Excess: The Obscene Supplement in Slavoj Žižek’s Religion and Politics

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I. Introduction

In his book *The Parallax View*, Slavoj Žižek discusses a split between the overt rule of law and the obscene underside of the society governed. He claims the split is irreducible and can only be understood as a function in the parallax gap between conscious and unconscious injunction. The 2004 reports of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib raised the specter of war-crimes, and though the Bush administration attempted to blame the abuse on isolated, rogue behavior by deviant soldiers, subsequent reports from human rights organizations exposed a pattern of torture condoned, authorized, and encouraged at every level of the chain of command. The incident provided Žižek with an interesting hypothetical: had the Bush administration’s claims of ignorance and noninvolvement been true, would it have then been innocent? Žižek claims the overt rule of law is always sustained by an obscene supplementary element that transgresses the conscious element; in short, such abuse is *exactly* what anyone should expect to see from young soldiers put in the charge of captives whom they are trained to see as sub-human, religiously other, etc., in prison hidden far from media attention.¹ Just as Lacan claimed the symbolic and Real are supplemented and sustained by their divergence,² the overt commands and desires of the administration would be supplemented with an obscene, excessive opposite (“do as you please, nobody is watching!”).

The corpus of Slavoj Žižek’s work on religion and politics relies on a curious term: the obscene excess-supplement of the superego. The supplement is present wherever a conflicted anxiety exists between conscious and unconscious. Žižek uses the obscene supplement to


describe the defense of the superego in neurosis and perversion that prevents the subject from consciously experiencing anxiety and commands the subject to enjoy. The supplement also appears to function at the ego-level for the pervert. This paper will explore what is meant by Žižek’s use of this term in relationship to belief and desire. The thesis of this paper is that understanding Žižek’s use of the obscene excess-supplements of the ego and superego can explain how political and religious signification defends the ego from change by mitigating anxiety and commanding the subject toward jouissance. My objective is to 1) provide an overview of relevant psychoanalytic terminology, 2) discuss the Žižek’s use of the supplement in relation to Christianity, 3) discuss Žižek’s use of the supplement in political dynamics, and 4) provide a response and critique to his use of the supplement.

II. Psychoanalytic Terminology and Method

In order to define Žižek’s use of the supplement, the psychoanalytic categories and terms involved must be briefly defined. Terms to be explored include the three pathologies (psychosis, neurosis, and perversion), Lacan’s three registers (imaginary, symbolic, and Real) in relation to the ego, superego, and id, and the relationship of the pathologies and registers to jouissance and the objet petit a. I will then discuss Lacan’s early and later goals for therapy and transference to provide a basis for Žižek’s approach to religion and politics apropos of the obscene excess-supplement. This paper relies heavily on Bruce Fink’s A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Clayton Crockett’s Interstices of the Sublime in order to explain these terms and their function in Žižek’s work.³

³ Refer to figure 2.1 for pathological types.
The obscene excess-supplement of the superego refers to an injunction to enjoy in the midst of a conflict between the conscious and the unconscious. While both Freud and Lacan use the latter two terms, Lacan differs in locating the subject in the symbolic register (otherwise, Freud’s conscious ego is similar to Lacan’s imaginary register). The symbolic is composed of (following Saussurian linguistics) signifiers that mediate imaginary, signified ideas, and the Real.\(^4\) The unconscious symbolic supersedes and structures the imaginary,\(^5\) meaning the excess-supplement is both constitutive and unconscious for the subject’s perception. The Real is unconscious and constituted by the drives of the id. Rather than being “reality” in a strictly Saussurian sense of the referent, the Real is “the impossible... Which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic.”\(^6\) As with Freud, the Lacanian superego is unconscious and structures the ego/imaginary in balance between the pleasure and reality principles, and the Lacanian superego always instructs the subject to enjoy\(^7\) (often in the form of the death drive’s obscenely excessive repetition).\(^8\) Freud’s delineation of illusion and delusion\(^9\) are instructive here. Though it is clear Freud considers illusions generally negative, their root in a wish (desire in Lacan) can have a useful function. The illusion is rooted in the ego’s desire to please the id in a way compatible with the developed superego. In contrast, a delusion is rooted in an essential conflict of ego with reality. Though Freud is reluctant to call all religion

\(^8\) Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 110.
delusional, he is quite clear religion is an illusion rooted in a mixture of conscious and unconscious wishes. Lacan’s well-known claim God (big Other) is unconscious locates desire in the symbolic register, meaning the excess-supplement is always present in symbolism. As Lacan writes, “The subject’s unconscious is the other’s discourse.”

Freud’s early work located anxiety as an after-effect of the three mechanisms (e.g. the neurotic represses, which leads to anxiety and a return of the repressed). In his later work, the relationship is reversed: anxiety is repressed, foreclosed, or disavowed. For Lacan, the subject (I) should not be confused with the resistant ego (me). The reaction of the latter to anxiety will structure the unconscious former. Far from being a passive acceptance of pathology, the goal of all three mechanisms is to actively prevent change in the subject by keeping awareness unconscious.

**Psychosis**

The distinction between psychosis, neurosis, and perversion is crucial for a psychoanalytic analysis of belief and the obscene excess-supplement. The psychotic is defined by a lack of a developed superego, or by “the symbolic’s failure to overwrite the imaginary” during the mirror stage. The psychotic has no “Name of the Father,” no paternal/Law metaphor functioning to create an ego-ideal (ichideal). The psychotic does not experience guilt, doubt, or anxiety in the same way a superego-developed individual does (Lacan holds that “normal”


13 Refer to *figure 2.2* for the relationship between the three pathologies and their constitutive mechanisms.

individuals are by default neurotic, beholden to a functioning paternal metaphor). As the psychotic does not have a normally developed superego, the psychotic is controlled by drives and forecloses the symbolic before a thought can be repressed or disavowed. Psychosis is therefore excluded from Žižek’s obscene supplement of the superego.  

**Neurosis**

Neurosis has three subtypes: obsessive, hysterical, and phobic. The neurotic has a developed superego is accustomed to following normative social relations, expectations, laws, etc., often paralyzingly so in the case of obsessives. Neurotics are “castrated” in Freud’s terminology, having accepted the ego-ideal of the parent, and they exhibit a high degree of doubt. “The obsessive’s fantasy implies a relationship with [l’objet a], but the obsessive refuses to recognize that this object is related to the Other.” The obsessive follows norms as such without the need to consider the genesis of the rule, whether the rule should be discarded, and so on. “The hysterical, on the other hand, emphasizes the partner or Other, making herself into the object of the Other’s desire so as to master it. The Other is the desiring subject in the hysterical’s fantasy.” In religious and political behavior, the obsessional neurotic is the individual that follows laws and taboos explicitly, forgoing the direct jouissance of freely pursuing satisfaction of desire by acquiring a substitute satisfaction from following the big Other’s injunctions. The religious or political hysterical sees herself as the objet petit a of the big

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15 On rare occasion, Žižek does refer to the psychotic driven by an excess of the id, but the categorical difference between the id drive and ego/superego injunction makes psychotic excess irrelevant to the obscene excess-supplement studied in the scope of this paper. The psychotic’s excess is an excess of id drive rather than ego or superego injunction.

16 Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 84.


Other and experiences a substitute *jouissance* from the imagined pleasure of the big Other. The final subtype of phobia receives little attention in Žižek’s work, but is included here in the interest of proper explanation. The phobic, which *Seminar VIII* calls “the most radical form of neurosis,”¹⁹ refers to a superego that is subject-generated without instantiation by the Name of the Father. Even rebellion against the Father (as the author of Law), binds the subject in relationship to Law.²⁰ In both all three subtypes of neurosis, desire and fulfillment are thus displaced by the superego, which opens space for the superego supplement to continue to (unconsciously) function.

**Perversion**

The pathology of perversion is the most difficult to define. Freud left this category largely undeveloped, so Žižek’s references to perversion can be assumed to rely on Lacan’s systematization. Like the neurotic, the pervert has a developed superego, but the pervert’s *objet petit a* is always fetishistic while the Real is disavowed.²¹ “In perversion the subject struggles to bring the law into being- in a word, to make the Other exist.”²² The subject-barred ($) used in Žižek’s work refers to the subject split into imaginary, conscious (ego) and symbolic, unconscious (superego) which allows a mediated (supplemented) relationship to the Real.²³ But the pervert contains a second split which Freud refers to as the “splitting of the ego.”²⁴ This second split allows mutually exclusive ideas to be maintained in the imaginary register that are

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¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 163


²¹ Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 166.


effectively indifferent to reality. Žižek’s work is unclear on this point, but one might think of the obscene excess-supplement functioning for the pervert in both the superego and the ego, creating multiple tiers of disavowal. Whereas the neurotic must only repress undesirable knowledge to the unconscious, the pervert must add to this an additional strategy of continually disavowing knowledge that raises itself to conscious awareness.

**Objet Petit a and Jouissance**

The objet petit a is the object of desire, but must be understood as a relationship between the subject, the ego, the desire’s real object, the desire’s cause, and the je ne sais quoi invested in it by the analysand.25 Thus while l’objet petit a is multifaceted, Žižek uses it as the imaginary’s object of desire. The acquisition of l’objet petit a is associated with jouissance, which is defined as enjoyment beyond pleasure. Pleasure (plaisir) relates to Freud’s homeostatic law in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, whereas jouissance is acquired by a transgression the pleasure principle.26 The drive, which Freud defines as “an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things,”27 is ultimately conservative and finds its ultimate example in the death drive’s cycle of repetition. In contrast, jouissance is, “desire carried to the extreme... certainly sexual or libidinal in nature, but it is also destructive and ultimately self-destructive passion... unwilling to compromise or negotiate its drive for satisfaction.”28 Jouissance is transgressive and obscene by nature, requiring an excess-supplement to drive the subject toward it.

**The Object of Therapy and Categorization of Pathology**

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Far from helping analysands find happiness, Lacan’s early goal was to “eliminate the interference in symbolic relations generated by the imaginary.”}\textsuperscript{29} By the 1950s, Lacan’s goal reversed emphases to “pierce through the imaginary dimension which veils the symbolic and confront the analysand’s relations to the Other head on.”\textsuperscript{30} In therapy, Lacan uses the term transference for the moment the analysand projects the subjective position onto the analyst so as to analyze herself.\textsuperscript{31} Therapy concludes when the analysand resumes the position of the subject to realize the nonexistence of the big other.

The difficulty in analyzing Žižek’s use of the supplement, as with the difficulty of categorizing analysands in therapy, is that most of the categories are fluid; that is to say, the disavowal of reality by the fetish/symbol can be used to repress reality for a neurotic without leading her to become a pervert. Further, while psychotics are a concretely separate category from the much more similar categories of neurosis and perversion, it is often the case that the latter two demonstrate behavior that appears on the surface to be psychotic. In the example from Abu Ghraib, it is premature to label the guards as psychotic simple because they acted one their own, without regard to the supposed prohibition on torture. Certainly, some of the guards might be properly categorized as psychotics, but Žižek rightly argues that their apparently psychotic behavior is actually grounded in the obscene supplement that characterizes neurosis or perversion. In short, expression of an unwritten rule exposes a conflicted symbolic order that can be analyzed according to the injunctions the big Other sends.

\textsuperscript{29} Fink, \textit{A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis}, 33.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}, 35.

Finally, a word must be said regarding a break between Freud and Lacan that Žižek oscillates between. Freud used disavowal as a mechanism for each of the three pathologies, whereas Lacan reserved the term exclusively for perverts. I will return to this break in my critique below, but the reader should be aware that Žižek often uses disavowal in the Freudian sense rather than the Lacanian, demonstrating a liberty to mix pathologies and their mechanisms as he explains the role of the excess-supplement.

III. Christianity, Law, and Love

The subtitle of *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* refers explicitly to the obscene supplement functioning in belief. Apropos of perversion and Christianity, Žižek writes, “In his ‘father, why hast thou forsaken me?,’ Christ himself commits what is, for a Christian, the ultimate sin: he wavers in his Faith. This... concerns what cannot but appear as the hidden perverse core of Christianity: if it is prohibited to eat from the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise, why did God put it there in the first place?”32 Žižek cites Kenneth Burke’s work on the Decalogue as a command to never kill with a veiled injunction to do the opposite. Žižek continues, “This is the Lacanian opposition between the symbolic Law and the obscene call of the superego at its purest... you are put in an impossible position of always and a priori being under suspicion of violating some (unknown) prohibition. More precisely, the superego splits every determinate commandment into two complementary, albeit asymmetrical, parts,”33 Excusing his rather inflammatory reading of the injunction not to kill, the point made is the splitting of the superego into dual (and dueling) injunctions. The reader should recall the

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split-subject (of the neurotic and pervert) and the further split-ego (of the pervert). The parent instructing their child not to reach for the desert creates the same dueling injunction: the axiom from Lacan is that the spoken prohibition creates the desire to transgress.

**Transgression Solicited by Law**

The only solution to the anxiety created by the split superego is to transgress the cause of the antagonism. For St. Paul, the Law must be transgressed so that, in Žižek’s reading, the ego can freely desire what it loves without the opposing injunction. One is free to love when one is not required to love. Citing Agamben on St. Paul’s “Kafkaesque” disposition with regard to the Old Testament Law, Žižek reads the Law as being in opposition to Love; further, the opposition reveals the antagonism is located within Law itself. The Law’s concrete injunction tells the subject to obey while its more abstract potentiality makes the subject always guilty, experiencing a crisis over whether Law is really meant to be applied in some particular instance. The superego tells the subject that while the Law is theoretically whole and uniform, she is nevertheless to understand the excess-supplement injunction toward jouissance to break the Law to show mercy (l’objet petit a). Using this irreducible inconsistency between Law and Love, Žižek asks whether it is not better to reverse the obligation of the subject; instead of living by the Law while making slight deviations in favor of mercy, is she not better served by orienting herself toward mercy/Love so that the strict application of Law can become the exception? Žižek cites St. Paul’s as-if-not injunctions in I Corinthians 7 to demonstrate this point (e.g. the believer who mourns should live as if she is not mourning).[^34] One must, “obey the laws as if

[^34]: Ibid., 110-1.
you are not obeying them,'... *We should suspend the obscene libidinal investment in the Law, the investment on account of which the Law generates/solicits its own transgression.*”\(^{35}\)

This is not such a radical claim. The readers of St. Paul most heavily cited by Žižek read St. Paul with varying levels of anarchism, but none is arguing a community can operate without some instance of Law. The opposition of Žižek’s influences in Agamben and Badiou on the one hand and Taubes on the other is instructive here. While Badiou\(^{36}\) emphasizes the radical claim of faith that allows St. Paul to dethrone the Law and reorient ethics toward the Event of the risen Christ in I Corinthians, Taubes \(^{37}\) argues with much more emphasis on St. Paul’s anarchic disposition to Law in Romans. As a self-described “Paulinist Jew,” Taubes appreciates St. Paul’s Pharisaical knowledge of Law and its antagonisms in conjunction with the creation of a community no longer defined by the normative markers of civilization (neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female). But however much Taubes flirts with the language of anarchism (claiming Paul’s political theology is so far radicalized that it appears conservative), his point remains not that Law is unnecessary but that Law is the exception. Žižek builds on these figures to argue that the internal antagonisms and excess-supplement of the Law should lead the subject to reorient herself toward Love.

Of course, Lacan’s claim is not that an analysand can become completely free of the superego’s injunctions. A properly neurotic Love would still contain the excess-supplement to apply Law just as any loving parent will still punish a child, but the subject can become aware, as it were, of the injunctions living through herself and orient herself toward her own desire as she


becomes aware of symbolic demands. Law must sublate to Love. On this point, Žižek reads Agamben on *aufhebung*: “Pauline love is not the cancellation or destructive negation of the Law, buts its accomplishment in the sense of “sublation,” where the law is retained through its very suspension, as a subordinate (potential) moment of a higher actual unity.”38 Reorientation can only take place in therapy with the subject’s reoriented relationship to the Other.

**Dialectics in Lacan and Hegel**

So as not to confuse Žižek’s meaning, it should be noted that Lacan’s use of dialectization in therapy, which refers to the process of exchanging demand for desire in transference between analysand-as-subject and analyst-as-subject, differs from Hegel’s use of the term. The rejection of the big Other brings us to the reason Žižek appreciates the perverse core of Christianity. Following Chesterton’s reading of Job as the trial of God, Job is seen as a proto-Christ figure that unmasks the impotency of God. If Law must sublate to Love, the concrete universal figure of Christ is the Event of the infinite God experiencing finitude. The Hegelian universal whole must become split into its 1) Part and 2) Remainder. The Remainder is read by Žižek as the obscene supplement that transgresses the whole.39 “Since the function of the obscene superego supplement of the (divine) Law is to mask this impotence of the big Other, and since Christianity reveals this impotence, it is, quite logically, the first (and only) religion radically to leave behind the split between the official/public text and its obscene initiatory supplement; there is no hidden, untold story in it. In this precise sense, Christianity is the religion of Revelation: everything is revealed in it, no obscene superego supplement accompanies its public message.”40 (But

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38 Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 112.


40 *Ibid.*, 127.
subjective excess is still read as constitutive of a Hegelian objective excess of abstract
universality—this is either a contradiction in Žižek or a relocation of supplemental excess to the
ego). The Holy Spirit is then read as the entry of the signifier that constitutes a “first
symbolization,” but this new symbolization is explicitly anti-Master-Signifier, suspending
normal social distinctions and symbolic, subjective distortions of the superego.

Christianity as Perverse

Why then is Christianity perverse? The entry of the signifier constituting symbolization
means Christianity-as-subject cannot be psychotic as it requires the symbolic big Other as a
given field for the theology that develops. But the transgression of Law (in St. Paul) and the
death of the big Other (in Christ) together require that Christianity not be neurotic. This leaves
us only with the category of perversion, and the spit-ego of the perverse subject, holding
mutually exclusive views. Perversion is particularly well equipped to maintain fidelity to a cause
that it both believes and rejects simultaneously (mitigating anxiety via fetishism). If we grant
the materialist Christian position Žižek advocates, it is quite simple to see the appeal of a big-
Other-less faith, a faith that affirms a founding myth of God’s death while simultaneously
denying the divine. The ego-injunction of the pervert is to 1) transgress the big Other while 2)
being an instrument of the Other’s jouissance. Žižek’s reads Christianity to be a most extreme
case of superego-less, perverted faith. The ecclesiology of the Žižek’s perverse reading is that
of a community defined by Love (transgressing the Law) while maintaining fidelity to a cause’s
jouissance in l’objet petit a of the fetish Christ Event. Having explored the way in which

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42 Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 112.

43 Normal perversion retains the superego element. Žižek’s representation of Christianity is perversion carried to the extreme, beyond what is normally seen in analysands.
Christianity exposes and exploits the existence of an obscene excess-supplement, this paper will now turn to discuss how the obscene supplement functions in political dynamics.

IV. Political Dynamics

We have seen that the symptom and mechanism by which the three main pathological categories deal with anxiety reveal the pathological nature of the body. This section will table the idea that a society could exhibit a psychotic nature as a whole and focus instead on how Žižek and his influential forebearers analyze the obscene supplement operating in collectives.

First, I turn to a source cited often in Žižek’s work, Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, to provide context for Žižek’s focus on the superego in a fascist system.

**Staged Theater: Fascism and Anti-Semitism**

The final chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is an exposé on the inner logic of fascism. Horkheimer and Adorno write that anti-Semitism must not be reduced to a misdirected failure of German self-preservation; hate cannot be conceived as a case of reason gone terribly wrong. Instead, anti-Semitism must be seen as irreducibly arbitrary; the Jew is an object of disavowal for the German citizen to project anxiety upon. Externalization reveals a self-hatred that must be repressed and returned in the form of blaming the other. 44 “The psychoanalytical theory of morbid projection views it as consisting of the transference of socially taboo impulses from the subject to the object.” 45 As instances of anti-Semitism spread and ossify throughout the culture, deviation from the new subjective reality is seen as pathological. 46

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into the superego of the culture. Capitalism in its fascist conclusion contains an obscene injunction against intellectual criticism or spiritual inquiry, and “knowledge is neutralized and used as a mere qualification on specific labor markets and to heighten the commodity value of the personality.”

In short, the totalizing nature of capitalism, especially in its fascist conclusion, requires the economic and political superego to give an obscene injunction to externalize angst upon an arbitrary entity.

Žižek refers to fascism’s method as staged theater in his discussion of the truth-Event. “Nazism was a pseudo-Event and the October Revolution was an authentic Event because only the latter related to the very foundations of the situation of capitalist order, effectively undermining those foundations, in contrast to Nazism, which staged a pseudo-Event precisely in order to save the capitalist order... ‘to change things so that, at their most fundamental, they can remain the same.’” The staged theater of the fascist regime illuminates his criticism of the third way, “global capitalism with a human face.” The sentimental, merciful aspirations of liberalism with regard to human rights can function as a cover for the obscene underside of the capitalist economy. In an ironic twist, Žižek is hostile toward liberalism’s emphasis on human rights for precisely the same reason he, Horkheimer, and Adorno are hostile toward the anti-Semitic projections of fascism: each represents an ego justification for continuing in the powerful, obscene, and unconscious logic of capital.

Complexities of Pathological Categorization in Politics

47 Ibid., 197-8.


Before turning to a final example of the excess-supplement function in a clearly perverted political system, the ambiguity of psychoanalytic categories is worth pausing to consider. The discussion on the motivations behind Hitler in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* demonstrate how vague and difficult settling on a pathological category can be, especially between hysteric neurotics and perverts. Žižek considers four possible explanations for Hitler’s use of anti-Semitism: 1) pure, irrational hatred of Jews, 2) cynical manipulation of prejudices to acquire power, 3) honest belief that Jews were a dangerous threat, and 4) pure evil. Only the last option is psychotic, acquiring direct *jouissance* from the act of persecution itself. The second option is indicative of a perverted sociopath. The first and third options are more traditional neurotic explanations. With the exception of the fourth option, which acquires *jouissance* not from the superego but directly from the id (satisfaction of his malevolent instinct), the other three options acquire substitute satisfaction in ways that can be analyzed according to their mechanisms of anxiety-avoidance. However, we may imagine Hitler and his cohort experiencing *all* these positions at some point or another, meaning the social pathology (depending on collective behavior) is much more fluid than personal pathology (categorized by how the subject relates to the symbolic register).

Perhaps a fascist society would be more appropriately labeled hysterically neurotic due to its substituted satisfaction in nationalistic ideology and repression. The fusion of capitalism and state that defines fascism produces a powerfully developed, unconscious superego for the society. Neurotic fascism experiences substitute *jouissance* from conformity to social ideals and/or desires the *jouissance* of the big Other in the form of nationalism. It represses anxiety by

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50 Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), 61-3.
externalizing in a way that exhibits a return of the repressed. Žižek might opt to label fascism as perverse, but, given the similarities between the hysteric and the pervert, this may be due to his reluctance to label totalitarian regimes as anything other than perverted. Lacan’s Seminar XVII on the four discourses, an analysis of capitalism in the wake of the French student protests of 1968, is used by Žižek to call capitalist excess hysteric in just this way: “The explosion of the hysterical capitalist subjectivity that reproduces itself through permanent self-revolutionizing, through the integration of the excess into the ‘normal’ functioning of the social link (the true ‘permanent revolution’ is already capitalism itself).”51 But he quickly reverts to describe the capitalist consumer as caught up in a game of perverse, excessive desire. The conclusion of his argument seems to point to a matrix of hysteric citizens caught up in a perverse game (where the Lacanian concept of excess-supplement is explicitly linked to the Marxian concept of surplus value): it is possible that Žižek’s ambiguity is an intentional overlap of pathologies pointing to an excess-supplement that has no consistent objet a. Therefore we must ask: what would a truly perverted political economy look like? Žižek finds perversion in Stalinism.

**Perversion in Stalinism**

The trial of Politburo member Nicolai Bukharin during the 1930s purge under Stalin reveals the antagonism of a neurotic individual clashing with a perverted system. In his chapter “When the Party Commits Suicide,” Žižek uses the episode to discuss displaced belief, claiming, “Belief is a notion that displays the deadlock characteristic of the Real: on the one hand, nobody can fully assume belief in the first person singular... One the other hand, however, no one really escapes belief - a feature that deserves to be emphasized especially today in our allegedly

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godless times... We all secretly believe.” 52 As discussed above, the pervert is defined by a splitting of the ego beyond the first split of the subject into conscious and unconscious. The second split, that of the ego itself, allows the pervert to hold mutually exclusive views simultaneously. The anxiety from conflicting realities is dealt with by the fetish disavowal, and the subject desires to be the object of the Other’s desire. As opposed to the staged theater of fascism, revolutionary movements are particularly prone to perversion in the sense that the revolutionary ideology sees itself as the instrument of historic progress. The greatest threat to a pervert is naming the disavowal as a farce; the superego is fragile, and there can be no overt acknowledgement of the obscene excess being disavowed. Žižek cites the cynical motto from the Stalinist era, “the more they are innocent, the more they deserve to be shot,”53 to illustrate the fragility of the split ego. Thus, the terror of the purge can be disavowed as necessary for the jouissance of the Other’s will in revolution, but in order for this to happen the supplementing disavowal mechanism must not be named.

Returning to the show trial of Bukharin, we see an individual who is fully resigned to his fate, but who still desires absolution from his comrades. Bukharin writes to Stalin that, while not contesting his purely formal guilt, he still hopes that Stalin will forgive him and admit (in secret) his innocence of the conspiracy charges. Bukharin exhibits the neurotic characteristic of fully believing in the world his superego has constructed. His relationship with the Other is codependent. He has likely always repressed the excesses he witnessed by seeing them as the obscene exceptions supplementing the basic rule in the social superego. In short, Bukharin believes he and Stalin are playing the same game. But Stalin and the Party have moved on

52 Žižek, Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?, 88.
53 Žižek, How to Read Lacan, 80.
toward a system of full perversion that is perfectly fine with contradictions so long as the contradiction is not named. The Party’s excess-supplement is functioning directly within the ego rather than the superego. During the purge, the accused individual’s actual guilt is irrelevant and disavowed; only the individual’s formal guilt matters. Žižek claims that Bukharin’s confusion comes from maintaining his place as a subject when a perverted system requires Bukharin to be nothing more than an object of the big Other: he was ready to plead guilty in public if the Party needed his confession, but he wanted it to be made clear among the inner circle of his comrades that he was not really guilty but merely agreeing to play the necessary role in the public ritual.

“This, precisely, the Party could not grant him: the ritual loses its performative power the moment it is explicitly designated as a mere ritual.”

The excess cannot be named. The supplement cannot be revealed.

Bukharin never received even a private absolution. 79 of 82 Party secretaries were shot during the 1930s purge. Bukharin’s story would be nothing spectacular except for the way in which it shows the antagonism between neurosis and perversion. The obscene supplement of the neurotic comes in the form of an exception to the superego’s rule. In the perverted split-ego, the obscene supplement is constitutive of both the superego and the ego itself. The split-ego of the perverted individual or system allows it to remain indifferent to the Real, but it is fragile.

V. Critique

It is clear that Žižek appeal to Christianity relies on a very specific reading of the death of God, the resurrection and Holy Spirit, and the relation of the Christ event to the transgression of

Law. Without a reading of these that mirrors the Lacanian conclusion of therapy, it is difficult to see how Žižek could have any use for Christian theology. The question is raised whether Žižek has any genuine interest in Christianity as such or instead sees Christianity as a vehicle to re-actualize German Idealism via psychoanalysis. His theology is admittedly radicalized and does not portray itself as traditional or orthodox, but he nevertheless makes a curious statement regarding Milbank: “My claim is that it is Milbank who is in effect guilty of heterodoxy, ultimately of a regression to paganism: in my atheism, I am more Christian than Milbank.”

The question of dialectic versus paradox in *The Monstrosity of Christ* is the clearest example of Žižek’s deviation from traditional Christian theologies in the name of supplemental excess. On the one hand, Milbank stands accused of nothing more than an updated paganism for his advocacy of a paradoxical harmony of the antagonisms in Christianity. On the other hand, Žižek claims Christianity leads to a sublation that subtracts its own historical dependence on the big Other. This claim is made strongly in the opening chapter of *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, where three claims are made: 1) Žižek is a materialist, 2) the subversive element of Christianity is only available to the materialist, and 3) dialectical materialism must be accessed through Christianity. He is quite clear in his assertion that a dialectical application of Christian theology *must* eventually lead to the materialist position. As the question of Christian materialism is not the subject of this paper, I will not attempt to resolve the gap between Milbank or Žižek. I only comment to clearly locate the controversy over his theology and its relevance to the excess-supplement, which is found nowhere more clearly than the question the reader must face in *The Monstrosity of Christ*: is Milbank’s paradoxical theism still a viable option today, or

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is Žižek’s dialectical materialism, his theology without the big Other, the inevitable goal towards which Christian theology moves?

Concerning the obscene excess-supplement, my critique concerns the fluidity of categories Žižek deploys to explain group pathology. Žižek’s language is notably inflammatory and excessive. Points with which he feels strongly are always pure, irreducible, and so on. I do not mean to critique his writing style so much as I would critique the way he quickly forces categories that require more finesse. Consider his use of mechanisms to define pathology in the Stalinist regime above: is there a confusion of neurotic and perverted mechanisms (repression and fetish, respectively) that blurs the distinction between the two pathologies? If a regime is said to have a split-ego and is deploying fetish symbols, is it not a confusion of categories to speak of “repressing” via fetish? Or is this simply the difficulty of psychoanalyzing systems instead of individuals? In both Violence and Parallax View, the “return of the repressed” is labeled a perversion apropos of the Stalinist regime. As noted above, one might imagine that the hysterical neurotic pathology might be a better application for a regime (such as fascism) finding subjective satisfaction in the big Other while maintaining excess-supplements at the superego level. Žižek maintains this ambiguity by labeling fascism as both hysteric and perverse. While Žižek refers to obscenity, injunction, excess, and supplement with regard to perversion, he never links the specific phrase “obscene excess-supplement” to the ego. My interpretation is that Žižek would affirm the existence of the supplement functioning at the ego and superego levels in perverted analysands and political systems, and the confusion of terms is the result of his loose

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57 Žižek, Violence, 211.

58 Žižek, The Parallax View, 287.
interpretation of differences in Freud and Lacan as well as the layered complexity of political psychopathology.

This returns us to the complexity of psychoanalyzing systems. Žižek clearly sees himself as a psychoanalyst of cultures, not of individuals. In therapy, pathological categories are exposed via the subjects relation to symbols rather than behavior. In Žižek’s group therapy of entire cultures, the option of analyzing individual relationships to symbols is impossible, and thus an analysis of the culture’s behavior toward symbols is the only option available to the analyst. Certainly, Lacan taught that the analyst must learn to ignore the conscious reasoning for speech and actions in order to get at the unconscious motives often best seen in behavior, but the wide gap between individual and social analysis remains. Nowhere is this gap more clear than the simplest realization that a culture cannot be psychotic; only the varieties of neurosis and perversion are open to the cultural psychoanalyst. As discussed above, extreme behavior in one pathological category can mirror symptoms of another category until the analysand “slips” in conversation and discloses motives she is not aware of. The development of a collective superego (in the form of normative behavior, laws, religions, taboos, etc.) is the beginning of culture, so analysis of the obscene excess-supplement remains relevant to social psychoanalysis every bit as much as it applies to individual analysands. But the decision to label a culture neurotic-obsessive, neurotic-hysteric, or perverse may be as much of an a pure choice as that between paradox or dialectic.

Finally, if Milbank is correct and Christianity requires the paradox, does this render Žižek’s perverse claim, along with his analysis of the obscene excess-supplement, a mute point? I argue that that Žižek’s emphatic materialism is ultimately irrelevant to the value of his reading
the neurotic and perverse categories into faith and politics. Even the most conservative and orthodox sects can be analyzed as neurotic or perverse according to the *jouissance* experienced in relation to their fidelity to faith-claims. My position remains that analysis of the believer’s imagined *objet petit a* and substitute *jouissance* is a powerful tool for analyzing religious behavior and experience that manifest in relationship of the subject to the excess-supplement.

**VI. Conclusion**

I have explained the role of the obscene excess-supplements of the ego and superego in religious and political signification. Having provided an overview of Freudian and Lacanian terminology, this paper has explored the role of the supplement in Žižek’s work on Christianity and politics. I have concluded by arguing that regardless of the reader’s opinion on Žižek’s materialistic reading of Christianity or political affiliations, an understanding of psychoanalytic theory can provide a schema for understanding belief in individuals and groups. The question of how to label the fascist regime as well as the question of why Žižek claims Christianity contains a perverse core accessible only to the materialist perspective should naturally raise a question about the excess-supplement: is there a consistent definition of the supplement deployed in Žižek’s work on neurotic and perverse belief? This paper concludes that while the role of the supplement can be seen broadly at work in political and theological beliefs systems, the exact nature of the supplement when used in analysis of groups remains somewhat vague in Žižek’s work. It is unclear whether Žižek himself has a more precise definition or instead used the term in a polymorphous strategy to outline broad behavior not meant to withstand the scrutiny applied to individual psychotherapy of analysands.
This paper concludes at precisely this impasse in Žižek’s work between the diverging nature of the Lacanian/Freudian analysis of individuals and the Žižekian analysis of societies. Further reading of Lacan’s Seminar XVII on the relationship between capitalism and the four discourses may elucidate Žižek’s use of the supplement in society, but Žižek own use of the excess-supplement derived from Seminar XVII renders a firm resolution of political psychopathology unlikely. The reader may surmise Žižek sees an obscene supplemental excess at work in any relationship of power, whether religious, political, or economic. It functions either 1) by sustaining the conscious injunction by disavowing the “underside” of the injunction, or 2) by condoning the subject’s transgression of the conscious injunction. The obscene excess-supplement is the underside of the big Other, the injunction toward jouissance the subject becomes caught up in as she fetishizes the je ne sais quoi of the objet a. It is not something we can remove from ourselves or our societies without collapsing into psychosis. The most we can hope for is the recognition of the underside, the unwritten rule, the obscene and irreducible difference within the symbolic autre that gives birth to our experience of reality.
Bibliography


Figures

**Figure 2.1:** Pathological relationships between the Subject, the *objet a*, and the Other

- **Psychosis:** Subject does not relate to external Other.
- **Neurosis:** Subject defines herself in relationship to the Other, oriented toward *objet petit a*.
- **Perversion:** Subjectivity is projected onto the Other, fetishizes relationship via *objet petit a*.

**Figure 2.2:** Pathologies and Mechanisms

- **Anxiety** → **Repression** → **Neurosis**
- **Foreclosure** → **Psychosis**
- **Disavowal** → **Perversion**

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1 Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 195.

2 Ibid., 76.