

Obstacles and Distortions
A Speculative Approach to Ideology

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Abstract

Building on Hegel's speculative philosophy, this paper seeks to critically engage with Ernesto Laclau's highly influential theory of ideology. Three central points of contention are developed. First, while Laclau's view of the ideological distortion as a distortion of a lack is well taken the paper affirms that in order to sustain itself this distortion becomes a paradoxical two, or in Hegelian terms an oppositional unity. In other words, the distortive illusion of fullness (the concealment of basic lack) only becomes operational via a reciprocal supplementary distortive illusion of an external obstacle to that fullness – the illusion of fullness is thus sustained by its opposite. Second, in contrast to Laclau's view of the extra-discursive as a distant imaginary it is argued that the existing capitalist power structure functions effectively as its own extra-discursive in a far more immediate and direct sense in the organization of reality. Third, the real problem of ideology is not simply that (extra-discursive) closure is absent and has to be imposed but rather that the very proximity of closure generates unbearable tensions and antagonisms that need to be externalized and re-staged in more manageable ways. Drawing on a range of examples, the paper aims to synthesize an alternative speculative approach to ideology.

Keywords: Hegel, Laclau, Lyotard, Habermas, Speculative, Ideology, Distortion, Belief, Extra-discursive, Unconscious, Illusion, Populism, Antagonism, Democracy.

According to Étienne Balibar, philosophy has never really recovered from the effects of the notion of ideology and its implicit demand to ground thought in the complex interplay of material finitude.¹ And it is a curious fact that, while reflecting distinct paradigms, both mainstream modern and postmodern thought tend to be broadly unified in their opposition to the notion of ideology. Based on the ongoing development of modernity Jürgen Habermas, for example, sees ideology as steadily dying out in the face of communicative reason. This position is further reflected in the accounts of people like Daniel Bell and Francis Fukuyama who similarly regard ideology as withering (if it has not already withered) on the vine of history. The arch postmodernist Jean-Francois Lyotard, on the other hand, prefers not to speak about ideology at all. Characterized by an increasing atomization of discourses, our

postmodern condition is one in which any attempt to distinguish between ideological and non-ideological discourses becomes simply meaningless; the ideological dissolves in a “post-truth” world dominated by endless differences, *doxa* and pure assertion. The central ambition in ideology to distinguish truth from illusion can only appear as naïve and misguided.

This dual opposition to ideology is more than merely coincidental. Ernesto Laclau points out that both types of paradigm retain an implicit positivity that (tendentially) eradicates the sense of ideological distortion. In Habermas, the idea of undistorted communication relies upon reaching a positive extra-discursive vantage point from which “reality would speak without discursive mediations”.² With Lyotard, on the other hand, the postmodern condition does no more than transfer “the notion of a full positivity from an extra-discursive ground to the plurality of the discursive field”³ – there are *only* incommensurable discourses without distortion. Laclau rejects what he sees as both the essentialist unificationism of Habermas and the essentialist separatism of Lyotard. In a highly innovative contribution to the theory of ideology, Laclau argues that we should not abandon the notion of distortion but rather reformulate it and give it a new kind of centrality. For him, the ideological illusion subsists not in the distortion of anything substantial or extra-discursive but in the very notion of an extra-discursive as such.⁴ Thus what is distorted is not anything pre-given or positive but rather a radical absence or negativity: the concealment of a lack through the superimposition of an image of social fullness/transparency. In paradoxical terms, what ideology distorts is precisely the distortable nature of (discursive) reality as such. Ideological illusion and false consciousness thus reflect the idea of an immediate (non-distorted) reality.

This paper seeks to critically engage with Laclau’s theorization of ideology and to reformulate it along Hegelian lines. Three main points are made. First the very features that Laclau identifies as paradigmatic of ideology are only achievable through dialectical reversal, or what Hegel calls oppositional unity, in which an image of transparency simultaneously depends upon an image of blockage. Second in contrast to Laclau’s view of extra-discursive closure as a distant imaginary or panacean social arrangement it is argued that the extra-discursive functions in a far more immediate sense in the constitution and organization of everyday reality, which

in today's world is capitalist reality. Thus what is false is not so much the extra-discursive viewpoint itself but rather the misperception of its constitutive role. Consequently the ideological does not subsist in the "non-recognition of the infinite play of differences"⁵ but precisely the opposite: the non-recognition of the finite play of differences, the misrecognition of the implicit functioning of the extra-discursive in the shaping and regulation of the discursive terrain, including prevailing ideas about the economic order, democratic control, political autonomy and so on. In practical terms, the extra-discursive is constituted and mediated through unconscious belief and is at its most insidiously powerful when we perceive ourselves to be spontaneous free agents. The question is not whether or not we (directly) believe in the extra-discursive but rather how does the actualized extra-discursive believe in us? how does its practical functioning take possession of our general orientation and what we simply accept as given, immovable, impervious to change and so on. While the extra-discursive viewpoint is certainly illusory (there is no positivity outside the discursive), the real ideological distortion consists in the realization of this viewpoint in concrete terms. In other words, there is a further dialectical twist wherein the ideological reproduces itself through the illusion of the illusion of the extra-discursive (i.e. the misperception that the extra-discursive is merely illusory).

The third point is that in ideology the central problem is not simply that closure is absent and that it has to be imposed but virtually the opposite: closure is unbearably close in terms of the violence required to maintain it in consistent systemic terms. By transposing immanent systemic violence into external threat, ideology seeks to reproduce the existing closure by interposing a manageable distance from it. In this way the image of transparency is conjured as something that is in principle attainable but which is presently denied by a specific obstacle: a spectral Other whose antagonistic presence supposedly explains the inherent problems of a system. Yet these dimensions of externalisation and antagonism are surprisingly absent from Laclau's account of ideology. All three points are summarized in terms of what I am proposing here as a speculative approach to ideology

Hegel's Speculative Approach

Speculative thought is characterized as that which “apprehends the unity of the determinations in their opposition”.^{6 7} Hegel takes as an example the relationship between being and nothing. At one level, being and nothing are fully equivalent. In pure being there is no differentiation or distinction; it is an endless continuum of “indeterminateness and emptiness”.⁸ Pure nothingness similarly lacks all distinction and determination: it is equally empty. Being and nothing thus appear to be the equivalent: two modes of the same void. Yet in order for two things to be equivalent they must also be distinct from each other, and consequently the idea that being and nothing are simply the same internally dissolves – there exists an infinite reflection of the unity/distinction contradiction. In the Aristotelian universe, where it is “not possible to assert and deny the same thing truly at the same time”,⁹ such a contradiction appears as insurmountable and a basic sign of falsity. But in an ingenious move – one that is paradigmatic of his speculative approach – Hegel affirms contradiction itself as its own solution. Contradiction is here re-conceptualized as a living force or “an *unrest* of simultaneous *incompatibles*, a *movement*”¹⁰ as the very basis of reality. Indeed for Hegel the central task is to find a way in which this movement of simultaneous incompatibles at the centre of all existence can become thinkable. In this new context, being and nothing are brought together as an oppositional unity in the ongoing movement of *becoming*. As movement, becoming contains within it both the moment of being over nothingness (a positive determination against general indistinctness) and nothingness over being (the dimension of negativity that undermines every positive determination). Thus what appears as an obstacle (contradiction) now functions as the very dynamic that drives becoming.

The same speculative logic is at play in Hegel's famous assertion that substance is also subject – they form an oppositional unity.¹¹ At first glance, substance and subject appear as opposed: subject as particularistic identity and substance as the universal constituents that make up the actual. But, Hegel argues, a subject can only be a subject in relation to its substance. The subject “God”, for example, is merely a sound whose meaning has to be retroactively constituted through universal (predicative) substance: “love”, “morality”, “infinity” and so on.¹² On the other hand, substance

can never reach a point of completion or resolution and ultimately falls back on the subject: the universals exhaust themselves and affect a return to the basic affirmation “God is God”.¹³ Both substance and subject now appear as (ultimately) the same. Yet for Hegel this unity is also oppositional. This is achieved by re-conceptualizing the subject as the dimension of negative movement *within* substance itself. Subject is precisely the inward unrest, the failure of substance to complete itself. In this sense it functions as both the condition of impossibility and possibility for substance. On the one hand, subject is the movement of self-relating negativity that shows the incomplete/impossible nature of universal substance but, on the other, it is that which shows the nature of substance as a particularistic (historical) phenomenological structure. Rather than a moment or level within substance, subject persists as the structural torsion of substance as such. This is what lies behind Marx’s (Hegelian) view of the modern world as one in which “the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself, for the valorization of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement.”¹⁴ Thus what appears as the universal substance of the world – the basic medium of socio-economic relations as grounded in capital – is in fact a self-referential theatre of shadows where (the subject of) “capital appears as a relationship to itself”:¹⁵ that is, a self-reproducing particularistic power distortion.

Neither substance nor subject possesses an independent status. Thus what appears in Kant as an existential obstacle – the phenomenological distortion of (subjectively experienced) reality that permanently separates us from the noumenal world of universal substance – becomes for Hegel the very key to the in-itself. In speculative terms there exists no external domain of the absolute: the absolute is rather the phenomenological and its failure or, more simply, substance as also subject. Hegel’s philosophy is therefore neither representationalist nor interpretivist. It is not as if things happen objectively, in a realm of actuality, which are *then* represented/interpreted through subjective discourse. When Hegel affirms that appearance is inscribed within essence (as constitutive of the real world), he means that there is nothing external or hidden from us; everything effectively exists on the same plane. The distinction between essence and appearance is interior to appearance as such. Another way of formulating this would be to say that for Hegel ontology is topology.¹⁶ Where Hegel draws an analogy with a “circle that presupposes its end as its goal and has its end for its beginning, and which is actual only through this

accomplishment and its end”, a far better topological rendering of his perspective would be that of the single-sided Möbius torsion ¹⁷ (see fig. a).



fig. a

With the Möbius torsion everything exists on the same plane and consequently the distinction between internal and external is purely a matter of perspective according to location – questions of opposition/unity, depth/surface, distinction/indeterminacy, appearance/essence and so on are entirely intra-dimensional in this sense. Nothing can be identified, or represented, beyond the torsional plane itself. ¹⁸ As a topological continuum it reflects the absence of centre, or substrate, for concrete existence. The substantiality of existence is premised ultimately on an essential restlessness: the movement of self-relating negativity within substance that is subject. ¹⁹

Drawing on Marcus Aurelius’ aphorism, Hegel’s philosophy is unique in that what appears to stand in the way becomes the way: the obstacle is not external but is shown to be an inherent ontological condition of existence as such. In Hegel the obstacle is not anything tangible but is rather the dimension of the negative: the negative not just as a limit to the positive but also as *inner* negativity, something generative of the positive as such: the positive as constituted through the negation of the negation. Negativity – which appears as obstacle – is in fact the primary condition for the emergence of all positive distinction and existence. Here again the positive and the negative may be seen to form an oppositional unity. It is in the context of these two central and overlapping ideas - (i) all existence is based on oppositional unity, and (ii) the obstacle, or limit, is generative of the thing itself – that a speculative reframing of the nature and functioning of ideology is sought.

The Unbearable Proximity of Closure

Laclau affirms the idea of extra-discursive closure as the essence of ideology. False consciousness consists not in the failure to recognize an underlying reality but in the failure to recognize its absence. An ideological form of consciousness is one that embraces positivistic ideas about the world; what is natural, normal, true and so on. In common with Lyotard, Laclau affirms that discourses are neither inherently ideological nor non-ideological. But against Lyotard, he maintains that the ideological moment of a discourse can be nonetheless specified. A discourse achieves ideological status as the result of what he calls incarnation. Laclau gives the example of nationalisation in a “Third World” country. Nationalisation is simply a “technical way of running the economy” (one among others), not an ideology as such. It only becomes an ideology when,

“the particularity of the economic measure starts to incarnate something more and different from itself – for instance, the emancipation from foreign domination, the elimination of capitalist waste, the possibility of social justice for excluded sections of the population, and so on; in short, the possibility of constituting the community as a coherent whole.”²⁰

While all ideologies are discourses not all discourses are ideological. Discourses become ideological through a process of (metaphorical) expansion, a cathectic movement towards incarnating the impossible object of a fully reconciled society:

“This is the ideological effect *strictu sensu*: the belief that there is a particular social arrangement that can bring about the closure and transparency of the community. There is ideology whenever a particular content shows itself as more than itself. Without this dimension of horizon we would have ideas or systems of ideas, but never ideologies”²¹

The distortive operation consists in creating the illusion of transparency: the projection onto a particular social arrangement the (illusion of the) “impossible fullness of community”. Indeed distortion is “constitutive of social objectivity” as such and thereby functions as a basic existential. While distortion is necessary for the purpose of imposing some kind of social closure and consistency, closure is unachievable precisely because it is based on distortion and can never reach a final ground or ideal form. This line of reasoning is in fact very Hegelian in confirming that there is no original substance from which we are alienated. Against standard (messianic) accounts in which humankind needs to recover a lost spiritual unity

and/or ideal state of being, Hegel argues that there was never a unity to begin with. The very sense of an original unity that has been lost is entirely a retroactive illusion, a way of trying to resolve the basic negativity that is (constitutively) inscribed in all existence. For Hegel, what concrete existence shows is ultimately “the negativity of the moments, the return of nothing through nothing back to itself”.^{22 23}

So how might Laclau’s theory of ideology look from a speculative point of view? On the surface, Robert Mugabe’s post-independence Zimbabwe would appear to reflect many of the elements that Laclau identifies in respect of the formation of a nationalist ideology: the promise of emancipation from foreign control, extensive redistribution of wealth/property and a new emphasis on inclusive social justice linked to a comprehensive programme of land reform and nationalisation; in short, the projection of a generalized social holism onto a particular socio-economic arrangement or model of social transparency. Yet it is clear that after almost forty years in power, Mugabe did not achieve anything like social transparency. Why then did Mugabe’s nationalist ideology persist for so long?

The first thing to note is that what Ndlovu-Gatshen identifies as Mugabeism²⁴ was a form of (authoritarian) populism,²⁵ and the mark of all populism is that in its very construction of “the people” it relies simultaneously on an opposing discursive pole of “enemy of the people” to give it consistency and meaning – populism is an exclusivist cut in this sense.²⁶ This is clearly evidenced in the recent history of Zimbabwe. The more Mugabe failed to deliver social harmony the more he gave political emphasis to internal and external threats. The economic frustrations following land reform and indigenisation, for example, were consistently blamed on domestic insurgency and Western conspiracy. At home Mugabe relied increasingly on the mechanisms of a securocratic and highly militarized state to ruthlessly suppress the “malcontents” and political opponents, especially the minority Ndebele people and the MDC who were regularly characterised as anti-Zimbabwean and a force for re-colonization. In this way, by identifying its opposition the state sought to justify its exceptional measures in respect of a general idea of future reconciliation. Yet this was little more than a stage-managed distortion that in reality served to disguise the installation of a neoliberal agenda (the real distortion). Through its economic structural adjustment programme of the 1990s, Zimbabwe fully incorporated the working principles set

down by the IMF and World Bank (in essence, austerity and liberalisation), opening up its economy to global corporate capital. By the end of the 2000s Zimbabwe had abandoned its own currency in favour of the US dollar, and by the 2010s transactions switched from cash to electronic on a vast scale (more than 80%) via Vodafone's M-Pesa network. Through a thematic combination of the national-popular and social threat, Mugabe forged an enabling discourse for structural adjustment in the face of a new economic reality. But there is nothing especially unique about Zimbabwe in this respect; rather it reflects a paradigmatic process in which national economies everywhere are being increasingly integrated into a global capitalism under the auspices of the so-called Washington Consensus.

For Laclau the ideological distortion is concerned to overcome a basic lack by projecting an image of an impossible closure.²⁷ But the real problem is not so much that closure is simply impossible but rather that people tend not to accept that impossibility. This is what ideology feeds on. The seductive power of ideology lies with the way it re-stages the idea of social closure not as lacking but as something *denied*, thwarted by specific obstacles. Ideology is concerned less with an idealized closure (typically no more than a vague image of communion) and far more with providing a credible/acceptable explanation for the failure of the *existing* closure. Far from being idealist/utopian, ideology is fully realist in enabling a system of closure to work in practical terms. Addressing the consequences of actualizing a system of closure (which, of course, can only be *relative* closure), ideology seeks to externalize and reconfigure the constitutive violence and antagonisms of a system in such a way that it becomes manageable. This is what we see under Mugabe: the identification of visible enemies as a way of masking the inherent violence of the structural changes enacted to align the Zimbabwean economy with global capitalism. Diverting attention away from hyperinflation, the sudden withdrawal of food and fuel subsidies and the upsurge of the "IMF riots", official discourse routinely targeted the "colonizers", the "traitors" and the figure of the "white man" ("our real enemy") in its construction of a demagogic nationalism ("Zimbabwe is for Zimbabweans").

This served not only to justify state violence and authoritarian repression but also to enable Mugabe's emerging system of socio-economic power and privilege to reproduce itself and make its economic adjustments in a relatively unimpeded way,

presenting it as something necessary in the form of a naturalized closure. This kind of political logic is a feature of the contemporary world and is widely reflected in the current resurgence of right-wing populism across the globe. Through a steady erosion of welfare-oriented principles in favour of a growing economic liberalisation and predatory forms of private corporatisation, the consequent social disruptions and negativity are being increasingly projected onto images of corrupt elites, immigrants and foreign interlopers in various combinations.

Contrasting with Laclau, it is not that closure is projected into a separate/distant imaginary because it is lacking but virtually the opposite. The central work of ideology is not to cover up for a lost wholeness but to cover up for the fact that there is a certain (incomplete) wholeness already functioning and that there is a social price to be paid for this functioning. The problem of ideology is not closure as such but rather that closure is too proximate.²⁸ In order to avoid coming too close to the existing closure - something that would risk exposing it as a particular (historical) object - a certain distance has to be interposed. By redirecting the (ongoing) constitutive violence of a power system into a set of external antagonisms, ideology is able to regulate a critical distance with that system and thereby ensure its quiet reproduction as its own form of extra-discursive (unquestioned) reality. The problem, in other words, is one of retroactively producing the sense of universal necessity for a system out of its contingent (power) origins. Through the externalisation of obstacles, recycling inherent problems into specific (manipulated) antagonisms, the closure of a system is effectively sustained in *de facto* extra-discursive terms. What we have is closure-in-opposition in which the formulation of the obstacle serves to sustain its necessity.

This can also be discerned in respect of Brexit in which there is no clear sense of an alternative social arrangement as such. The accent falls in a different place. It is the very image of enduring bondage to the “Euro-dictators” of Brussels that sustains Boris Johnson’s idea of a new “Golden Age” in which Britain can achieve national restitution and truly flourish.²⁹ In this sense, ideology precisely does *not* aim at social transparency but quite the opposite: the generation of external obstacles to transparency as the very form in which the existing closure reproduces itself. The ideological distortion cannot deliver social transparency and in order to preserve itself

relies upon the distortion of a recognizable blockage to that transparency - closure is paradoxically realized through not being realized.³⁰ This in turn relies upon a further distortive operation. Rather than being simply counterposed to the political (*qua* the moment of openness), ideology seeks a basic reconfiguration wherein the political generation of acceptable (externalized) antagonisms at the mythic level becomes a way of depoliticizing (inherent) antagonisms at the socio-economic level.³¹ It is through such depoliticization that a working foundation for effective extra-discursive power formation is instituted.

Beyond Belief

In this context, the discursive and the extra-discursive can also be said to form an oppositional unity: they are distinguishable but cannot be separated in absolute terms. In the production of meaning, the discursive is reliant upon a set of rules, grammar and categories (Lacan's master signifiers) that is effectively beyond meaning and which, in an extra-discursive capacity, serves to stabilize the discursive order. The extra-discursive, on the other hand, possesses no independence and exists only in relation to the constitutive limits of the discursive itself. The question consequently is not whether the extra-discursive exists but rather *how* does it emerge in living terms within the discursive? For Laclau the extra-discursive subsists in "the belief that there is a particular social arrangement that can bring about the closure and transparency of the community".³² But this raises an immediate question as to whether there exists any such belief in a utopian social arrangement? In the 1980s Lyotard had already argued that there is now a widespread incredulity toward metanarratives and ideas of a royal road to final human emancipation. From Lyotard's postmodern perspective, Laclau's view of a messianic form of collective belief appears somewhat overdrawn. On the other hand, Lyotard's assumption of a general absence of collective belief appears equally questionable. Everything depends on grasping the strange and indeed speculative nature of belief itself.

In a very Hegelian way, Žižek has shown how belief and non-belief mutually condition each other (the one already implies the other). In its everyday functioning belief is "displaced onto another, onto a 'subject supposed to believe'".³³ Trying to

believe directly is ultimately oppressive and burdensome: e.g. endless praying that never seems to be quite enough – the belief, like closure, is too proximate. In order to relieve oneself of the intensity of direct belief, it again becomes necessary to interpose a critical distance by externalizing belief and projecting it into routinized practices that are (perceived to be) believed by others. By participating in everyday observances, formalities, routines and so on one effectively transfers the demands of belief to the Other: the subject supposed to believe in a full and direct way. Because it cannot be simply affirmed, belief can only achieve a practical symbolic efficiency through being not (directly) believed. In this specific way, belief is gained by surrendering it to the external mediation of rituals so that one can believe indirectly at one remove. In this oblique way belief achieves the potency of acceptance.

Far from being a simple matter of interior spiritual meditation, belief achieves its full operational force through being normalized and conveyed in the everyday practices of socio-cultural interaction (the implicit observation of norms, protocols, etiquette etc.) and, above all, the global practices of economic exchange. Belief is always already split: one can declare a whole range of beliefs but whether one actually believes in those beliefs in a meaningful way is entirely another matter. In psychoanalytic terms, authentic belief may be said to reside at the level of the Freudian unconscious. Far from being a dark inaccessible realm, the unconscious is rather a register of our lived reality and its manifestations. Put in other terms, the unconscious functions as the objective expression of our subjective life and governs how we act and feel in the real world. While conscious life tends to strive for an explicit symbolic efficiency it is nonetheless capable of deception. The unconscious, by contrast, functions in ambiguous terms through homonymy, paronomasia, equivocation and so on but is incapable of deception as such: through a particular set of symptoms it nonetheless registers the truth of the subject.³⁴ In this respect we can trace a direct line between Hegel's idea of the speculative and the Freudian unconscious: i.e. the unconscious as that which registers the obstacles, the moments of denial and repression in conscious life as integral to the oppositional unity of being.³⁵

Unconscious belief possesses the same type of fantasmatic structure identified by Octave Mannoni:³⁶ "I know very well that x is not really true...but nonetheless I behave in the real world as if it were true". This dimension is overlooked in both

Laclau and Lyotard. Thus it is not a question of whether or not we believe in this or that metanarrative (or extra-discursive) but again *how* do we believe. Here a third possibility presents itself: the metanarrative that, mediated through the Other, is perceived to believe *in itself* (“the metanarrative supposed to believe”). This aspect of objectified reflexive belief is key. The real strength of ideological belief lies not so much with explicit conviction regarding a specific metanarrative or model of emancipation but rather with what is quietly assumed in the *everyday* practices and regulation of the existing socio-symbolic system of reality.³⁷ Today the system of reality that is implicitly accepted on a global scale is capitalism. Regardless of subjective position, the human world essentially recognizes and acts in accordance with capitalism as a functioning order; in short, we believe that (via the Other) the capitalist order believes in itself. More than this, reality becomes altered in such a way that what becomes central to its efficiency is how this autopoietic order is perceived to believe in us: i.e. how it recognizes (interpellates) us as debtors, creditors, workers, consumers and so on in the general determination of our social and political agency.³⁸

What appears as non-belief – the “neutral” pragmatics and technicalities of global capitalism – functions precisely as today’s *systemic* metanarrative. There is incredulity towards metanarratives because the capitalist metanarrative is already silently operating, repressing all sense of any real alternative to it. The capitalist metanarrative is distinguished in that it lacks specific content or vision of the world. In Badiou’s terms, capitalism is atonic and lacks a specific “truth”;³⁹ it effectively narrates a multiplicity of “narratives” through its form or “grammar”; indeed it is perhaps more accurate to speak of capitalism as a meta-grammar. Thus one can have all different kinds of capitalism - religious, secular, liberal, authoritarian, democratic and even communist forms of capitalism - as long as the basic principles remain in place.

The capitalist extra-discursive operates in a practical immediate sense such that every “technical way of running the economy” can only take place within the unquestioned terms of the capitalist order. Far from residing in remote imaginaries, the extra-discursive is located in the naturalized system of power relations that already constrains those imaginaries and is accepted implicitly as the foundation of today’s

dominant reality. The very atonal-ness of global capitalism (its perceived necessity) constitutes precisely its own form of closure without any pre-given emancipatory or messianic content. Rather than reflecting an alternative social arrangement, the strength of ideology lies with the idea that there is no alternative: i.e. its affirmation of a *lack*. In this way, ideology derives its efficiency not from a belief in (future) transparency but from its obfuscation of the basic structuring effect of the unconsciously functioning illusion: in today's world, the capitalist structuring of everyday life. Extemporizing on Foucault, we might say that it is not so much explicit knowledge that is the real source of power but rather the implicit acceptance of working illusions that quietly frame our actions and expectations. We all know, for example, that money is essentially a digital abstraction and yet we behave as if it were the authentic substance of value; ⁴⁰ we follow this fiction precisely because at an unconscious level we already accept that the system (via the perceived participation of others) believes in the same fiction. More than merely a viewpoint, the extra-discursive exerts itself as a practical enchantment wherein ideology melts into the background and becomes part of the natural rhythm and flow of existence as such. ⁴¹

The working form of today's capitalist extra-discursive is reflected in an account given by Yanis Varoufakis of his meetings with the Eurogroup when he was finance minister for the Syriza government. Varoufakis revealed that whenever he tried to advance a reasoned economic argument for Greek recovery he was met with silence: "there was no engagement at all. It was not even annoyance, it was as if one had not spoken." ⁴² On the one hand the Eurogroup tended to accept his economic reasoning (openly confirming that "we are on the same page analytically"), but on the other the most powerful Eurogroup members would "look at you in the eye and say 'you're right in what you're saying, but we're going to crunch you anyway'". ⁴³ Again what we see here is the basic structure of fantasy: "We know very well that what you're saying is true...but nonetheless we will continue to act as if we do not know". What Varoufakis came up against was this unconscious persistence of the modern extra-discursive: i.e. a reflex conformity to the perceived need for re-capitalization, the imposition of austerity, the reaffirmation of the absolute right of the banks to mediate the "natural" flows of finance and so on. To try and regulate the financial sphere through mere reason would be to risk the jealous wrath of capital itself.

While the soundness of Varoufakis' position was accepted it was overtaken by a much deeper implicit belief in the need to protect the capitalist system from the knowledge that it is nothing more than a power construction, which if publicly recognized could well dissolve the myth of its self-reproducing capacity. Members of the Eurogroup clearly understood the nature of the threat posed by Varoufakis and their very silence was its own message: "we know very well that the financial system can be modified...but to do so would risk exposing its power and authority". Ideology effectively comes of age in the cynical acceptance of the (extra-discursive) illusion of naturalized economic power. This is what Žižek means by "enlightened false consciousness".⁴⁴ People are aware of the constituted nature of reality (they are aware of the virtual nature of money and so on) but they participate in that reality as if they did not know, regarding it as of little consequence and/or too risky to confront directly.⁴⁵ The misrecognition here is essentially objective, not subjective. Rather than a straightforward belief in the extra-discursive, the ideological operates through an extra-discursivisation (or objectification) of belief: that is, a belief in the idea that the capitalist system believes in itself and that its codes and practices should be fully observed (even in a cynical way); to do otherwise would mean compromising one's place in the framework of reality. Thus what appears as obstructive – postmodern cynicism, irony, incredulity and so on – becomes the very form of objective sincerity. Through objectified misrecognition the capitalist extra-discursive becomes the basic horizon circumscribing the possibilities for change and development within its own terms. And the efficacy of this horizon relies upon not coming too close to it. This was the basic transgression of Varoufakis: he approached too directly the extra-discursive organizing principles of the European financial system, threatening their naturalistic spell.⁴⁶

Externalization and Eternalization Democracy and its Demons

The extra-discursive is not something set apart but becomes operational through the mode of discursivity itself.⁴⁷ This mode is sustained by two basic organising myths: eternalization and externalization.⁴⁸ In authoritarian regimes, eternalization is generated by the idea of the existing regime as an embodiment of popular will (it

exists to “serve the people” as the Chinese Communist Party’s motto has it). Any challenge to that embodiment thus becomes an external threat to the people as such. In Western democracies these two myths tend to be reproduced in a more subtle form. In the first instance, eternalization is conveyed in the idea that democracy already possesses the means by which to overcome its limitations and “radicalize” itself - it is “the last conceptual revolution” as Rorty claims.⁴⁹ This myth is even more entrenched in contemporary radicalism. With regulationism and radical democracy, there is the same basic idea that we already possess the capacity to command, subvert and transform the existing socio-economic system and to resolve its excesses.⁵⁰ Even relatively progressive movements such as Extinction Rebellion tend to focus on addressing their demands *to* the existing structure of power (indeed the very notion of rebellion relies upon the ongoing existence of a given authority). Apart from rather vague ideas about the need for a regenerative culture and more equitable forms of participation, there is no real attempt to formulate a socio-economic alternative as such. Far from presenting any substantial threat, the primary emphasis on sustainability in the mainstream ecology movements is one that tends to feed into a view of capitalism as a (potentially) naturalistic and enduring order – capitalism functions perfectly well as long as it is sustainable.⁵¹

And perhaps here, contra Badiou, we can see a certain ideological tonality beginning to emerge in the increasing attempts to ecologize capitalism. With its motifs of balance and sustainability, the ideological mood music accompanying the growth of eco-capitalism is one that carries within it the implicit message that fundamental socio-economic change is not necessary and that consequently we do not have to undergo any real or painful transformation. It is against this kind of background tonality that the modern extra-discursive exerts its reality. We should also be wary of Extinction Rebellion’s proposal to move “beyond politics” by creating a National or Citizens’ Assembly based on sortition.⁵² The idea is that the vitality of democracy can be restored to itself by informed commonsense via a supplementary chamber.⁵³ Yet what this relies on is precisely an idealized collective subject (“the people supposed to know”) that is somehow capable of resolving issues and achieving the right outcomes, a subject that effectively functions as a screen for fantasmatic projection. The implicit assumption is that there is nothing wrong with democracy as such; it simply requires the right subject to embody it.⁵⁴

This goes to the heart of contemporary democratic thought. Following Claude Lefort, the general view has been that the crucial advance of democracy has been to render visible the empty space at the centre of all social order.⁵⁵ Under democracy the ordering of society is shown to derive from provisional (and impossible) attempts to fully occupy the empty space. Democracy effectively de-divinizes the symbolic immediacy of the sovereign (Hobbes' "mortal God") and opens up the constitution of governance to a plurality of competing forces. But with this de-divination there emerges a new kind of divination of the empty space itself which, as Alenka Zupančič points out, becomes a way of saving the absolute authority of the big Other in the form of the global capitalist order.⁵⁶ In its perceived neutrality, the empty space of democracy is in principle open to a range of political actors but only in a secondary governing role and only on condition they do not disturb the basic infrastructure in any substantial way.⁵⁷ It is a divinized space in the sense that it already holds the place of the big Other wherein every particular (merely empirical) occupant can only be an inadequate approximation and/or reflection of its implicit authority. From this discursive viewpoint power should be exercised frugally and be modest in its ambitions. Contemporary democracy offers ongoing political pluralization but with no real point of purchase on the existing symbolic co-ordinates of the economic order itself - the power dispersion of the former becomes a way of reproducing the concentration of power in the latter. Taking a metaphor from Hegel, what is obscured in today's myth of political control and transformation is the extent to which the "sacred grove" of democracy (as empty place) is in fact already part of the very timber of the construction of capitalism itself. The empty space of democracy and the extra-discursive amplitude of economic power are inverted reflections of each other. In this way the idea of finite democratic occupancy and the delimited nature of political actors goes hand-in-hand with the eternalization of the capitalist order.⁵⁸ In a twisted version of Nietzsche, universal power is retained through a certain will to powerlessness: the (re-) affirmation of a transcendental empty space where every critique can be made and all appears possible but only on condition that the strict delimitations of the existing framework of power are observed.

The paradigmatic separation of politics from economic power is rooted in the bourgeois origins of modern democracy in which political freedom (universal

suffrage) was traded for economic unfreedom (the capitalist regime of production imposed through waged labour). Economic innovation and political reform can progress, but only insofar as this basic configuration of the political economy itself remains in place: i.e. the torsional twist sustaining the appearance of a naturalistic separation of the political and economic spheres in capitalism. A central prohibition against trade unions, for example, is that they should not be “political” or pursue anything beyond a strictly regulated agenda (pay, working conditions etc.). Or if we take political struggles that are seemingly economic in character – e.g. opposition to property development in a particular area – we see that these are typically framed in socio-cultural terms: respect for local traditions and cultural sensitivities, opportunities for local people (jobs, affordability of housing etc.), observation of environmental standards of sustainability and so on. In other words, they take place on the accepted (neutralized) basis of private property ownership and offer no real challenge to this.⁵⁹

The history of democracy has consequently been one of profound contradiction and discordance in which advances in legal equality, human rights and universal welfare have developed alongside extreme social marginalisation, repressive violence and displacement on a vast scale. This is also what lies behind the increasing instability of today’s democracies. As crises reverberate across the globe, the typical response is again externalisation in which various groups (immigrants, Muslims, Mexicans etc.) are projected as the real threats. In contrast to Karl Popper’s view that “in a democracy, we hold the keys to the control of the demons”,⁶⁰ we might say that democracy gives rise to its own kind of demons that are then targeted as a way of reproducing itself (democracy must “be protected against its enemies”, it must “take back control” and so on). Such demons are the result of concerted ideological attempts to conceal the basic antagonistic fault-line running through modern democracy and its constitutive separation of the spheres of politics and socio-economic power. As it becomes more and more difficult to keep these spheres separated, contemporary democracies are symptomatically turning towards populist (and authoritarian) forms of politics in order to obscure the cracks. Far from being an exception, populism is tending to become the norm: a series of projections as a way of attempting to preserve national image and identity within the terms of the capitalist world order.

Conclusions

This paper shares the same starting point as Laclau: distortion is originary and consequently there is no meta-position or independent vantage point from which to proceed to a critique of ideology as such. As a theatre of distortions, ideology is constitutive of social reality and consequently there is no clear or absolute distinction between the two. At the same time, Hegel's perspective allows for a more nuanced appreciation of the functioning of ideology in relation to the speculative role of the obstacle. Thus where Laclau identifies the concealment of an absence as the central ideological distortion, the Hegelian insight would be that this distortion divides into a certain kind of two or oppositional unity. In order to conceal absence, the distortive ideological operation consists not only in the generation of an illusion of fullness but also in the generation of an opposing illusion of a positive external blockage to that fullness. The opposing illusion renders possible the illusion of fullness by regulating a critical distance with it, ensuring that we do not come too close or approach it too directly. Ideology subsists in this speculative economy of distortional movement between the mutually reinforcing illusions of positive fullness and external blockage. In this way ideology strives for a certain eternalization by recasting future possibility and development in its own image.

Yet ideology's distortions serve a thoroughly realist purpose, which in the contemporary world consists in the reproduction of global capitalism on a contextual basis. In order to avoid any direct confrontation with the actualized extra-discursive closure of the capitalist order, ideology recycles its constitutive violence into external threat and thereby grounds its distortions as a functioning reality. At the same time, through its (unconscious) fantasmatic mediation, capitalism develops as an order that believes in itself and achieves precisely the "dimension of horizon" of which Laclau speaks. This horizon relies on a strict separation of the political from the economic such that the latter becomes exclusively the preserve of technocrats and corporate management. In Western societies the neutralized economic sphere corresponds with the empty space of democracy where in principle everything can be subverted except for the separation itself. The naturalization of this separation continues to circumscribe the nature of the political.

Whereas Lenin identified the colonization of territory as the highest stage of hitherto capitalism, we might say that contemporary capitalism advances to a new stage in the colonization of the political imagination. Ideology functions at its optimum not in “the belief that there is a particular social arrangement that can bring about the closure and transparency of the community” but rather in the silent acceptance that there is *no* social arrangement that could deliver such an outcome. This is the real ideological illusion. If for Wilde a map that does not signpost utopia renders it worthless, for ideology this may be considered its highest goal: i.e. the production of a (cognitive) map of the global imaginary in which all traces of a utopian alternative are absent. Today’s dominant ideological (extra-discursive) viewpoint comprises a basic utopianization of the present, a Leibnizian best of all possible worlds. This utopianization reflects Hegel’s notion of *aufhebung*, or preserving through overcoming. Democracy, for example, is reproduced through a whole series of obstacles – ongoing attempts to overcome the exclusion or under-representation of marginalized groups and so on – but only insofar as the central distortion (the independence of capital) is preserved. In this way the self-abasement of democracy (the repeated emphasis on its empirical failings and limitations) serves to sustain the very idea of progress within the terms of the existing power structure.

Because of his tendency to overlook the speculative logic of the obstacle, Laclau’s view of the construction of an alternative notion of “the people” as the main task of radical politics also appears questionable.⁶¹ At one level this is clearly true: populism is the predominant mode of political engagement that radical forces must address and seek alternatives to. Laclau, however, goes further than this. For him populism is co-extensive with the political as such.⁶² In implicit terms, Laclau’s notion of populism can be seen to complete the circle with his other central notion of antagonism - populism becomes effectively a reflection of a basic existential in which social objectivity tries to implement itself through the antagonistic expulsion of negativity. It is the ultimate “ism” in that it is contained within all ideologies as a baseline (Schmittian) opposition between “us” and “them” and thus shows the central logic of antagonistic constitution at work across the political horizon.

There are two central problems here. First, as Žižek points out, in all populism the construction of “the people” relies upon the positivisation of the inherent negativity preventing its full constitution into various figures of antagonism: corrupt elite, social parasite, enemy-of-the-people and so on. Second, and as a direct consequence of this, there would appear to be no possibility of escaping and/or disrupting the ideological form and its paradigmatic externalization of negativity. In Laclau’s schema there can only be repetition of the same kind populist gesture played out in different ways as a kind of spurious infinity. Yet for Hegel the problem of negativity does not condemn us to eternally recycling the us/them (or friend/enemy) distinction. Externalization is not the only way to deal with something that is radically interior. Indeed Hegel’s entire philosophy can be understood as an attempt to overcome such externalization. From a speculative viewpoint, antagonism (in its positivistic sense) should be regarded as a misrecognition of the surplus negativity that is already contained within all existence as its dynamic force.⁶³ Hegel presents an alternative, and opposing, approach in the form of his notion of reconciliation: that is “the recognition that that towards which the negative relating is directed is rather its essence”.⁶⁴ What Hegel aims at here is a reconfiguration of the obstacle of negative excess. Where ideology attempts to externalize negativity and then offer false solutions to it (the eradication of an enemy), reconciliation seeks to show that negative excess is a strictly inherent and constitutive obstacle. In reconciliation the idea of finding a name for, or concrete solution to, this obstacle is the primary illusion.

While there can be no positive critique of ideology (we cannot transcend all distortion to see the world as it really is), what a speculative approach renders possible is a kind of negative critique: that is, a critique of how we apprehend and become reconciled with the negative. In Hegel’s notion of reconciliation what one is reconciled with is not anything positive but precisely the ineradicable negativity that undermines and overflows all attempts at ideality and externalization. Here we might say that the obstacle is shown to be a non-obstacle: the positivized obstacle (*qua* entity to be overcome) is shown as the product of those power systems that seek to sustain themselves ideologically through the externalization of excess. In this strict sense, the true obstacle is ideology itself. Following Hegel, we are not bound by any systematic necessity or political horizon such as populism. In its radical interiorization of

negativity speculative philosophy and, in particular, the notion of reconciliation may be regarded as formally anti-ideological thought.

Notes and references

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- ¹ É. Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, (London: Verso, 1995), 43-44 & 120-21
- ² E. Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 13.
- ³ Laclau, *ibid.*, p. 13.
- ⁴ Laclau, *ibid.*, p. 13.
- ⁵ E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, (London: Verso, 1990), p. 92.
- ⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic Part I* (trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting & H. S. Harris), (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1991), p. 130.
- ⁷ The term speculation already contains both the idea that what is immediately present should be transcended and that subjective content (e.g. wagering on an outcome) should be “realized or translated into objectivity” (Hegel, *ibid.*, p.132).
- ⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (trans. G. Giovanni), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 59.
- ⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (trans. H. Lawson-Tancred), (London: Penguin, 1998), p.247.
- ¹⁰ Hegel, *op. cit.*, Ref. 8, p. 67.
- ¹¹ For an extensive analysis of Hegel’s speculative thought see G. Daly, *Speculation: Politics, Ideology, Event* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2019).
- ¹² G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 12-13.
- ¹³ In a dialectical shift, the particularity of the subject is realized through the universality of substance and the universality of substance is realized through the particularity of subject.
- ¹⁴ K. Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 953.
- ¹⁵ K. Marx, *Capital: Volume 3*, (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 139.
- ¹⁶ This idea was proposed by Mladen Dolar at the European University, St Petersburg (4/12/2018) accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBlOABhRglo>
According to the philosopher Simplicius (of Cilicia), Plato had the following engraved on the door to his Academy: “No one ignorant of geometry can enter here” - cited in C. Rovelli, *Anaximander* (trans. M. L. Rosenberg) (Pennsylvania: Westholme Publishing, 2011), p.72. Hegel’s philosophy may be said to demand something similar in respect of topology.
- ¹⁷ See S. Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 218-19.
- ¹⁸ In this context we might also say that for Hegel teleology is also tautology. That is to say, the end result of a formation shows precisely its beginning: the contingency of a formation gradually resolves into a necessary structure of its elements, and the necessity of its elements shows the contingency of the formation. This is what lies at the root of Hegel’s idea of “absolute knowing”, which has nothing to do with knowing everything. Absolute knowing is the recognition of the absolute (and constitutive) limitation of knowledge as such. In other words, knowledge does not develop ultimately as a progressive continuum but as reflexive knowledge of its *own* cut or paradigm.
- ¹⁹ This applies in literal terms to the world of objects – see for example G. Daly (2014), “The Quantum Infinite”, *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 8:1, 2014, pp.

1-24. Against the object-oriented ontology of Harman *et al*, Hegel presents what might be called an obstacle-oriented ontology. In Hegel the universal condition is one in which every particularity (including every object) exists only through an irresolvable relationship with its opposing obstacle, through self-othering. Object-oriented ontology is thus doubly mistaken from this perspective. First in its primary emphasis on objects it misses the inherent dimension of opposing negativity that renders objects possible; it misses the dimension of subject. Second in its attempt to overcome anthropocentrism it reduces the subject to human subjectivity (the human should not be ontologically privileged because subject is merely another object etc.). Yet for Hegel the subject is not something human as such (human subjectivity is rendered both possible and impossible because of the non-human dimension of the subject, or void, that inheres within it); rather the subject is inscribed in the objective world as the very condition of its possibility. What is human is no more than one reflection of the subject (that which allows for and simultaneously prevents subjectivity). The subject is the essential movement of the negative, the constitutive void of general indeterminateness that traverses *both* objectivity and subjectivity.¹⁹ In other words, the subject reflects a functioning equivocation (becoming/unbecoming) that runs throughout existence in its dynamic incompletable nature.

²⁰ Laclau, *op. cit.*, Ref 2, p. 17.

²¹ Laclau, *ibid.*, p. 17.

²² Hegel, *op. cit.*, Ref. 8, p. 438.

²³ This is also the key to understanding Hegel's de-spiritualized view of spirit. Spirit is not anything divine or mystical but rather a reflection of the different ways of trying to come to terms with essential alienation: not from God or any cosmic originary but from ourselves, our own existence.

²⁴ S. J. Ndlovu-Gatshen, *Mugabeism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

²⁵ Of course, this populism became institutionalised over time and in an everyday sense would have been mainly experienced as a highly restrictive conservatism. But in the same way that Trump's populism has also become embedded in longer-term institutional practices via a discourse of (internal and external) social threat, the "structural adjustments" and extreme security measures of Mugabe's rule were also routinely justified in reference to "enemies of the people".

²⁶ As Slavoj Žižek remarks, in populism "the enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity (even if this entity is spectral) whose annihilation would restore balance and justice" - S. Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation", *Critical Inquiry*, 32, (2006), p. 555.

²⁷ Laclau, *op. cit.*, Ref 2, pp. 15-16.

²⁸ See also G. Daly (1999), 'Ideology and its Paradoxes: Dimensions of Fantasy and Enjoyment', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 4:2, 1999, 219-238.

²⁹ Which in this context means opening the way for new forms of economic deregulation and opportunity for global capital.

³⁰ A further example would be the ideological figure of the "Jew" in Nazi Germany. Far from being an additional feature of Nazi ideology the enmity towards Jews was the very form of its closure, functioning in a performative way as an expression of belonging.

³¹ For an extended analysis of the interplay between political constitution and depoliticization see G. Daly (2009), "Politics of the Political: Psychoanalytic Theory and the Left(s)", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 14:3, 2009, 279-300.

³² Laclau, *op. cit.*, Ref 2, p. 17.

³³ S. Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), p. 353.

³⁴ Even if these symptoms appear as so many misdirections, they are precisely symptomatic of an underlying truth (or truths) in the subject in which fundamental blockages/obstacles show their particular orientation.

³⁵ This is also why the event is such a traumatic intrusion: it reflects a major shift in the unconscious (perhaps an experience of love) that cannot be directly assimilated at the conscious level and which inevitably leads to all kinds of disruptions and behaviour considered “out of character”.

³⁶ Octave Mannoni, 2003. “I Know Well, But All the Same ...”, in Molly Anne Rothenberg & Dennis Foster (eds), *Perversion and the Social Relation*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 68–82.

³⁷ This is why for Žižek ideology should *not* be seen as something dreamlike beyond social reality but rather as structuring of social reality as such – S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (London: Verso, 1989), p.45.

³⁸ This is immediately to invite accusations of a naïve economism and/or what Laclau identifies as an “economization of politics” (E. Laclau (2006), “Why Constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics”, *Critical Inquiry*, 32 (Summer 2006), p. 666). But everything here depends on what is meant by an economization of politics. If economization implies a pre-given saturation of the social space in which the political cannot emerge then clearly this has no purchase. But if such economization is understood as the result of a historical power process in which the central (tendential) outcome has been a depoliticization of the capitalist framework then a rather different (and, I would argue, accurate) picture emerges.

³⁹ A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 420.

⁴⁰ It is in this sense that we are “fetishists in practice, not in theory” (Žižek, *op. cit.*, Ref. 36, p. 31).

⁴¹ This practical enchantment might be said to consist in the illusion of the illusion of the extra-discursive (i.e. the deception that the extra-discursive is merely illusory).

⁴² Y. Varoufakis, “Interview with Varoufakis”, *New Statesman*, 13th July 2015.

⁴³ Varoufakis, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ S. Žižek, *op. cit.*, Ref. 36, p.29.

⁴⁵ In effect, Varoufakis breached a basic taboo. The function of a taboo is essentially to avoid the void at the centre of every system of belief: one should not press beyond certain boundaries/prohibitions lest the system in question collapse like a house of cards.

⁴⁶ Here we might say that Varoufakis suffered a similar curse to that of Ham in the book of Genesis. Failing to avert his eyes from his father’s nakedness, Ham (along with all the Canaanites) was cursed by Noah and cast into subjection. By gazing directly on the nakedness of Noah, he was perceived to have profoundly disturbed the spell of his paternal/spiritual authority.

⁴⁷ The logic of oppositional unity is similarly at play in the relationship between the discursive and the extra-discursive. While the two are clearly distinguishable, the discursive can only function through the extra-discursive (the extra-discursive *qua* constitutive limit enabling discursive coherence). All discourse contains within it an extra-discursive dimension that cannot be named/incorporated but which is essential to it. A national discourse, for example, cannot be explained by adding more

discursive elements to it: a point of exhaustion is reached such that one can only *get* the idea of the national by accepting its tautological loop (“America is America!”). This functioning tautology is the constitutive dimension of the extra-discursive in and through the discursive.

⁴⁸ The myth of eternalization is reflected in Hegel’s critique of a bad or worldly state that is concerned only with maintaining the existing power order as an “infinite finitude”, a repetition of the same basic reality. This is the situation that effectively obtains today where everything appears possible but only under a capitalist sky – the future is implicitly perceived as the future of capitalism. The myth of externalisation, on the other hand, is the primary target of Hegel’s speculative approach. In Hegel’s way of thinking, when we look beneath the surface we effectively find *only* the surface: the surface of relational appearance formed in Möbius torsion. Consequently there is nothing external in externalisation as such; the appearance of the Other and/or obstacle is rather co-generative of the appearance of the thing itself – there is no reality without its obstacles. This provides the very starting point of a possible Hegelian critique of ideology.

⁴⁹ R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 63.

⁵⁰ See also C. Hay & A. Payne, *Civic Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015). The central motto of the book is “ask not what you can do for capitalism, but what capitalism can do for you.” In other words, the entire agenda for change is set firmly within the horizon of capitalism as such.

⁵¹ The institutionalization of the category of sustainability is reflected in the way it has been adopted throughout university discourse. There are now “sustainability degrees” in the areas of engineering, environmental science, architecture, design, technology and above all business. In this way “sustainability” is tending to become a universal (empty) signifier.

⁵² The idea that we should we move beyond politics (as a kind of institutional fix) is one of the three central demands of Extinction Rebellion - <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/demands/>

⁵³ In order not to be misunderstood, I am not suggesting that a citizens’ assembly axiomatically could not play a progressive role in governance, merely that we need to proceed with caution. In addressing the different dimensions of ecological crises (including pandemics), such an assembly could very well become a vehicle for problematizing the division between economic and political power. More widely, by drawing on authoritative expertise and information, it could also serve as an important countermeasure to “post-truth” (and populist) discourse. But there are no guarantees here.

⁵⁴ At the same time we also see an opposing type of idealization of the subject in the form of the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT). The founder of VHEMT, Les Knight, is unequivocal in his view that human beings are “incompatible with the biosphere” (<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/live-long-and-die-out-stephen-jarvis-encounters-the-voluntary-human-extinction-movement-1372200.html>). Instead of the subject-supposed-to-know as a way of optimizing democratic efficiency, we have the implicit construction of the subject-supposed-to-die as a way of optimizing ecological efficiency. Both idealizations function as a fantasmatic screen onto which images of homeostasis can be projected.

There are two further issues. The first concerns the status of incompatibility. Given that humanity, along with every other species, is the product of the biosphere then the idea that we are incompatible with it can only mean that the biosphere is incompatible *with itself* – this is precisely the Hegelian supplement that needs to be added. The second concerns authenticity. Extinction Rebellion openly show their rational egoism in affirming the need to develop a sustainable ecology in order to support the ongoing survival of humanity. Contrastingly the proposal by VHEMT to voluntarily embrace extinction can only appear as fake: they know full well that there is zero chance of this being adopted in any real or meaningful way – it is an empty idealization that effectively relies on nothing really changing. The true objective of VHEMT is rather to enable a paradoxical moral elevation through the debasement of oneself and one's species. As a variant on Peter Singer's perspective, we might say that it embodies a form of (inverted) speciesist *jouissance*.

⁵⁵ C. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Transl: David Macey) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p.225.

⁵⁶ A. Zupančič, *Why Psychoanalysis?*, (Uppsala: NSU Press, 2008), p.55.

⁵⁷ This is by no means to dismiss the advances of democracy, which have been considerable and far-reaching: universal rights, welfare standards, an openness to diversity and so on. The point is rather that all of this has tended to come at the expense of a depoliticization of the economic realm. Moreover, with the rise of increasingly authoritarian forms of capitalism and corporate management, the capacity for political agency is more and more restricted to marginal degrees of economic regulation.

⁵⁸ One of the symptoms of this eternalization, or lack of politicization, of the economic order is the hyper-politicization of a whole range of socio-cultural issues (sexuality, gender, language and so on).

⁵⁹ The depoliticized status of the economic order was also reflected in the financial crisis of 2008/09 when the G20 leaders met to discuss not *whether* the banks should be recapitalized but rather *how much* recapitalization was needed. Contrastingly the current coronavirus virus has undoubtedly opened up the realm of the possible – especially with regard to the sense of state welfare agency and international co-operation – but it remains an open question as to whether this will result in systemic change. While figures such as George Osborne are predicting a return to austerity to address public debt, the influential think tank, The Social Market Foundation, is proposing a “new social contract” for business and society (with a familiar emphasis on social responsibility), which it describes as an essentially “pro-business plan” (<http://www.smf.co.uk/smf-press-release-business-needs-new-social-contract-to-avoid-virus-backlash/>). The reality may well be a combination of these two types of position (perhaps with nationalist overtones) in which, once again, social sacrifice is framed in terms of economic necessity. On the other hand, there is also the more radical potential to push for a thoroughgoing denaturalization of the existing order and to develop new forms of planetary solidarity capable of disrupting and dissolving the necessitarian logics and mythical independence of global capitalist power. This is a very open moment.

⁶⁰ K. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 337.

⁶¹ E. Laclau (2006), “Why Constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics”, *Critical Inquiry*, 32 (Summer 2006), pp. 646-80.

⁶² Laclau argues that populism is in fact “a constant dimension of political action which necessarily arises (in different degrees) in all political discourses” – E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, (London: Verso, 2007), p. 18.

⁶³ In order to avoid any misunderstanding here, the argument is not that we can overcome antagonism through some kind of enlightened or authentic knowledge but quite the opposite: antagonism is rather a meta-category that cannot be reduced to a particular Other or positivized object of knowledge. Against Laclau’s view of antagonism as a relationship in which the presence of an Other-enemy prevents me from being fully myself, we should rather reaffirm Žižek’s critical point that “the negativity of the other which preventing me from achieving my full identity with myself is just an externalization of my own auto-negativity” – S. Žižek in Laclau, *op. cit.*, Ref. 5, pp. 252-253. In other words, precisely within the (existential) field of antagonism a distinction needs to be made between what Žižek terms “pure antagonism” (the Hegelian dimension of self-othering in which all identities are already thwarted by their own negativity) and specific actualized antagonisms into which pure antagonism is projected. This distinction, which tends to get lost in Laclau, is central to an understanding of how ideology functions as a way of attempting to cover up the traumatic persistence of pure antagonism through externalized projections of it into “empirical” antagonisms: antagonisms with proper names. Hegelian reconciliation, on the other hand, can be characterized as anti-ideological in orientation precisely on the grounds that in implicit terms it begins with the radical assertion of pure antagonism. This is what is at stake in Hegel: reconciliation with pure antagonism and a rejection of the type of false solution - the covering over pure antagonism through a projection of negativity into a constructed “enemy” – offered by all ideologies (including populism).

⁶⁴ Hegel, *op. cit.*, Ref. 8, p. 140.