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Productive Resistance, Nihilist Production, and the Fetish of Negation

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ABSTRACT

IF CAPITALISM PROVIDES THE MOST compelling solutions to the problems it causes, how could it be possible to ever undermine capitalism itself? Emerging tendencies within anarchist theory suggest it is possible to overcome the problem of capitalism by material (and metaphysical) 'negations' of the symbolic order. This text analyses whether it is possible to undermine power in secular capitalist modernity by negation. *Bœdan*, an anthology of queer anarcho-nihilist texts, defines the symbolic order as that which constitutes and reproduces the current order, and therefore represses and contains irrational and disruptive tendencies. Queer — by their definition — opposes the drive to (re)productivity, and therefore is associated with their reading of the death drive. *Bœdan* views the death drive as a negation-inducing force because it aligns with the repressed tendency to disrupt the symbolic order — for them, it encompasses the desire to revolt and destroy the world. Although explicitly rejecting postmodernism, these emerging anarchist tendencies implicitly exemplify its logical conclusion: they aim to reject or destroy the primacy of the Hegelian *Idea* by invoking the multiplicity of *being* as that which undermines the *Idea*. This presents a problem: if all attempts at undermining power in secular capitalism end up reproducing it, on which grounds can we know that *being* itself is antithetical to power? What is the project of negation hoping to affirm instead, and what makes this *beyond-of-negation* different from that which is to be destroyed? By bringing together Spinoza's substance-as-*causa-sui*, Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, and Foucault's description of biopower, this analysis

finds that power cannot be undermined negatively — perhaps only positively, by something else of the same nature. Which is to say that the current form of power can only be undermined by accounting for (that is, *including*) what the current structure *excludes*. By examining the parallel between the Kantian *antinomies of reason* and Lacan's *theory of desire*, this analysis finds that what power in secular capitalist modernity excludes is the recognition of the *regulative* role of *Idea* and *Being*. *Idea* overlaps with *Being*, as they both constitute the (non-existent) *transcendental principle* which is both the cause and effect of definite or concrete forms of being or representation. Because the authors of *Bœdan* presume that an unmediated enjoyment can *exist* beyond the symbolic order — in truth, such a 'beyond' can only exist as 'nothingness' (or as 'impossible-real', or as 'ideal') — the world can only become meaningful to them if it appears that power is being undermined (that is, 'negated'). The world can only appear to be in the process of being negated if they themselves become the manifestation of a *negating force*. This means that the world can only be meaningful to them if they sacrifice themselves. Thus, their "force of negation" — the death drive — is the *precondition* for both enjoyment and meaning, not that which destroys the latter.

I. THE CONTEXT

> [T]he global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point. Its 'four riders of the apocalypse' are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself (problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions.[1]

Slavoj Žižek provides an excellent example of where (and how) the power structure which dominates the world (capitalism) is destructive. Since capitalism is a human construct, Žižek blames humans. At one time, it was radical (extreme) to call for any measure to avoid the 'collapse' of this world — suggesting that the world could collapse as a result of human activity mediated by the global market was, to the proponents of modern capitalism, a farce. Over the course of the last decade, this view has slowly shifted; everywhere (in news media, between politicians, amongst innovators in science and industry, *et al.*) the discussion of ecological catastrophe, widespread inequity, and social oppressions are discussed soberly, as problems society *must* solve.[2] An entire market of products, services, and lifestyles, has thus emerged to provide solutions through consumption. During this shift, the criticism of advanced capitalist society is no longer seen as a threat to be dismissed but as the very vehicle of reform.

This new mainstream perspective on the world — and the renewed faith in consumerism it has produced — has transformed the description of crisis so radically that it now "seems easier to imagine the 'end of the world' than a far more modest change in the mode

1 Žižek, Slavoj. 2011. Living in the End Times. Brooklyn, NY: Verso. Print. x.

2 Buzzell, Linda. "New Report: "Global Collapse Appears Likely." The Huffington Post. thehuffingtonpost.com, 11 Jan. 2013. Web. 29 Mar. 2013.

of production, as if liberal capitalism is the 'real' that will somehow survive even under conditions of a global ecological catastrophe."[3] Likewise, under these circumstances, the tendency to dissent — once a *characteristic* of a lifestyle — has itself been relegated to a lifestyle; those who wish to 'save the world' need only appeal to those who embrace this lifestyle to exact their solutions. Social struggles — once dismissed, minimized, and suppressed — now have their own academic departments. Whether or not capitalism is seen as the culprit of these issues is moot, as it remains impossible to see any anesthetic more efficient than capitalism itself.

Politicians and industrialists may have once determined the field of political discourse (while anti-capitalists and anti-statists elaborated alternatives), but now issue-based struggles do — these social struggles insist that substantive change cannot occur until more acute oppressions (racism, ecological degradation, sexism, *et al.*) are first resolved. Thus, the sum of these struggles appear as some ultimate realization of democracy — as if the co-existence of these particular struggles and the collective reform (and repurposing) of government (and capitalism) were always the path to freedom.

Correspondingly, political ideologies no longer seem interested in identifying a singular *cause* of the problems which threaten 'the world', and political discourse has thus become a contest to describe a multiplicity of *solutions*. The description of the *cause* is instead revealed, less explicitly, in the celebration of the diversity of its victims, whose respective forms of oppression intersect to level a generalized accusation at the entire system of capital. If capitalism can be found to provide both the cause of these oppressions *and* the solutions to them, how could it be possible to ever undermine capitalism itself?

As this paradoxical pattern becomes evident to anti-capitalist radicals, a more cynical (and ironic) position emerges — the *anti-social* activist. As critics of the "multiplicity of struggles" analysis, they see those who profess the importance of such struggles as a class of politicians, and their rejection of identity politics has become the site of fierce and unapologetic intervention and critique. In an environment in which it becomes apparent that the very reproduction of the dominant order occurs through a multiplicity of attempts to *change* it,

3 Zizek, Slavoj. 1994. Mapping Ideology. New York, NY: Verso. 1.

the only (anti-)alternative, in their view, is to reject the demand to formulate an alternative altogether. Their aim is instead to completely *undermine* capitalism's power to produce (and exploit) this paradox by 'negating' their subjectivity and the conditions which they suppose produce it — that is, to destroy the world as we know it.

The anti-alternative of rejecting alternatives and instead aiming for the destruction of the world relies on a binary between *representation* and *being*; holding the reproduction of order to pertain to the symbolic (representation) and destruction to the unspeakable body (being), this approach sets out to unleash the irrationality of being itself. Such a dualistic approach to the world becomes problematic; by attempting to 'free themselves' from a repressive form of representation, they imaginarily (and actually) identify with the margins of society — a move which itself is articulated within the symbolic. The question is whether the same can be said for such an anti-alternative approach that is not merely spoken or articulated, but explicitly acted out.

This paper will inspect the cogency and potential of this objective by identifying and examining the premises upon which it depends. By analyzing the changes in metaphysics which occurred during the Reformation, Enlightenment, the emergence of capitalism, and the modern era, this text will demonstrate that it is not possible to undermine a system of power by 'negation'. Analyzing the structure by which we render the world meaningful, Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, and Michel Foucault's theory of biopower will describe the conditions of power in secular capitalist modernity. An analysis of the misunderstanding of the 'conditions of power' contained within the *anti-social* 'negation' objective will demonstrate why such misunderstandings are likely, and how they are produced.

II. THE OBJECTIVE

Though the specific denominations of this tendency toward anti-social and anti-political interventions are numerable (many of the various proponents have produced theoretical manifestos), one emerging coterie of note is queer anarcho-nihilism. Queer anarcho-nihilism seems to have emerged in concert with (perhaps in reaction to) the growing social acceptability of queer-as-such. The journal *Bœdan*, an anthology of queer anarcho-nihilist

texts, argues against previous forms of antagonism for a rejectionist anti-politics in the negative:

> Whether in the form of gay assimilation, identity politics, or 'radical queer' subculture, any contemporary engagement with queerness must reckon with decades of capitalist integration into society and its state. These varying forms are joined together through positive queer identity as a shared content. [...] There is no positive queerness that isn't already a site of society's reproduction. [...] To our horror, queerness becomes the avant-garde of marketplaces and the dynamic life-blood of the advanced postmodern economy. [...] This [...] positivism is not particular to queerness. One can easily point to any number of anarchist projects and expose the ways in which they reproduce the very alienation they aim to overcome. Cooperative business, radical commodities, independent media, social spaces, Food Not Bombs: when positive anarchist projects aren't doing social work to stave off collapse or upheaval, they are developing the innovations [...] that will help to extend capital's reign into the next century. (*Bœdan* 7-8)

Whereas the dominant view tends to see the emancipation of the marginalized as a method to transform power, *Bœdan* insists that *every inclusion* by capitalism simply magnifies its reach. Thus, the structural reproduction of capitalism by traditional market forces is, in effect, indistinguishable from the results of positivist social struggles.

This perspective is valuable, since it implies that social struggles (whatever the particulars) respond to the same dilemma: the inevitable absence of meaningful communication, and the ever-present injunction to produce it. If the authors of *Bœdan* are correct in this analysis, *why* power is misunderstood in these different ways — and the effect of this misunderstanding — should be of concern. However, *Bœdan* simply attempts to move on: "[t]he departure from these forms is the elaboration of queerness in the negative" (*Bœdan* 8). What, precisely, constitutes and differentiates negation? According to *Bœdan:*

> Rather than a progressive project which aims to steadily eradicate an emergent chaos over time, our project [...] bases itself upon the persistent negativity of the death drive. We choose not to establish a place for queers, thereby shifting the structural position of queerness to some other population. (*Bœdan* 15)

By holding the death drive to be a negation-inducing force, *Bœdan* suggests that the death drive inherently negates power. Whether or not this can be said to be true remains to be interrogated later on in this analysis, but *Bœdan's* reading of the death drive (and how it 'negates power') will prove key to identifying their misunderstanding of power's operation. The arguments advanced in *Bœdan* — namely, that their project of undermining power should be taken seriously — cannot be seen as qualitatively different from that which already structures the world until it can be shown as such. Because the death drive holds such a privileged position in their call for undermining power through negation, this analysis must begin by outlining what they mean by it.

How, then, does the queer anarcho-nihilism of *Bœdan* read Jacques Lacan's concept of the death drive[4], and how does this lead to the supposition that the death drive negates power? *Bœdan* defines the death drive as a "constant eruption of disorder from within the symbolic order itself" (*Bœdan* 13). They hold that the symbolic order is that which facilitates and invests our bodies into the marketplace, and therefore, that the "symbolic deployment of queerness by the social order is always an attempt to identify the negativity of the death drive, to lock this chaotic potential up in the confines of this or that subjectivity" (*Bœdan* 14). Thus, *Bœdan* sees no position within the symbolic order from which one could undermine power, and if one *wants* to do such a thing, one must instead identify with something which disrupts order from within: namely, what they understand as the death drive.

Bœdan refers to the Lacanian death drive through Lee Edelman, author of *No Future*. Edelman argues that "politics [...] works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child" (Edelman 3). Insofar as "*queerness* names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children', the side

4 It was Sigmund Freud who coined the term and the concept, but Bœdan draws on Lacan's employment of it.

outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism," the authors of *Bœdan* position themselves as those who are against politic altogether (Edelman 3).

Although Edelman concedes that reproductive futurism is not an exclusively "heterosexual" concern, but something that is reinforced by all who succumb to society's investment in the productive potential of the individual, he calls upon the queer to *identify* as the disruption of society, rather than attempt to reframe or redefine society's view of queerness:

> Rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it. Not in the hope of forging thereby some more perfect social order — such a hope, after all, would only reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism, just as any such order would equally occasion the negativity of the queer — but rather to refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation, which is always affirmation of an order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane. (Edelman 4)

The reason why Edelman proposes that the *negativity* ascribed to *the queer* be affirmed, rather than rejected, is that this negativity indicates the existence of *something else* which demands to be realized. Here, Edelman relies on Lacan's elaboration of the death drive as a consequence (not the precedent) of the symbolic order. Edelman notes that this is indicated in Lacan's *Seminar II*, in which he writes that "the symbolic order is simultaneously non-being and insisting to be, [and] that is what Freud has in mind when he talks about the death instinct as being what is most fundamental — a symbolic order in travail, in the process of coming, insisting on being realized" (Lacan 1991, 326). Even though this passage indicates that the death drive is not necessarily opposed to — but rather partakes in — the continuous production or becoming of the symbolic order, Edelman continues by arguing that "this constant movement toward realization cannot be divorced, however, from a will to undo what is thereby instituted, to begin again ex nihilo" (Edelman 9). Throughout his analysis, Edelman thus associates the affirmation of the death drive with the undoing of the dominant social or symbolic order.

Edelman sees the symbolic order as the process of signifying the world (arranging it structurally by giving it meaning) — a process which also reveals an *unnamable* world; since the signifier, by definition, is something other than that which it signifies, it thereby reveals the existence of something *beyond signification.* It follows that, from this view, the symbolic order harbors the notion of a *lack* in its core; specifically, that which appears to be beyond signification. As Edelman paraphrases, "the death drive marks the excess embedded within the Symbolic through the loss, the Real loss, that the advent of the signifier effects" (Edelman 9). Edelman is arguing that the death drive is the refusal to fully realize (insofar as that word describes our bodies) the symbolic order — here, his point is not that queers ought to *become* the death drive, rather that they *affirm* it by refusing to succumb to a perception of reality which is grounded upon the denial of the death drive's insistence:

> As the death drive dissolves those congealments of identity that permit us to know and survive as ourselves, so the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization as such — on disturbing, therefore, and on queering ourselves and our investment in such organization. For queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one. (Edelman 17)

Both Edelman and *Bœdan* consider a death-drive-identified queer as a *negating force.* Such queerness has no aspirations to reasoned articulation within the symbolic order, but performs a refusal (or disruption) of meaning altogether. Because they see Edelman's project as detached from "any practice of revolt," *Bœdan* suggests "a praxis through which queer theory and queer revolt are fused in an elaboration of active nihilism, of *anti*-politics" (*Bœdan* 18). Such anti-politics is defined as "refusing all political logic: representation, mediation, dialogue with power," and *Bœdan* argues that this "insurrectionary anarchist practice of self-organized attack" is what is lacking in Edelman's account (*Bœdan 19*). *Bœdan* imagines this *queering* of the death drive will constitute a more final return (or production) of the *real* by overcoming the endlessly divisive process of representation:

> An insurrectionary, queer anti-politics functions to interrupt the closed circuitry of emptiness –politics–emptiness. Halting the ceaseless pursuit of a better world for the Child, our project centers itself on immediate fulfillment, joy, conflict, vengeance, conspiracy and pleasure. Rather than politics, we engage in social war. Without demands, we expropriate what we desire. Instead of representation, we rely on autonomous self-organization. We do not protest, we attack. (Bœdan 23)

This negation, by design, contradicts the ordinary, customary, and predictable — here, ultimate freedom can't reside in the realization of demands, and so must be "beyond the boundaries of any image or representation [...] in nothing more than the capacity to advance into emptiness" (Bœdan 16).

The hypothesis that the absolute negation of the symbolic order brings absolute freedom reveals *Bœdan's* implicit demand for freedom, and thereby meaning, for they describe the destruction of the world as something that brings infinite joy. They say that *one need not* submit oneself to the symbolic demands for meaning, for the symbolic structure is repressive. Yet, the rejection of meaning becomes an implicit demand for an alternative meaning — the realization of freedom and "immediate fulfillment, joy, ... and pleasure." This follows from their argument that that which *negates* the structure harbors 'true' and 'unmediated' desire. Thus, they argue that revolting against the symbolic order will bring the realization of the things that are now *lacking*.

At the same time, as already revealed, they argue that the death drive is itself a *product* of the symbolic structure. This reveals a dilemma: how do they suppose the affirmation of desires contradicts said structure? This conflict goes to the core of why *Bœdan's* approach to power functions no differently from those they criticize. For now, the reformulation of this dilemma is as follows: precisely *when* they propose the absolute rejection of meaning — as defined by and within the symbolic structure — they seem to propose an 'alternative meaning', which is the realization of absolute freedom through infinite negation. If, in the course of rejecting meaning, another kind of meaning is produced, to what extent is this (productive) negation *different* from that which it criticizes?

In "Negation and Its Reliabilities: An Empty Subject for Ideology", Robert Pfaller criticizes the privileging of negation (the Freudian sense) in fathoming *meaning* and *truth.* While negation seems to transgress what it negates by inferring the existence of something beyond the utterance, Pfaller argues that negation is an imaginary transgression. The problem of imaginary transgression will clarify how *Bœdan's* analysis, and consequently their aspirations to challenge power, can be appraised.

Bœdan argues that negating the symbolic order amounts to "advancing into emptiness"; there is thus a realization that everything "positive" or "tangible" about us, about any subject, is a product of the symbolic order, which represses our true *being.* Negating a symbolic order (which defines us in "repressive ways") by advancing into nothingness is a problem Žižek has clarified: "[c]apital [has] succeeded in penetrating and dominating the very fantasy-kernel of our being: [that] none of our features is really 'ours'." (Žižek 1993, 10). In elaborating upon this, Žižek draws on the linguistic distinction between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the enunciated (*e.g.* in the utterance of the word "I", the "I" revealed is the subject of the *enunciated*, while that which utters this statement is the subject of the *enunciation*). The process of recognizing oneself as a product of capitalism reveals two distinct selves: the produced self and the self which recognizes such a production. This distinction allows one to recognize that "everything that I positively am, every enunciated content I can point at and say 'that's *me*,' is not 'I'; I am only the void that remains, the empty distance toward every content" (Žižek 1993, 40). And, as Pfaller notes, Lacan held this to demonstrate that "the position where the utterance was enunciated from was never identical with anything contained within this utterance" (Pfaller 226). In recognizing "that one's true subjectivity is situated outside the field of anything I can speak about" (Pfaller 226), Pfaller shows that it is possible to dissociate from every enunciated content. It is precisely this dissociation that allows *Bœdan* to propose that 'truth' exists in the negation of the symbolic order.

Because the enunciated content can be seen as never being identical to the position from which the utterance was enunciated, every utterance *implies* the existence of something beyond what is said. Pfaller paraphrases Lacan by writing: "the subject in his/her speech constantly announces his/her elusive dimension without even wanting or noticing it." According to Lacan, "the subject of the unconscious was [...] to be found in every

discourse on the level of its enunciation" (Pfaller 226-227). This suggests that the subject is able to indicate "that there is something else in him or her than just his/her possibly faked presence of body and contents of mind" (Pfaller 227). By explicitly negating that anything we know about ourselves has anything to do with our *true selves*, *Bœdan* implicitly promises a fuller existence beyond that which can be symbolized.

Regarding the negation of subjectivity and the voidness of a subject, *Bœdan* attempts to describe an authentic subjectivity; insofar as subjectivity is manifested in free-thinking consciousness, rejecting the appearance of the everyday world provides the moment of authentic subjectivity. This is not an unfamiliar trope, and has been amply used in science fiction films of the last few decades.

One science fiction film that exemplifies this question of an authentic subjectivity beyond anything one can articulate is *Blade Runner* (1982) In Žižek's analysis of *Blade Runner*, concerning the growing self-awareness of the film's androids, he theorizes that "precisely the *negation* of the status they want to achieve [namely, being human] seems to provide them with this status" (Žižek 1993, 41, EMPHASIS ADDED). *Bœdan* implies a similar logic regarding the existential dilemma of human subjects who may begin to suspect that they are simply products of capitalism. They might argue, as Žižek does, that "it is only when at the level of the enunciated content, I assume my [status as a product of capitalism], that, at the level of enunciation, I become a truly human subject" (Žižek 1993, 41). In short: so long as they assume they are the void, they can only be a product of capitalism.

By the same token, Žižek argues that the only way to exist outside ideology is to reveal that 'I am in ideology'. Žižek suggests that one may prove one's true subjectivity through the act (or performance) of such implicit negation:

> [We are] pure subjects only insofar as [we] testify that every positive, substantial content, inclusive of the most intimate fantasies, is not [our] own but already implanted. In this precise sense, the subject is by definition nostalgic, a subject of loss. [...] [It is] the eternal gnawing doubt over whether I am truly human [...] which makes me human. (Žižek 1993, 41)

However, we must not immediately assume that that which is indicated through negation is true. Insofar as a negation is also an utterance, the two levels of speech should be considered equal, regardless of the fact that the one involves negation. As Pfaller points out, Freud "made clear that the key feature of negation had to be found [not only in a word like *not*, but] in the split between the two levels of speech" (Pfaller 242 fn 11). For example, Ludwig Wittgenstein observed that the utterance of a thing that should be beyond doubt "immediately signalized the contrary: that there existed some reason for such a doubt, a necessity for such an assurance." Pfaller concludes "in Wittgenstein's understanding, doubting, *as well as affirming certainty*, was an operation between [the] two levels of speech" (Pfaller 242 fn 11, EMPHASIS ADDED). When such an utterance occurs, "the situation that seemed to build the frame of communication [namely, the level of enunciation] is transferred to its explicit content, 'perverted' into a remarkable fact." Thus, "negation signalizes a background different from that which we considered it to be" (Pfaller 228).

This means that, although one must first recognize one's subjectivity under ideology to critique it, such an implicit "negation is not always reliable. On the contrary, there is an ideology that is based precisely on propositions like this; [...] in saying things like 'I am in ideology'." Indeed, this "structure might even be the basic feature of ideology as such" (Pfaller 231). After all, the split between *enunciation* and the *enunciated content* "does not mean that the speaker must have a position outside the limits of his knowledge. [...] This split [...] is not identical with a split between two levels of knowledge" (Pfaller 231).

This split only *pretends* to transgress the knowledge one admits, but the "modesty of the enunciated is not so modest on the level of enunciation; and it is presumptuous, because the position of enunciation to which the enunciated alludes is imaginary" (Pfaller 232). Because the imaginary position of transgression can be used to tell something other than the truth, it is not only whether something is a *negation*, but also whether what this proposition denies is *true*. If a negation reveals a hidden message, the message is not necessarily true. Because the speaker can depict themselves as something beyond the enunciated content and identify with the 'transcendent' position, Pfaller argues, a theory of subjectivity must account for such "cunning negation":

> [E]verything that negation says — even what it says on the level of its enunciation — belongs to its enunciated content. Only the fact that it is a negation remains on the level of enunciation. Everything that can be falsified or verified is part of the constative level of the enunciated — not of the performative level of enunciation, where the question of truth does not play any role. (Pfaller 233)

In response to the privilege attributed to negation, Pfaller argues that "negation represents an absence, but is not the presence of the absent itself. [...] Negation cannot let such a thing appear, and, according to Althusser, such a thing does not exist" (Pfaller 234).

Is the form of negation which *Bœdan* proposes different than the one discussed by Pfaller and Žižek? *Bœdan's* negations are decidedly *material.* That is to say, although *Bœdan* articulates their perspective on negation in writing, their approach to power is to explicitly and materially "destroy what destroys you."[5] Moreover, since the destructive, repressive, and exploitative forces are infinitely interconnected, the consequent destruction must be equally limitless. Surely, those who discuss negation as the methods through which one says 'I am not' cannot use the same framework as others who say, this *building, policeman, politician, etc.* 'is not.' The question is, could such material negations be found to be *just as* imaginary? That is, can the critique leveled at the implicit truth-claims of negations — namely, that a truth implied through negation indicates an absence but not the presence of the absent itself — be leveled at the call for destroying the world by affirming or realizing the death drive? And if that is the case, what is the status of that which is implied in negation?

III. FETISHIZING THE NEGATIVE, FETISHIZING BEING

The problem of the *status* of *being* which is held to be nascent in the affirmation of the death drive, is not much unlike the status of an absolute Idea, despite *Bœdan's* rejection of it. To argue that being itself manifests an anarchic drive is to propose a truth, which, just like the

5 "Dangerous Spaces — Violent Resistance, Self-Defense, and Insurrectional Struggle against Gender." 7. http://zinelibrary.info/files/dangerous.pdf (Accessed 4-18-2013)

positing of an absolute idea, inspires the question of *on what ground* (or, from what perspective) such a truth can be posited. The logic of rejecting the symbolic order is not much unlike the postmodern trust in the multiplicity of truths, or the poststructuralist rejection of an overarching truth. This section will demonstrate that *Bœdan*'s argument parallels the arguments it rejects, because it cannot escape reproducing the logic of the *not-all set*, that is, of positing something as ground for truth that is exterior to the all, which, however, cannot be determined to be either within or without the *all*.

According to Kojin Karatani, the political environment in the United States is characterized by postmodernism as a result of the broad rejection "of the Hegelian *Idee*," that is, the assumption that history is moving progressively towards the realization of absolute freedom (Karatani 185). In postmodern mainstream discourse, the idea of a fixed truth contradicts the commonly accepted values of freedom and flexibility. Consequently, the subversion of dogmas and the disruption of fixed meaning are held as the paths to liberation from (presumably false) idealism. However, the "multiplicity of solutions"-approach relies on a kind of "auto-adjustment mechanism, which Adam Smith referred to as the 'invisible hand'" and which is implies that "*by the grace of God*, the spontaneous will" of the multitude "will result in an order or pre-established harmony" (Karatani xxxvi, 90).

Bœdan rejects postmodernism, and insofar as they set out to destroy the symbolic order altogether, they surely appear to go *further* than postmodernism. However, as will be discusses, the status of that which is implied in absolute rejection, is not much unlike the unknowable existence indicated in postmodernism. Poststructuralism similarly rejects altogether the idea of fixed or absolute truth. Plato described the world as an inferior copy of the transcendent Idea and degraded representations as the mere simulacra of a true idea. Baudrillard and other poststructuralists challenged the Platonic hierarchy by arguing that there is no difference between simulacrum and so-called original. For them, there is no *metalanguage*, no position of absolute truth, for truth itself is "reduced to one of the style effects of the discursive articulation" (Žižek 1989, 153). This is problematic, as the rejection of truth is itself a claim to it, to the extent that the rejection *is* considered true. Žižek clarifies:

> [T]he position from which the deconstructivist can always make sure of the fact that 'there is no meta-language'; that no utterance

> can say precisely what it intended to say; that the process of enunciation always subverts the utterance; is *the position of metalanguage* in its purest, most radical form. (Žižek 1989, 154-155)

Similarly, *Bœdan*'s absolute rejection of sense and the symbolic order, amounts to indicating an absolute saturation of (non-)sense of the body, as that which harbors the uncontainable *being*. In both cases, the argument relies on assuming the position or existence of an exterior. However, Karatani reveals the "exterior" not as something that negates "the man-made," but "as a negative figure at the heart of the man-made" [*sic*] (Karatani 37).

Karatani draws on the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, Jakobson, and Deleuze to argue that human constructs, like language or speech, work because "a higher classificatory meta-level" is presumed (Karatani 39). Therefore, "whenever meaning for the subject of speech, exists, the *form* that distinguishes it is understood to be preexistent, and not vice versa" (Karatani 40, EMPHASIS ADDED). The subject does not *make* this form, but simply enters or makes sense of it. However, neither does anybody else make it. "Structure, therefore, presupposes the *transcendental* ego with which it integrates itself" (Karatani 40).

This transcendental ego corresponds to that which closes an endless system of signifiers — a floating signifier, the position which pre-exists content, or *zero*. In either case,

> This is exactly like the empty space in a puzzle of shifting numbers or letters that allows the pieces to be shifted around into some kind of order. What drives the movement of the game is not the differential system of signifiers, the 1, 2, 3, but the empty lot itself. While a player may think that she or he is relocating numbers, from another point of view it is the empty lot that is floating around and that enables the movement. To put it in the language of Lacan: while each number thinks that it is the subject, it is nothing but an effect of this floating signifier. No matter how radical this reversal may be, it must be noted that the floating signifier, or zero sign, guarantees the structurality of structure and, thus, exists merely as a proxy for God or the transcendental ego. (Karatani 43)

In this light, the assumption that that which is radically antithetical to the symbolic order, and that its realization or affirmation is the most radically free act, must equally be understood as the "empty external" acting through the emotional investment of the queer anarcho-nihilist. Here, the zero sign or floating signifier is similar to Kant's notion of the *thing-in-itself.*

> Kant called that which is constituted by the form of subjectivity 'phenomenon' and that which affects subjectivity, yet cannot be composed by it, the 'thing-in- itself.' The thing-in-itself can be conceptualized, though it cannot be experienced. (Karatani xli)

Immanuel Kant's conception of *Idee* was "an imaginary representation of the 'thing-in-itself'" and thus a *Schein* ("semblance"). (Karatani 185). Kant's thing-in-itself "is neither the *Hinterwelt* nor the true world, but the opposite; he means to criticize such realms by suggesting that they are mere *Schein*" (Karatani xli). For Kant, the *Idee* "was a necessary *Schein* that functions 'regulatively,' though it cannot be proven theoretically and must never be realized 'constitutively.'" (Kant 186) Here, the idea as *regulative* means that it operates as an ideal while never being given in reality, and *constitutive* refers to the understanding that the ideal can be given in reality. Kant's thing-in-itself is never given as such, but functions regulatively and therefore exists in its effects. That is to say, regardless of the impossibility of grounding truth, there are still the effects of truth:

> Metalanguage is not just an Imaginary entity. It is *Real* in the strict Lacanian sense — that is, it is impossible to *occupy* its position. But, Lacan adds, it is even more difficult simply to *avoid* it. One cannot *attain* it, but one also cannot *escape* it. (Žižek 1989, 156)

In his antinomies of reason, Kant demonstrates the regulative nature of the *Idee* by demonstrating that the undecidability of reason (arising from the demand to form a totality) produces a double failure: both *representation* and *being* are the effects of the failure of reason to form a totality (which can be formed only by prohibition). In *Read My Desire*, Joan Copjec

reads Kant's antinomies in conjunction with Lacan's formulas of sexuation. She clarifies that both Kant's antinomies of reason, and Lacan's formulas of sexuation, demonstrate that reason is limited not by its inability to understand the totality of something, but by the very *idea of totality*. For the purpose of the present argument, we must add, that both the the belief in democracy, and the desire to realize being by destroying the world, are regulated by the idea of the world as purposeful.

Before clarifying how Copjec's analysis reveals that *being* and *representation* are on the same level in relation to the idea of a totality, we must summarize Kant's antinomies of reason. According to Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, when trying to grasp something in its totality — something which could never be an object of our experience — reason falls into contradiction with itself. Importantly, Kant observed that "the failure of reason [is] not simple, but founded upon an antinomic impasse through two separate routes; the first [is] mathematical, [and deals with the realm of appearances,] the second dynamical, [and deals with causality]" (Copjec 213).

The mathematical antinomies "are concerned with the addition or division" of the phenomena of the world (Kant 1977, 82 §52c) — for example, whether the world is limited in time and space, or infinite. Kant concludes that either statement is false, given that our idea of the world is made up of the categories of "time and space," which, "as modes or representation" pertain only to appearances and not to things in themselves (Kant 1977, 82 §52c). For, as Kant writes, "space and time, together with the appearances in them, are nothing existing in themselves and outside of my representations" (Kant 1977, 82 §52c). Both statements of the mathematical antinomy are false because they attempt to "impute to a mere appearance, which can exist only on experience, an existence previous to [or beyond] experience" — namely, an existence on the level of the thing-in-itself, which is never given in experience (Kant 1977, 83 §52c). To decide whether the world is infinite or finite is thus impossible, "as the concept of an absolutely existing world of sense is self-contradictory, the solution of the problem concerning its magnitude, whether attempted affirmatively or negatively, is always false" (Kant 1977, 83 §52c).

The dynamic antinomies, on the other hand, are not false, nor do they really constitute an antinomy, because they "represent as contradictory what is compatible". For, whereas

the mathematic antinomies are concerned with extension, the dynamic antinomies are concerned with causality (the relation between cause and effect), proving both that "[t]here are in the world causes through freedom" and that "[t]here is no freedom, but all is nature." (Kant 1977, 80 §51). Kant calls this second class of antinomies "dynamical" because causality describes the relation of something heterogenous, as final causes are of a different order than that which is caused. Here, causality explains the "means of which something is posited through something else quite different from it" (Kant 1977, 84 §53). Hence, "whereas in the first case the opposed assertions were both false, in this case, [...] where they are opposed to one another by mere misunderstanding, they may both be true," which, as Kant eventually shows, they are (Kant 1977, 83).

Kant holds that the "universal law of nature" requires everything we perceive to take place in time, and thus our perceptions must be an effect preceded by a cause (which also must have been determined). (Kant 1977, 84-85). This invariably leads to the same infinite regression that befell Descartes (who invoked God as the ultimate answer). Although still sharing the same concern as Descartes — establishing a ground for human freedom on reason alone — Kant, succeeding Descartes by several years within the process of secularization and Enlightenment, was able to avoid an explicit invocation of God and instead to conclude that "the effect, as well as the cause, would have always existed" — that is, transcended experience (Kant 1977, 84).

> [T]he absolute totality of all possible experience is itself not experience. Yet it is a necessary problem for reason, the mere representation of which requires concepts quite different from the pure concepts of the understanding, whose use is only immanent, i.e. refers to experience so far as it can be given. Whereas the concepts of reason aim at the completeness, i.e. the collective unity, of all possible experience, and thereby go beyond every given experience. Thus they become *transcendent.* (Kant 1977, 70, §40)

Even though Kant himself imagined the realm of freedom — arbitrarily posited on the level of the thing-in-itself and *outside* the realm of experience — as a spontaneous and

independent cause, this *freedom* can only be imagined on this level if it is *prohibited* in the realm of experience. Freedom exists outside the universal law of nature; it is transcendent to it. This implies that totality (the realm of law/causal determinism) is formed by means of an exclusion: freedom; for, in declaring both dynamic antinomies *true*, Kant implicitly brings the world of determinism to a "total" existence, limited only by freedom, which escapes it. This, in the context of his political theory, allowed Kant to argue that both freedom and obedience to the law (legal determinism) can be attributed to the citizen. To make this point, Kant produces an original distinction between private and public — whereby *private* means the realm wherein one can freely debate politics and deliberate alternatives, while *public* means the realm in which one as a professional is bound to the laws and regulations of the state.

Kant thus privileges the dynamic antinomy, demonstrating that the world forms a totality insofar as we conceive freedom as external to the realm of appearance. But this seems incomplete, for the exceptional realm in which freedom could be conceived is not really distinct from the rest of the world. Kordela adds:

> What escapes Kant is the fact that the complete rule of reason derives from both ways in which reason fails, the dynamic and the mathematic — which, at least initially, entails that both antinomies provide us only with a 'regulative principle of reason.' Both antinomies tell us something about experience and appearances (representation), not about Being in itself, as is evident in the fact that when applied to political philosophy, the dynamic antinomy arbitrarily designates a realm of experience (the "scholar" as the freely reasoning subject) as the Being in itself. (Kordela 95–96)

The rule of reason pertains to appearance even when it deals with causality. We must therefore understand both the 'real' world and its appearance or representation to be regulated by the same *idea*, which seems to render the assumption of a 'being beyond language' as imaginary. At the same time, even though freedom as the thing-in-itself is the exception which transcends experience, arbitrarily positing a realm of freedom within immanent

reality *works*, or has *real effects*. In order to understand how these real effects brought about by a prohibition are no less real than the representations themselves, we must look more closely at the undecidable status of the prohibition.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, in his Seminar *xx: Encore*, gives four formulas which explain the sexuation of the subject. In *Read My Desire*, Copjec demonstrates that these formulas overlap with Kant's antinomies; as Copjec explains, Lacan reiterates the psychoanalytic position that "our sexed being [...] is not a biological phenomenon, [...] but 'results from the logical demands of speech.'" (Copjec 213). "[W]ords fail" in two ways, the "male way ... [and] the female way." (Copjec 213). Copjec reproduces Lacan's formula and provides the following translation:

$\exists x\ \overline{\phi x}$ *There is at least one x that is not submitted to the phallic function.*	$\overline{\exists} x\ \overline{\phi x}$ *There is not one x that is not submitted to the phallic function.*
$\forall x\ \phi x$ *All x's are (every x is) submitted to the phallic function.*	$\overline{\forall} x\ \phi x$ *Not all (not every) x is submitted to the phallic function.*

The left side of the formulas correspond to the *male* failure, and the right to the *female*. Copjec argues that these formulas produce a paradox parallel to Kant's antinomies. Regarding the logical symbols, Copjec defines them as follows:

> [T]he symbols ∀ and ∃ are quantifiers, that is, they indicate the quantity of the subject term. ∀, the universal quantifier, is shorthand for words such as *every, all, none*; but it is important to note that proper nouns are also considered universals. ∃ the existential quantifier, stands for words such as *some, one, at least one, certain, most.* The quality of a proposition is determined by the quality of its copula, either affirmative or negative. The affirmative is unmarked, while the negative is marked by a bar placed over the predicate term. (Copjec 214)

In addition to the quantifiers and the qualifiers, Lacan includes the phallic sign *phi* (ϕ), which serves as the function of the formulas, of which the statement are arguments. The formulas of sexuation are not descriptive, that is, they do not classify subjects based on predicates. Rather, the phallic signifier describes a function, and whether "one falls into the class of males or females depends, rather, on where one places oneself as argument in relation to the function" (Copjec 215). The phallic signifier does not affirm or deny some shared characteristic, but, as indicated by Copjec's translation of Lacan's formulas, the phallic signifier produces on each side of the table two conflicting statements, by both affirming and denying the phallic function, thereby ruining "the possibility of any simple affirmation or negation" (Copjec 215).

That which is present in all formulas, x, relates to *jouissance*. Therefore, what the phallic function affirms and denies on both sides, is "an inclusion and exclusion of absolute (non-phallic) *jouissance*" (Copjec 215). *Jouissance* is the French word for enjoyment, but should not be seen as referring to some absolute, unmediated, pre-symbolic pleasure. For Lacan, *jouissance* is rather a kind of pleasure-in-pain that is invariably related to the signifier. *Jouissance* is characterized "by an impasse" since "the signifier is the cause of *jouissance*" while simultaneously being "what brings *jouissance* to a halt." (Lacan 1998, 9, 24).

On the female side of Lacan's formulas, we have the arguments "[t]here is not one $\times$ that is not submitted to the phallic function", and "[n]ot all (not every) $\times$ is submitted to the phallic function" (Copjec 214). Copjec shows that Kant's answer to the mathematical antinomy corresponds with Lacan's formulas for the *Woman*, "who, like the world, does not exist." (Copjec 221) As Copjec argues, via Lacan, this is because, "to posit a 'there exists,' one must also be able to construct it, that is, know how to find where that existence is. (Lacan 1998, 103). In other words, the conclusion of the mathematical antinomy that "the world — the content of all phenomena — is not a whole existing in itself," or that "phenomena are nothing, apart from experience" is not a negation that would cancel all phenomena; it is "rather the affirmation of a negative predicate" (Copjec 223, 224). Kant shows that one can only avoid the antinomies arising from undecidable ideas of the world by affirming "that the world is not a possible object of experience without pronouncing beyond this on the existence [or non-existence] of the world." What makes such a conception impossible is an internal limit of reason, the fact that reason strives for the (impossible) idea of totality (Copjec 204).

The solution to the mathematical antinomy is given in an indefinite judgment; the "Woman is not-all", just as "not-all phenomena are a possible object of experience" (Copjec 224, 221). Copjec regards this as a 'failure of the symbolic', not in constituting reality, but in passing judgment on the existence of Woman.

Kant argues that the contradiction is overcome on the side of the dynamic antinomy, for causality is heterogenous, that is, cause and effect need not be of the same nature (such as fire and the house that it burns). Thus, even if all causes and effects within the realm of appearance are determined, their ultimate cause can be freedom, as something outside appearance (time and space), that is, as the thing-in-itself. It follows that the existence of the world-in-itself, which could not be guaranteed in the mathematical antinomy, is secured on the male side. Existence is similarly guaranteed on the male side of Lacan's formulas of sexuation, by concealing the lack which was apparent on the female side. The lack on the male side is concealed through a "negative judgment regarding what cannot be included in the series" of appearances — being itself (Copjec 230) This negative judgment suggests that in the realm of experience (appearance) "not one x is not submitted to the phallic function." (Copjec 230)

Copjec remarks that "what is involved in the shift from the female to the male side is a subtraction" (Copjec 230). In the mathematical antinomy, Kant argued that both thesis and antithesis "said too much"; they illegitimately posited the world's existence. Copjec clarifies:

> The surplus declarations of existence that caused the conflict on the female side are silenced on the male side because it is precisely existence — or being — that is subtracted from the universe that forms there. This is how one should read Lacan's placing of the existential quantifier as the limit of the all, which is ruled by the universal quantifier. (Copjec 231)

This indicates that the existence which is secured on the side of the dynamic antinomy is merely conceptual. Since *being as such* is excluded, the "universe that forms is thus defined by a certain impotence, since everything can be included therein except being, which is heterogenous to the conceptual world" (Copjec 231). Copjec seems to favor the side of the

mathematical antinomy, insofar as this side is rendered capable of indefinite judgments. At the same time, Copjec herself indicates that both antinomies arise from the same source, namely, reason's internal limit (regulation by the idea of *totality*).

Ultimately, Copjec directs her analysis at constructivist positions such as Judith Butler's, who in critiquing the sexes as stable categories — and in and in her attempts to destabilize sex — argues that "signification is always in process and then concludes from this that there is no stability of sex" (Copjec 206). Butler and others then "link sex to the signifier, to the process of signification," thereby placing the subject below language, as that which is communicated through language. Copjec contests this perspective, but adds as a caveat that the return of "the subject as preexistent or in any way transcendent to the laws of language or the social order" is not her argument. For her, the subject is "at exactly the same level as" language, or, more precisely: "she inhabits it *as limit*" (Copjec 208, 209). In other words, "the subject is an *effect* but not a realization of social discourses," the cause being the "the impossibility of saying everything in language," whereby the subject is the *failure* of language (Copjec 211).

What is equally problematic, however, is to regard "failure as uniform," thereby "collapsing sexual difference into sexual indistinctness" (Copjec 216). As we have seen through Kant, the failure of reason (its antinomic character) occurs in two ways, which is why there are two sexes. Here the question arises as to whether this equation of sex not with representation (reason) but with its failure entails that sex is natural or cultural. The paradox here is, as Karatani writes:

> If we do not consider culture as an a priori given, it can only be deduced from nature. But culture does not emerge from nature. (Karatani 95)

Lévi-Strauss solved this paradox by arguing that a prohibition — the prohibition of incest — gives rise to both culture and nature. On one hand, the prohibition of incest is natural, since it is already presupposed for society (culture) to emerge, but on the other hand, it is cultural, since it is only humans in society that obey it. Therefore, the prohibition of incest cannot be said to belong either to culture or nature, nor is it some kind of combination of the two. Instead, it is the moment when nature and culture are for the first time differentiated, while being also linked.

Žižek compares that which is signified by prohibition to the Real in the Lacanian sense, which (in this case) amounts to *jouissance*. As Žižek indicates, insofar as the prohibition can be said to be the cause of both culture and nature, it is prohibiting something which is impossible, namely human existence in pre-cultural nature.

> The solution to this paradox — why forbid something which is already in itself impossible? — lies in the fact that the impossibility relates to the level of existence (it is impossible; that is, it doesn't exist), while the prohibition relates to the properties it predicates (*jouissance* is forbidden because of its properties). (Žižek 1989 164)

Thus, an anarchic (or simply *other*) existence is implied to exist because of its prohibition. That which does not exist is nevertheless implied to exist because of its prohibition. From this, one can deduce that the prohibition is that which must be internalized for the world to make sense. It is a kind of nonsensical demand which must be adopted as something one always already was or desired. When Copjec theorizes that the subject is on the same level as language — not under, and not above it — constituting its *limit*, one can assume that it is precisely in this sense that she means it. Sex is the effect of both the impossibility of representation (the construct) to form a totality (its failure to do so) and of the *prohibition of this impossibility, which, by dint of prohibiting the impossible, makes it exist.* As Bruce Fink writes:

> What cannot be said in language is not part of its reality; it does not *exist,* strictly speaking. In Lacan's terminology, existence is a product of language: language brings things into existence (makes them part of human reality), things which had no *existence* prior to being ciphered, symbolized, or put into words. (Fink 25)

This reveals that the *being* referred to in language exists on the same level as representation or appearance. The real as *existence,* or as that which "has not yet been symbolized, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization," reveals itself as *lacking* and thereby causing (and producing) (Fink 25). Which is why the real always returns "in the form of a center of

gravity around which the symbolic order is condemned to circle, without ever being able to hit it" (Fink 28).

In short, the Real can be described as the *effect* which precedes its *cause* and can only be understood and given a cause in the symbolic order after the fact. It is something which does not really exist, since it never coincides with its place (insofar as this is designated by the symbolic, retroactively) — at the same time, it is the *only* thing which exists, in the sense that the symbolic always fails to capture it. Žižek writes that many reproach Lacan for failing to account for the objective world, that his philosophical discussion of the world pertains only to the subject, and the subject's relation to the world as mediated through language. Lacan's answer to this, according to Žižek, is to state that not only does the world not exist, but "neither do language and subject exist" (Žižek 1989 72). What exists is the symptom (of the Real) around which the symbolic order is structured.

This reveals that *Bœdan*'s program of affirming a *being* beyond negation is futile. The *being* which is implied to exist beyond the symbolic only exists because it is prohibited. It is that around which the symbolic circulates, and which is presupposed by it, at the same time as *being* does not exist without the symbolic. It is this very indeterminability, this not-all structure of *being* which gives it the appearance of a promise. This promise, however, is on the same level as the Idea: its function is regulative, not constitutive.

The solution, however, is not a "fuller" rejection — one which includes the rejection of being too. A re-evaluation of the project of undermining power demands an analysis of how forms of power that dominate in today's capitalist, secular world manifests the same logic of the *not-all set*.

IV. COMMODITY FETISHISM IN SECULAR MODERNITY

The Rise of the Secular

Understanding the rise of the structure of power which dominates the modern era is critical to defining how power 'might be undermined'. The demise of theocracy and the birth of both secular thought and capitalism is held to have gradually come about some time between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and is regarded as 'an awakening from

dogma', 'of seizing liberation', 'making discoveries', and of colonization and immense expansion. According to one biographical account of René Descartes, the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern period was:

> [A] supremely interesting and remarkable epoch in human history, in which one after another, in a bewildering succession, the shackles which bound the minds and conceptions of men were struck away, and the world, liberated from its thousand year stay in medievalism, passed into the modern time [...]. In the course of little more than a century there followed, namely, the development of printing, the great voyages of Columbus, the explorations and conquests of the Americas, the Protestant Reformation, the achievement of the Copernican theory of the universe, and finally, in a very large measure through Descartes himself, the emancipation of philosophic and scientific thought from the confining bonds of the medieval scholasticism.[6]

While a more nuanced perspective of the Enlightenment period (namely, that these "developments" included immense violence, acculturation, and systematic repression) exists today, the logic of scientific rationalism that emerged during this era is still held by many as the path toward human liberation.

Bœdan rejects the idea of progress, and regards society as a sinister force which produces alienation, abstraction, and *lack*. Their aim is to interrupt the endless reproduction of the social order by means of an equally *endless* or *infinite* social war without demands. They set out to challenge the empty and senseless abstraction of the symbolic order, but the call for "infinite destruction" or "endless social war" does not seem to be any less idealistic and, therefore, any more meaningful for the individual. In order to understand how this call is any different from what it opposes, it is necessary to analyze the notion of infinite progress in relation to forms of thought associated with the Enlightenment and to what extent infinite destruction may or may not depart from them.

6 Langer, R.E. 1937. "René Descartes". *The American Mathematical Monthly*, Vol. 44, No. 8 (Oct., 1937), pp. 495-512

The failure to understand or undermine power directly correlates to misunderstanding the power that emerged in Enlightenment thought and the capitalist mode of production. Neither the emergence of Enlightenment thinking nor the emergence of capitalism are understood as a consequence of the preclusion of God's function in thought; instead, these "new" formations are understood as a maleficent, parasitic imposition on the natural world. Looking closely at those forms of thought precluded since the Protestant Reformation will reveal how capitalism emerged from a form of secular thought that was already implicit within Christianity.

In *Meaning in History*, Karl Löwith argues that secular thought, and especially the idea of history as purposeful, grows out of certain conditions within Hebrew-Christian theology. The Hebrew-Christian worldview differs from Greek or Roman mythologies and genealogies in that, for the latter, "the past is represented as an everlasting foundation," while in the former, "the past is a promise to the future" (Löwith 6). However, because only God himself can reveal the nature of the promise which the future holds, it cannot be inferred or interpreted from the past as its natural consequence.

> Though the future may be predetermined by the will of God,
> it is determined by a personal will and not by natural fatality,
> and man can never foretell it unless God reveals it to him. And,
> since the final fulfillment of Hebrew and Christian destiny lies
> in an eschatological future, the issue of which depends on man's
> faith and will and not on a natural law of pragmatic history, the
> basic feeling in regard to the future becomes one of suspense
> in the face of its theoretical incalculability. (Löwith 9)

One consequence of this suspense, is that there can no longer be any signs of God's grace or forgiveness in worldly life, and God's decree becomes absolutely unknowable. Löwith emphasizes that one must not assume this to be a result of "shortsightedness of our theoretical knowledge" but rather of "the absence of those religious assumptions which made the future transparent for the ancients" (Löwith 10). In other words, secular thought is the form of thought in which the function of the *spiritual* is precluded from thought and life.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber emphasizes that secular forms of thought associated with capitalism emerge from this very absence of certainty of God, that is, from the *lack* of connection between representation and the world, brought to its logical conclusion during the Reformation. If Christianity is characterized by God as a transcendent creator of the world, the Reformation radicalized his transcendence to the point where God's function was completely eliminated from worldly life. This was especially true for Calvinism. Calvin confined the individual's intercourse with his God to one of "deep spiritual isolation," canceling the influence of all ritualistic or earthly paths to salvation, such as sacraments or confessions. There was no way to *influence* God or one's fate, but one's state of grace was proven by action in *ad majorem Dei gloriam* ("to the greater glory of God"), and therefore, "labor in the service of impersonal social usefulness appears to promote the glory of God and hence to be willed by Him" (Weber 181 note 30 & 64). Here, the proof of salvation is justified by a new injunction — live to realize the glory of God in everything! In Weber's words:

> [S]ince Calvin viewed all pure feelings and emotions, no matter how exalted they might seem to be, with suspicion, faith had to be proved by its objective results in order to provide a firm foundation for the *certitudo salutis* ('certainty of salvation'). [...] In practice this means that God helps those who help themselves. Thus the Calvinist [...] himself creates his own salvation, or, as would be more correct, the conviction of it. But this creation cannot, as in Catholicism, consist in a gradual accumulation of individual good works to one's credit, but rather in a systematic self-control which at every moment stands before the inexorable alternative, chosen or damned. (68, 69–70)

Protestant Asceticism added the "psychological sanction of [worldly activity, that is labor,] through the conception of [...] labor as *calling*, as the best, often in the last analysis, the only means of attaining the certainty of grace." (Weber 121) The strict asceticism of Christianity (which imposes "rational conduct on the basis of the idea of the calling") is absolutely

fundamental to the spirit of Capitalism as it persists today, "only without the religious basis," which has since died away (Weber 122, 123).

Weber's analysis elucidates the futility of any criticism leveled at the greed and selfishness capitalism might be supposed to encourage. While capitalism *does* seem to enable (and produce) massive inequalities, domination by capital must be understood as the individual's submission to a new, novel form of power. That is, the very forces which permit one to identify as a 'free and rational' being are exactly the forces to which one must submit.

It is remarkable that *Bœdan* manifests their program in terms of a *call* which is aimed at something equally transcendental and irrational: the destruction of the symbolic order. They argue that any form of activity complicit with dominant forms of power reinforces them. For them, the only approach capable of undermining power is the one they advance. This power is not justified by God's glory, but individual satisfaction. Just like the idea that God's salvation is proven through endless labor and accumulation of value, so is the idea of the destruction of the world ultimately an endless and self-denying project.

Weber describes the new focus on "labor in a calling" as an effect of the need to establish a means to salvation — as the function of God was eliminated from everyday life. We can assume that this effect had far-reaching consequences, and that the radically transformed conditions of knowledge also transformed the relation of the individual to the world.

One such consequence is a new interest in the natural sciences. Weber summarizes the attitude of Protestants toward science in the following analogy: "just as the Christian is known by the fruits of his belief, the knowledge of God and His designs can only be attained through a knowledge of His works" (Weber 215). Puritan, Baptist, and Pietist Christianity demonstrated interest in physics, mathematics, and other natural sciences. In short, the "empiricism of the seventeenth century was the means for asceticism to seek God in nature. It seemed to lead to God, philosophical speculation away from him" (Weber 215).

Similarly, Hans Blumenberg suggests that the degree to which God is seen as indifferent and merciless towards human affairs indicates that nature could no longer be "a matter of indifference to" humans, since every natural event could be regarded as a sign of punishment by God, and because one could no longer rely on prayer as a means to God's mercy. This inspired ceaseless scrutiny and subordination of nature "as the field of his existential

prospects" (Blumenberg 182).

Blumenberg argues similarly regarding the founder of secular philosophy, Descartes, who defined "the character and claims of modern thought" by "making the implications of theological absolutism crucially more explicit and developing them into such an acute threat that a basis for resistance could now only be found in absolute immanence," that is, in the earthly world (Blumenberg 195). Indeed, Descartes set out to eliminate all preconceived ideas and dogmas, by exposing himself to a method of radical doubt, whereby he claimed to reject anything of which he previously thought he was certain, including God. Descartes invoked a *malicious spirit* (that which might deceive him into thinking he existed) to demonstrate that even his own existence could not escape his radical doubt. In realizing that doubting is itself a form of thinking, Descartes established that he could be certain that he was a thinking thing. From this follows Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am").

However, Descartes could not declare certainty of anything without invoking the idea of an all-powerful benevolent and non-deceptive God as the guarantor of certainty. Because *good* is greater than *evil*, Descartes was certain that God was benevolent, and had no intentions of deceiving him. It is only with the presupposition of this God that Descartes could be certain of his ideas — and this basis for knowledge became the support for the scientific study of nature.

Blumenberg notes that in radical doubt, Descartes divorces himself from the troubling conditions of thought that the end of the Reformation revealed. Descartes needed a new, unconditional guarantee of knowledge:

> [T]his is the level of doubt that follows from the idea of the *genius malignus*, that all-powerful cunning world spirit who is intent on misleading Man by appealing to his constitutional credulity — an appeal against which man can at least oppose the one effort inherent in his freedom: his ability to withhold judgment. (Blumenberg 183)

By hypothesizing the *malicious spirit*, Descartes revealed that the ability to *decide* not to be deceived was inherent to freedom of thought. Descartes posed conditions of "artificial difficulty," and decided to posit God in this way. After all, the "hidden God" of the time was not

seen as evil or deceptive, "he is only the God who does not enable man to be certain that he is not." (Blumenberg 184). Through this experiment, Descartes is able to claim the absolute beginning of the independence of the freely-thinking autonomous consciousness from the middle ages:

> By transforming the theological absolutism of omnipotence into the philosophical hypothesis of the deceptive world spirit, Descartes denies the historical situation to which his initial undertaking is bound and turns it into the methodical freedom of arbitrarily chosen conditions. (Blumenberg 184)

Descartes concealed the elimination of God's function (to soothe existential worries) by presenting his exploration as *voluntary*. That Descartes had to invoke the existence of God simply to be certain of anything beyond the fact that he was a thinking thing should indicate that the establishment of an independent ground for thought which exists apart from thought itself is far from voluntary. This rendered the function of God unnecessary for thought — after all, the idea of a benevolent God was invoked to rid Descartes of a malevolent God. Descartes thus draws the "medieval concept of reality all the way to its absurd consequences and thus made it ripe for destruction" (Blumenberg 187). The path toward secular scientific knowledge was paved.

It appears that *Bœdan* remains within this *Cartesian* logic; they posit the symbolic order as deceptive, that one can exist outside falsity if one decides 'not to be deceived,' and that the individual's understanding of their own body is 'truer' than any ideology presented to them.

Secular thought is also trapped by a dualistic, Cartesian framework because it understands consciousness as independent of (and above) the 'natural world'. In itself, this observation does not connect Descartes exercise to form of power which emerged in capitalism — for that, it is essential to examine how (like *Bœdan*) Descartes failed to understand what his own methodology implied, and his certainty *depended upon* his ignorance of those implications.

With respect to the Western canon, Descartes founded the modern scientific subject through his *cogito*; however, the fact that he is ultimately forced to invoke an omnipotent and benevolent God (who guarantees certainty) has invited much critique. As Kojin Karatani argues:

> Descartes had no choice but to resort to God as guarantor of certainty. The attempt to prove the existence of God by starting from the cogito, however, is itself a para doxa — nothing more than circular reasoning. It is what Kierkegaard would call a 'leap.' (Karatani 150)

Doubt of God's existence is what informs Descartes' analysis to begin with: because he invokes the existence of God after failing to establish certainty, his reasoning is circular. However, this *leap* in Descartes does not undermine the significance of his philosophy; rather, it demonstrates that the thinking subject, in order to appear as an autonomous consciousness, has to posit its own ground as distinct from itself — and this at the same moment that it does not want to invoke any transcendental function, such as God. Spinoza, a major critic of Descartes, acknowledges the circularity in Descartes' reformulation of the *cogito* as *ego sum cogitans* ("I am thinking"). By positing both thinking and being simultaneously, Spinoza's thinking *I* thus marks the true advent of secular thought. Kiarina Kordela explains:

> The real break, which Descartes failed to procure, came, therefore, with Spinoza's revolutionary reconceptualization of causality, which intrepidly legitimized Descartes' tautological or circular logic as the sole possible cognitive mode of secular thought. (Kordela 30)

For, once thought becomes secular — i.e., transcendence is eliminated — truth is no longer something knowledge reveals (or, reaches) as something external to thought, but rather it becomes both the *cause* and *effect* of thought. Likewise, the process of knowledge will reveal something which was already the cause of it. Spinoza's understanding of knowledge reveals a *break* that affects, in parallel, both the way thought operates and the way the world works. Spinoza describes that the *world itself* functions differently as a consequence of this break in

knowledge by demonstrating that, because knowledge of God attaches itself to the natural world, God and Nature are indistinguishable.

In *Ethics*, Spinoza defines an Aristotelian substance as "independent and primary existence", that which "could exist by itself" (Feldman 22). As the editor of the *Ethics* Seymour Feldman notes, "Descartes applied this notion of primary and independent existence to God and claimed that God alone was the only entity that was really independent of everything else" (Feldman 22–23). While Spinoza accepts, as a basic premise, the existence of something which exists 'in and by itself,' he also demonstrates that, when taken to its logical conclusion, such a premise generates a very *different* description of the world than what Descartes was able to reveal.

Spinoza posits that "there is only one substance", and that it is "self-caused" (Spinoza, 40, 31, 42; *Ethics*, part I, prop. 14, corollary 1; def. 1; prop. 15, scholium) because everything that exists must be either self-caused or caused by another thing. Being self-caused, this substance must then be, in part, the cause of all other things. Thus, the intellect that conceives of anything must do so *through* this one substance. Substance manifests itself not *as such,* but rather in its attributes, through everything the intellect has conceived. This one and only substance is "necessarily infinite", because a substance can only be "limited by another substance of the same nature" (Spinoza 39, 34; *Ethics* part I, prop. 14, prop. 8). Spinoza calls this substance God, and holds that everything that exists "is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God" (Spinoza, 40; *Ethics* part I, prop. 15); consequently, "nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from necessity of the divine nature determined to exist and act in a definite way" (Spinoza 51; *Ethics* part I, prop. 29).

If "nothing can be nor be conceived without" God, it follows that God knows no 'final ends', but everything already exists with the same perfection as him. Spinoza thus rejects all anthropomorphic conceptions of God. For him, to embrace the idea of God's infinity and perfection amounts to the understanding that God *is* the created world — "God or Nature" (Spinoza 153; *Ethics* part IV, Preface).

Spinoza identified what he considered to be misbelief, that "all things in Nature" act "with an end in view," and that "God himself directs everything to a fixed end" and "has made everything for man's sake." (Spinoza 57; *Ethics* part I, Appendix). He explains that this contradicts the belief in a perfect, all-powerful God; for "if the things produced directly by

God were brought about to enable him to attain an end, then of necessity the last things for the sake of which the earlier things were brought about would excel all others." This implies that God would "be seeking something that he lacks." (Spinoza 59; *Ethics* part I, Appendix). This is why there can be no contingency in God, or why God's omnipotence must be regarded as "from eternity [...] actual" (Spinoza 45; EIP17 scholium). Spinoza rejects "the traditional idea of God as the creative, transcendent cause of the world" and conceives the world as completely indifferent towards human happiness or suffering (Spinoza 25). There can be no final causes, because everything that follows from the necessity of God's nature is always already actual — God cannot have a *will* because expectation of a future existence is inconceivable from the perspective of God's eternal perfection.

Spinoza's theory of substance poses real challenges to the classical notion of an absolute distinction between cause and effect. If substance is self-caused, it follows that substance can only bring itself into existence if it exists *before* it brings itself into existence, in other words, the effects of such a substance must be its own cause, or, the substance as cause must be the effect of its own effects. This is why "God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things" (Spinoza 46; *Ethics* part I, prop. 18).

Spinoza's proof of the impossibility of will (and thereby a *telos*) for God and nature would seem to support scientific rationalism. In fact, Spinoza assumed that an "absolute, transparent, 'scientific' knowledge without imaginary distortion" was possible (Kordela 5). However, the fact that he regards any idea of final cause as a fiction means that the "only possible truth about the cause, end, or meaning of life is, therefore fictional — which is one of the fundamental psychoanalytic premises." (Kordela 6). This suggests that, insofar as finding a cause or meaning for things is irresistible to humans, fiction is a precondition for truth.

Although Spinoza was the first to argue that "truth is the standard both of itself and the false", Kordela notes that he remained partly ignorant of this fundamental principle of his own philosophy (Kordela 9, Spinoza *Ethics* part II, prop. 43, scholium 1). To demonstrate that this approach is, in fact, the consistent interpretation of Spinoza, Kordela turns to Spinoza's reading of the story of God commanding Adam not to eat from the tree of knowledge, which Spinoza cites as an example of his distinction between moral (fictional) and scientific (true) causes. In doing so, she draws on Gilles Deleuze's commentary on the same

passage in Spinoza, which describes a rejection of fictional moralism in favor of true scientific understanding. In Deleuze's words: "because Adam is ignorant of causes he thinks that God morally forbids him something, whereas God only reveals the natural consequences of ingesting the fruit" (Kordela, 8; Deleuze 1988, 22). Kordela reads it differently: "[t]his distinction [...] remains untenable as far as Adam's subsequent action is concerned." (Kordela 8). This is because God's explanation to Adam is simply that it will kill him:

> Nothing in this statement indicates whether Adam should prefer to live rather than die, and this preference in itself presupposes an end (to live) as better than another end (to die). For the decision to eat or not from the tree, even if one hears the commandment not as a moral but as a scientific truth, presupposes a choice of a *telos* — a knowledge of what is good for oneself — which, in turn, as Spinoza rightly argues, presupposes a fiction. But without such a fiction, one cannot decide whether to eat or not to eat the fruit. (Kordela 8)

Unless we want to accept that human self-preservation is somehow intrinsic to human nature, which would render suicide (risking one's life for a cause or for saving another life, and so on) pathological, the scientific truth that eating something will kill you cannot be translated into an index of what one should do, without taking recourse to fiction.

If one wants to remove fiction, then one has to reason in the following way. Given that everything that exists is in God and is conceived through God, and, hence, "embodies the attributes of the one substance (God) in the same degree of perfection as it," and given that God or nature radically lacks a will or *telos*, then all beings, too, should "be marked not only by the tendency to increase their power and fulfill their self-interests but also the impulse to undermine this tendency" and even be self-destructive (Kordela 10).

The question of the 'ultimate cause', then, produces retroactively its own *arbitrary* answer whereby the relation between *cause* and *effect* is immanent, and determines both what seems to be 'objective reality' and our thoughts. This indicates that the 'zero function' of the previous section — the 'place which precedes its content' — is both immanent, insofar

as it is posited by the subject as something *external* to herself, and transcendent, insofar as this something — like God — is posited as an eternal existence, and thus beyond time and space. And yet, this transcendent cause-effect is produced by the subject, and is thus that effect which *retroactively* determines or causes everything, insofar as it is the lack of ground (the effect whose cause is *unknown*) which solicits (and thus causes) the positing of a cause.

As revealed with Descartes, secular thought posits the individual as *free* and reason as *autonomous*, for only under those conditions can the arbitrary ground appear as independent and thus as *real*. However, as Spinoza theory of substance reveals, this freedom amounts to *realizing* the substance. In order to understand how the structure which Spinoza reveals demonstrates the form of power which dominates in secular capitalist modernity, and why *Bœdan* can be seen to reproduce that power, we must turn to Marx analysis of capital, and his theory of commodity fetishism.

From Secular Thought to Capitalism

Marx begins his analysis of the capitalist mode of production by parsing the peculiarities of its most basic element, the commodity (sign), in its most elementary form: the simple form of value. Since a commodity is any object of utility which can be exchanged for other commodities, Marx argues that, just like Saussure's sign, the commodity "has a dual nature" (Marx 1990 138); it is a bearer of both use-value (a signified) and exchange-value (a signifier). Goods are produced as commodities, whose main purpose is be exchanged (not used directly). In this sense, "the development of the commodity-form coincides with the development of the value-form" (Marx 1990 154). As Saussure observed: value arises from the combination of things that are simultaneously dissimilar and similar. In Marx's analysis, the value of a commodity is expressed by equating it to another object that is at once *dissimilar* (e.g., coffee and linen) and *similar* to the first. Two different commodities can only be similar if they both express a third thing, namely, being products of human labor. Although this labor is not observable in the object in some objective sense, the commodities manifest "the same phantom-like objectivity," that is, "congealed quantities of homogeneous human labor" (Marx 1990, 128). In other words, the fact that two commodities are comparable and exchangeable owes to the fact that the unit through which commodities are compared and

exchanged is labor-time. As values, therefore, the substance of commodities is abstract human labor, which is measured in time.

While the commodity is split, being both use-value and exchange-value, this internal opposition is "represented on the surface by an external opposition" in the process of exchange (Marx 1990, 153). This external opposition necessarily crystallizes into the money form, in which one commodity "acquires the form of universal equivalent, because all other commodities make it the material embodiment of their uniform and universal form of value" (Marx 1990, 160). The money form 'necessarily' arises, because commodities are produced for exchange, thus for having their potential value activated or realized. But as long as the commodity has to give itself the form of value through particular exchanges, its value is never complete, for its relation will be different within each exchange. A "commodity can only acquire a general expression of its value if, at the same time, all other commodities express their values in the same equivalent", that is, through a universal equivalent, which represents socially homogenous human labor. In other words, although each commodity is both exchange-value and use-value, because their value is entirely relative to everything else, "the need to give an external expression to this opposition for the purposes of commercial intercourse produces the drive towards an independent form of value, which finds neither rest nor peace until an independent form has been achieved by the differentiation of commodities into commodities and money" (Marx 1990, 181).

Classical economists treat money as a transcendental center which renders the economy an equilibrated system, but Marx demonstrates how this conception is impossible — there is no intrinsic ground for exchange, as the value of one thing is determined by others, just as in Saussure's description of language. It follows then that money exists as such because all other commodities seek to express their value in it — to use money as a universal exchange-value. Likewise, money must seek its value in commodities *while being a commodity itself.*

The money form is peculiar in that it is itself a commodity whose value is expressed in relation to other commodities. And yet it is different, for although the commodity exits the market when consumed, the process of circulation doesn't end after the use-value has changed hands. When "one commodity replaces another, the money commodity always

sticks to the hands of some third person" — "circulation" therefore "sweats money from every pore" (Marx 1990, 208). Thus, even though the "movement of commodities is [...] a circuit [...], the form of this movement excludes money from the circuit. The result of the movement is not the return of money, but its continued removal further and further away from its starting point" (Marx 1990, 210). Therefore, the circulation of money, in contrast to that of commodities, "is a constant and monotonous repetition of the same process" (Marx 1990, 210–211).

> Hence, although the movement of money is merely the expression of the circulation of commodities, the situation appears to be the reverse of this, namely the circulation of commodities seems to be the result of the movement of money. (Marx 1990, 211-212)

That Marx begins with the simple form of exchange shows that the commodities are being equated not in their aspect of being use-values, but as collections of congealed labor-time. That is to say, the exchange of commodities is the medium through which the labor of the producers is equated. In this sense, a part of the laborer enters into the process of exchanges in the form of alienated labor-power and congeals with the commodity. Here, money (whose value is determined by labor power) emerges as the transcendental equivalent; money is thus the manifestation of the arbitrary establishment of a ground posited by the producers of labor as something *external to themselves*.

Although money can be understood merely as the representation of the circulation of commodities, the appearance of its control over every aspect of society does not go away. "To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labors appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things" (Marx 1990 165-166). Similarly, as Étienne Balibar adds, the constant variations in the exchange-value of a commodity do not dissipate "the appearance of an intrinsic relation between the commodity and its value, they in fact confer on it an added objectivity: individuals go to the marketplace of their own free will, but it is not as a result of their decisions that the

values (or prices) of commodities on the market fluctuate. It is, rather, the fluctuation of values which determines the conditions in which individuals have access to commodities" (Balibar 58).

Marx shows that capitalism appears at once *natural* and religiously *supernatural.* "The determination of the magnitude of value by labor-time is therefore a secret hidden under the apparent movements in the relative values of commodities" (Marx 1990, 168). In other words, as Marx continues, "[t]he whole mystery of the form of value lies hidden in" the simple form of the commodity — the value of money only arises (or, is only *activated*) in exchange, when compared as objects of homogenous human labor.

In the exchange of commodities (objects of human labor) the owners — or producers — compare their labors as equals "without being aware of it"; they do not recognize that this value is a social relation or that the movement of capital is determined by a perspective which regards the commodity in this way. Even though "the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's [sic] social product as it is their language", the movement of capital remains mysterious — because they don't recognize the nature of the commodity, they therefore do not regard exchange as reflecting social relations (Marx 1990 166-167). Even if we know that the determination of value is based on social relations, the historical character of the commodity vanishes in the appearance of its value as natural and objective. Recall Saussure's description of the signifier: even though the sign is arbitrary, changing over time, it does not eliminate its use and social validity. It is as if these merely social norms carry objective reality.

For Marx, this skewed perception defines the way the movement of money controls us — he calls this *commodity fetishism.* Marx defines this as "the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 1990, 165). The common reaction to such a revelation might be to argue that the solution lies in enlightening the people, to "show that the phenomenon — exchange value considered as a property of objects, the autonomous movement of commodities and prices — is an appearance and therefore a 'misunderstanding" (Balibar 60). Such a 'scientific' approach misses that "fetishism is not a subjective phenomenon or a false perception of reality, as an optical illusion or a superstitious belief would be. It constitutes

rather the way in which reality ... cannot but appear" (Balibar 60). The 'religious' approach — to view the circulation "as the effect of a supernatural power of money", as Marx himself indicated — is equally true.

According to Balibar, one should not choose between the two, rather, one should see the "two conceptions as symmetrical and interdependent." (Balibar 59). Marx recognized the simultaneity of these two perceptions of "commodities [as] sensuous things, which are at the same time supra-sensible or social." (Marx 1990 165).

Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, as clarified by Balibar, poses again the question of objectivity insofar as it avoids describing the constitution of the objective world as separate from what constitutes the social. For Marx, the constitution of the world is original, for

> it does not arise out of the activity of any subject, or at least not of any subject which can be conceived in terms of a model of consciousness. On the other hand, it does constitute subjects or forms of subjectivity and consciousness in the very field of objectivity. (Balibar 66).

Whereas classical notions cast subjectivity and consciousness as transcendent to the world by viewing the subject as a free, autonomous agent, Marx explains that the human is as equally subjected to the process of circulation as any commodity. This notion of value effaces classical distinctions between subject and object, material and immaterial, true and false, reality and imaginary, etc. — instead, always regarding either as equally valid positions in relation to value.

The parallels to the constitution of substance are already indicated by Spinoza, who conceives of everything as either attributes or modes of one infinite and self-caused substance. It is possible to read Marx's description of value as just such an immanent, self-caused substance. Substance never manifests itself as such, but instead as infinite attributes or as definite modes. Value as such, for Marx, never manifests as absolute surplus-value, but always as either definite expression of (infinite) exchange-value or a definite use-value:

> Momentarily, indeed, the value originally advanced, the £100, is distinguishable from the surplus value of £10, added to it during

> circulation; but the distinction vanishes immediately. At the end of the process, we do not receive on one hand the original £100, and on the other surplus-value of £10. What emerges is rather a value of £110, which is in exactly the same form, appropriate for commencing the valorization process, as the original £100. At the end of the movement, money emerges once again as its starting-point. Therefore the final result of each separate cycle, in which a purchase and consequent sale are completed, forms of itself the starting-point for a new cycle. [...] the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself, for the valorization of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The movement of capital is therefore limitless. (Marx 1998, 252–253)

Surplus-value does not actually exist anywhere, yet it appears to be the subject of this whole process. The peculiarity of capitalism, as observed by Marx, is that it presents an imaginary structure which simultaneously carries objective reality. In truth, as Marx's analysis of capital explains, our perception of objective reality arose from the misunderstanding of our social relations — a misunderstanding which, nevertheless, is necessary.

It is important to recognize the role the "empty square" or "zero function" plays in the seemingly endless expansion of capital. As Weber's analysis shows, submission to labor as a calling is motivated by the individualization of the transcendental, i.e. the fact that the proof of salvation must be produced by the individual itself. With Descartes and Spinoza, we see that the individual must himself posit God as something external to himself, i.e., he must himself *become God.* At the same time, this must be posited as something external to oneself, which motivates the organization and understanding of external reality. The realization of the (virtual) substance thus exists in the potentiality of thought and extension. It is only within capitalism that this becomes actual. Within capitalism, the absence of a fixed ground for value is what enables money to become the transcendental equivalent in which everything expresses its value, but which simultaneously determines the value of all. Money is at once a commodity and an transcendental exception to all commodities, and because of this, it appears to be the manifestation of surplus-value.

But surplus-value is never given as such, it only exists *potentially*, as a virtual structure.

In truth, this potentiality exist in us. Marx understood that capital does not grow by itself; only labor-power generates surplus-value. The labor power, "does not exist apart from [the laborer] at all, thus exists not really, but only in potentiality, as his [*sic*] capacity [which] becomes a reality only when it has been solicited by capital" (Marx 1993, 267).

Bœdan understands that the virtuality of the structure is tied to our bodies. However, *Bœdan* fails to recognize that this potentiality exists only in relation to or with the emergence of the structure of capital. By discussing Michel Foucault's theory of biopower, it will become evident how even the most radical forms of being reproduce capitalism and the forms of power it manifests.

From Commodity Fetishism to Biopower

Michel Foucault's description of biopower strongly parallels Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. Let us begin by noting the analogy between the two thinkers that, just as capitalism requires the investment in the labor-power potential which exists in the body (*bios*), biopower describes the exercise of power through the production and regulation of life (*bios*) itself. In the following, we shall see how, as a result of the above, commodity fetishism presupposes and entails biopower.

In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that secular modernity transforms the nature of power to "a power that exerts a positive influence on life" (137). The pre-modern sovereign, whose relationship to his subjects was purely juridical, exercised power as a response to the transgression of the law. This execution of negative power functioned "mainly as a means of deduction," for example in the levying of taxes, the raising of armies, or the taking of life (The History of Sexuality 136). The transformation of the economy to the capitalist mode of production brought about a shift in the focus of power toward the administration of both individual bodies and entire populations.

Because modern society is characterized by the principles of democracy and universalism, the extent to which power appears to protect the life of its citizens — and maintains or improves the quality of life more generally — determines its legitimacy. Power had to be exercised in such a way that it appeared to be, at once, beneficial to the individual *and* to the population as a whole.

This power over life evolved into two elementary forms: the first disciplines the individual "body as a machine," magnifying its capacity as a biological body, the second concentrates the productive and regulative potential of the population as a whole. The "setting up [...] of this great bipolar technology [...] characterized a power whose highest function was perhaps no longer to kill, but to invest life through and through" (The History of Sexuality 139). One consequence of this new form of power was the emergence of the *norm*. While the law executes its power through the right to kill, biopower is a "regulatory and correcting mechanism" that "[distributes] the living in the domain of value and utility" (The History of Sexuality 144). Such power does not care to punish as it cares to measure, appraise, and organize people around the norm.

In the process of identifying the importance of the norm, Foucault made a significant discovery: that "at the pivot of the two axes" (the individual body and the population) is sex. The production and regulation of sexuality, through a variety of mechanisms and apparatuses, became a primary tool for the management of life. Rather than being something intrinsic to or real in the human experience, sexuality can be seen as a historical construct of secular capitalist modernity, as it is "the deployment of sexuality, with its different strategies" that has "established this notion of 'sex'" (The History of Sexuality 154).

Foucault remarks that through the discourse of modernity, sexuality becomes elevated to truth; it becomes an object of knowledge that "the individual has to pass in order to have access to his [*sic*] own intelligibility" or identity (The History of Sexuality 155). The codification of sex thus becomes essential to the exercise of biopolitical control, since the subject becomes invested in attaining knowledge of her sexuality: a discourse which is constructed within the domain of power. Here, it becomes clear that power, knowledge, and sexuality are inextricably linked.

Sex becomes the doorway an individual must pass through in order to gain access to his own intelligibility, his body, and his identity. Sex thus becomes key to the meaning of one's life. In the deployment of sexuality, sex is projected as desirable, something liberating, and something that can express the truth of the subject. It is "this desirability of sex that attaches each one of us to the injunction to know it, to reveal its law and its power" (The History of Sexuality 156). But Foucault argues that we are mislead here:

> We must not place sex on the side of reality, and sexuality on that of confused ideas and illusions; sexuality is a very real historical formation; it is what gave rise to the notion of sex, as a speculative element necessary to its operation. We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality. (157)

Challenging the perception that "free sex" can disrupt the repressive apparatus of sexuality has perhaps never been more urgent. The rise of queer politics and its dispersion into all spheres of popular culture is perhaps the strongest evidence of the relevance of Foucault's critique. When mistaking sexuality for the revolt against a repressive mechanism of sexuality, the call to affirm one's sex drive beyond traditional boundaries appears to be the ultimate assault on power, especially by affirming unproductive pleasure, disruptive or public display of non-traditional sexuality, trans-identification, non-monogamy, and power play. But the fact that these engagements are having presumably subversive effects on society or are radically transforming the way people live and imagine their lives, does not prevent such activity from contributing to biopower. Obviously, this does not mean that the relationship to sex should be inverted — as Marx's theory of commodity fetishism indicates, criticizing a relationship as a construct tied to power does not dissolve the appearance of that relationship as true; or, to repeat Balibar's remark, the imaginary construct "constitutes rather the way in which reality ... cannot but appear". What is to be recognized here is rather how biopower operates through the production of seemingly subversive positions, when in truth they serve the very system they are supposed to undermine.

The supposition by secular capitalist modernity that the individual is *free* reveals something key to understanding modern power. As Foucault explains, biopower operates through the very concepts with which the subject anticipates her own freedom. Biopower invents 'repressed sexuality,' thereby implying the existence of a 'true, healthy' sexuality to which we have not been given access. Because of this, speaking and practicing sex appears to be a deliberate transgression — the same dynamic holds for the practicing of freedom altogether, one's self-identification as "free".

St. Augustine introduced *freedom* as a solution to the problem of evil in the world, despite an omniscient and benevolent God. Freedom could thereby place the responsibility of choice (and thereby, the presence of evil) on humans (Blumenberg 133). Freedom was, from the outset, motivated by religion, as a means for responding to the theodical question: *whence evil*? Marx revealed the true meaning of "freedom," when he argued that the development of capitalism presupposed that workers be free, both in the sense of being free to offer his labor power "for sale...as a commodity" (1990 271), and second, as a possessor of labor-power who is not in possession of (other) commodities, the individual must be "compelled to offer for sale as a commodity that very labor-power which exists only in his body" (1990 272). The laborer is thereby forced to sell his labor-power as both his only commodity, and the means to meet his needs. Here, freedom as compulsion is concealed and is seen as a purely positive (ideal) characteristic of the individual.

To raise the freedom of the individual to an absolute principle is a problematic operation: the struggle for freedom, as with liberated sexuality, depends upon an 'objective' freedom as such supposed to exists in a natural state of life. Foucault explains that the notion of the 'real state' freedom is itself a product of biopower, and (as Marx demonstrated) of capitalism. Therefore, it is possible to infer that the struggle *for* freedom can only amplify the effects of biopower by increasing the efficacy of workers and producing more demanding consumers.

Recall *Bœdan's* argument: that '*queer* cannot define an identity — only disturb one.' Its authors identified this as one method queers can 'disrupt social organization' and thereby 'interrupt power.' The analysis of biopower and commodity fetishism has provided a less-than-promising promising perspective on this program. Rather than undermining power, it seems that the very struggle to create the world in accordance with one's ideals reinforces power's hold. In other words, the *attempt to realize* such ideals is itself the actualization of the 'objective reality' which appears to dominate us. The central lesson of commodity fetishism is that exposing a thing as an imaginary construct does not dissolve its power: a different mode of thinking about *being* (and its representations) is required.

The study of secular modernity and capitalism shows that power rules not *despite*, but *through* the voluntary identification as a *free* individual. Without religion or a sovereign

ruler, power can now present itself as both "objective knowledge" and as the subject's own desire (Kordela 57). That is, objective knowledge doesn't appear to be "voiced [...] from a place of enunciation that involves authority and power". (Kordela 57) Consequently, "the truth of the secular subject adjoins itself to that of 'objective knowledge,' just as surplus-value adjoins itself to capital." (Kordela 58) The call for endless negation and destruction of the world as a path to liberation (and absolute enjoyment) can be felt as sincere by the individuals that make it, but it does not escape the logic of capital — such a call still attempts to fill a void with something which is produced by the structure of capital. As demonstrated, this is due to a misunderstanding of the operation of power in secular modernity.

The implication of the secular conditions of thought are easily misunderstood, and from this misunderstanding, the dominant form of power emerges. This indicates that the current structure of power *excludes* a recognition of that misunderstanding. Consequently, any proposed limitation of that structure of power must *include* the recognition of this misunderstanding. If one agrees with Spinoza (and Pfaller) that something can only be limited by something else of the same nature, one can assume that the current political structure can only be limited by another political structure that includes that which the present structure excludes: the recognition that the idea of an eternal Idea, or Being, is necessitated by our demand for meaning, but that it has a regulative function — it is never and *can* never be manifested as such.

V. CONCLUSION

As a supersensible (and yet, sensuous) commodity, money controls us, even as an imaginary object. This is due to both a particular mode of perception and the way 'objective reality' cannot but appear.

Invoking an 'irrational, riotous, and disorderly' *being* to 'disrupt the social order' divulges the fact that the function of the *lack of meaning* has been misunderstood. This lack is not at all contrary to the symbolic order — in truth, it alone solicits our attribution of meaning to the world. Moreover, such a solicitation can only be met when we sacrifice ourselves to fill it in. The "sense" that is made of the world is at once a product of the collective

performance of this surrender, *and* retroactively its cause. Therefore the disruption of sense (the creation of *nonsense*) merely reproduces the same demand for meaning that any other intervention would. So long as the conditions of thought remain the same, power and its structure cannot be undermined through disorder, or 'negation'.

Being appears to evade capture within the symbolic order and thereby appears to constantly to negate it; since the subject associates truth with what appears 'objectively real,' the repetition and re-emergence of this *promise of disorder* is indeed the only way reality *can* appear. Thus, this obsession with negation.

Even to its most staunch critics, capitalism today seems almost as if it were *inevitable* all along. Yet, it is capitalism itself which seems to bring about the world's collapse. Simply to identify as *free*, one must adopt an identity that is, on some level, rejecting the dominant structures of power — and yet, to call for the realization of the 'multiplicity of being' reinforces the structure of capital itself. That there could ever be a notion of *being* beyond the symbolic order is a desirable *ideal* that exists because it has been prohibited.

The *ideal* in queer anarcho-nihilism is disruption, and those who are compelled by its arguments come to *identify* as disruption. This 'becoming-disruption' is, in part, a process of negating one's identity and therefore one's self. But the process by which one determines which things 'are' and 'are not' disruptive — namely, those characteristics which seem to *comply* with order — is exactly the one at work in biopower, wherein one produces the values of an identity which can give meaning to the self.

The call to infinite disruption disassociates from capitalism (itself harboring necessary misrecognition of the conditions of production) and further reinforces this misrecognition. Everything we can think and imagine is already a part of the structure of power — so what is *excluded* by calls to undermine power is just as important as what is *included.* What does *Bœdan* exclude by radically distancing themselves from the symbolic order? Recognizing that revolt is as integral to power as "complicity", what does it mean that a radical distinction between revolt and complicity is drawn in *Bœdan*? Just like *being*, *existence*, and *sex*, the cause that renders the world meaningful in secular thought is also imagined — since the elimination of transcendence (God) renders such 'ultimate' or 'first' causes impossible — and must therefore undergo a process that makes it real for us.

Recall Lacan's discussion of Freud's analysis of a father's dream. In this story, a father, whose son had recently died, has a dream "that his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him *reproachfully*: 'Father, don't you see I'm burning?'" (Žižek 1989 44, EMPHASIS ADDED). The father awakens to realize that a candle has fallen on the son's corpse, burning it. Lacan speculates that, what "wakes the sleeper" is not the "external reality," in which the son is already dead and burning, but the *other* reality which is revealed in the dream — the one in which the father finds himself *guilty* of the son's death as revealed in son's question, "full of reproach." (Lacan 1981, 58; 70). This invokes an 'external gaze' under which the father is reproachable and thus guilty. Lacan continues:

> Is not the dream essentially [...] an act of homage to the missed reality — the reality that can no longer produce itself except by repeating itself endlessly, in some never attained awakening? (Lacan 1981, 59)

The "missed reality" is the 'missed' *cause* for the son's death, namely, that such a cause is impossible within the parameters of secular reason. It is this impossibility that is prohibited so that the father can offer his own guilt as the cause of his son's death. The process by which the secular world can be rendered meaningful here is "fatal", for the only material with which the lack of meaning can be filled is the subject's own innocence.

Lacan argues that there is no conscious reason or meaning for the inexplicable events which demand to be interpreted; only the unconscious can produce such meaning. The unconscious is precisely that which exists only in its effects, that which answers unanswerable questions and thereby constitutes a *meaningful* world. Lacan understands this unconscious being — which is posited by oneself as an Other — to fulfill the function of the absent God in secular thought. In this sense "God is not dead" but "God is unconscious" (Lacan 1981, 59). The death drive answers to the demand for meaning by unconsciously sacrificing oneself.

While Freud initially supposed that the pleasure principle (the tendency to manage homeostasis, balance, and pressure) is the ultimate principle of life, he later revised this theory to argue that the *death drive* is the precondition for the pleasure principle. The *pleasure*

principle presupposes that the individual sacrifices himself for an (imaginary) Other, i.e. *becomes* the object of desire in the Other. It is in this sense that the death drive is a precondition for the pleasure principle. Freud also postulated that this is because, unlike the non-human animal, humans are determined by the symbolic structure. As Spinoza revealed, the lack of *telos* in God (Nature) makes it impossible for the world to have some anthropomorphic meaning. Only by invoking a fiction can this world have meaning, and this fiction must be posited by the individual as something *external* to individuality.

The imperative issued in *Bœdan* also reveals an unconscious determined by its effects — by calling for the 'surrendering to the death drive' (and mistaking it for the path to liberation) the authors of *Bœdan* prescribe a methodology for imbuing *being* and the *self* with a meaning which somehow transcends their current definitions within the confines of power. It is the structure of this very prescription which has, all along, determined power's capacity over bodies, their lives, and their thoughts.

It thus appears that the radical rejection of the symbolic order is a radical affirmation of the subject's independence and autonomy — which, as we have seen, only means a stronger demand for creating oneself in accordance with the virtual structure. Even if the 'rejection of the symbolic' effectively furthers the secular project of abandoning dogmas, it appears that it constitutes a further internalization — and, thereby, further actualization — of the virtual structure of capital.

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