichés about the "stupid Bosnians" which were a commonplace in Yugoslavia', indicating that 'true solidarity leads through direct confrontation with the obscene racist fantasies [...] through the playful identification with them'.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere, he defines identification as a matter of insisting on an option that is formally given, but not really meant to be chosen. So, if two friends are competing over a job promotion and the one who is offered it politely offers to step aside so the other can take it, the other would shatter the social rules by really following the fantasy and accepting it.<sup>40</sup> This acting in accordance with the letter of the law undermines the subject's enjoyment of obedience, and reveals its arbitrary nature.

The main issue here is that of identifying the status of the subject at the point of recognising that the big Other and fantasy are subjective suppositions. Specifically, this conscious recognition emerges within language, and the meaning of language is only stable if guaranteed by some Master-Signifier. As such, the subject can only recognise the contingency of the fantasy, and the libidinal attachment to its Master-Signifier, if the authority of that Master-Signifier is first undermined by another that contradicts it. Therefore, when the subject identifies with its attachment as a matter of (partial) enjoyment, and embraces the fundamental lack within itself, as opposed to the loss of something, there is already an ideological motivation behind that

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<sup>38</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> Žižek, 'Concesso non Dato', p. 235.

<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2008), p. 138.

identification that implies certain responses. Žižek is not always clear on this point, as he maintains notions of traversal as a negative step into the unknown, or suggests a temporal process that *first* dissolves the Symbolic itself, and only *subsequently* reconstructs a new symbolic identity and Master-Signifier. On one hand, this temporality is a purely analytical way of showing how the Symbolic 'posits its own presupposition', or makes itself appear universal after the fact. For example, Žižek considers via Schelling how the symbolic subject begins, and theorises that symbolic subjectivity cannot be accounted for, unless there is already some subject that brings itself into symbolic consciousness. Here, he explains that there is no actual state of pre-symbolic subjectivity, and that the concept comes from 'the need for the form of mythical narrative', which 'arises when one endeavours to break the circle of the symbolic order and to give an account of its genesis ("origins")'.<sup>41</sup> But, on the other hand, he also states that drive should be considered as pre-symbolic, in that, 'The "subject before subjectivization" is a positive force in itself, the infinite force of negativity called by Freud the "death drive"'.<sup>42</sup> This idea changes the meaning of drive and the Real, as it implies 'an a priori structural emptiness preexisting the sequences of subjectifying identifications', rather than a gap 'hollowed out through the increasingly apparent contingency of all operators of subjectification',<sup>43</sup> and because it 're-naturalises the drives, returning them [...] to biological instincts'.<sup>44</sup> Also, through this idea, Žižek presents traversing the fantasy as *repeating* some founding moment of symbolic attachment *after* consciousness, in that 'the death-drive does the negative work of destruction, of suspending the existing order of Law, thereby, as it were, clearing the table, opening up the space for sublimation, which can (re)start the work of creation'.<sup>45</sup> Thus, drive somehow *restarts* the subjective circuit from within the symbolic order, and this 'wiping the slate clean' necessarily 'precedes any positive gesture of enthusiastic identification with a Cause'.<sup>46</sup> In discussing the film *Fight Club*, Žižek then emphasises a scene in which the main character literally beats himself up, and explains that 'the pure subject emerges only through this experience of radical self-degradation', emptying it 'of all

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<sup>41</sup> Žižek, *Indivisible Remainder*, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> *IDLC*, p. 344.

<sup>43</sup> Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), p. 231. On this point, see also: Rex Butler, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 96.

<sup>44</sup> Boucher, *The Charmed Circle of Ideology: A Critique of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2008), p. 219.

<sup>45</sup> *FTKN*, p. lxxxiii.

<sup>46</sup> *TS*, p. 179.

symbolic support which could confer a modicum of dignity'.<sup>47</sup> That is, *first*, annihilation of subjective identity destroys the attachment to the Master (or big Other), and then the subject can take the next (revolutionary) step.

In our understanding, the notion of a 'pure subject' is problematic even as a concept, because it obscures how subjectivity is the compromise of symbolic identity, which has repercussions for considering political change. If the subject is the cause of subjective identification, there is no point at which this empty subject exists, and no way of returning to it. Rather, the subject is always in the circuit of subjectivity, and the empty subject is nothing but a concept posited retrospectively from within subjective identification. The idea of a subject emptying itself of all symbolic support *prior to* assuming a new symbolic attachment then detracts from focus on the kinds of political ideas that may allow subjects to understand the lack of the big Other, and influence their response to that idea. This issue becomes more apparent where Žižek correlates the Lacanian psychoanalytic process to shifts in political ideas. In traversing the fantasy in psychoanalysis, the analyst assumes an effective 'empty' mediating presence, or a subject presumed to know all the answers, for the analysand. Thus, Žižek explains, 'there is a desire that remains even after we have traversed our fundamental fantasy, a desire not sustained by a fantasy, [...] *the desire of the analyst*'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Žižek claims that in politics, because change must occur through a transferential relationship, 'a leader is necessary to trigger the enthusiasm for a Cause, to bring about the radical change in the subjective position of his followers, to "transubstantiate" their identity'.<sup>49</sup> The difference here, we contend, is that political leaders do not hold the supposed place of knowledge 'empty', *because* they attempt to trigger enthusiasm for a particular cause. They can bring subjects to perceive potentials for change only by convincing them through alternative universalised ideas that a certain kind of change is needed. Conversely, as Bryant says, it seems impossible 'to get a politics out of the discourse of the analyst', because it 'does not aim at collective engagement or the common'.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 252.

<sup>48</sup> *TS*, p. 358.

<sup>49</sup> Žižek, 'Concesso non Dato', p. 253.

<sup>50</sup> Levi Bryant, 'Žižek's New Universe of Discourse: Politics and the Discourse of the Capitalist', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 2 (2008), 1-48 (p. 36)  
<<http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/141/141>> [accessed 10 August 2016]

We can thus only embrace the 'always-already' paradox of subjectivity, in which the effect posits its own cause, and therefore alternative ideology is the prerequisite for negation.<sup>51</sup> In these terms, it is not so much a case of repeating the gesture that set the circuit in motion; rather, certain types of ideological influence allow the subject to recognise symbolic contingency as such, and that recognition is part of the ideological shift. As Žižek says, the big Other cannot pre-exist and determine subjective identity, because it is only imagined as such by the subject. Yet, the subject does not construct a big Other from nothing, but is guided by established discourses embedded in language. In this way, recognising the inexistence of the big Other grants the subject a *relatively* self-reflexive position from which to question dominant principles. The point is to enable a more open politics that challenges existing power relations because it understands contingency, against the alternative of positing 'perfect self-identity in some form of otherness', which 'will always function as a barrier to our political acts'.<sup>52</sup> Often, Žižek implies just that, especially when traversing the fantasy is interpreted as absolute knowledge, which recognises its own inevitable inclusion in the contingent symbolic series. It also seems to be the necessary conclusion when Žižek formulates a politics of negation through socially excluded subjects, who embody 'truth' because their exclusion reveals contradictions in the social whole.<sup>53</sup> Here, recognising contingency and negating the existing order appear to involve an already-formulated ideological position which identifies with the needs of the excluded. However, Žižek generally does not explicitly acknowledge the need for a clear positive ideology (with particular beliefs, assumptions and values) to facilitate negation. For instance, where he discusses traversing the fantasy through over-identification, he does not examine the kind of consciousness required to make such gestures. In his examples (the Bosnian TV show, the insincere job offer), identifying with the fantasy does not appear to mean actually affirming it, but *pretending to* take it seriously,

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<sup>51</sup> The logic follows that of a time travel paradox, such as in James Cameron's film *The Terminator* (1984). Here, John Connor, leader of the human resistance against killer machines in the future, sends his friend (Reese) back in time to protect his mother (Sarah) from the terminator, at a point before his own birth. The unforeseen result is that Reese and Sarah have a sexual relationship, which leads to Sarah becoming pregnant and giving birth to John. In effect, the adult John (symbolic subject) unknowingly causes his own origin (symbolic attachment) by sending Reese (the vanishing mediator, who dies at the end of the film) back. There is no beginning to this sequence, and no 'original' timeline which sets it in motion.

<sup>52</sup> Todd McGowan, 'Hegel as Marxist: Žižek's Revision of German Idealism', in *Žižek Now*, pp. 31-53 (p. 35).

<sup>53</sup> In this respect, truth is 'an empty *place*', whose effect 'is produced when, quite by chance, some piece of "fiction" (of symbolically structured knowledge) finds itself occupying this place' (*SOI*, p. 217).

to consciously enact its contradictions from an already-formulated counter-hegemonic position. It therefore depends on the prior recognition of flaws from an oppositional perspective.

Our approach also indicates that only certain forms of negation imply an oppositional political response, or reveal symbolic contingency in a way that points towards radical freedom and agency. In other words, there may be various ways of reacting to the idea that reality is ideology, and not all imply a radical Left position.<sup>54</sup> Without emphasising this point it is, as Glynos says, not clear 'precisely what the difference is between crossing any one of a whole array of social fantasies (in the plural) and crossing the fundamental social fantasy (in the singular)', and 'too easy to abstain from offering any response, even if we accept the necessarily negative gesture that this ethical move entails'.<sup>55</sup> In this respect, we maintain that the difference between traversing particular fantasies and the universal fantasy is located in certain ideologies which identify with subordinate positions in existing power relations. With Žižek's theory, however, and even his politics, pure negation often appears to be a prerequisite of change (see Sections V and VI). For this reason, there is *some* validity in criticisms that he uses ideas such as contingency and absolute knowledge 'to promote blind Faith at the expense of rational belief or unconditional Fidelity at the expense of critical theory'.<sup>56</sup> From our perspective, it is because Žižek connects ideology primarily to enjoyment, with rationalisation through fantasy its mere effect, that he does not consistently affirm the inseparability of negation and particular oppositional beliefs, which already fill in the fantasy as they empty out the previous content.

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<sup>54</sup> Filip Kovacevic, *Liberating Oedipus? Psychoanalysis as Critical Theory* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2007), p. 197. Kovacevic defines four different reactions: continued conformist acceptance, cynical manipulation of those who still believe, attempting to realise the big Other, and critical theory.

<sup>55</sup> Glynos, "'There is no Other of the Other": Symptoms of a Decline in Symbolic Faith, or, Žižek's Anti-capitalism', *Paragraph*, 24 (2001), 78-110 (p. 103).

<sup>56</sup> Robert Paul Resch, 'What If God Was One of Us: Žižek's Ontology', in *Traversing the Fantasy*, pp. 89-103 (p. 101).

### III. Internalisation

#### i) Ideology as Fetish

According to our position, it should be possible to disrupt ideologies in the sense that the relationship between conscious belief (knowing) and unconscious belief (obeying) is one of mutual influence, and under certain conditions the fantasy may struggle to 'rationalise' behaviour, or support the existing attachment to a particular Master-Signifier. To establish the plausibility of this notion further, we must then also confront Žižek's concept of ideological 'displacement', which disconnects knowledge from obedience by understanding that subjects are often aware of social problems and oppose them *in theory*, while justifying behaviour that reproduces those problems through a 'fetish'. For Žižek, this mode of ideology renders traditional ideology critique less useful, as it is no longer a matter of revealing contradictions through 'symptoms', but of showing how conscious awareness denies a deeper attachment to obedience and enjoyment. Against this idea, we argue that there is no clear distinction between 'fetishistic' and 'symptomal' ideology, because fetishes still rely on conscious belief, and symptomal analysis remains the crucial factor in uncovering them.

Displacement, for Žižek, means that ideological statements are less matters of error and ignorance than ways of justifying behaviour that contrasts with consciously held values. Such statements take the form of 'I know, but nevertheless', such as, '*I know* God does not exist, *but nevertheless* I participate in religious activities out of respect for others, and because they have communal benefits'. This 'lying by way of the truth' is honest in terms of conscious belief, but represses unconscious belief (obedience to religion).<sup>57</sup> In politics, it may involve legitimising a pragmatic political measure that violates theoretical principles, on the basis that extraordinary circumstances make it necessary. The fetish of necessity allows the politician to avoid acknowledging actual belief (and enjoyment) in the measure. Alternatively, for Žižek, the subject might recognise that an action will have disastrous consequences but must do it for a higher reason, or that there is a 'split between the moral norms I usually follow and the unconditional injunction I feel obliged to obey'.<sup>58</sup> Žižek's example here is Abraham, willing to break moral law and kill his own son to obey God, even though his obedience overrides morality.

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<sup>57</sup> FTKN, p. 242.

<sup>58</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, p. 14.

According to Žižek, this mode of ideology is different from traditional Marxian concepts, in which illusion is at the level of awareness, because distortion is in social reality itself, at the level of action that maintains the existing order. Everyday activities such as using money thus become ideological, in that people know money does not have value as such, but *act* as though it embodies wealth, which reproduces capitalist relations. In Žižek's terms, these people 'are fetishists in practice, not in theory', and misrecognise that, in the social reality of commodity exchange, 'they are guided by the fetishistic illusion'.<sup>59</sup> In displacement, subjects thus project their unconscious belief onto an external fetish object, which protects them from the inconsistencies of that belief, because they do not experience it as their own. The fetish can be an object (money), concept (God, political circumstances), or even another person, such as in cynical ideology which projects a subject supposed to believe in the morality of norms that the cynic knows are corrupt and unjust. Whether or not such believers really exist, the cynic uses the concept to justify acting in accordance with these norms on the grounds that everyone else does. As Žižek says, 'in a definite, closed multitude of subjects, each person can play this role for all the others', with each acting based on their belief that the others believe.<sup>60</sup> In effect, cynics do not 'believe *in*' the authority of the Symbolic order but still 'believe *it*', and 'feel bound by some symbolic commitment'.<sup>61</sup>

The first question which arises is whether *all* ideology involves displacement, or whether it relates to a particular (contemporary) form. Žižek in fact distinguishes between 'symptomal' ideology, in which 'the ideological lie which structures our perception of reality is threatened by [...] cracks in the fabric of the ideological lie', and the 'fetishistic' mode, in which 'the embodiment of the Lie [...] enables us to sustain the unbearable truth'.<sup>62</sup> He states that in today's supposedly 'post-ideological' era ideology functions 'more and more' in its fetishistic mode, which implies that fetishism is currently dominant but historically variable. He also defines a semiotic square, in which 'symptomal' and 'fetishistic' positions are placed in opposition, with cynicism and fundamentalist on the side of fetish, and liberalism and ideologico-criticism being symptomal.<sup>63</sup> In this understanding, symptomal cases do not mask some actual reality, because it is always a

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<sup>59</sup> *SOI*, p. 28.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>61</sup> *OB*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>62</sup> *FT*, p. 65.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

matter of fantasy covering the irrationality of attachment, but indicate instances in which subjects rationalise their behaviour directly, and consciously believe in what they do.

Conversely, Žižek suggests at other points that disavowal is central to ideology as such. For example, he says, 'displacement is original and constitutive', that the 'most fundamental' beliefs 'are from the very outset "decentred" beliefs of the Other', and that 'the phenomenon of the "subject supposed to believe" is thus universal and structurally necessary'.<sup>64</sup> The idea here is that subjects do not believe first and then displace their belief, but that the symbolic attachment is immediately and necessarily displaced into the desire of the Other. In this sense, however, fetishistic displacement does not represent an opposition with symptomal forms, and we in fact infer from this idea that the two modes of ideology are intrinsically connected, or that symptomal ideology emerges from displacement *and* fetishist disavowal still relies on beliefs with identifiable symptoms. As such, while Žižek's concept of fetishism is crucial to understanding ideology, in that rationalisation is not always direct, and different rationalisations may maintain the same underlying belief, ideology critique is still a matter of examining how conscious beliefs support behaviour. For Žižek, increased ideological fetishism makes ideology critique a matter of getting subjects to realise that they really believe in and enjoy their actions. For us, the route to this realisation remains symptomal analysis, since all affirmative ideology still justifies behaviour by repressing alternative possibilities.

To demonstrate the interconnection between the two modes, we can first show that symptomal ideologies are also fetishistic. For example, in Žižek's semiotic square, liberalism is a symptomal ideology which allows for 'interpretive demystification', according to which 'an "honest" liberal democrat will have to admit that the content of his ideological premise belies its form, and thus will radicalize the form (the egalitarian axiom) by way of implementing the content more thoroughly'.<sup>65</sup> According to this idea, when confronted with the lack of freedoms in liberal societies, liberals should insist on their values, and radically reimagine society to implement them, else they would submit to fetishistic cynicism that claims such ideals are impossible to realise. However, if, as Žižek says, the fantasy accounts for its own failures by blaming particular circumstances, the symptomal and fetishistic modes may be combined in a statement such as, 'I know current liberal societies do not embody liberal values, but nevertheless we should maintain

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<sup>64</sup> *PF*, p. 135.

<sup>65</sup> *FT*, p. 68.

existing institutions because reforms could bring us closer to the ideal.’ This statement constitutes a non-cynical, fetishistic liberalism. Furthermore, Žižek defines fetish as something which, ‘far from obfuscating “realistic” knowledge of how things are, [...] enables the subject to accept this knowledge without paying the full price for it’.<sup>66</sup> He explains that everyone has fetishes which allow them to tolerate hardship, from spiritual experiences ‘which tell us that our social reality is mere appearance which does not really matter’, to our children ‘for whose good we do all the humiliating things in our jobs’.<sup>67</sup> Yet in this sense, even traditional or religious ideological mystification is fetishistic, because it provides ways to accept the *realities* of social disparity and injustice. For instance, belief in an afterlife, or belief that aristocrats are inherently superior to peasants, are fetishistic coping mechanisms (I know that society is unfair, but nevertheless I tolerate it because we will be rewarded in the afterlife) based in ignorance.

At the same time, we can see in such examples that ‘error’ reappears in the fetish itself, which implies that fetishistic positions have analysable symptoms. Specifically, the fetishistic statement ‘I know, but nevertheless...’ also includes a ‘because...’ which contains contestable reasoning. While this ‘because’ involves more obviously fragile assumptions in traditional mystified forms of ideology (for instance, any evidence that religion is a human creation undermines notions of the afterlife), the principle can also be applied more generally. The reformist position of the liberal fetishist, for example, is susceptible to symptomal analysis which indicates a more fundamental disconnect between liberal values and the social structure. With fetishistic cynicism, meanwhile, the statement ‘I know social relations are unjust, but nevertheless I act in accordance with them’, is completed with ‘because’ clauses such as ‘they are too powerful to resist’, ‘everyone else believes’, or ‘human nature is intrinsically selfish’, just as a traditional ideological statement reasons its acceptance. The cynic’s position therefore still relies on excluding certain notions — that altruistic behaviour is as natural as self-interested behaviour, that many people do not believe in official ideology, or that resistance often improves people’s lives.

In Žižek’s theory, however, the fetishistic element of cynicism dominates, and becomes the archetypal form of postmodern ideology. He accepts that society appears ‘post-ideological’ (in the symptomal sense, which understands that illusion is located in knowledge), because in the prevailing cynicism ‘people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological

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<sup>66</sup> *IDL*, p. 300.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

propositions seriously'.<sup>68</sup> Rather, subjects are already aware that official ideological norms are bogus, and accept them nonetheless, so challenging this awareness appears largely irrelevant. In this view, cynics are fully aware of everything except their own ideological displacement. From our perspective, in contrast, while cynics may be more generally aware of social relations, it is problematic to assume they have such a complete understanding of social issues. According to Žižek, 'the basic lesson of the failure of traditional *Ideologie-Kritik*' is that 'knowing is not enough, one can know what one is doing and still go ahead and do it'.<sup>69</sup> But our point is that even when subjects 'know' in this sense, there is always some contradiction in this knowledge that means ideology critique remains useful.

At times, Žižek links cynicism to specific ideological propositions, but he still does not present these concepts as symptomatic contradictions, or conclude that fetishistic disavowals revolve around conscious beliefs. First, the need for the image of a subject presumed to believe, means that cynicism 'can function only if this system is "out there", publicly recognized'.<sup>70</sup> That is, the whole theatre of elections, political posturing, scandal, and earnest discussion must continue for the image to remain credible, so there is no 'pure post-politics', in which parties simply promote their ability for competent administration, because 'any political regime needs a supplementary "populist" level of self-legitimization'.<sup>71</sup> Also, Žižek says, 'enemy propaganda against radical emancipatory politics is by definition cynical', but 'precisely insofar as it *does* believe its own words, since its message is a resigned conviction [...] that any radical change will only make things worse'.<sup>72</sup> As with Jameson's market ideology, there appears to be real belief that forces of change must be stopped because qualitative improvement is impossible. In our understanding, such cynical convictions about the other, either as dupe or enemy, represent symptomatic elements that may be challenged. Indeed, if cynicism relies on a subject supposed to believe, then either cynics are right and most people still believe, in which case propagandistic manipulation remains socially dominant (and should be the focus of ideology critique), or the cynic is wrong and few people really believe, in which case the cynic's false assumptions are dominant (*and should be the focus of ideology critique*).

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<sup>68</sup> *SOI*, p. 30.

<sup>69</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 983.

<sup>70</sup> *FTKN*, p. lxxii.

<sup>71</sup> Žižek, 'With Defenders Like These, Who Needs Attackers?', in *The Truth of Žižek*, ed. by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2007), pp. 199-257 (p. 252).

<sup>72</sup> *FT*, p. 28.

Žižek's focus on ideology is thus a critique of form, or how ideologies relate to power, rather than content or beliefs. He explains that dominant ideologies can be 'true' in terms of content, and the important point is '*the way this content is related to the subjective position implied by its own process of enunciation*'.<sup>73</sup> For example, he says, when western military intervention is claimed to be motivated by human rights, even though it is ideological (because it also consolidates western dominance), it is true if intervention really improves human rights in the target country. Or, in East Germany after the fall of socialism, it was true that those who saw an opportunity for a properly socialist third way (such as the political group *Neues Forum*), 'were nothing but a bunch of heroic daydreamers', because the powerful forces surrounding capitalism were already in motion. But that criticism was still ideological, because it 'implied an ideological belief in the unproblematic, non-antagonistic functioning of the late capitalist "social state"'.<sup>74</sup> In our view, these truths are at best partial, and still obscure blank spots, inaccuracies, and hidden suppositions. With western military intervention, the truth of humanitarian efforts is simultaneously the lie that covers for the other reasons. With *Neues Forum*, the pro-capitalist belief in the non-antagonistic functioning of the capitalist state is factually problematic. Yet Žižek does not recognise this flaw as a symptom to be exposed, and concentrates instead on the value of the impossible utopian narrative in *Neues Forum* to reveal systemic antagonism. For him, this example illustrates the Lacanian point that truth has the structure of a fiction, but in the dominant, cynically 'realistic' ideology that opposes it we can also see that fiction has the structure of a truth. In other words, ideology critique should analyse *both* how *Neues Forum* reveals the alternative potential beyond the apparent necessity of capitalism, *and* the possibility of developing that potential by criticising contradictions in the capitalist view directly.

## ii) Forms of Internalisation

As we have seen from Žižek's semiotic square of ideologies, he does not only examine cynical forms, although he views them as particularly dominant. As such, further analysis of other ideologies that Žižek describes can help us develop the ideology map we have defined in the previous chapters. The three forms of affirmative ideologies in the semiotic square (cynicism, liberalism and fundamentalism), provide a framework of main positions, but some ideologies also

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<sup>73</sup> Žižek, 'Spectre of Ideology', p. 8.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

imply overlaps between these points and variations within them. The aim here is to consider these positions in a way that relates them back to those in the map and identifies possible symptoms within them. Žižek's formulations are useful in that they often reveal connections between ideologies, and demonstrate how apparently opposed positions effectively act together as mutual supports for the social whole. However, we are also interested in how different rationalisations represent different levels of commitment to the social order, and seek indications of this variation in the details Žižek provides. In this way, it can be understood how these positions relate to the whole as indirect forms of support that it must maintain.

Having already begun to consider cynicism, we can continue by exploring different variations that Žižek introduces alongside cynicism 'proper' (the idea that subjects are aware of social problems and official hypocrisy, but believe that change would make things worse). First, Žižek redefines 'Kynicism' (from Sloterdijk) as a cynical distance which impotently complains and mocks official dictates, or a defeatism in which the subject is fulfilled by complaint itself. Through Hegel's concept of the 'Beautiful Soul', which laments its victimisation by the social conditions, Žižek shows that cynical defeatists identify with the status quo, because only while things remain the same can they maintain their identity and be proven correct about their treatment.<sup>75</sup> Thus, by complaining about the existing authority, the Beautiful Soul demands something from it, rather than challenging it. He also mentions a similar defeatism that comes from an apparent desire for change, embodied by 'progressive liberals' who 'often complain that they would like to join a "revolution" [...], but no matter how desperately they search for it, they just "do not see it"'.<sup>76</sup> He perceives that, despite the element of truth (there is no revolution on the horizon), this attitude of waiting to see a revolution before getting involved demonstrates a lack of genuine desire. Elsewhere, elements of defeatism or resignation are notable in a 'Buddhist' response, which for Žižek stresses that, rather than struggle either for tradition or progress, we should 'drift along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference', because 'social and technological upheaval [...] do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being'.<sup>77</sup> This position retreats from politics by prioritising spiritual concerns, but since subjects are always within power relations, equates to tacit acceptance of dominant forces.

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<sup>75</sup> *FTKN*, p. 71.

<sup>76</sup> *IDLC*, p. 392.

<sup>77</sup> *OB*, p. 13.

These positions allow us to build on the notions of cynicism and defeatism we have already introduced. On one hand, they reveal variations in defeatism, or different fantasies that justify feelings of impotence. It is not only that people want change but cannot envisage it, but that they 'enjoy' playing the victim, or place themselves above political involvement. On the other, this variation also suggests that these positions may not be equally cynical, or as equally committed to the status quo. The 'Buddhist' stance seems particularly cynical, because, like the concept of human nature in cynicism proper, it elevates non-interference in existing conditions to an ahistorical principle. Conversely, the 'progressive liberal' stance may represent a more complex mixture of the 'Beautiful Soul' and some residual desire for change that remains genuine on some level. As such, while these positions are disavowals that displace their support for the existing order, the different claims may represent *conditional* disconnects between behaviour and belief, with support more fragile in some cases than others.

Many other positions Žižek identifies relate to the categories of liberalism and fundamentalism, which he sees as connected, as two sides of the same (postmodern) coin. He often defines liberalism in terms of 'pluralist' or 'multiculturalist' attitudes, and sees (similar to Jameson) that fundamentalist beliefs are *reactions* to such 'post-ideology' thinking, rather than remnants of the past. The repression of antagonisms into pragmatic measures and identity issues returns in the guise of supposedly defunct political categories, such as racism and fascism,<sup>78</sup> but because these ideas are widely deemed unacceptable, they assume a postmodern form in which they are merely implied. As Žižek says, neo-fascism is 'more and more "postmodern", civilized, playful, involving ironic self-distance... *yet no less Fascist for all that*'.<sup>79</sup> Populist fundamentalism even uses the 'strategies of identity politics, presenting itself as one of the threatened minorities, simply striving to maintain its specific way of life and cultural identity',<sup>80</sup> but the racism remains behind this pluralist argument. Also, for Žižek, fundamentalism and pluralism share a common basis in their fascination with the Other. On one hand, many fundamentalisms are 'perverted', because rather than focusing on their own world, they are

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<sup>78</sup> *PF*, p. 211.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>80</sup> *TS*, p. 251.

obsessed with others' sin and decadence, and lack conviction of their own superiority.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, western multiculturalists are fascinated by distant cultures as representations of both mystical liberation and filthy primitiveness. These fixations on the *jouissance* of the Other are comparable, except that while fundamentalist fixation causes jealousy and resentment, the multiculturalist maintains an essential image of the Other at a distance (and the Other remains fascinating and acceptable as long as it conforms to this image). In this sense, Žižek describes 'multiculturalism' as 'a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism', which respects the Other as an object viewed from a supposedly empty universal position.<sup>82</sup> It is not explicit racism that asserts superiority, but multiculturalists view their own position as a neutral point from which to evaluate other cultures, which involves an assumption of superiority over the specificity of the Other.<sup>83</sup>

In both these ideological forms, the concept of the Other is therefore central, and should represent the point at which they may be challenged. Yet, Žižek maintains, the fundamentalist is impervious to ideological challenge as he clings to his ideas and '(not so much believes as) directly "knows" the truth embodied in his fetish'.<sup>84</sup> To a great extent we agree here, in that, although there must still be some challengeable narrative that supports belief, as opposed to pure blind adherence, the strength of commitment to racist ideas makes them especially difficult to penetrate. With multiculturalism, however, the politics of tolerance suggests a particular avenue of belief that may be challenged. According to Žižek, pluralist tolerance naturalises and neutralises political difference into issues of cultural identity or personal opinion, and as such cannot tolerate it if the Other actually insists on being Other, or that its cultural 'choices' are crucial to its identity.<sup>85</sup> Or, while great sympathy is reserved for the Other as passive victim of oppression, who cannot assert its cultural choices, the moment it 'wants to strike back on its own',

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<sup>81</sup> For Žižek, 'authentic' fundamentalists include Tibetan Buddhists and the Amish, who demonstrate an 'absence of resentment and envy, [and] deep indifference towards the non-believers' way of life' (*IDLC*, p. 332).

<sup>82</sup> *TS*, p. 258.

<sup>83</sup> Žižek, 'Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 1/225 (1997), 28-51 (p. 44).

<sup>84</sup> *FT*, p. 69.

<sup>85</sup> *PV*, pp. 331-332.

it 'magically turns into a terrorist, fundamentalist, drug-trafficking Other'.<sup>86</sup> In our understanding, these limits of tolerance embody ideological symptoms, or the conditions behind the fetish, of which the multiculturalist seems unaware. It is thus important to challenge these contradictions in multiculturalist tolerance, and understand more clearly why some people are deemed 'worthy victims',<sup>87</sup> who deserve protection, while others are left to their fates. Specifically, it seems a matter of the symbolic Real split itself, or the way in which affirmative pluralist ideology obscures that it operates within the boundaries of consumer capitalism.

The triad of liberalism, fundamentalism and cynicism may be expanded further if we also consider the dualism Žižek identifies between Cultural Studies and the 'Third Culture' ideology of scientific progress. As Žižek explains it, Third Culture ideology imagines a new epoch of humanity in which 'egotistical individualism will be replaced by a transindividual cosmic Awareness', and the naturalisation of the social, such as cyberspace becoming 'a self-evolving "natural" organism', will be coupled with the socialisation of nature.<sup>88</sup> For Žižek, these ideas do not consider power relations, so although Third Culture asks questions about humanity itself, it is not anchored in social analysis (such as how cyberspace relies on political and economic institutions), or understanding of how science functions within hegemony. He then sees Cultural Studies as the opposite, in that it represents a relativist-pluralist ideology (whether or not the actual academic field fits Žižek's description) that confronts everyday power struggles, but does not examine the general workings of the universe or the human psyche. According to Žižek, the aims of Cultural Studies predominantly 'involve a kind of cognitive suspension [...] characteristic of historicist relativism', and 'rely on a set of silent (non-thematized) ontological and epistemological presuppositions about the nature of human knowledge and reality'.<sup>89</sup> In effect, Cultural Studies assumes certain notions of social hierarchy and identity struggle, and ignores considerations about humanity overall. This focus on power relations then reveals the theoretical deficiencies in the utopian humanism of Third Culture, while the wider view of Third Culture

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<sup>86</sup> Žižek, 'Attempts to Escape the Logic of Capitalism', *London Review of Books*, 21 (1999) <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n21/slavoj-zizek/attempts-to-escape-the-logic-of-capitalism>> [accessed 10 August 2016] (para. 34 of 38)

<sup>87</sup> The term 'worthy victim' originates from Chomsky and Herman. See Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2002), chapter 2.

<sup>88</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, p. 214.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 218-219.

indicates the gaps in Cultural Studies. What both miss, for Žižek, is the possibility of *combining* their positions to think the social order as a historical totality.

In our theory, the dualism Žižek presents here also highlights how different affirmative ideologies may be both unified at a higher (systemic) level and contradictory. In particular, this contrast between Third Culture and Cultural Studies (or intellectualised pluralism) appears to split liberalism into postmodern multiculturalist and more traditional or humanist forms. That is, pluralism retains liberal concepts such as human rights and freedom of opinion, while Third Culture is a liberalism that contrasts identity politics with concepts of scientific progress and enlightenment values. As we saw with Jameson, there remains a common liberal ground in their emphasis on the individual as conscious agent, but there are also major differences. The other important factor here is that the way Žižek describes these positions suggests opposing *affirmative* ideologies may contain the elements necessary to challenge each other and develop a dialectical perspective. Third Culture and Cultural Studies at once operate within apparently incompatible circles and are potentially able to transform one another into something more radical, via mediation. In this sense, what keeps them apart *is* their common ground, because it lacks perception of struggle as a *collective* endeavour within specific circumstances.

A final position to note here is Žižek's notion of economic realism, or the neoliberal idea that we must simply accept (as mature adults) that utopian ideals cannot be realised, so it is best to rely on the 'neutral' mechanism of the market. As Žižek explains, with such thinking, economic dictates regarding lower costs, higher efficiency, increased competition, and constant growth *become* ideals, and the necessity of the market 'is itself to be inserted into the series of great modern utopian projects'.<sup>90</sup> Thus, while economic realism has no illusions about the essential goodness of human nature, it believes a global mechanism can create progress and balance, and denies the social split caused by the mechanism itself. In other words, this ideology claims that there can be no major economic or political changes, 'to render invisible the impossible-real of the antagonism that cuts across capitalist societies'.<sup>91</sup> In the terms we have developed so far, economic realism is less cynical than Jameson's 'market ideology', and again takes a more liberal stance based around scientific advancement and individual endeavour. Moreover, it is a useful illustration of the fundamentalist core within apparently pragmatic ideas. For Žižek,

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<sup>90</sup> Žižek, 'Holding the Place', in *Contingency, Hegemony*, pp. 308-329 (p. 324).

<sup>91</sup> Žižek, 'A Permanent Economic Emergency', *New Left Review*, 64 (2010), 85-95 (p. 94).

fundamentalist ideologies that revolve around absolute principles can justify anything, which is why religious terrorists blow up civilians in the name of God's will, and Stalinists killed millions by claiming to represent historical necessity.<sup>92</sup> We would argue that this same idea applies to principles of market stability and expansion, which justify wars, forced regime changes, and mass impoverishment.

Taking all these points into account, along with the positions we have identified in previous chapters, our map of ideologies can develop further. With the help of the relationships Žižek explores, the positions diversify, and a wider variety of overlaps and contrasts become visible. Broadly defined, the ideologies now included are: neoconservative/fundamentalist moralism, neoliberal moralism, liberal/scientific moralism, liberal pluralism, hedonism,<sup>93</sup> neoliberal/self-interested cynicism, cynical resignation, and conditional cynical defeatism. In our view, all these positions comprise an ideological totality in late capitalism, each with symptoms that can be questioned, which may be more susceptible to alternative thinking in some cases than others. In Žižek's work, this overall picture is less clear, despite the range of positions he describes, as he tends to reduce the ideological totality to two or three terms. For example, he says that 'today's ideological constellation is determined by the opposition between neoconservative fundamentalist populism and liberal multiculturalism'.<sup>94</sup> Or, he links specific positions to class groups — the 'symbolic' or professional class to politically correct liberalism; the 'middle class' of traditional workers to populist fundamentalism; and the 'excluded' class of unemployed and underprivileged minorities to either hedonistic nihilism or radical fundamentalism.<sup>95</sup> Yet, while these ideas are relevant, they lack the complex variation of ideological positions implied by Žižek's overall theory. Most significantly, there is no cynicism distinguished from the official liberalism and conservatism in the first example, or from the values attached to the middle and symbolic classes in the second. These ideas contrast with Žižek's emphasis on cynicism elsewhere, in which 'today's typical subject' cynically distrusts all public ideology, and fills in the gaps with 'paranoiac fantasies'.<sup>96</sup> In our understanding, it is important to

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<sup>92</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p. 116.

<sup>93</sup> Žižek's concept of hedonism is explored in the next section, in conjunction with his theory of consumerism.

<sup>94</sup> *PV*, p. 349.

<sup>95</sup> Žižek, 'Holding the Place', p. 323.

<sup>96</sup> Žižek, 'The Big Other Doesn't Exist', *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, 5 (1997) <<http://www.psychomedia.it/jep/number5/zizek.htm>> [accessed 10 August 2016] (para. 18 of 26)

## Consciousness and the Limits of Social Conformity

view cynicism as one part of the ideological composition, which itself involves universalised assumptions, and contrasts with other ideologies with non-cynical values. For example, as Dean explains, the dominance of neoliberal economics in the US has relied on connections with religion and anti-government rhetoric, so 'the category of fantasy alone cannot explain the hold of neoliberalism'.<sup>97</sup> Affirmative ideologies are not only ways of organising a fundamental attachment, but must be maintained through particular structures of belief.

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<sup>97</sup> Dean, *Democracy*, p. 63.

#### IV. The Commodity Form

##### i) Commodity as Symptom

These definitions of ideologies represent a specific view of consciousness in consumer capitalism, and our next step is then to examine some of the ways the capitalist order structures the ideological field and problematizes change. In this respect, Žižek identifies many obstacles to oppositional politics presented by commodification and consumer culture, but, similar to Marcuse and Jameson, his theory in this area places too much emphasis on these obstacles, which narrows channels for critique. First, we consider how, despite some potentials in Žižek's theory for symptomal analysis, other elements of his work still render ideological content insignificant. On one hand, Žižek shows how contradictions in the commodity form embody the symptomal point of capitalism, and implies that economic social hierarchies still rely on certain beliefs. On the other, the potentials of a critique based on these ideas are overridden by the everyday fetishistic practices of work and consumerism, and the cycle of capitalist reinvention that Žižek describes. To demonstrate that a symptomal analysis may be more effective, therefore, we emphasise gaps between ideological behaviour and ideological commitment, so consumerist behaviour does not necessarily indicate disavowed support for capitalism, and also dispute Žižek's correlation between capitalism and the inescapable circuit of subjectivity.

Žižek's theory shows that the commodity in capitalism is a fetish in practice and symptomatic of systemic contradictions. That is, although subjects know the commodity form is merely symbolic, exchange and value become natural in daily transactions, so that commodities are endowed with 'special powers' through participation. However, for Žižek, we can expose this naturalness through the logic of the Freudian dream work, in which the essential aspect is not *what* objects symbolise, but *why* particular symbols represent particular things. In other words, it is important not only to recognise the equivalence between work and value, 'but to explain why work assumed the form of the value of a commodity',<sup>98</sup> and ask how value naturalises its relationship to labour, or why labour power must be expressed as value. According to Žižek, every universal has a point of false unity, in which the particular form undermines the general concept. With the idea of equivalent commodity exchange, the exchange of labour power for

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<sup>98</sup> *SOI*, p. 4.

wages, 'precisely as an equivalent, functions as the very form of exploitation'.<sup>99</sup> Or, if the capitalist notion of freedom revolves around individuals being free to sell their labour, by accepting this freedom workers become enslaved to capital. The result is that while relations between people are no longer fetishised in capitalism (so that certain people are seen as intrinsically superior), the fetish remains in relations between things. But then, Žižek says, 'the repressed truth — that of the persistence of domination and servitude — emerges in a symptom which subverts the ideological appearance'.<sup>100</sup> It therefore seems that identifying this symptom, or recognising that labour is a commodity only by convention, reveals the contingency of exchange relations.

The inequalities of commodity exchange relations thus reinforce hierarchy, despite formal equality between individuals. There is a double standard in daily life, in which, for example, 'a "postmodern" boss insists that he is not the master but just a coordinator of our joint creative efforts', and yet '*remains our master*'.<sup>101</sup> The commodity relationship means that the boss remains superior, regardless of appearance, and cannot really be treated as another co-worker. Similarly, with celebrity culture, it could be said that individuals *know* celebrities are just normal people, but their success is a sign that they should be treated as special. In our understanding, these inequalities caused by the commodity form return to ideology, because they must be rationalised in some way. This idea is supported by an observation Žižek makes that fetishistic relations are again reversed, so that relations between things now assume the appearance of relations between people. He states that, 'the book market is overflowing with psychological manuals advising us on how to succeed', and 'making our success dependent on our proper "attitude"',<sup>102</sup> rather than complex market forces. Or, he notes that discussions of figures such as Bill Gates are dominated by consideration of his personal qualities, ignoring how the systemic structure enables one individual to accumulate so much wealth. Put another way, such business entrepreneurs really become superior, following a Calvinist logic of pre-ordained selection, in which those who 'make it' prove they were always special. However, inequality then requires conscious ideological support, beyond the structures produced by the commodity form. In this way, Žižek's observations about Bill Gates can be read as an indication that certain narratives

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>101</sup> *IDLC*, p. 202.

<sup>102</sup> *TS*, p. 425.

have to be sustained for the hierarchy of commodity to be widely accepted, and provide points of ideological contention.

If Žižek's theory hints at such possibilities, he does not develop them as such alongside his notions of the fetishistic practices and the self-reproductive power of contradictions in capitalism. First, as mentioned previously, Žižek identifies the everyday act of using money as fetishistic illusion, because people know money has no intrinsic value, but behave as though it does. For Žižek's theory, this participation indicates subjects' symbolic attachment to capitalist Master-Signifiers, to the extent that, as he says via Hegel, 'it does not matter what individuals' minds are preoccupied with while they are participating in a ceremony; the truth resides in the ceremony itself'.<sup>103</sup> Understood in this way, and because today almost nobody can avoid participating in commodified exchange relations, conscious ideological supports appear largely insignificant. Second, Žižek explains that, while non-capitalist economies have historically followed a cycle in which contradictions finally erupt after a period of stability, the capitalist contradiction is ever present, causing continuous self-transformation, and increased resilience.<sup>104</sup> The secret to capitalism's endurance is a kind of internal dialectical motor — because its contradictions are 'crippling', it evolves constantly, becoming a cycle in which increasingly large contradictions are followed by greater development and invention. Žižek describes this cycle in Lacanian terms, according to which the ideal of non-contradictory capitalism functions as an object of desire, and contradiction maintains the drive to fill the gap. He draws a homology between surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment, as two constitutive driving forces, and explains that Marx failed to grasp capitalism's ability to continually create and resolve its contradictions.<sup>105</sup> In these terms, it does not seem that symptomal analysis would be able to disrupt this circuit.

In the first case, the focus on fetishistic behaviour means it is not clear in Žižek's theory how we can evaluate ideology where individuals act in contrasting ways, such as buying consumer goods while also working towards political change. As we see it, this possibility indicates that behaviour is only partly representative of belief or obedience, and that conscious beliefs and values are also a measure of ideological commitment. As such, if exposing the realities of continued social hierarchy and marking the difference between formal freedom and

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<sup>103</sup> *PV*, p. 66.

<sup>104</sup> *SOI*, p. 53.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

actual experience can affect conscious beliefs, those effects may cause changes in behaviour. In fact, as Žižek notes (drawing on Marcuse), the formal notion of freedom necessary to late capitalism provides a certain potential, because people have to understand the notion of their freedom before they can experience an antagonism between it and their actual servitude.<sup>106</sup> Even so, we cannot ignore the links between consumer behaviour and affirmative ideology, and the need for reduced consumption. Žižek imagines a scenario in which mass refusal to participate economically 'in the financial virtual game', could be today's 'ultimate political act',<sup>107</sup> since virtual money only functions as long as people believe in it by participating in its circulation. While Žižek does not see such full refusal as an actual proposition, it suggests the possibility of a connection between market growth and consumerist belief. Specifically, capitalism needs people to *overconsume*, and this need is supported by major ideological forces, so reduced consumption (rather than ethical consumption, which does not necessarily delink from excess) is a way of challenging both consciousness and practice.

In the second case, the association between capitalist contradictions and the circuit of desire, or surplus value and surplus enjoyment, conflates capitalism's *historical* ability to evolve through crisis with *constitutive* elements of subjectivity. Thus, if Marx wrongly assumed that capitalist antagonisms would be resolved in an inevitable transcendence to communism, Žižek's comparison between capitalist dynamism and the unending effects of interpellation, does not consider that capitalism has limits. That is, this circuit does not include social relations outside the capitalist mode of reinvention, or the internal excess (the excluded) which Žižek elsewhere presents as the force capable of disrupting capitalism. This excess effectively changes the relationship between surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment, and emphasises the *symbolic* aspect of capitalism, or that its constant change more resembles the fantasy adapting to retain coherence in the face of contradictions. There is then theoretically a point at which the fantasy cannot maintain a narrative without changing its overall direction.

### ii) Enjoyment and Consumerism

Late capitalism's requirement for overconsumption appears ideologically as a general notion of fulfilment through consumerism that all affirmative positions internalise in some way. In Žižek's

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<sup>106</sup> *FT*, p. 143.

<sup>107</sup> *IDLC*, p. 303.

theory, this aspect of consumer capitalism distinguishes it from other social forms in that the superego demand to enjoy becomes the law itself, collapsing the two together. He then demonstrates that permissiveness destabilises subjectivity, because there is no specific embodiment of the big Other, which enables the dominant logic of capitalist demands to hide behind a lack of absolute authority. In our terms, however, the demand to enjoy is still regulated by an overall logic that creates general social expectations of both pleasure and productivity, and this logic is in some way embodied in various authority figures. The question then is how different ideologies internalise the general demand by prioritising certain elements according to certain authorities, which contrasts with the notion that they experience sheer lack of direction. By identifying the particular ways in which different ideologies hook onto consumer capitalism, it becomes easier to identify how they may be challenged.

In consumer capitalism, Žižek explains, the call to submit to a prohibitive paternal authority through ideas such as nation, God, or race, in which enjoyment is a hidden underside, gives way to a direct injunction to 'enjoy'. Subjects are guided by imaginary ideals (of social success), and the ferocious ascendance of this demand, which turns their 'perverse' enjoyment into law, and removes the tension between their 'innermost idiosyncratic creative impulses and the Institution that does not appreciate them or wants to crush them'.<sup>108</sup> In particular, this injunction points to consumerist pleasures that encourage experimentation and free choice. But, by following the demand to enjoy and its accompanying micro-choices, the consumer forfeits a deeper freedom to choose whether to participate at all. As Žižek puts it, what is excluded in consumer societies, 'in which even such "natural" features as sexual orientation and ethnic identification are experienced as a matter of choice, is the basic, authentic, *choice itself*'.<sup>109</sup>

Furthermore, the demand to continually choose and maximise pleasure confuses the subject's desire. The individual is treated as a 'subject *supposed to know what he really wants*', but because there is no external guarantee for that knowledge, the burden of choice and responsibility leaves subjects needing guidance more than ever, and they must be told what they want.<sup>110</sup> The lack of predetermined patterns in social life is then presented as opportunity for self-reinvention. As Žižek says, 'if this predicament causes you anxiety, the postmodern [...] ideologist

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<sup>108</sup> *TS*, p. 452.

<sup>109</sup> *OB*, p. 28.

<sup>110</sup> *PF*, pp. 197-198.

will immediately accuse you of being unable to assume full freedom',<sup>111</sup> and (as with one-dimensionality) instability is reduced to individual personality defects. In effect, the subject comes to resemble the near-schizophrenic form that Jameson formulates, as the lack of clear authority sets meaning adrift. In fact, Žižek describes the consumer capitalist situation as one in which there is no big Other, in the sense that no specific individual or institution in society embodies that role. Thus, he says, 'there is no "Invisible Hand" whose mechanism [...] somehow re-establishes the balance; no Other Scene in which the accounts are properly kept', and 'no global mechanism regulating our interactions',<sup>112</sup> which can ensure the meaning of choices.

The lack of absolute authority, for Žižek, does not mean that there is no social structure, or that society is in some sense 'post-Oedipal', because subjectivity still requires *subjection* through continuing forms of domination. At the very least, he claims, there is a big Other that the subject 'blames [...] for its failure and/or impotence, as if *the Other is guilty of the fact that it doesn't exist*'.<sup>113</sup> Here, the lack of clear authority leads subjects to direct their ire at some invisible Other, but this blind blaming misses that capitalism itself frames social demands. As Žižek says, 'the spectral presence of Capital is the figure of the big Other which not only remains operative when all the traditional embodiments of the symbolic big Other disintegrate, but even directly causes this disintegration'.<sup>114</sup> In *IDLC*, Žižek clarifies this point further by explaining that what is lacking today is not a big Other to tie the social order together, but 'a small other' that can 'stand in for, the big Other', or someone 'who directly embodies authority'.<sup>115</sup> Similar to postmodernism for Jameson, this lack of a proper authority creates the impression of an 'atonal' range of multiplicities that obscure their structuring logic. Thus, Žižek explains, the usual aim of radical politics to undermine an authoritative feature cannot work, and (as with Jameson) he seeks instead to reveal the tone behind the atonality, or the capitalist big Other that *still unites* the various imaginary ideals. As such, the point is not, as Sharpe and Boucher argue, that Žižek seeks a new prohibitive authority to replace multiplicity, because he believes that any political pluralism is undesirable and 'supporting multiple struggles for cultural recognition and different

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<sup>111</sup> *OB*, p. 116.

<sup>112</sup> *TS*, p. 412.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 440.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

<sup>115</sup> *IDLC*, p. 35.

sorts of political demands [...] actually makes things worse'.<sup>116</sup> Nor is it that, as Boucher says elsewhere, 'Žižek's position implies that political revolution is fundamentally a restoration of Oedipal subjectivity and a redemption of the "big Other", redolent of a religious "cure" for postlapsarian wickedness.'<sup>117</sup> Rather, the issue for Žižek is the *existence* of the big Other in its current form as an inaccessible pseudo-natural force, and the way in which pluralism can become an expression of its logic.<sup>118</sup> As he explains, the problem is not 'the inadequacy of every small other to stand in for the big Other', but that the big Other hides behind them, and the appearance of unfettered multiplicity.<sup>119</sup>

These aspects of Žižek's work reaffirm the emphasis on individual responsibility in Marcuse's one-dimensionality, and that on the structuring of difference in Jameson's postmodernism. Yet, as with those theories, some of the implications are overly extreme. First, the superego cannot simply be integrated into dominant social demands in a way that eliminates the tension between them, because even if enjoyment becomes a symbolic duty, the superego still demands pure, non-symbolised enjoyment. As Žižek says, superego guilt is that 'of accepting the ego ideal (the socially determined symbolic role) as the ideal to be followed in the first place, and thus of betraying one's more fundamental desire'.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, the superego injunction to enjoy cannot be the only symbolic mandate, because the superego is indifferent to the preservation of the organism, while late capitalist societies expect a kind of responsibility from individuals to their consumer power. Therefore, although advertising encourages excess in all areas, other social norms temper these demands and retain a sense of paternal prohibition. This incorporation of *certain aspects* of enjoyment recalls Marcuse's 'repressive desublimation', or an allowance of indulgence that serves the purposes of a 'performance principle'. We can also here follow Vighi's distinction between *jouissance* and the valorised enjoyment of consumerism, or an imitation enjoyment that is regulated 'as "enjoy responsibly" and "enjoy wellbeing", i.e. "enjoy without enjoyment"'.<sup>121</sup> For Vighi, the 'potentially (self-)destructive injunction to embrace excessive enjoyment' is 'constantly balanced out and domesticated by opposite discourses'.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Sharpe and Boucher, *Žižek and Politics*, p. 159.

<sup>117</sup> Boucher, *Charmed Circle*, p. 225.

<sup>118</sup> Fabio Vighi and Heiko Feldner, *Žižek: Beyond Foucault* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 45.

<sup>119</sup> *IDLC*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>120</sup> *TS*, p. 319.

<sup>121</sup> Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 28.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

This distinction is politically important because if this core aspect of subjectivity were fully incorporated into the existing order, it would be impossible to reorganise *jouissance* for non-capitalist ends.

The further repercussion of this patriarchal demand is that there may be more of a unifying sense of authority than Žižek suggests. In other words, there *is* an ‘invisible hand’ regulating interactions, or some ‘Other scene’ which judges and guides performance, and if subjects are sometimes bewildered by the choices on offer, they are not necessarily desperate for new authoritarian masters. Žižek claims that because freedom is fully part of the law, no enjoyment is now really transgressive except submission or domination, so some ‘extreme form of strictly regulated domination and submission becomes the secret transgressive source of libidinal satisfaction’, and ‘the Unconscious is not secret resistance against the Law; the Unconscious is the prohibitive Law itself’.<sup>123</sup> Defined in this way, it is as if society is *totally* permissive and lacking authority, so that only dominance and subordination can be excessive. In our view, however, some forms of submission and domination remain socially acceptable, while other kinds of libidinal satisfaction do not, based on forces of social guidance that emphasise not only enjoyment and consumption, but also productivity and self-maintenance. This force is difficult to obey, as it is dispersed throughout various contrasting institutions, but still creates general rules and expectations.

In this way, ideological rationalisations represent different modes of internalising the overall demand by emphasising the authority of certain institutions or leader figures (who partially embody the background capitalist logic) over others. Contradictions in particular ideologies then reflect attempts to resolve the paradoxical demand to ‘enjoy responsibly’. For Žižek, various local and temporary authorities, such as ethics committees, decide on particular issues because there are no established moral norms in various social domains,<sup>124</sup> and any small others are finite and fallible, rather than constant and stable. As such, ideological fantasies react to the lack of embodiment of the big Other by constructing an idea of the big Other behind the scenes, or an ‘Other of the Other’, through paranoid conspiracy theories.<sup>125</sup> Or, fundamentalisms lead to ‘the re-emergence of the different facets of a big Other which exists effectively, in the Real, and not

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<sup>123</sup> *TS*, p. 418.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 442.

merely as symbolic fiction'.<sup>126</sup> Yet, most of the ideological positions we have identified (including fundamentalisms) involve a 'knowing' subject embodied in a specific authority figure that anchors the Symbolic, rather than some unknown force. They do not then seem ephemeral, or lacking guidance, and phenomena such as ethics committees may be less a matter of creating individual moral positions and more a way for officials to mediate between varied convictions.

From this perspective, we can suggest connections between particular ideologies and authorities, which condition their attachment to the capitalist background. For example, neoliberal narratives emphasise productivity, and give the market a moral justification through a fetish of capital producing more capital, which is strongly supported by mainstream economics. Or, liberal positions involve moral principles of individual responsibility, representative democracy and so on, and even if liberal freedom means subjects freely choose to do exactly as they are told,<sup>127</sup> they are directed by (enlightenment or multiculturalist) values, embodied in branches of media, politics and academia. Alternatively, positions may relate more to the scientific establishment (cynicism, liberal humanism), the government (cynical defeatism), or to religious leaders and populist politicians (fundamentalism). These ideologies all internalise, to some extent, demands for both consumerist consumption and productivity, often prioritising one over the other. They thus range from the extremes of economic commitment to the opposite extreme of 'hedonism', which accepts the injunction to enjoy and actively focuses on consuming. Žižek describes this position as one in which consumer goods are never truly fulfilling, but 'are nonetheless experienced as excessive, as the *surplus-enjoyment*', so 'the "not enough", the falling short, *coincides with the excess*'.<sup>128</sup> This falling short turns consumption into a burden for the hedonist, because maximising pleasure requires so much preparation, that the initial attraction is lost.<sup>129</sup> That said, hedonists are less concerned with the bigger responsibilities of late capitalist life, such as the future of the environment, because they reduce their needs to popular or fashionable choices.

### iii) Cultural Politics

Our final area of concern at this point is how, for Žižek, commodification effectively blocks or diffuses radical cultural expression. As may be expected, cultural content is a less prominent

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<sup>126</sup> Žižek, 'Big Other Doesn't Exist' (para. 17 of 26).

<sup>127</sup> *OB*, p. 120.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>129</sup> *TS*, pp. 449-450.

consideration in Žižek's work than unconscious belief and participation in consumer practices, and overall he does not prioritise political aesthetics as much as either Marcuse or Jameson. In fact, he is critical of cultural Marxism, arguing that even its most sophisticated proponents, including Jameson, see 'that the workers' consciousness is obfuscated by the seductions of consumerist society and/or manipulation by the ideological forces of cultural hegemony', and mistakenly conclude that 'the focus of critical work should shift to "cultural criticism"'.<sup>130</sup> While Žižek analyses various cultural forms, then, it is less to identify their potential (or lack of) to act as catalyst for radical politics, than to illustrate their repressed ideological meanings and contradictions. Yet, we maintain, if challenging ideological content is important to political change, it must somehow function even within commodified communications, so we must continue to theorise how radical culture may make such an impact.

Where Žižek examines aspects of culture in terms of political potentials, he generally emphasises their de-politicisation. For example, he notes the abstract potential of art, but does not see it as an important source of change in current social circumstances. He describes artists as those who do not 'reconcile the opposites and tensions in the aesthetic Totality of a harmonious Whole', but 'construct a place in which people can ecstatically perceive the traumatic excess around which their life turns'.<sup>131</sup> In other words, as for Marcuse, art points negatively beyond dominant narratives, or indicates a real excess. However, Žižek explains, this dimension is missing in postmodern 'transgressive' art, in which artists display their inner fantasies on stage, because it 'confronts us directly with *jouissance* at its most solipsistic', and 'precisely characterizes individuals insofar as they are caught up in a "crowd"'.<sup>132</sup> He later adds that there is nothing 'more dull, opportunistic, and sterile' than constantly trying 'to invent new artistic transgressions and provocations', or 'to engage in more and more "daring" forms of sexuality'.<sup>133</sup> This critique of the impotence of shock in permissive society also echoes Marcuse, but Žižek does not then continue to imagine how 'authentic' art may re-emerge in the current order.

A similar concept of narcissistic individualism is apparent where Žižek examines the supposedly progressive qualities of new media and technology. For example, he describes how, for its advocates, cyberspace is effectively a postmodern Utopia made real, in which subjects

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<sup>130</sup> *PV*, p. 50.

<sup>131</sup> *OB*, p. 96.

<sup>132</sup> *PV*, p. 311.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 358.

embrace their de-centred disintegration and become plural selves, seamlessly adopting different masks in different situations. The problem is that 'depriving the Self of any substantial content ends in radical subjectivization, in the loss of the firm objective reality itself'.<sup>134</sup> Taken to its logical conclusion, the subject becomes an enclosed monad, communicating only with other masks, and if there is no Master and anything is instantly available, the desire of the Other is experienced as intrusion, because it compromises the illusion of limitlessness and points to the Real. Furthermore, cyberspace remains rooted in an economic system of exploitation and exclusion, but distances itself from that reality. As such, rather than representing the 'unending possibilities of limitless change', it hides 'an unheard-of imposition of radical closure'.<sup>135</sup> In other words, the concept of frictionless capitalism, or capitalism without antagonism, that emerges with cyberspace relies on its material existence within unequal social relations.

At the same time, the point for Žižek is not to oppose such technology, or argue that technological progress threatens to erase some essential notion of being. He explains that, while utopian theorisation of technological development is problematic, 'negative descriptions of the "meaningless" universe of technological self-manipulation' involve the same 'perspective fallacy', because 'they also measure the future according to inadequate present standards'.<sup>136</sup> The utopian free floating subjectivity, and the dystopian loss of meaning are then two sides of the same fantasy, because each considers humanity as a fixed entity to be lost or sustained, rather than a changing condition. In both cases, transcendental ideas are foreclosed, and together they constitute a cultural field which cuts off consideration of how capitalism structures conceptions of humanity. Against such ideas, for Žižek, the important factor is how technology is implemented, in terms of the natural and human resources required, and its impact on social antagonisms. It is therefore problematic when discussion around these issues is purely cultural, because it largely reduces politics to administrative matters, and difference to individual idiosyncrasies or ethno-religious disagreement.<sup>137</sup> Rather than merely participating in this cultural debate, Žižek explains it is necessary to confront the politics of these issues, by linking culture to the economic.

To a great extent, this concept of linking culture to the economic accords with the aims of Marcuse and Jameson we have already discussed. The important point to consider again is then

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<sup>134</sup> *OB*, p. 26.

<sup>135</sup> *PF*, p. 199.

<sup>136</sup> *PV*, p. 195.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379.

how cultural criticism may connect to the economic, and whether it can utilise commodified channels. For Žižek, it is not a matter of directly opposing capitalism, and although 'the economy is the key domain', where 'the battle will be decided', any 'intervention should be properly *political*, not economic'.<sup>138</sup> The reason, he explains, is that anti-capitalist sentiment is non-subversive, as it has become part of mainstream culture, such as in Hollywood movies that demonise big corporations. As Žižek puts it, 'there is no lack of anti-capitalists today', and 'we are even witnessing an overload of critiques of capitalism's horrors'.<sup>139</sup> Conversely, he sees that the main sacred concept in society today, untouched by cultural criticism, is not capitalism but political belief in *democracy*, or control over capitalism through mass participation. According to this thinking, only by questioning democracy itself, does the contingency of the whole system come into view, including the capitalist structure.

For our purposes, the issue here is that, since anti-capitalist ideas can be so comfortably incorporated into mass cultural spheres, it is not clear how the critique of democracy could avoid a similar fate. That is, if concepts as radical as anti-capitalism can be rendered non-subversive, it seems that the commodity form can co-opt any message. So, for any criticism to appear worthwhile it is necessary to counter this idea and understand that economic criticisms may still have some impact. In short, either the political approach meets a similar de-politicised fate, or there is room for various forms of radical content to show through their commodification. In particular, in terms of Žižek's work, we can contest the theory that mainstream culture, such as conspiracy films, has harmlessly incorporated anti-capitalist ideas. As already mentioned, Žižek sees conspiracy theory as a way subjects imagine the 'Other of the Other', or a secret force behind the scenes. This idea then recalls Jameson's theory that conspiracy films are failed cognitive maps that do not recognise the centrality of capitalism itself. In that sense, the ideological point in films such as *Enemy of the State*, which is among Žižek's examples, is that rogue individuals or groups stand in for the capitalist system. There may be anti-corporate or anti-neoliberal sentiments at work here, but they do not question capitalism itself. In fact, as we have also seen, even when actual financial crisis occurred in 2007, opposition to capitalism overall was limited, and narratives focused on inevitable systemic fluctuation or greed and incompetence. Žižek appears to make precisely this distinction elsewhere when he criticises the

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>139</sup> Žižek, 'Permanent Economic Emergency', p. 87.

anti-globalisation movement because, 'instead of the critique of capitalism as such, [...] we have the critique of the imperialist "excess", with the (tacit) idea of mobilizing capitalist mechanisms within another, more "progressive", framework'.<sup>140</sup> Seen in this way, the problem for anti-capitalism is that it still does not have a substantial cultural presence, and the goal remains that of creating and maintaining cultural space for any radical criticism, whether political or economic.

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<sup>140</sup> *IDLC*, p. 181.

## V. Agency

### i) The Act

In Žižek's terms, the possibility of mass radical politics revolves around some major traversal of fantasy, and it is a question of how subjects make such a shift psychologically and what factors may cause it. First, it seems that, for any political tactic to be meaningful, subjects must have some internal motivating factor that allows them to take unsanctioned steps beyond their own fantasies. To this end, while, for Žižek, the fantasy envelops rationalisation, speech and action, in a way that seems to render an ideological shift impossible, he defines the possibility of an 'act', in which subjects become agents by taking responsibility for their symbolic attachment. Subjects act when they realise that the Symbolic does not provide an answer for how to proceed in a given situation, so they must take a decision to engage in action which takes them outside social norms. For us, this capacity for subjects to react differently by recognising their subjective determination implies that consciousness can effectively alter its symbolic attachment. But, the political act often appears in Žižek's work as a formal decision that happens to negate the Symbolic, creating an openness that allows for alternative ideas. In our view, here, it is important to emphasise that the possible outcomes of an act reflect the politics behind it that caused the disruption to begin with. As such, the prerequisite for a radical progressive politics is not merely *an* act, but one that represents an *explicit* attempt to achieve such ends, based from the start on oppositional ideology.

Žižek perceives that subjects have a freedom beyond the basic illusion that they have chosen their own interpellation. Specifically, while subjects 'are passively affected by pathological objects and motivations', they 'have a minimal reflexive power to accept (or reject) being affected in this way'.<sup>141</sup> This freedom remains a retroactive endorsement of causal influences, but allows subjects to decide which 'sequence of necessities' determines them. That is, if subjects take responsibility for their interpellation and enjoyment, they react differently when confronted with their overdetermination by external forces. As Žižek explains, if it is an illusion that subjects decide their own fate, then 'simply to endorse and assume this predicament is also an illusion, an escapist avoidance of the burden of responsibility'.<sup>142</sup> Subjects who simply accept

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<sup>141</sup> Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* [ebook] (London: Verso, 2014), chapter 10.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 9.

overdetermination as an absence of meaningful agency, lack a capability for self-reinvention gained by those who experience overdetermination as liberating. In this way, 'we are thoroughly passive, determined by and dependent on the past, but we have the freedom to define the scope of this determination'.<sup>143</sup> This freedom accepts that the Other is unknowable and takes responsibility for desire, and is a form of agency because it produces different behaviour, including that towards social change.<sup>144</sup>

Žižek calls this moment of agency an 'act', which he develops from Lacanian psychoanalysis into a radical political gesture. The main criterion for an act is that it cannot be accounted for within the Symbolic, but changes symbolic horizons and is symbolised retrospectively under the new conditions. As Žižek says, 'an authentic act momentarily suspends the big Other, but it is simultaneously *the "vanishing mediator" which grounds, brings into existence, the big Other*'.<sup>145</sup> Because it goes beyond existing symbolisation, it first appears as an aberration, crime, or form of madness. Yet the act is 'ethical' precisely in this respect, not because it embodies a particular notion of good or frees subjects from pathological motivation, but because it reveals the contingent imposition of the existing law, and law in general. The authentic act thus involves risk, because it confronts a fundamental social antagonism whose resolution must cause momentous transformation, and the subject should even accept that 'it will acquire a meaning different from or even totally opposed to what [the subject] intended to accomplish'.<sup>146</sup> In this way, according to Žižek, political movements such as fascism are not acts, because they are still guaranteed by the big Other, and because they do not go beyond 'the key feature of their society, the capitalist relations of production'.<sup>147</sup> He even explains that, for the acting subject, 'its final outcome is ultimately even insignificant, strictly secondary in relation to the NO! of the pure act'.<sup>148</sup> But, as such, acts always ultimately 'fail', in that they always inaugurate a new Symbolic, or another 'unethical' imposition of law. The only truly successful act in this sense would be one that permanently dissolved symbolic subjectivity altogether.

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<sup>143</sup> *IDLC*, p. 314.

<sup>144</sup> Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), pp. 36-37.

<sup>145</sup> Žižek, *Indivisible Remainder*, p. 144.

<sup>146</sup> Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 31.

<sup>147</sup> *IDLC*, p. 152.

<sup>148</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), p. 51.

An act is then only recognised as an act when it fails and creates a new Master-Signifier, which re-signifies history. In this way, history is not only what happened and retrospectively appears as necessity, but a whole range of possible alternatives that may be redeemed depending on how it is signified. The act banishes certain historical ghosts by changing historical perspective, and then turns that perspective into necessity, with the act itself becoming the 'missing link' in the process. At this point, the act 'succeeds' (in its aim, not its goal) by re-suturing the Symbolic and erasing 'the radically contingent, "scandalous", abyssal character of the new Master-Signifier'.<sup>149</sup> For this reason, although acts are rooted in material conditions (if the conditions are not right, nothing can change), they 'are possible on account of the ontological non-closure, inconsistency, gaps, in a situation'.<sup>150</sup> Therefore, change occurs only when the subject marks it by shifting the co-ordinates of what can be recognised. It is not that the act can simply happen, without being 'the outcome of intentionally guided forms of *praxis*',<sup>151</sup> because the Symbolic does not collapse until subjects posit a new order.

As with traversing the fantasy, the question is how, precisely, a subject acts against symbolic meaning, and how acts are politically motivated. It seems that, because the subject acts outside the bounds of accepted symbolic codes, the 'actor' cannot be the symbolic subject. In fact, Žižek explains, 'if there is a subject to the act', it is 'an uncanny "acephalous" subject through which the act takes place as that which is "in him more than himself"'.<sup>152</sup> He also describes the act as a choice that simply must be taken, or a 'purely formal' decision 'without a clear awareness of *what* the subject decides about', which is 'non-psychological', has 'no motives, desires or fears', and is 'not the outcome of strategic argumentation'.<sup>153</sup> The cause of the act is then some excess 'Thing' in the subject that experiences the pure ethical imperative. However, Marchart suggests, it then appears that acts 'occur in a vacuum where all strategic considerations are suspended'.<sup>154</sup> Against Žižek's reading of Lenin, he states that, 'when Lenin in 1917 came to a different conclusion to that of his fellow-revolutionaries, this was not because he was prepared,

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<sup>149</sup> *FTKN*, p. 193.

<sup>150</sup> *IDLC*, p. 309.

<sup>151</sup> Johnston, 'The Cynic's Fetish: Slavoj Žižek and the Dynamics of Belief', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 1 (2007), 65-110 (p. 88).

<sup>152</sup> *TS*, p. 460.

<sup>153</sup> Žižek, 'The Act and its Vicissitudes', *The Symptom*, 6 (2005)

<[http://www.lacan.com/symptom6\\_articles/zizek.html](http://www.lacan.com/symptom6_articles/zizek.html)> [accessed 10 August 2016] (para. 3 of 22)

<sup>154</sup> Oliver Marchart, 'Acting and the Act: On Slavoj Žižek's Political Ontology', in *The Truth of Žižek*, pp. 100-117 (p. 103).

existentially, to “take a leap”, but because he arrived at a different strategic assessment of the situation’.<sup>155</sup> Similarly, for Sharpe, Žižek regards all strategy and consequence as being relegated beneath the ‘ethical’ negation,<sup>156</sup> which ignores that actors are always motivated, even if not according to social norms.<sup>157</sup> Žižek counters such points by explaining that his concept of the act does not disqualify political decision-making. Rather, he says, it ‘is neither a strategic intervention *into* the existing order, nor its “crazy” destructive *negation*; an act is an “excessive”, trans-strategic, intervention which redefines the rules and contours of the existing order’.<sup>158</sup> In other words, it is a strategically motivated need to do the impossible by exceeding accepted strategies, and Lenin’s unprecedented action was *based on* assessment that the strategies on offer were insufficient. In this sense, the *need* to act is strategic, but the act itself is not, according to the existing Symbolic.

In this way, revolutionary subjects do not exit symbolic subjectivity in the act, because it is justified by their politics. For example, Žižek states, although ‘psychoanalysis confronts us with the zero-level of politics’, or a gap which the political act can exploit, their relationship is always ‘a missed encounter’, in that ‘psychoanalysis opens up the gap before the act, while politics already sutures the gap’.<sup>159</sup> The implication here is that the political act represents a certain interpretation of contingency, from a certain political stance, which has already filled in the negative space. The complexities of Žižek’s position are clarified somewhat where he explains that the gap between negation and sublimation, ‘is *not just a theoretical distinction* between the two aspects, which are *inseparable in our actual experience*’, and the (Lacanian) point is to focus ‘on those *limit-experiences* in which the subject *finds himself confronted* with the death drive at its purest, *prior to* its reversal into sublimation’.<sup>160</sup> Here, the gap is *neither* purely theoretical *nor* actually experienced, but the subject can be confronted with the death drive, *prior to* sublimation. In effect, the subject who traverses the fantasy is confronted with the truth of drive, that there is no big Other, but from within the Symbolic, so the free choice of symbolic identity at that point can *retrospectively* be seen to have already been decided.

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., pp. 107-108.

<sup>156</sup> Sharpe, ‘What’s Left in Žižek’, p. 168.

<sup>157</sup> Sharpe, *A Little Piece of the Real*, p. 244.

<sup>158</sup> Žižek, ‘Žižek Live’, in *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory*, ed. by Rex Butler (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 139-152 (p. 145).

<sup>159</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 963.

<sup>160</sup> *TS*, p. 189 (emphasis added).

The problem, we assert, is that if the political act is understood in this way, it cannot be a 'purely formal' decision for the actor, as in psychoanalysis. Specifically, the analysand in psychoanalysis acts against their unconscious attachment for reasons that are only symbolised subsequently, whereas the contingency of the existing Symbolic in politics is recognised *due to* conscious, oppositional goals. In other words, the risk in the political act is that of trying to realise new social goals according to an already-functioning oppositional ideology that contrasts with *dominant* beliefs, and recognises there is no absolute guarantee for its own beliefs. However, Žižek tends to disconnect the initial political aims of the act from the new Symbolic it creates, as if the act merely negates, with no bearing on the subsequent outcome. For example, he explains that radical political change cannot be measured by how much life would improve for the majority afterwards, because it 'changes the very standards of what "good life" is, and a different (higher, eventually) standard of living is a by-product of a revolutionary process, not its goal'.<sup>161</sup> Yet, while the new meaning of the good cannot be explained according to existing *dominant* standards, revolutionaries (such as Lenin) must already have an alternative notion of the good life, which motivate them to act. This alternative is necessary because we 'have to be in a position to prepare for, if not completely recognize, a kind of *portent* or sign of how freedom might unfold, in time'.<sup>162</sup> It then influences the kind of thinking that follows the political act, which, unlike the act in psychoanalysis, is not only signified in retrospect.

To illustrate the point further, we can examine Žižek's analysis (following Lacan) of Antigone, and her insistence on the proper burial of her brother in defiance of King Creon, which leads to her execution. For Žižek, Lacan's main focus regarding Antigone is 'on the moment when she finds herself in the state "in between the two deaths", reduced to a living death, excluded from the symbolic domain'.<sup>163</sup> That is, before her actual death, Antigone's insistence takes her beyond the symbolic law and big Other embodied by Creon. Žižek also explains that the concept of the Other denotes both the authority figure guaranteeing the rules of language, and the 'Thing', or direct injunction without reason. He adds that, in contradicting the symbolic big Other through her pure injunction, 'Antigone does not merely relate to the Other-Thing, she — for a brief, passing moment of, precisely, decision — directly *is* the Thing', and is excluded from the

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<sup>161</sup> Žižek, '*Concesso non Dato*', p. 253.

<sup>162</sup> Joshua Ramey, 'Ceremonial Contingencies and the Ambiguous Rites of Freedom', in *Žižek Now*, pp. 84-99 (p. 89).

<sup>163</sup> *TS*, p. 189.

community regulated by symbolic relations.<sup>164</sup> Elsewhere, however, Žižek says Antigone embodies *both* the desire of the big Other, 'which demands that the (brother's) body be integrated into the symbolic tradition', and 'a willing self-exclusion from the big Other, a suspension of the Other's existence'.<sup>165</sup> In this sense, she exceeds the *dominant* symbolic norm in accordance with another symbolic mandate. But then, as Grigg says, Antigone 'refuses to comply with a command she thinks is wrong [...] in the name of a higher law'.<sup>166</sup> She does not simply refuse in a way that eradicates the big Other for her, and her act 'makes freedom [...] relative to a particular form, or determination, of the Other'.<sup>167</sup>

The point is that, since Antigone insists on established customs, her act does not recognise overall contingency. On the one hand, she realises and accepts the likely consequences of her actions, and feels she cannot do otherwise. For Žižek, this gesture is political 'in a negative way', in that 'such "apolitical" defiance on behalf of "decency" or "old customs" [can be] the very model of heroic political resistance'.<sup>168</sup> On the other, Antigone does not take full responsibility for her defiance, because for her the external Other demands the burial, and this appeal to 'decency' or 'old customs' replaces social norms with another absolute. Thus, while Antigone's refusal does the impossible by defying the king, it does not render the existing order contingent, so much as simply wrong, in a way that does not recognise the *general* non-existence of a big Other. Antigone's act is thus not negative enough, and there is no reason to assume that such an act is relevant to progressive social change.<sup>169</sup> In Žižek's terms, even with such content, there can still be a general negating effect. He describes Antigone's act as symbolic, rather than a confrontation with the Real, and says that 'Antigone insists up to her death on performing a precise symbolic gesture', and she 'does not stand for some extra-symbolic real, but for the pure signifier'.<sup>170</sup> We argue that there is no pure symbolic insistence, because the act does not simply negate the previous Symbolic to allow for new meaning, but already suggests its

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<sup>164</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, p. 163.

<sup>165</sup> Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 60.

<sup>166</sup> Russell Grigg, 'Absolute Freedom and Major Structural Change', *Paragraph*, 24 (2001), 111-124 (p. 116).

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>168</sup> Žižek, 'Žižek Live', p. 146.

<sup>169</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 135.

<sup>170</sup> *IDLC*, p. 305.

own meaning.<sup>171</sup> The level of openness to restructure the Symbolic after negation is dependent on the ideology that negates it, and Antigone's act is relatively closed in that sense.

In our understanding, therefore, a progressive political act must be more like a counter hegemonic movement that explicitly focuses on social division. Here, Vighi and Feldner explain that, 'the conscious definition of a subversive political strategy already *necessarily* includes drive and the dimension of the act', which 'can be conceived as synchronous with the attempt to disturb the core of the hegemonic ideological constellation'.<sup>172</sup> This 'conscious' aspect is crucial, along with pointing to a general contingency, and only in this way does the act become a radical political move. For Žižek, 'what makes a certain move an act proper are not its inherent qualities but its structural place within a given symbolic network', so it is not 'a mere whimsicality', and 'the externality of the act is absolutely internal to the symbolic order'.<sup>173</sup> In contrast, we contend it is not only the structural place that is important, but also whether an oppositional ideology can formulate its aims against this structure. To an extent it may be that Žižek is 'simply pointing to the unavoidability of the moment of negativity in any theorisation', to set up 'not simply an *abstract* "violent" negation of modern liberal-democratic institutions but rather a *determinate negation* of the normative consensus [...] that sustains them'.<sup>174</sup> However, some of Žižek's examples imply a far more *indeterminate* negation.

This point can also be applied to some of Žižek's empirical examples of acts, which either seem to merely force dominant discourses to adjust, rather than collapse, or more fully negate dominance in ways that do not imply potential for progressive alternatives. In the first case, Žižek views the arrest of Augusto Pinochet in the UK as an act that 'changes the very parameters of the possible', because, in Chile, 'the fear of Pinochet dissipated, the spell was broken, the taboo

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<sup>171</sup> It seems that Žižek simply does not accept this impurity, and says, 'If it cannot be a real purity, let it be a symbolic purity!' (Stavrakakis, 'On Acts, Pure and Impure', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 4 (2010), 1-35 (p. 7) <<http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/301/301>> [accessed 10 August 2016]).

<sup>172</sup> Vighi and Feldner, 'A Subject that Matters: Žižek's Ideology Critique Today', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 4 (2010), 1-22 (p. 10) <<http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/272/272>> [accessed 10 August 2016]

<sup>173</sup> Žižek, 'Concesso non Dato', p. 252. The phrase 'mere whimsicality' comes from Grigg, 'Absolute Freedom', p. 123.

<sup>174</sup> Robert Sinnerbrink, 'The Hegelian "Night of the World": Žižek on Subjectivity, Negativity, and Universality', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 2 (2008), 1-21 (p. 19) <<http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/104/104>> [accessed 10 August 2016]

subjects of torture and disappearances became the daily grist of the news media'.<sup>175</sup> The arrest was an insistence on international law that inadvertently allowed history to be re-signified and subordinate voices to be heard. Yet this event does not alter class disparity itself, and represents more of a shift within the existing (capitalist) Master-Signifier rather than the introduction of a new one, because it is not explicitly signified in terms of class struggle. In the second case, Žižek discusses the Canudos, a 19<sup>th</sup> century movement in Brazil in which the poor and social outcasts created an autonomous community under the leadership of an apocalyptic prophet. He also describes an instance in the Vietnam War in which the Viet Cong discovered that the US army had vaccinated the children in a village, and cut off the arms of the children into which the vaccines had been injected. Here, Žižek endorses the complete negation of the Other, whether via religious fanaticism, or by rejecting even its 'good' qualities, because 'If one adopts the attitude of "let us take from the enemy what is good and reject or even fight against what is bad", one is already caught in the liberal trap of "humanitarian help"'.<sup>176</sup> But, with the Canudos, the negation of one big Other leads to its replacement by another that is equally dogmatic. Meanwhile, with the Viet Cong, the logic of simply negating the Other results in an absurd, directionless 'ethics' condemned to mindlessly react. In these examples, 'What seems to count for Žižek is not the content of an emancipatory project, but the purely formal fact that a radical break is established vis-à-vis the existing order'.<sup>177</sup> It suggests that only the symbolic effect of the act is important, not the type of politics that causes it.

## ii) Class Struggle

In our view, the act must then connect more explicitly with class struggle and the symbolic Real, which Žižek sees as the anchoring points of radical political agency. As already mentioned, class struggle is effectively the Real of the social, glimpsed through its effects, or excluded groups that experience need for change. Žižek describes it as 'the name for the unfathomable limit that cannot be objectivized, located within the social totality, since it is itself that limit which prevents us from conceiving society as a closed totality'.<sup>178</sup> We argue in support of Žižek's concept of class struggle here, because it represents a way to challenge affirmative ideological assumptions based

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<sup>175</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, p. 169.

<sup>176</sup> Žižek, 'Žižek Live', p. 147.

<sup>177</sup> Marchart, 'Acting and the Act', p. 104.

<sup>178</sup> Žižek, 'Spectre of Ideology', p. 22.

on the realities of deprivation, and to construct a political act that points towards a progressive result. Nevertheless, as Žižek recognises, it remains difficult to imagine how class conscious agents can emerge in existing conditions, which still resemble those Marcuse theorised when he noted the fragmentation of revolutionary elements. As with Marcuse, Žižek also considers some potentials for class consciousness to develop that appear unlikely, but he also sees class politics as a matter of connecting different movements and ideas under a larger goal. This latter approach then implies the possibility of creating gradual ideological change through a variety of political and cultural channels.

Žižek explains that the importance of class struggle is not that it overrides other struggles, but that it redefines their relationship. As he puts it, class struggle is not ‘the ultimate referent and horizon of meaning’, but ‘the structuring principle which allows us to account for the very “inconsistent” plurality of ways in which other antagonisms can be articulated’.<sup>179</sup> Class struggle signifies a symbolic and political move which reveals the politics and relationship to power of other symbolisations, because it shows that any concept of society involves ‘a partial position of enunciation’.<sup>180</sup> Even relativism that considers particular antagonisms as equal and separate affirms the social order by failing to recognise its underlying antagonism. Furthermore, this concept of class struggle goes beyond particular, historical groups, such as the industrial proletariat, to a general social antagonism. Laclau in fact criticises Žižek because his notion of classes is too empty, and their only feature is that they, ‘in some way, are constituted and struggle at the level of the “system”, while all other struggles and identities would be intra-systemic’.<sup>181</sup> But the primary point of class struggle *is* this dichotomy, which exposes the difference between making changes within a system, and transcending it.

If class struggle has no stable content, it must still be established why only certain groups symbolise it, and why it privileges economic exclusion. That is, class is not merely a negative category, since the very designation ‘smuggles a positive content into the “Real” of antagonism’, because it already implies a particular way of considering the social split.<sup>182</sup> In Žižek’s view, the *economic* antagonism, specifically, enables us to understand the constitutive lack of totality. It shows that pluralist identity struggles which supposedly replace class as the central social

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<sup>179</sup> *PV*, p. 361.

<sup>180</sup> *FTKN*, p. 125.

<sup>181</sup> Laclau, ‘Structure, History’, p. 205.

<sup>182</sup> Marchart, ‘Acting and the Act’, p. 113.

antagonism are cultural expressions of late capitalism. As such, where class struggle appears irrelevant, and economic relations are widely accepted, that does not indicate its lack but '*the index of the victory of one side in the struggle*'.<sup>183</sup> In this sense, 'the multitude of particular struggles with their continuously shifting displacements and condensations is sustained by the "repression" of the key role of economic struggle'.<sup>184</sup> Focusing on the economic then reveals this general context, while taking a non-economic perspective means accepting certain basic assumptions of the existing order. Class struggle is thus still a *representation* of the social Real, or what the political field represses, and there is no absolute line dividing subjects that are socially 'excluded' from those who are 'included'. For Devenney, there is a clear contradiction here, because, based on notions of contingency, 'the determining role of class cannot even be viewed. Yet this is precisely what is required if the act is to traverse the fundamental fantasy'.<sup>185</sup> In other words, to know how to transcend class antagonism, we need to know what it is in some concrete form. Similarly, Sharpe argues that understanding class divide as antinomy, or an always present split in the social, regardless of its content, allows Žižek to avoid examining specific social antagonisms, and to attribute the concept of class struggle to political groups almost at will.<sup>186</sup> Either class struggle is this Real, or it is particular political struggles, but it cannot be both. However, we can support Žižek's point here that, while no specific subject *is* class struggle, because that is the antagonism in every social, there is a part of each social order that *represents* class struggle. As such, class struggle can be derived from the groups who are most displaced and impoverished in society, and it is always a question of which groups fulfil that role in each situation.

Radical change therefore revolves around society's 'part of no part', or a common need for change represented by groups such as the unemployed, imprisoned, or displaced. In Žižek's terms, these groups are the 'empty set', which are represented only as transgressions in the dominant view of society, but could also represent society's failure on its own terms.<sup>187</sup> What Žižek calls 'politicization proper' is then a process in which 'the logic of excluding a particular

<sup>183</sup> Žižek, 'Holding the Place', p. 320.

<sup>184</sup> Žižek, 'Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic', p. 47.

<sup>185</sup> Mark Devenney, 'Žižek's Passions for the Real: The Real of Terror: The Terror of the Real', in *The Truth of Žižek*, pp. 45-60 (p. 55).

<sup>186</sup> Sharpe, *A Little Piece of the Real*, p. 210.

<sup>187</sup> For example, they show that, if 'society needs fewer and fewer workers to reproduce itself (20 per cent of the workforce, on some accounts), then *it is not the workers who are in excess, but Capital itself*' (Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*, p. 291).

group is shown to be part of a wider problem', providing 'a kind of distilled version of what is wrong with society as such'.<sup>188</sup> This group represents the truth of a situation, and re-signifies other oppositions to social contradictions in more radical terms. In *IDLC*, Žižek defines four possibly destabilising antagonisms in today's societies: the ecological imbalance of global warming and resource shortages; the incompatibility between notions of private property and 'intellectual property'; the consequences of technological advances in areas such as biogenetics; and new forms of 'apartheid' in major cities between middle classes and slum-dwellers. He explains that it is the last of these issues that represents class struggle, as humans are almost literally discarded as surplus to requirements, and that the other three only become revolutionary through the lens of the fourth. Critics of ecological waste, biogenetic practices, and intellectual property can be progressive or conservative, but 'the antagonism between the Excluded and the Included' overdetermines 'the entire terrain of struggle'.<sup>189</sup>

In our theory of ideology, this notion of class struggle represents an oppositional point that counters many of the assumptions of affirmative ideologies. The issue then is how it may be employed to this end. First, it appears necessary to unite the singular issues and group interests of many postmodern political movements, which implicitly highlight contradictions in capitalism without actually defining them as such. Žižek explains for example that workers' rights campaigns should recognise that 'there is no worker without a capitalist organizing the production process', and that to overcome oppression 'one has substantially to transform the content of one's own position',<sup>190</sup> that is, view it universally or remain a worker. For Žižek, class opposition must reinvigorate the concept of generalised Left movements, which means rejecting Beautiful Souls who 'want a true revolution [but] shirk the actual price to be paid for it'.<sup>191</sup> He explains that such Left liberalism claims to support collective social change, but always postpones considering it due to specific humanitarian emergencies, or the threat of 'totalitarianism' that 'relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively *prevents* us from thinking'.<sup>192</sup> In this view, the eternal delay reflects that the liberal Left is comfortable with the current system, and we must choose between accepting its struggle within capitalism, or rejecting it and actually confronting class antagonism. The latter

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<sup>188</sup> Žižek in: Žižek and Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, p. 142.

<sup>189</sup> *IDLC*, p. 428.

<sup>190</sup> *TS*, p. 79.

<sup>191</sup> *OB*, p. 4.

<sup>192</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, p. 3.

involves recalling that many modern social rights emerged from Left victories, and showing that concepts of collectivity and labour struggle need not be replaced by single group issues. As Žižek says, we must decide how 'to remain faithful to the Old in the new conditions', because '*only* in this way can we generate something effectively New'.<sup>193</sup> An oppositional ideology is not a matter of repeating the past, but of retaining the memory of collective politics and rethinking it for the current situation.

Despite the potential of such an approach, a problem remains that the excluded are often not politically active, or in a position to articulate their universality. Also, as class struggle in capitalism has disconnected from the Marxist proletariat, the excluded is a more fragmented force, detached from any clear political movement. As Laclau explains, the unity of class as a concept is lost when classes have no concrete identity, and although today 'there are still remainders of full class identities in our world [...] the main line of development works in the opposite direction'.<sup>194</sup> Or, as Marcuse effectively observed, the excluded is not equivalent to the exploited working class, with its combination of material deprivation, central role in production, and potential collective consciousness. Žižek also describes 'three fractions of the working class' today as 'intellectual labourers, the old manual working class, and the outcasts', all of which replace the universal class, and are currently antagonistic to each other.<sup>195</sup> He notes that even the slum-dwellers are not a revolutionary class, because while 'the classic Marxist working class [...] is defined in the precise terms of economic "exploitation" [...], the defining feature of the slum-dwellers is socio-political'.<sup>196</sup> The difficulty is then how to include the excluded in an oppositional political project at all, or create class consciousness where it really matters.

At certain points, Žižek formulates a potential 'proletariat', but these attempts remain unconvincing as the three required elements of revolution never intersect. For example, he states that 'to be a "proletarian" involves assuming a certain *subjective* stance', because 'the line that separates the two opposing sides in the class struggle [...] is not the line separating two positive social groups, but ultimately *radically subjective*'.<sup>197</sup> Elsewhere, he explains that 'today's proletarians' are found 'where there are subjects reduced to a rootless existence, deprived of all

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<sup>193</sup> *OB*, p. 33.

<sup>194</sup> Laclau, 'Structure, History', p. 301.

<sup>195</sup> *FT*, p. 147.

<sup>196</sup> Žižek, '*Concesso non Dato*', p. 226.

<sup>197</sup> *TS*, p. 273.

substantial links'.<sup>198</sup> The first of these definitions is advantageous in that it creates a more inclusive concept, and implies that individuals from all classes could begin a class movement. However, there is no obvious need linking these conscious individuals to those who are materially deprived. Žižek tries to define common ground by explaining that, due to technological and environmental issues, we are all proletarians, 'dispossessed of our symbolic substance, our genetic base heavily manipulated, vegetating in an unlivable environment'.<sup>199</sup> But lacking here is any *immediate* deprivation as experienced by the impoverished slum dwellers, just as this latter group has less notion of class consciousness. Žižek says that, since deprivation is experienced in the global slums, 'we should be looking for signs of the new forms of social awareness that will emerge from the slum collectives'.<sup>200</sup> It seems, however, that such awareness can only emerge through mediation between different class representatives of the 'proletariat'. Marginality in itself is not sufficient for a radical politics,<sup>201</sup> and the issue remains how to connect the subordinated potentials in all classes.

At the same time, Žižek presumably realises that these attempts to define a proletariat demonstrate an incredibly slight potential, as he is aware that no major anti-capitalist politics is currently plausible. He explains that, 'calls for a radical overthrow of capitalism and its democratic political form, [...] although necessary in the long run, are meaningless today'. But, he continues, it is not then a matter of turning to local forms of resistance instead, because 'it is more crucial than ever to continue to question the very foundations of capitalism'.<sup>202</sup> Importantly, for our aims, this position Žižek takes is not merely a 'vain hope of the implosion of capital', which demonstrates 'profound ignorance of the more complex mechanisms whereby contemporary forms of capitalisation function'.<sup>203</sup> Rather, *because* the part of no part still represents a need to overthrow capitalism, and also the current impossibility of succeeding, anti-capitalism must begin through continuous production of alliances between groups and individuals, based on an economic logic. For Žižek, it is still necessary to create a global anti-capitalist project, to avoid capitulating to capitalism, but class struggle means opposing 'concrete political agents and their

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<sup>198</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, p. 140.

<sup>199</sup> *FT*, p. 92.

<sup>200</sup> *IDLC*, p. 426.

<sup>201</sup> Sharpe, *A Little Piece of the Real*, p. 247.

<sup>202</sup> Žižek, '*Concesso non Dato*', p. 224.

<sup>203</sup> Devenney, 'Žižek's Passions', p. 52.

actions', while anti-capitalism remains 'the horizon of all its activity'.<sup>204</sup> In this sense, Žižek's project is not hugely different from, for example, Laclau and Mouffe's radical democracy, which also attempts to dissolve ideological boundaries, and find common points of articulation, to subvert hegemony.<sup>205</sup> The difference is that it constructs a politics in opposition to capitalism specifically, which considers the human excess of capitalist production, for whom change within capitalism is inadequate. Despite the difficulties (which face any unifying political movement today), it is a necessary position from our perspective in that it goes beyond interactions between contrasting affirmative ideologies, and may therefore create a more radical sense of contingency, and the most liberated agent.

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<sup>204</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 1005.

<sup>205</sup> Daly also expresses this notion in: Žižek and Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, p. 18.

## VI. Political Action

### i) Democracy

What remains is to consider the actual political moves that may develop into acts, or begin to create a class consciousness. According to our theory of ideology, the aim is to gradually increase the presence of alternative thinking by challenging affirmative ideological content. It is therefore necessary to negate dominant ideas with a positive opposition, which has certain radical beliefs and assumptions but also understands the contingency of all belief. Our argument in this section is that Žižek provides us with a form of politics that is sufficiently radical, and implies the possibility of slowly building an opposition, but is in some ways still too focused on negation. That is, in line with his concept of the act, Žižek promotes concepts of withdrawal and rejection of sacred ideas to create space for alternative thinking, and these concepts can appear to lack political direction, or obscure the ideology that motivates them. To begin with, we analyse Žižek's theory of democracy, and the shift he makes in his work from supporting radical democracy to rejecting democracy altogether. At this stage, we are mainly concerned with *defending* Žižek's position, because it represents an anti-capitalist politics that specifically aims to place control in the hands of the excluded. The important point here is that Žižek does not actually discard democracy, but reformulates it around the excluded, in line with the goals of class politics. The problem is where such a democracy may come from, as there is currently no clear path for it to emerge within existing social structures.

Throughout Žižek's work on democracy he retains the idea of the irrational Master-Signifier, which fills the locus of power with some unquestionable notion. For instance, he explains, where the Jacobins attempted to keep the centre of power empty, to protect it from all pathological motivation, they effectively took power themselves in 'the most cunning and at the same time the most brutal, unconditional way'.<sup>206</sup> Following this idea, any democracy also necessarily involves some irrational occupant of power, as well as an excluded social element. In his earlier work, Žižek reads the implications of these excesses as a need for radical democracy, *because of* the contradiction it implies. He accepts that democracy is manipulated and corrupted, and it cannot eradicate those factors, but that the abstract notion of democracy acts as 'a

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<sup>206</sup> FTKN, p. 269.

symbolic fact in the absence of which effective democracy [...] could not reproduce itself'.<sup>207</sup> In other words, democracy is both a particular realisation revolving around some contingent point, and the process of its own evolution, based on the impossibility of realising its universal idea. For Žižek, 'this split is the very source of the strength of democracy', if it can 'take cognizance of the fact that its limit lies in itself, in its internal "antagonism"'.<sup>208</sup> Here, it is not that Žižek distances himself from democracy, because it necessarily contains 'particularistic ideological fantasies',<sup>209</sup> or its hidden excess has 'sinister connotations', aligned 'with bureaucratic idiocy, illegal transgressions, racist *jouissance*, patriarchal sexism, and so forth'.<sup>210</sup> Rather, it is precisely recognition of the ideological fantasy, corruption and irrational excess in democracy that gives the concept its dialectical momentum.

From the mid-1990s onwards, Žižek changes his position as he identifies democracy as the major obstacle to social change, in the sense that people trust in the *existing* democratic process. He states that, 'What, today, prevents the radical questioning of capitalism itself is precisely *the belief in the democratic form of the struggle against capitalism*'.<sup>211</sup> Democracy cannot fulfil the role of addressing deep antagonisms constitutive of capitalist society, so he considers whether it is 'so discredited by its predominant use that, perhaps, one should take the risk of abandoning it to the enemy'.<sup>212</sup> In such comments, Žižek in fact points to a particular understanding of democracy, in which voting and other formal aspects of *liberal* democracy become a kind of panacea. Yet, because in today's society there is an almost immediate association between liberal democracy and democracy as such, it may seem that anti-capitalist politics has to counter democracy itself to undermine its liberal form.

In taking this step, Žižek also distances himself from radical democracy, on the basis that its appeal to the empty universal of democracy is filled by a hidden supplement. For Žižek, theories of radical democracy are problematic when they equate recognising the universality of social antagonism with an ability to keep democracy open, or function without fantasy. For example, Laclau speaks of maintaining a gap 'between the particularity of the normative order

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<sup>207</sup> *SOI*, p. 167.

<sup>208</sup> Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 168.

<sup>209</sup> Sharpe, 'What's Left in Žižek', p. 156.

<sup>210</sup> Boucher, *Charmed Circle*, p. 208.

<sup>211</sup> *IDLC*, p. 183.

<sup>212</sup> *OB*, p. 123.

and the universality of the ethical moment', and states that 'the only democratic society is one which permanently shows the contingency of its own foundations'.<sup>213</sup> Meanwhile, Stavrakakis argues against Žižek that 'democratic lack can acquire a non-essentialist positive existence', and that we can sacrifice 'our libidinal, fantasmatic/symptomatic attachment to symbolic authority', to 'really enjoy the signifier of the lack in the Other'.<sup>214</sup> Such ideas, we assert, either imply that social stability is problematic because the law is always undermined by admission of its own contingency,<sup>215</sup> or that hegemony shifts to a higher level, in which insistence on the 'emptiness' of power gives power to those who define emptiness. Žižek focuses on this second point, and states that 'the democratic empty place and the discourse of totalitarian fullness are strictly correlative', because 'it is meaningless to [...] advocate a "radical" democracy which would avoid this unpleasant supplement'.<sup>216</sup> Concepts such as the empty place do not acknowledge their own positive ideology, which, as Daly puts it, 'reproduces the fantasy that it can submit everything (including global economic activity) to conscious political control and that we could change if we *really* wanted to'.<sup>217</sup> Even a self-reflexive democracy must have an excess that is naturalised via fantasy, so 'enjoying the lack' ensures these norms remain authoritative.

What is missing specifically in radical democracy, for Žižek, is a notion of class struggle, as the antagonism that remains repressed by the constitution of any form of law. Žižek illustrates this point in a critique of Mouffe's pluralist 'agonistic' democracy, in which different discourses meet as adversaries rather than enemies, to enable a variety of political positions to each propose 'its own interpretation of the "common good", and [try] to implement a different form of hegemony'.<sup>218</sup> For Mouffe, this democracy is not a matter of rational consensus, or agreement without exclusion, but the principle of democratic contestation should remain regardless of the hegemony established. Žižek here points to a 'key political struggle' besides 'the agonistic

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<sup>213</sup> Laclau, 'Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics', in *Contingency, Hegemony*, pp. 44-89 (pp. 85-86).

<sup>214</sup> Stavrakakis, *Lacanian Left*, pp. 278-279.

<sup>215</sup> As Daly says, 'in arguing for equivalences to be established between all disaffected groups *within* the terms of the democratic imaginary', radical democracy may be 'increasingly entangled in endless cycles of infra-political networking' (Daly, 'The Materialism of Spirit: Žižek and the Logics of the Political', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 1 (2007), 1-20 (p. 8)).

<<http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/66/63>> [accessed 10 August 2016]

<sup>216</sup> *IDLC*, p. 101.

<sup>217</sup> Daly, 'Causes for Concern: Žižek's Politics of Loving Terror', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 4 (2010), 1-23 (p. 11) <<http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/316/316>> [accessed 10 August 2016]

<sup>218</sup> Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, p. 104.

competition within the field of the admissible', which is 'the struggle for the delimitation of this field, for the definition of the line which will separate the legitimate adversary from the illegitimate enemy'.<sup>219</sup> That is, some position is already excluded to establish the agonistic system in the first place. Mouffe explains that the beginning point is 'a certain amount of consensus' around 'ethico-political principles', and confrontation should be between different interpretations of these principles, which include 'liberal-conservative, social-democratic, neo-liberal, radical-democratic, and so on'.<sup>220</sup> Absent from this list is any clearly anti-capitalist position, which would require a different institutional system from some of the other discourses to be able to effectively compete. As Žižek says, this limit point represents the undemocratic assumption behind democratic inclusion, and is 'overdetermined by the fundamental social antagonism ("class struggle")', that 'cannot ever be adequately translated into the form of democratic competition'.<sup>221</sup>

Žižek's approach to democracy thus centres on the inclusion of class struggle, and his opposition to established forms of democratic participation is defined against a democratic explosion of popular will. This effective 'act' of democracy, for Žižek, appears anti-democratic in the sense that it represents what is repressed by existing democracy. Its success involves resignifying the symbolic order, by exceeding normal procedure and becoming institutionalised 'in the guise of its opposite, as revolutionary-democratic *terror*'.<sup>222</sup> Consequently, this counter democracy is not a dictatorship that replaces democracy, but a subversion of the limits of existing democracy into a new form. Žižek explains via Lenin that liberal democracy should be seen in this way as bourgeois dictatorship, because 'the very *form* of the bourgeois-democratic state, the sovereignty of its power in its ideologico-political presuppositions, embodies a "bourgeois" logic'.<sup>223</sup> Liberal democracy is democracy within capitalism, and therefore reveals its 'dictatorial dimension' if the overall background that sustains it is questioned. In these terms, the dictatorship of the proletariat is a *democracy* formulated around the excluded in society, which negates the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. It also has limits, but the important factor is who controls state power, and what the effects of that control are. Žižek says, 'if the price of being freed from the *invisible* hand of the market is to be controlled by the *visible* hand of new rulers', it is worth it 'if the

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<sup>219</sup> Žižek, 'Jameson as a Theorist of Revolutionary Philately', in *Jameson: A Critical Reader*, pp. 112-124 (p. 114).

<sup>220</sup> Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>221</sup> Žižek, 'Jameson as a Theorist', p. 117.

<sup>222</sup> *IDLC*, p. 266.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 412.

visible hand is visible to and controlled by the “part of no part”.<sup>224</sup> The important question is whether decisions are ‘made in the public space, through the engaged participation of the majority’, and if not, ‘it is of secondary importance if we have parliamentary democracy and freedom of individual choices’.<sup>225</sup>

This concept of democracy marks a clear distinction between existing institutions and a potential beyond them. It therefore represents an ‘oppositional’ ideology in the sense of seeking change based on the contingency of the economic and political logics in the social order. Also, while it is unclear whether Žižek’s abandoning of the term ‘democracy’, rather than attempting to re-signify it, constitutes the most effective approach, it remains a commitment to a mass movement. However, although Žižek’s proposal is more inclusive than Marcuse’s consideration of ‘dictatorship’, it shares the problem that there is no large-scale, anti-establishment political explosion on the horizon. In other words, it does not take us beyond Marcuse’s political impasse, in that self-determination means first escaping established democratic procedure, which requires a self-determined subject to change social relations in advance. In fact, Žižek observes that citizens in constitutional democracies resemble the (Hegelian) formal monarch, who merely ‘signs off’ on administrative measures decided elsewhere, and it is a question of ‘how to maintain the appearance that the king effectively makes decisions, when we all know this not to be true’.<sup>226</sup> It then remains to be considered how a large-scale rejection of established democracy can gradually come to fruition, in ways that may even involve forms of democratic participation.

## ii) Refusal

At this point, we examine whether the political tactics Žižek suggests are compatible with this gradual development. Žižek places a strong emphasis on a politics of refusal, because a great deal of political activity is ‘pseudo-activity’ that merely appears to be doing something, based on an ‘urge to [...] “participate”, to mask the Nothingness of what goes on’.<sup>227</sup> We understand here that Žižek does not literally recommend that people do nothing, but instead choose behaviour that exceeds accepted forms of participation. However, we question whether refusal has sufficient

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 419.

<sup>225</sup> Žižek, ‘What Is to Be Done (with Lenin)?’, *In These Times*, 21 January 2004  
<<http://inthesetimes.com/article/135/>> [accessed 10 August 2016] (para. 9 of 12)

<sup>226</sup> *FT*, p. 134.

<sup>227</sup> *PV*, p. 334.

political direction, and whether its goals can really be separated from established politics. As with traversing the fantasy and the act, Žižek sometimes focuses exclusively on the negating power of refusal, which ‘clears the table’ of positive ideas *before* introducing specific political ideas. Yet, in other cases, he implies a need to maintain certain forms of ordinary political participation to reach particular ends. We therefore maintain that it is necessary to be more specific about how refusal and participation function together, and the ideological assumptions motivating the movement.

Žižek defines three kinds of act that contrast with the act proper, because they only add to existing debates or cause momentary disruption: the hysterical act that ‘stages’ its complaint for the ruling order; the *passage à l’acte* that merely strikes out blindly (and violently) in impotence; and a symbolic act that stands in for a political programme, such as a cultural statement.<sup>228</sup> The hysterical act forms demands and claims for rights that, as such, continue to recognise the existing authority. The act of striking out (such as riots), meanwhile, disturbs the social structure momentarily, but does not restructure its symbolic coordinates. As Žižek says, ‘an authentic political gesture [...] enforces a vision, while outbursts of impotent violence are fundamentally [...] a reaction to some disturbing intruder’.<sup>229</sup> Finally, the cultural act is similar, for Žižek, in that, although aesthetic spectacle is clearly very different from spontaneous violence, ‘there is a deeper “identity of the opposites” at work’, in that both are performative representations of frustrations that cannot name them and do not touch on the political real.<sup>230</sup> These three acts are thus incorporated within the establishment, in constitutional democracy, the legal system, and commodified culture respectively.

The radical alternative, according to Žižek, is a symbolic violence that disturbs society’s apparent balance and introduces a point of separation. Rather than the violence of the *passage à l’acte*, or a fascist spectacle that stands in for real change, revolution requires the violence of refusal. The gesture is encapsulated, for Žižek, in the phrase ‘I would prefer not to’, spoken by Herman Melville’s character, Bartleby the scrivener. It is *passive* refusal that causes the wheels of procedure to grind to a halt, and as such is a non-violence that is extremely violent in its effects. Žižek explains that such refusal allows us to pass from a politics ‘which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position *and* its

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<sup>228</sup> *OB*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>229</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p. 179.

<sup>230</sup> *IDLC*, p. 482.

negation'.<sup>231</sup> In effect, maintaining the system as it is requires more effort than changing it, 'so that the first gesture to provoke a change in the system is to withdraw activity, to do nothing'.<sup>232</sup> Even certain forms of apparently subversive activity contribute to the energy needed to sustain the system, and simply stopping would be more productive for political change.

It should be noted, however, that this 'doing nothing' is not exactly the complete withdrawal that Žižek's reference to Bartleby implies. That is, it is not that he 'affirms only something like [...] individual subjective withdrawal from the concrete options open in the present'.<sup>233</sup> Instead, it represents a politics whose *first move* is to refuse the terms of the debate, or the totality represented through a limited choice, such as liberalism and conservatism, and choose its hidden excess. The aim is effectively to make the impossibility of radical change possible by treating it as a genuine option, as 'the greatest fear of the rulers is that these voices will start to reverberate and reinforce each other in solidarity'.<sup>234</sup> As with Marcuse, revolution can become necessity only once it has become a possibility, and Žižek states that, whereas in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it was clear what the Left needed to do, but not when to do it, today 'we do not know what we have to do, but we have to act now, because the consequence of non-action could be disastrous'.<sup>235</sup> The necessary radical move is then this abyssal negation of existing domination, to make space for politics. For example, with the environmental crisis, for Žižek, we must insist upon drastic, preventative action (and risk appearing absurd if there is no catastrophe), rather than choose between doing nothing or taking limited measures that do not disrupt the social order.<sup>236</sup> In that sense, refusal is the most active approach.

What is less clear here is whether Žižek sees Bartleby politics as any rejection of dominant terms, or one which has a clear political alternative in mind from the beginning. In our understanding, refusal cannot connect with radical progressive politics unless it already challenges affirmative ideologies based on particular notions of revolutionary possibility. But, in some cases, Žižek's description of refusal presents it more as indeterminate negation, such as when he suggests that a 'zero-level' or 'empty form of protest [...] deprived of concrete content', is needed to 'open up the space into which concrete demands and projects of change can then

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<sup>231</sup> *PV*, pp. 381-382.

<sup>232</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p. 180.

<sup>233</sup> Ramey, 'Ceremonial Contingencies', p. 95.

<sup>234</sup> *FT*, p. 156.

<sup>235</sup> Žižek, 'Permanent Economic Emergency', p. 95.

<sup>236</sup> *IDLC*, p. 456.

inscribe themselves'.<sup>237</sup> Elsewhere, he also says 'it is all too simple to oppose this *passage à l'acte* directly to the authentic political act', and we '*have to accept the risk* that a blind violent outburst will be followed by its proper politicization'.<sup>238</sup> Yet, as we have seen, this 'zero-level' describes a 'missed encounter' that has already been sutured by a politics, while a 'blind violent outburst' represents an expression of misdirected rage. As such, all protest is determinate to some degree, and there is no likely correlation between blind outbursts and progressive alternatives. At other points, Žižek implies that refusal is a more deliberate and directed political action. For example, he states that Bartleby's attitude remains the permanent foundation in a radical movement, so 'the very frantic and engaged activity of constructing a new order is sustained by an underlying "I would prefer not to" which forever reverberates in it'.<sup>239</sup> Here, Bartleby signifies a sentiment or principle that runs *throughout* a specific politics, whose agents presumably also have in mind what they *would* prefer.

In more practical terms, it is also not clear whether refusal is to be applied at all times, or whether negation is best achieved through forms of sanctioned participation in some situations. For instance, Žižek suggests that individuals could subtract themselves from politics by making a conscious decision to not vote, which may eventually undermine the government's legitimacy. But, he adds, while in principle 'one should be indifferent to the struggle between the liberal and conservative poles of today's official politics', in fact '*one can only afford to be indifferent if the liberal option is in power*'.<sup>240</sup> With such an idea, it seems that radicals should only refuse if they are sure the liberals will win (and retain legitimacy), because a conservative win would further solidify dominant discourse. On another occasion, Žižek criticises Critchley's notion of making infinite, unfulfillable demands against the state, and argues that it is more subversive 'to bombard those in power with strategically well-selected *precise, finite* demands', which the government cannot simply dismiss.<sup>241</sup> The implication here is that demands to the state *as such* are not problematic because they recognise the incumbent power, only certain kinds of demands. Yet Žižek does not then specify which demands are compatible with refusal, or how to determine when they may be productive.

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., p. 482.

<sup>238</sup> Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*, p. 225.

<sup>239</sup> *PV*, p. 382.

<sup>240</sup> Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*, p. 301.

<sup>241</sup> *IDLC*, p. 350.

It is difficult to reconcile these notions with others in which Žižek encourages non-participation at all costs. At one point, he explains that 'I would prefer not to' means not only not participating 'in capitalist competition and profiteering', but refusing 'to give to charity to support a Black orphan in Africa, engage in the struggle to prevent oil-drilling in a wildlife swamp, send books to educate our liberal-feminist-spirited women in Afghanistan', and so on, because these actions contribute to maintaining the capitalist machinery.<sup>242</sup> In this sense, refusal involves accepting disastrous short term consequences for various people, and, as Dean says of this comment, although it confronts the existing Left with its complicity in the current system, it appears as 'the provocation of a catastrophe', especially for those most vulnerable, 'in the hope that an act will somehow occur'.<sup>243</sup> Furthermore, such blanket withdrawal implies not only the risk of defying liberal fearmongering about totalitarianism, but that of leaving the political consequences to chance. Overall, it thus seems necessary to balance concepts of withdrawal and participation, to create a mediation between the everyday and the radically different, as suggested by Jameson's theory of Utopia. Also, it may be fruitful to emphasise refusals that target capitalism and the affirmative aspects of political participation more specifically, such as simply buying less, as a means of rejecting individualist choice for more collective political involvement.

### iii) The Party

Refusal is not merely a matter of individual decision, for Žižek, and he recognises that it must be organised into a movement which can influence individuals to take responsibility for their symbolic attachments. He thus constructs a concept of 'the Party', as a force of leadership that demonstrates the possibilities of negation. As he describes it, the Party and its leaders develop reciprocally with a movement, in that the Party's universal structure is filled by people's particular grievances. It therefore represents a form of political opposition that mediates between abstract ideals and everyday concerns, and is self-reflexive and open to different content. However, despite the importance of these qualities (which can combine with Jameson's theory of Utopia and Marcuse's concept of radical educators), Žižek emphasises the Party's negating effects over any positive beliefs that define the leadership's initial framework. In our understanding, the Party

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<sup>242</sup> *PV*, p. 383.

<sup>243</sup> Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), pp. 130-131.

*inevitably* privileges a certain perception of social issues, and it must be clear about the limits that structure its opposition to remain open. This notion is important if the Party is to become the unifying point of a political movement, because it involves challenging conscious rationalisations of affirmative ideologies, and its ideological content overdetermines these challenges, as well as the alternative direction desired.

Žižek explains that radical politics requires a certain organisation and conceptualisation, in what he describes as ‘the tetrad of *people-movement-party-leader*’.<sup>244</sup> The idea is to maintain a relationship of mutual influence between these terms, with none assuming the position of absolute control or knowledge. Thus, he says, ‘the authority of the Party is *not* that of determinate positive knowledge, but that of the *form* of knowledge, of a new type of knowledge linked to a collective political subject’.<sup>245</sup> In this way, the Party introduces and maintains class consciousness, and turns resistance into a revolutionary project by emphasising class struggle in terms of the excluded, and the lack of the big Other. Meanwhile, the content of the movement is produced by people within it, under this anti-big Other framework. As such, for Žižek, ‘there is no “true” party line waiting to be discovered’, as it ‘emerges out of the zigzag of oscillations’, or ‘through the mutual interaction of subjective decisions’.<sup>246</sup> The leader is then the element that unifies Party and people by literally taking the lead, rather than being a Master who objectifies the subject-supposed-to-know, or claims to speak for the will of the people. As Žižek puts it, the ‘authentic Master’ frees people from fear of acting by saying ‘something like: “Don’t be afraid, look, I’ll do it, this thing you’re so afraid of, and I’ll do it for free — not because I have to, but out of my love for you; I’m not afraid”’.<sup>247</sup> The Master is a vanishing mediator who embodies a freedom beyond symbolic horizons, and demonstrates that it is realisable.

As with the intellectual leadership discussed by Marcuse, the largely negative role Žižek gives to the Party means it does not prescribe what a specific movement should involve. Yet, also as with Marcuse, Žižek is then criticised for a merely formal commitment to revolution. According to Laclau, Žižek demands that we replace liberal democracies with ‘a thoroughly different regime which he does not have the courtesy of letting us know anything about’.<sup>248</sup> That

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<sup>244</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 998.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1000.

<sup>246</sup> *IDLC*, p. 230.

<sup>247</sup> Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, chapter 1.

<sup>248</sup> Laclau, ‘Constructing Universality’, p. 289.

is, Žižek simply dismisses existing political efforts, without theorising any concrete alternatives. Similarly, Samuels argues that, since Žižek merely criticises actual (non-revolutionary) politics, he 'denies the real effects the women's rights, worker's rights, civil rights, and gay rights movements have had on changing our political and social systems'.<sup>249</sup> For us, however, Žižek does not dismiss all existing politics, or claim that past left-wing gains have been worthless, and often positively registers unexpected political ruptures symbolised by even moderate left-wing victories (Obama in the US, Syriza in Greece). If Žižek does not fully endorse specific movements, it is more 'because they will inevitably be caught up in the logic of capital, a logic which has hegemonised hegemony'.<sup>250</sup> In other words, particular progressive moments in recent history demonstrate the *possibility* of acts, but cannot themselves resist dominant forces because they are not explicitly opposed to capitalism. Moreover, the main reasons for not formulating clear political content are to avoid constructing a rigid party line, and to reveal an excess in the norms of discourse. As Glynos explains, the 'attempt to predict outcomes can only rely on current standards and ideals', which calculate radical proposals based on 'foundational guarantees rooted in our current ethico-political horizon'.<sup>251</sup> In this way, if Žižek sometimes overemphasises the 'abyssal' quality of radical politics, he also effectively occupies the position of the analyst,<sup>252</sup> which provides a framework for a conversation between transcendental ideals and practical measures.

The issue we have with Žižek's concept of the Party is again similar to that of Marcuse's radical education, that is, not emphasising enough how certain political solutions are inevitably already implied by the leadership. First, the individuals who form the Party have motivations for doing so, and their already formed ideas become part of the Party's foundations. Second, the leadership cannot avoid being the figure of transference, or a knowing subject, in demonstrating what is possible rather than simply announcing the contingency of the social order. Here, the leader is analogous to the analyst, in that, as 'the lure of the analyst's knowledge makes the analysand create knowledge for him or herself', it is 'through the emancipatory activities of the

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<sup>249</sup> Robert Samuels, *New Media, Cultural Studies, and Critical Theory after Postmodernism: Automodernity from Žižek to Laclau* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 79.

<sup>250</sup> Chris McMillan, 'The Communist Hypothesis; Žižekian Utopia or Utopian Fantasy?', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 5 (2011), 1-20 (p. 2)  
<<http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/512/519>> [accessed 10 August 2016]

<sup>251</sup> Glynos, 'There Is No Other', p. 101.

<sup>252</sup> Dean, *Žižek's Politics*, p. xix.

leader or leaders' that 'individuals realize that they themselves are the final repositories of power'.<sup>253</sup> However, in transference onto the leader the subject experiences negation by following the leader's specific actions and aims, and, if we do not acknowledge this political content, the Party may be more dogmatic and less open to content from the movement that might redefine revolutionary goals. For example, in describing revolutionary-egalitarian justice, Žižek defines '*trust in the people*' as 'the wager that a large majority of the people supports [...] severe measures, sees them as its own, and is ready to participate in their enforcement'.<sup>254</sup> Here, the Party makes an assumption about what people need and *will* support, using 'the logic of the future anterior', or an 'idea of the people as if a future construction of the people was already in place'.<sup>255</sup> While this assumption is a way of resisting populism, it must also involve a prescription of political content based on the knowledge of the Party, rather than the movement. Without engagement between populist demand and the Party's concept of needs, the Party acts for 'the people' as an abstract concept, which resembles an ideological statement Žižek associates with totalitarianism. Here, Sharpe and Boucher are justified to ask 'whether the Leader could express the political will of the revolutionary vanguard in any other way than by messianically imposing it upon the *lumpenproletariat*, who would in turn impose it on society'.<sup>256</sup> To avoid this possibility, in our view, the Party needs to acknowledge the content of its position from the beginning, so it may be developed through the composition of the movement.

As with Marcuse, Žižek thus effectively presents leaders (educators) as a group that understands social problems, and the movement (students) as a group that experiences them. For example, in his analysis of Occupy Wall Street, Žižek argues that the protests successfully created an opening for rethinking politics, especially by rejecting ordinary political debate (a statement of 'I would prefer not to'). Yet, he explains, once this step has been taken, such a movement should also discuss what it *does* want, and create debate around new Master-Signifiers that suggest practical political measures.<sup>257</sup> In a sense, for Žižek, these protests call for a new Master, but it is not that there is some leader figure who simply knows the answers. Rather, the people and potential leaders have different gaps in their knowledge, or, 'it is the

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<sup>253</sup> Kovacevic, *Liberating Oedipus*, p. 206.

<sup>254</sup> *IDLC*, p. 461.

<sup>255</sup> Daly, 'Causes for Concern', p. 20.

<sup>256</sup> Sharpe and Boucher, *Žižek and Politics*, p. 193.

<sup>257</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 1007.

people who have the answers, they just do not know the questions to which they have (or, rather, are) the answer'.<sup>258</sup> But, from our perspective, the unity is important in that both sides can contribute something to form *and* content. Not only does the leader bring some content with their structuring role, but the people and movement can contribute ideas about the overall meaning and goal of their refusal.

Finally, we may ask why subjects might decide to follow the Party (or the ideas of individuals who may retrospectively be identified as the Party), if their aims are not already revolutionary. In analysis, only once subjects recognise a need to submit themselves to the process does transference occur, and in the sense that the leader equates to the analyst, the subject must experience social symptoms and view the Party as the best option to address them. But, if fantasies allow subjects to redirect blame for social symptoms onto others, it is not clear why anyone who is not already a revolutionary should look to the Party. Seen in this way, the Party can only increase its influence if, in line with our concept of ideology, symbolic attachments are susceptible to change due to the fantasy being affected by contradictory experience and knowledge. In particular, the kind of knowledge that may challenge affirmative ideological beliefs is that within the oppositional ideology of the Party itself. As such, if the growth of the Party depends partly on external circumstances weakening affirmative rationalisations, it also depends on the extent to which the beliefs represented by the Party gain an alternative presence. The particular assumptions that contribute to the Party's constitution are then the prerequisite for its power to negate, and for the gradual growth of a radical movement.

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p. 1008.

## VII. Conclusion

Our first aim in this chapter has been to affirm the idea of the Symbolic-Real split, in the contexts of both ideology theory and social change. The Real indicates that there is no external reason for interpellation into the Symbolic, which then forms the basis of ideology, because this lack must be hidden by a fantasy that structures rationalisation or conscious belief. Žižek also allows us to understand a split in symbolic attachments at the level of the symbolic Real, or around an empty Master Signifier, which includes and excludes certain content. Where he, like Jameson, presents this split as a question of class struggle, this view of social relations assumes a universal aspect, which implies the possibility of re-signification beyond the current Master-Signifier. Our understanding of ideology effectively follows these structures, and Žižek's analysis of ideological positions also enables us to develop our ideology map, by introducing detailed consideration of the different psychological reactions involved.

At the same time, Žižek's understanding of ideology contrasts with our own, particularly in the way he prioritises unconscious belief over conscious rationalisation. In Žižek's notion of the subject, the fantasy covers inconsistencies to maintain the basic attachment to the Master-Signifier, regardless of their content, and ideology is sustained primarily through the enjoyment of simply obeying. Furthermore, the dominant fetishistic mode of ideology makes conscious ideas even less susceptible to contradiction, as they already distance themselves from behaviour. Against this idea, we have shown throughout the chapter that thoughts and actions remain connected, so that a conditional justification supports fetishistic disavowal, and different forms of justification demonstrate a more or less direct commitment to systemic goals. In this way, fantasy and enjoyment have a reciprocal relationship, in that ideological attachment both produces the fantasy and relies on the fantasy retaining certain kinds of coherence for its stability.

These arguments have then framed our analysis of potentials for change, both in terms of how subjects may become politically active and the kinds of activity that may be productive. In many ways, Žižek's theory points towards the type of gradual development of alternative ideas, and the need to mediate between radical ideals and everyday political language, that we have promoted in previous chapters. The possibility of an agent that can make a move beyond dominant symbolic norms, and the way Žižek defines an anti-democracy politics that rejects these norms and organises itself in the Party, suggest steps towards a dialectical negation of the

existing whole. From our perspective, however, it is necessary to focus on the role of oppositional ideology in creating the conditions for this negation by challenging the content of existing affirmative fantasies. Žižek, conversely, tends to prioritise negation over its cause, or valorise the opening up of alternative horizons in itself (especially as he believes that ideology critique is ineffective). Our insistence on formulating a particular oppositional ideology to cause negation, that will also affect what comes after, then becomes part of political strategy. We thus conclude that the politics of refusal and the act, as well as the role of the Party, should be focused on creating breaks with political norms through specific challenges to affirmative rationalisations of those norms. This approach entails the possibility of subjects shifting their ideological attachments based on new knowledge or experience.



## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

The preceding chapters have reiterated a number of key points regarding the theorisation of ideology and how such theory affects approaches to political change. We have constructed these ideas both on foundations provided by Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek, and against aspects of their theory. Most fundamentally, these three theorists demonstrate the value of a dialectical view of society, which compares existing social relations to unrealised potentials implied by their developments and contradictions. In this way, there is an effective division between ideologies, based on whether individuals view society in terms of this excess, or what could be, rather than only consider what is. In terms of radical politics, the question of ideology then becomes that of how mass consciousness might shift from a one-dimensional or fragmented mentality to two-dimensional, historicised thinking. In particular, this shift appears to rest on the possibility of individuals recognising a constitutive antagonism in the socio-economic structure, in the sense that the very form of existing social relations creates a certain excluded or outside part, which embodies contradictions in proclaimed social values. As such, these excluded groups represent a necessity for change, which in turn suggests a need to reconsider dominant social priorities. This class antagonism is a unifying factor between the works of Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek, as well as our own theory.

The ideological split between 'affirmative' and 'oppositional' ideology then forms one part of a 'two-tiered' concept, whose other element is rationalisation. Here, Žižek's theory offers a basis for the relationship between the two-levels, in the way that a gap in subjective interpellation is repressed by imagined external justifications for the subject's position. Žižek also shows that this sheer negative excess is not some utopian impulse towards greater collectivity (as Marcuse and Jameson suggest), because drive is merely that which remains partially unfulfilled by sublimation. There is simply something in the subject not identical with its symbolic self, which implies potential for *some form* of radical break. However, in our understanding, Žižek still does not view the *content* of rationalisation as central to sustaining ideological commitment, so its role remains limited as in Marcuse and Jameson's work. In effect, unconscious belief and automatic

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acceptance predominate these theories, whereas we have argued for the equal importance of basic ideological attachment (affirmation or opposition) and its rationalisation. Thus, although subjects must be interpellated into language and culture to formulate reasons for that interpellation, the reasons themselves may affect the subject's ideological orientation in turn, even leading to significant behavioural change.

We have then considered how this concept of ideology applies to particular social circumstances, and specifically the forms of late, advanced or consumer capitalism described by Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek. The main point that has emerged in this respect is that of an overall background of social demands, which is not directly experienced, but to which all ideologies are responses of some kind. For Jameson and Žižek, this guiding force makes itself invisible through a logic of difference and a lack of clear authority. It appears that there is an endless range of demands on subjects to consume and recognise others that has a bewildering or fragmenting effect on the psyche, so the task is to somehow show that a structure still exists. Conversely, through Marcuse's concepts of the performance principle and repressive desublimation, there is a clearer sense of direction and limitation in these demands, which neither undermines the superego nor turns it fully into an injunction for consumerist enjoyment. Therefore, while the consumer-producer balance is no longer represented by a clear separation between work and leisure, as in Marcuse's time, affirmative rationalisations are clear belief systems that obey an overall demand by investing in certain institutional authorities over others.

Having theorised this structure behind the complex demands of consumer capitalist society, it becomes possible to imagine alternatives, based on the contradictions and exclusions it creates. Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek all note in different ways how the primacy in capitalism of economic growth and profitmaking leads to massive waste, environmental destruction, impoverishment and imperialist expansion. To challenge these problems on a sufficiently large scale therefore means confronting dominant ideas regarding social needs, and fundamental features of the capitalist mode of production. More specifically, it is a task that requires a mass political movement centred on class, or constitutive forms of economic and political exclusion in existing social relations. One of the main questions in this regard has been that of who could be the agents to start or join such a revolutionary movement. Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek all emphasise that there is no singular revolutionary class in consumer capitalism that replaces the

industrial proletariat, and it is clear that any such potential is now split and spread among different classes. Furthermore, as Jameson demonstrates in particular, it is difficult to identify a logic that can connect the issues faced by one class to those faced by another. We have thus maintained that the important point is to focus on pockets of 'class consciousness' present in elements within each class, which may represent a beginning point for connectivity.

The other main question is *how* a radical political movement may develop, not only as a result of worsening material circumstances, but through deliberate attempts to change dominant perceptions. In this respect, it is clear that there is no current likelihood of sudden change, or of a mass class movement, and any attempt to force such a theory (as in Marcuse's minority dictatorship) seems implausible. Consequently, we have highlighted ideas in each chapter that suggest a gradual development of political change, in which utopian ideals must mediate with everyday problems, and disruptive protest must combine with established political participation. Here, Marcuse's 'step by step' approach and concept of negative education, as well as Žižek's concept of the Party, imagine dialogue between leaders and activists. Meanwhile, Jameson's theory of Utopia demonstrates a means of bridging a gap between otherwise mutually exclusive discourses. However, these theories either assume that the subjects with whom it is possible to communicate are already involved in protest politics (Marcuse, Žižek), or that the aim is merely to reintroduce the possibility of historicising thought, rather than to actually create a specific political movement (Jameson). Conversely, we have suggested that such an approach could have an impact on *affirmative* forms of ideology, if oppositional political ideals can gain sufficient social presence.

This notion of presence leads to another consideration, which is the extent to which radical political ideas can be effectively expressed through commodified cultural channels. As we have seen, Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek emphasise the de-historicisation and de-contextualisation of culture by media structures, and how market demands marginalise oppositional ideas. While we see these analyses as largely realistic, we have also argued that there remains space for alternative ideas to be produced and received, and perhaps even to become sufficiently prominent that they begin to cause doubt and uncertainty in affirmative ideologies. Without ignoring the cultural dominance of certain narratives, this understanding focuses on gaps in the dominant structure of cultural production and distribution, such as the way

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it does not explicitly censor content, or control how content is received. Furthermore, the emphasis here is not only on Marcuse's notion of 'high art', whose utopian form would not be widely comprehensible until a shift in political sensibilities had already occurred. Rather, while we affirm Marcuse's criticism of anti-intellectual protest, it seems that a mass movement must utilise more direct political communication and popular cultural forms.

With each of these issues surrounding radical change, our overarching point has been the need for a modified approach to ideology that gives more attention to the conscious dimension, and shifts the scope of political possibility. In our view, attempts to emphasise the potential to increase oppositional sensibility in existing social conditions rest on the notion that affirmative ideologies can be challenged through their conscious rationalisations. As such, ideology cannot be understood fully through formulations of ego weakness (Marcuse) or psychic fragmentation (Jameson), according to which subjects simply assimilate dominant demands, and behaviour is not always a clear measure of ideological commitment (Žižek). Rather, there is a certain agency even in affirmative ideology, in that subjects accept their social positions conditionally and are capable of moving beyond those positions if they perceive that those conditions are not met. Ideology involves beliefs and assumptions based on values that are susceptible to challenge in some way, and the social structure depends on the support of these ideologies. Our analysis of political change proceeds from this notion.

Having understood ideology in this way, it has then been important to examine what kind of beliefs and conditions different ideologies have, if they are to be challenged. We have therefore identified various ideological positions, which enables us to see how certain ideologies may be more susceptible to opposition than others, as they involve more indirect commitment to the status quo. These positions have been drawn from the work of Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek, where they describe different forms of ideological internalisation, but our approach also considers the contrast between these positions as much as their overall unity of affirmation, and does not assume that certain positions are especially representative of current social circumstances. In particular, the focus on cynicism in Jameson and Žižek's theories suggests that individuals understand social problems but support the system regardless, which indicates that belief in absolutes is no longer a major component of ideology. Against this point, we have argued that

such ideologies still involve fundamental assumptions, and that non-cynical ideologies also retain a significant presence.

These ideological positions can then be arranged in what we have called an ideology map, outlining their various features. The content of this map, as developed through our analyses of Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek, consists of the eight positions defined below, and provides summaries in terms of beliefs, justificatory arguments and awareness of social issues. This individual analysis of ideologies identifies many of the deep assumptions relating to affirmative ideologies in consumer capitalist societies. Most significantly, it also allows us to ascertain which positions are more susceptible to oppositional challenges, what kinds of information or radical ideas may be most effective against particular assumptions, and how oppositional politics might communicate with everyday political thinking. In this sense, some essential aspects of such ideological challenge are already apparent. For example, it appears necessary to revive a notion of progress through mass participation both inside and outside established democratic channels; cultivate narratives that counter demands for excessive labour and excessive consumerism, based on alternative conceptions of individual and social needs; retain a commitment to pluralist participation, or inclusion of the marginalised parts within society, in opposition to cultural fundamentalisms. As we have seen, current social conditions mean that the expansion of such ideas will be a gradual process, but, as Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek all show, taking an oppositional stance that commits to the possibility and necessity of radical change is the first step.

### **Ideology Map**

Throughout the thesis, the process of constructing a theoretical basis for the study of ideology has also involved identifying ideological positions and their content. We have thus outlined certain features that either distinguish affirmative ideologies from one another, or connect them in some way. At this point, we can summarise those preliminary findings to establish a starting point for further research. The idea is that we may analyse various facets of culture to further understand the conscious supports for affirmative ideology that exist today, and the prevalence of particular beliefs and assumptions. To fulfil this proposal, it is useful to have a basic framework of ideological positions already defined, so that we have some concept of the patterns of rationalisation to be examined and challenged. This analysis may be centred on investigations of

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particular themes, such as those mentioned above (attitudes to work, consumerism, democracy), represented in political and media texts, as well as individuals' own accounts, to consider how different rationalisations relate to dominant (late capitalist) social demands.

As previously mentioned, the positions we have developed to this point merely represent a preliminary sketch, and are not meant to represent an exhaustive catalogue of affirmative ideologies. They do, however, cover a wide range of beliefs that include a variety of cynical ideas as well as more direct forms of attachment to aspects of late capitalist society. Also, they are not to be seen as rigid designations that individuals adhere to exclusively, as certain beliefs may overlap into others. For example, concepts of individualism or freedom of choice may be relevant to different positions in different guises, creating links between them. Conversely, other positions are less compatible, and this incompatibility may be considered to highlight that certain beliefs suggest a deeper commitment to existing social relations than others. In this way, we do not view them merely in terms of their higher level unity, or the similar kinds of behaviour they may engender, as Marcuse, Jameson and Žižek often do.

At this stage, we thus end with the following definitions, which should provide the basis to further understand how affirmative ideologies connect and contrast with each other, and the conditions that maintain them:

### **Cultural Fundamentalism**

For cultural fundamentalists, social problems such as unemployment and crime result from the corruption of traditional (religious or nationalist) structures that are considered timeless and unquestionable. This corruption is then blamed on groups at both ends of the social spectrum — permissive liberal elites on one hand, and traditionally oppressed minorities on the other. Cultural fundamentalism implies an awareness of social problems, but little awareness of their economic causes, or that apparently 'universal principles' are contingent and historically variable.

### **Economic Fundamentalism**

Economic fundamentalism describes a commitment to neoliberal capitalism based on belief that market deregulation, reduction of government and entrepreneurialism are the keys to general prosperity. As such, social problems are caused by government interference in market freedom,

which must be resisted at all costs, and individuals contribute to social good through hard work. This ideology maintains a utopian optimism that recognises economic inequalities, but believes they can be overcome by the market and individual effort, and thus fails to recognise connections between market demands and increased poverty.

### **Humanist Liberalism**

This position involves a belief that scientific rationality can shape society in progressive ways if it can resist more irrational forms of thought (such as religious faith). It tends to understand political and economic problems as specific issues that can be countered with reforms to existing structures, by utilising enlightenment values, empirical analysis and advanced technology. Such solutions, therefore, do not consider that contradictions may be more systemic, and do not distance themselves from existing power relations.

### **Pluralist Liberalism**

The pluralist liberal affirms existing social relations on the basis that they are inclusive of different cultural identities, and believes in tolerance. As such, any explicit ideological commitment (at least if it opposes culturally permissive capitalism) appears totalitarian, and effectively *makes itself* an intolerable enemy whose totalising visions are intrinsically oppressive. Politically, the focus of pluralism is on acceptance of different identities within existing social structures, which does not then consider the limits of acceptance due to the class disparities intrinsic to capitalism.

### **Consumerist Hedonism**

Hedonism in its affirmative form is the idea that self-fulfilment results from maximising pleasure. Specifically, this position focuses on a need to live life to the full by seeking enjoyment in terms prescribed by consumer advertising and current fashions, which then ties the hedonist into the labour necessary to afford and maintain the desired lifestyle. More than the other positions, hedonism implies low awareness of social problems and their causes, or the ability to disassociate social degradation from the reproduction of the consumer society.

### **Cynical Self-interest**

This form of cynicism sees that society is heavily flawed and corrupt, but understands that such flaws are inevitable in any system due to human nature. Any kind of political change that might disrupt the cynic's (relatively privileged) social position is thus deemed too risky, and the cynic employs various affirmative economic and cultural arguments to maintain this position. Social relations are then fiercely defended, despite high awareness of problems and entrenched power structures. However, cynics are less aware of how human behaviour is socially structured, or how social improvements can be achieved through collective effort.

### **Cynical Resignation**

Cynical resignation involves a more spiritual perception of social issues that distances itself from political concerns and makes its peace with existing circumstances. It re-contextualises political participation as insignificant in relation to higher universal powers, and is thus concerned with achieving forms of harmony in everyday life. Any awareness of social problems can thus be rationalised away, but in doing so individuals fail to acknowledge their own tacit complicity in social inequality and injustice by refusing to confront it.

### **Cynical Defeatism**

The cynical defeatist is heavily critical of the social system, but either understands that there is no way to resist it or that resistance may be even more destructive. The result is a focus on complaint and mockery, aimed at the establishment, with little commitment to actual political action, and even a tendency to retreat into escapist consumerism (in part to repress guilt). This ideology represents the highest awareness among those we have described of the deep structural contradictions behind social ills, but capitulates in its inability to define weak points in the system, and therefore continues to contribute to it.



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