That Obscure Object (a) of Drive: 
The Politics of Negativity in Derrida and Žižek

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Abstract

This paper investigates the theoretical nature of negativity and its ethico-political implications in Derrida and Žižek. It argues that there is an illegitimate shift in Derrida’s thinking of the limit from his early essay on *différance* to his later political formulation. With *différance*, the limit is strictly immanent within the system; however, the limit is transposed to the outside and to a figure of impossibility in his later work. Such a move has crippling implications for politics because it elevates passivity and imperfection into ethical principles, thus rendering radical political intervention inconceivable. The paper thus offers an alternative theorization of the limit from a Žižekian point of view. Central to this view is the ontological status of *object a* in psychoanalysis. The ontology of lack, thought from the point of view of the drive, is both self-fissuring and self-engendering. It posits an immanent negativity that, at the same time, constitutes the positive condition for radical political intervention. Politics, in this view, is not founded on primordial passivity or constitutive imperfection. Rather, it involves an element of subjective decisionism that, through the enactment and the embodiment of the limit, brings about symbolic suspension and allows new political sequences to unfold.

Keywords

*différance, object a, negativity, ontology, ethics, politics*

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1 The original draft of this paper was prepared for the seminar *Late Derrida* I took with Eleanor Kaufman in the Spring of 2008. I am indebted to Prof. Kaufman’s many insightful comments and generous encouragement. I also owe Shu-mei Shih my sincere gratitude for her support and mentorship. Finally, my thanks go to three anonymous reviewers whose discerning comments have pushed me to substantialize many claims I had carelessly or unjustly made in the original draft, and to expand my discussion in certain directions I had previously not thought of. Because it is not feasible to address all of their concerns without fundamentally altering the theoretical premise of this work, I assume the responsibility for making selective decisions, leaving some issues to future investigations.
How then can we situate the function of the Other? How . . . are we to posit a difference? For it is clear that the Other cannot be added to the One. The Other can only be differentiated from it. If there is something by which it participates in the One, it is not by being added. For the Other—as I already said, but it is not clear that you heard me—is the One-missing.

—Jacques Lacan

Introduction

In his recent article in memory of Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek makes an unexpected acknowledgement of the theoretical affinity between his work and Derrida’s notion of différance:

Having written many pages in which I struggle with Derrida’s work, now that the Derridean fashion is fading away, it is perhaps the moment to honour his memory by pointing out the proximity of my work with what Derrida called différance, this neologism whose very notoriety obfuscates its unheard-of materialist potential. (“Plea” 114)

While the Derridean fashion may be lingering a bit longer than Žižek thought, it is interesting to see Žižek, a Hegelian dialectician par excellence if ever there was one, concede a certain degree of theoretical convergence with a self-proclaimed non-dialectical thinker who repeatedly criticizes the oppositional model and teleological trajectory inherent in the notion of the dialectic, and who is never tired of subjecting it to a deconstructionist mode of analysis. To add insult to injury, Žižek often

2 References to Hegelianism in this paper come with the proviso that Hegelianism signifies different things to different thinkers. For example, Hegel is often criticized for presupposing the Absolute Spirit that undergirds the teleological movement of history. Moreover, the dialectical method comprising the triad thesis, antithesis and synthesis, is often (and erroneously) attributed to Hegel, who never employs these terms. In this regard, the Hegel who espouses teleology and the tripartite structure of dialectics is justifiably criticized from a deconstructionist point of view. Žižek, however, rejects the standard reading of Hegel and tries to formulate the Hegelian dialectic in terms of the negative self-relation of the One, so that his Hegel is really a “different” one. For a more nuanced view of the legacy of Hegelianism, see the co-authored volume Contingency, Hegemony and Universality by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Žižek. At certain points in the book, each author takes on the terms in the title in the context of Hegel’s thought and speaks of the relevance as well as the pitfalls regarding the Hegelian formulations of these concepts. Yet the
writes disparagingly on topics related to deconstruction in general and Derrida’s notion of democracy-to-come in particular, whereas Derrida, to my knowledge, does not even care to engage with Žižek’s criticism. A brief assessment of these two thinkers’ intellectual backgrounds reveals the incompatible nature of their works. How, then, should we understand Žižek’s acknowledgement and bring these two formidable thinkers together?

Žižek’s admission raises three questions: (1) How should we treat his previous polemics against Derrida? Are we to see in his most recent acknowledgement a deviation from the Lacanian/Hegelian framework that constitutes the backbone of his theoretical inquiry—or, is there after all a consistency in his critical assessment of Derrida? (2) How are we to understand the “unheard-of materialist potential” in Derrida’s notion of différance in relation to Žižek’s own work, and to Lacanian psychoanalysis in general? (3) Most importantly, by way of a rethinking of différance, can psychoanalysis and deconstruction jointly provide us with an other perspective on the question of the ethical/political and politics—a perspective which, unlike today’s predominant rational-deliberation approach, takes impossibility as the foundation of its theoretical enquiry?

Given, on the one hand, Žižek’s own recognition of the proximity between différance and his work—which takes lack and materialist creationism as its central theses—and, on the other, his polemics against many of the late Derridean ideas, it seems that his laudatory remark may just be eulogistic, the tribute paid by a thinker to an intellectual rival who has passed away in order to demonstrate a sense of

fact that Hegel features heavily in the book testifies to his significance in contemporary debates on politics (which a reductive version of Hegel does not deserve); the authors’ diverse interpretations also show that labels such as Hegelian and anti-Hegelian cannot be pinned down once and for all; their meaning is in constant flow, depending on which Hegel (or rather which dimension of Hegel’s thought) is given more prominence. This paper wishes to stress the complexity of the contemporary critical reception of Hegel. But in an attempt to advance Žižek’s argument, I will first look at the opposition he draws between Hegel’s speculative reflexivity and deconstruction’s anti-binary, anti-dialectical thrust, and gradually reveal the falsity of this initial opposition.

To avoid terminological confusion, it should be noted that the two terms are employed rather loosely by Žižek. In For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor, Žižek sets forth the distinction between the political and politics. While politics consists of “a separate social complex, a positively determined sub-system of social relations in interaction with other subsystems (economy, forms of culture . . .),” the political is construed as “the moment of openness, of undecidability, when the very structuring principle of society, the fundamental form of the social past, is called into question” (193). The political, in this view, designates the moment of a symbolic rupture which is associated with the act. Yet, in many of his later writings, the act is often referred to as an ethical act. This terminological conflation perhaps has to do with the collapse of the ethics-politics distinction, a central thesis I wish to develop in this paper.
solidarity, if only on the most superficial level. However, as is characteristic of Žižek’s style of writing, some of the same passages can be found in his books published prior to Derrida’s death and are repeated here almost verbatim, with different combinations and different agendas in mind. Therefore, the eulogistic context may only provide an occasion for him to restate and recast his earlier ideas in a new light. In order to unpack the theoretical complexity of Žižek’s perplexing statement, I suggest that we examine not only his specific references to Derrida but also engage Žižek at the thematic level. For example, after a brief mention of *différance*, Žižek devotes the key portion of the article largely to an exposition of *objet petit a*, distinguishing two libidinal economies associated with the object in psychoanalysis. Thus, instead of looking for direct references to Derrida in his other works (which are few and often disparaging), we had better look at Žižek’s discussion of the status of the object in psychoanalysis. In this paper, I will argue that Žižek’s laudatory pronouncement is in keeping with his generally unfavorable view of the politics of deconstruction, and that the materialist reading he suggests needs to be contextualized on three fronts: (1) the topology of the limit in the development of Derrida’s thought; (2) the ethico-political implications of different topological configurations of the limit; (3) an alternative theorization of the limit from a psychoanalytic point of view, one that adheres both to the primacy of the impossibility of self-sameness and to the necessity of a subjective decisionism capable of radical intervention, thus articulating a theory of praxis neither grounded on the actor’s autonomy and conscious sovereignty nor mandated by the ethical injunction of the Other.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section traces the development of Derrida’s thought from the early text “*Différance*” to the more explicitly political texts of his later phase. The force of *différance* initiates a radical questioning of presence and unicity. Derrida shows that *différance*, both as differentiation and as deferral, undermines the stability of presence and reveals its inherent limit. Thus, to claim a self-sufficient identity is to suppress the force of *différance* that truncates identity from inside. Derrida’s late turn to political theology and the messianic promise is still very much informed by his notion of *différance*, especially the idea of undecidability. However, the nature of the limit now undergoes subtle modifications. If in the “*Différance*” essay the limit is inscribed within the system, there is a shift in his later work on politics, where the limit is transposed to the outside and to a figure of impossibility: justice, unconditional hospitality to the Other, democracy-to-come or a messianic without messianism. The figure of the impossible is an empty formal category; as such, it is
not to be attained but only experienced. The experience of the impossible means the
traversal of the gap between ideality and its singular instantiations. This experience
of the impossible involves an act of translation. Yet by its nature translation has
failure inscribed in its very enactment. The aporia thus lies in the double bind of
necessity and failure: on the one hand, the figure of the impossible as ideality
demands emulation or approximation from the domain of determinacy; on the other
hand, its empty formalism not only renders conceptual determinations and positive
institutionalization of ideality impossible, but also forbids a mode of approximation
à la Kant’s regulative idea (The Specters of Marx 81). Hence, translation is at once
necessary and impossible, and the resultant passage in-between (i.e. the gap or the
famous quasi-transcendental) is a highly contingent formation, subject both to the
imperative of transcendental ideality and the changing dynamic of contextual
singularity. Paradoxically, instead of being paralyzed to a state of immobility, the
political realm actually gains momentum from this aporetic relation. Aporia,
therefore, is not a dead end or impasse, but a “nonpath” (Derrida, “Force of Law”
244) by virtue of which movement and transformation are set to work. In this sense,
the political relevance of deconstruction is to be sought in the intermediate space
between transcendental ideality and mundane historicity; or, in Gayatri Spivak’s
words, the space of the political in deconstruction is “caught between an
ungraspable call and a setting-to-work” (23).

In the second section, I pose the question of the ethico-political implications
of Derrida’s politics and examine the issue from a Žižekian point of view. Žižek’s
question is whether the shift from the early to the late Derrida is a legitimate one.
Undecidability in the early Derrida is undergirded by the internal rupture of
différance, whereas the limit of discursivity in the later Derrida is marked by the
impossible ethical injunction of the Other. To put it another way, if différance is the
force of deconstruction, is it possible to conceive of a deconstructionist politics
without compromising its initial insight? Is it possible to think together the internal
limit and positive measures without recourse to an external reference? Both
Derrida and Žižek reject the idea of an originary plenitude. However, in Žižek’s
view, by substituting empty formalism for the Thing, Derrida de-ontologizes the
content without changing the terms of the structure. As a result, the politics of
deconstruction is hamstrung by the same passivity (i.e. responding to the Other’s
call) and imperfection (i.e. the impossibility of living up to the Other’s call) that
have informed Lacan’s account of desire.

The central argument of this paper is then this: the theory of the object in
psychoanalysis offers us an alternative way of conceptualizing the limit. The limit
(or lack) in Žižek’s appropriation of Lacan is both fissuring and engendering. To grasp this materialist creationist thesis in psychoanalysis, we need to examine the ontological status of the objet petit a as well as its topological location in the economies of desire and drive. The structure of desire is informed by the logic of loss; according to this logic, castration (viz. the advent of language) deprives beings of primordial jouissance; the speaking being’s relation to the object thus revolves around the finding/refinding of the object. In this schema, an original object, though practically unattainable, can be ontologically ascertained by inference and is topologically situated outside the realm of the phenomenal world.

From the point of view of desire, language constitutes the ultimate horizon of psychoanalysis. However, is Lacan merely a philosopher of language, a philosopher who trumpets the omnipotence and omnipresence of the symbolic and the inevitability of our being subject to castration? Is it true that lack in psychoanalysis serves no other purpose than that of a negative reminder of the price we have to pay for our being-in-the-world? The incommensurability between language and jouissance, according to Žižek, is not Lacan’s last word. The drive economy confronts lack not as something lost that needs to be found again, but as lack itself. The paradox resides in the fact that it both affirms the mortifying effect of language on jouissance and recognizes in the drive-satisfaction another type of being (surplus-jouissance). Žižek argues that Lacan’s theory of the drive is couched in materialist creationist terms; it allows us to formulate the dialectic of nothing and something not as two opposing states of being but as two modalities of the same ontologically incomplete being. The drive object is neither the Thing itself nor the phenomenal stand-in for the lost Thing; rather, the object is generated by the drive’s circular movement around the lack. The limit, in the manner of the drive, is simultaneously negating and enabling: on the one hand, the object’s constitutive negativity is a hole in the whole of the objective reality; on the other hand, the lack itself functions as the place of taking place, a placeholder where radically new sequences unfold.

Hence, the title of this paper: the psychoanalytic object illustrates two distinct ontological schemas in desire and drive; it is obscure because the metaphysical distinction of being and non-being is inadequate to explain the creationist ontology—wherein lack and its ontologization only minimally differ from each other by what Žižek calls a parallax view—exemplified by the object of drive. When the object is gazed upon directly, it reveals the lack around which the drive circulates. The drive is at the same time the affective investment that provides minimal consistency to our symbolic existence. The materialist side of the drive
accounts for the possibility of collective coexistence, while its negativity prevents materialism from slipping into essentialism. In political terms, it suggests that the domain of politics is never self-identical and subject to constant reinscription. Moreover, because lack and its positivization are strictly correlative, radical intervention (e.g. suspension of the symbolic order through direct confrontation with the lack) and positive political measures (e.g. subjective investment in movements and activities) become indistinguishable and require a subjective decision to identify, in the pragmatic domain, what Lenin calls the “weakest link” in order to effectuate a radical break.

The ethico-political import of the limit put forward in Žižek’s formulation of the drive economy significantly revises that propounded by Derrida: while both agree on the incomplete nature of political ontology, their divergence lies in the ways they conceptualize the limit. Derrida is vigilant enough not to give in to the temptation of positing a primordial object, but he nonetheless “transcendentalizes” the form of that object and thus remains within the structure of desire (Žižek, “Plea” 131-132). The drive economy, on the other hand, offers a model of immanence that envisages a theory of agency in subjective and yet non-voluntaristic terms. In contrast to the constitutive non-fulfillment of desire, subjective decisionism involves an axiomatic leap of faith which asserts that the event, instead of being still-to-come, has already taken place. In this view, the coincidence of lack and being turns the crippling effect of impossibility into a positive condition for radical political intervention.4

In the final analysis, if we are to describe a general theoretical trajectory in Derrida and Lacan, it can be argued that in Lacan there is a shift from desire to drive, whereas in Derrida there is a reverse movement. The aim of this paper is to explain Žižek’s perplexing statement. It argues that the materialist potential of différance can be better real-ized with Lacan’s concept of the drive rather than Derrida’s own quasi-transcendental formulation, because the critical edge of différance is lost when the source of legitimacy is posited outside the system and subjective decisionism is subordinated to a primordial passivity in the face of the Other’s call.

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4 For an informative comparison of Badiou and Derrida, see Antonio Calcagno’s Badiou and Derrida: Politics, Events and Their Time. A similar critique of Derrida, but approached from the perspective of time, is advanced there by Calcagno.
In “Différance,” Derrida demonstrates that conceptual determination is achieved by neglecting the play of différance. In his reading of Saussure, Derrida points out that while Saussure is attentive to the principle of difference (i.e. differentiation or spacing) in meaning production, there is a dissociation between language as a system of differences and speech as its temporizing dimension. According to Saussure, language as a system operates on the dual basis of arbitrariness and difference. Saussure’s theory allows us to see the primacy of difference in meaning production. This account, however, leaves out the historical dimension of language.

Saussure is not unaware of the mutual implication of language and speech: “Language is necessary in order for speech to be intelligible and to produce all of its effects; but the latter is necessary in order for language to be established; historically, the fact of speech always comes first” (qtd. in “Différance” 12). Language and speech are two sides of the same system or entity that always implicate each other. However, this aporetic relation remains under-theorized in Saussure. Derrida’s reading focuses on the tension between langue and parole, the synchronic dimension of language as a system and the diachronic dimension of language as speech (12-15). Without fully engaging the essential discord between language and speech, Derrida argues, Saussure erases the play of différance fundamental to the dynamic function of language.

Derrida’s analysis shows that différance is an interval that makes signification possible by differentiating the present from what it is not. However, it also marks the limit of signification because “this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present” (13). The first consequence we can draw from this discussion is that the limit that undermines the constitution of a self-identical meaning is strictly immanent to the system of signification.

In addition to the self-fissuring motif, Derrida also develops this notion in other directions. What follows is a brief discussion of some key features I find important for situating his early notion in the context of his later thought.

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5 The use of the word “itself” is not intended to objectify Derrida. The “Derrida” in the subheading refers not to the person but to the body of his work. Cf. the chapter division in Žižek’s The Indivisible Remainder.
To begin with, Derrida argues that “différence is literally neither a word nor a concept” (3). Différence marks the point of discursive failure that defies intelligibility and cognitive appropriation. Following this line of reasoning, deconstruction is often taken to mean destruction, understood as an operation that displaces, disrupts and undermines the coherence of a given order. Différence, in this view, becomes an anarchic force that wrecks havoc but reaps no fruit. To focus Derrida’s challenge to presence solely on negativity, however, is to miss the dynamic interplay between order and violence; to see différence articulated only as an irrational force aiming at unsettling the structure—be it linguistic, psychic or philosophical—is to commit oneself to the metaphysical fallacy of the Two.

According to Derrida, différence “exceeds the alternative of presence and absence” (20). He approaches the question of presence and absence by thinking the two poles together in a non-oppositional manner. What is foregrounded in the “Différence” essay is not the opposing forces—différence on the one hand and the metaphysics of presence on the other—but the idea of the inseparability between the conditions of possibility and impossibility of the system. Thus, no either/or choice is at work here: even when Derrida criticizes the metaphysics of presence, he is not taking the whole philosophical tradition down. He acknowledges his indebtedness to the philosophical tradition, though he never accepts this inheritance uncritically.

Naming is an act of mapping, designating and systemizing. It is an act of metaphysical pretension that tries to seize and render différence divisible and categorizable; that is, to take away the letter a and disinvest it of the critical functioning of spacing and temporization. If différence is neither word nor concept, neither presence nor absence, neither reason nor unreason, what can we say about différence? The fact is that we cannot say anything about différence—in the sense of making propositional statements about its nature or essence. “There is no essence of différence,” says Derrida, “it is that which not only could never be appropriated in the as such of its name or its appearing, but also that which threatens the authority of the as such in general, of the presence of the thing itself in its essence” (25-26). Derrida’s gesture toward the de-ontologization of presence is a radical one. There is no such thing as “as such” because it implies a sense of complacency, an uncritical attitude that takes things for granted. And yet even though différence is not being, it would be too facile to say that it is nothingness, that it is not. This would bring us back to the grand metaphysical opposition between being and non-being, which again misses the peculiar position différence occupies.
While *différance* is resistant to naming, it is *not without* a name. The double negative does not result in the positive. What I intend to suggest with this double negative is a singular space that escapes nominal determination but also gets itself “enmeshed, carried off, reinscribed” in the function of the system (27). To understand the paradoxical status of *différance* as being simultaneously not a name and not without a name, we should probably turn to what Lacan calls the *ex-timate* relation: *différance* is outside of discursive imposition and yet, paradoxically, also inside this very same discursive domain, simultaneously contained by and exceeding the structure. In other words, even though *différance* resists representation, it nonetheless manifests itself in representation, albeit at its limit. That is why *différance* cannot be said to exist squarely outside nominal designation. It is more like a diagonal cut that hollows out a self-enclosed representation, leaving a trace of heterogeneity in the midst of internal homogeneity (Badiou 42-43). *Différance*, therefore, cannot be pinned down, once and for all, with the language and ideas associated with the philosophical category of being. *Différance* appears, but never long enough to present itself in the form of being. We can even venture to say that it appears to disappear, a vanishing point that pulsates between appearing and disappearing.

To recapitulate Derrida’s challenge to the metaphysics of presence, we should be aware that the purpose of his critique is not to turn presence on its head and champion the primacy of absence. Rather than reading *différance* as a purely negative operation, it is more fruitful to see it as indexing a liminal space or a place of non-place. *Différance* can be considered as a set of operations staging the dynamic tension inherent in the supposed homogeneity of a given system. It is not the dialectical movement in which a thesis is challenged and superseded by an antithesis in a sequential manner. Rather, I wish to take *différance* as a way of thinking the negative self-relation of presence.

As previously stated, the philosophical heritage is critically preserved. That is to say, philosophical concepts and vocabulary are retained not for the purpose of asserting a metaphysical proposition; rather, terms with sedimented meanings are subject to re-signification by uncovering the concepts’ unacknowledged preconditions, their gaps and lapses. This would account for Derrida’s continuous use of philosophical vocabulary to register the unacknowledged play of *différance*. This double gesture—simultaneously critical and affirmative—is evident in the way he approaches the legacy of Marxism:
[I]f there is a spirit of Marxism which I will never be ready to renounce, it is not only the critical idea or the questioning stance (a consistent deconstruction must insist on them even as it also learns that this is not the last or first word). It is even more a certain emancipatory and messianic affirmation, a certain experience of the promise that one can try to liberate from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-religious determination, from any messianism. (The Specters of Marx 111)

To understand Derrida’s famous, or notorious, claim that deconstruction has always been “a radicalization . . . in a certain spirit of Marxism,” (116) it is crucial not to lose sight of the double gesture of affirmation and critique. Marxism is important for Derrida because of the emancipatory promise it affirms. However, the programmatic nature of its historical claims or assumptions contradicts the fecundity of its liberating ideal by reducing Marxism to a set of dogmatic guidelines. Inheritance, in the Derridean sense, requires an effort to counter dogmatic adherence and blind acceptance. Deconstructive questioning, in this regard, becomes indispensable in our dealing with the past. Deconstruction, nonetheless, is irreducible to mere critical questioning. As Derrida puts it, “a consistent deconstruction must insist on [critical questioning] even as it also learns that this is not the last or first word” (111). Our criticism of the past necessarily comes with an acknowledgement of our indebtedness to the past. In the case of Marxism, inheritance means critiquing the Marxist ontology while also retaining “a certain emancipatory and messianic affirmation.” Deconstruction affirms, but it is always “a critical, selective, and filtering reaffirmation” (114) of a debt. We must be faithful not just to what is explicitly proposed or enunciated in the philosophical discourse, but more importantly to its underlying vision and its problematics. Inheritance is, thus, “a task,” (67) laboriously tried out, rather than a given, comfortably assumed.

The other prominent point in the above passage is the distinction between form and content. Derrida distinguishes the teleological thinking that observes the law of historical necessity from a messianic thinking that strives towards an emancipatory promise, formally empty and yet nonetheless capable of mobilizing politics towards an ever-receding horizon of completion. It is a promise that serves as the condition of both possibility and impossibility for determinate political action. Derrida calls this “a messianic without messianism,” a formal structure of emancipatory promise, de-ontologized and without content:
What remains irreducible to any deconstruction, what remains as undeconstructible as the possibility itself of deconstruction is, perhaps, a certain experience of the emancipatory promise; it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism, an idea of justice—which we distinguish from law or right and even from human rights—and an idea of democracy—which we distinguish from its current concept and from its determined predicates today. . . . (74)

In this passage, several key terms (deconstruction, promise, messianic, democracy, justice) are put in proximity with each other. We can even include other late Derridean terms here, such as hospitality and friendship, in order to identify a key feature running throughout Derrida’s later works. While each term has its specific occasion of enunciation, the commonality through which they are conjoined here is the formality of each, which safeguards it against determinate translation/predication. However, it should also be noted that the safeguarding function of these figures of impossibility is not an immobilizing force preventing the act of translation. These figures are both the ideality toward which each translation moves and the stumbling block which each necessarily encounters. Consequently, what is forbidden here is not translation as such, but translation mistaken for literalization.

The influence of différance undoubtedly leaves its imprint here. For Derrida, it is crucial that justice be an unfathomable category vis-à-vis the discourse of law and rights. The critical thrust of undecidability, therefore, remains relevant in Derrida’s thinking of politics. If Derrida’s dealing with the Marxist legacy exemplifies a deconstructive politics, it is “political” only in a very counter-intuitive sense. Then, how are we to understand the passage from theory to praxis in deconstruction? Does such a passage exist in deconstruction? Since in Derrida’s early works, the objective is to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence through analysis of language and textuality, the lack of sustained engagement with social reality renders obscure the practical applicability of deconstruction. The viability of deconstruction to bear on socio-political issues is thus called into question.

6 Hent de Vries suggests that many of the late Derridean concepts (e.g. hospitality, friendship, messianicity and democracy) share the same empty formal structure; however, he also points out that there is a “convoluted trajectory”—a constant process of folding and unfolding—in the development of these Derridean concepts and themes (173).
Together with the hubbub caused by the de Man affair, deconstruction in the late 1980s seemed to lose its credibility and appeared, more than ever, like a textual strategy to be studied in literature departments, but not a political one that could be extended outside the ivory tower of academia.  

Criticisms of Derrida’s early works were often couched in terms that set social immediacy against discursive mediation. Were such an opposition accepted, deconstruction would amount to mere intellectual gymnastics, removed from our situated existence in the world. To these charges Derrida first responded with an article entitled “Force of Law.” In this text he maintains that his early works—despite the apparent lack of concern for social issues—already constitute “oblique discourses on justice” (235). Deconstruction is an oblique discourse and must remain an oblique discourse on justice because “one cannot speak directly about justice, thematize or objectivize justice, say ‘this is just,’ and even less ‘I am just,’ without immediately betraying justice, if not law” (237). The demand made of Derrida to provide a theory of agency that addresses the concrete and determinate political situation is not without risk. The demand to deal directly with the “real world”—when unchecked by its formal impossibility—risks reproducing the same metaphysical structure that gives rise to social problems in the first place. Derrida warns that politics without justice is like the blind leading the blind, engaging in an endless repetition of the same:

Now, what would a “history,” a science, or a historical action purporting to be resolutely and ingeniously extradiscursive or extratextual actually do? What would a political history or philosophy, at last, realistic, in truth do, if they did not assume—so as to be confronted by and to account for the extreme formalization, the new aporias, the semantic inconstancy—all the disquieting conversions that we have just seen operating in these signals? . . . Let us answer: they could do very little, almost nothing. They would miss the hardest, the most resistant, the most irreducible, the othermost of the ‘thing itself’. Such a political history or philosophy would deck itself out in ‘realism’ just in time to fall short of the thing—and to repeat, repeat and repeat again, with neither consciousness nor memory of its compulsive droning. (Politics of Friendship 81)

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7 Even after Derrida’s death in 2004, the popular reception of deconstruction is still haunted by its alleged obscurantism and the negative repercussions of the de Man affair. See, for example, Jonathan Kandell’s obituary in The New York Times.
If we take social reality at face value without inquiring into the aporías involved in the discursive formation of reality, we are likely to repeat and reproduce the same problems that we set out to address. If we demand a decision by turning a blind eye to undecidability, we are likely to fall prey to the metaphysics of presence by assuming the sovereignty of a conscious subject. These are the liabilities of a “realistic” history, and these problems can only be addressed, if not solved, when we are able to move away from social immediacy (without ignoring it) and recognize the discursive mechanism that has constructed what we understand as reality.

To unpack the aporetic nature of Derrida’s politics, let’s break down the terms that we have mentioned thus far. On the most fundamental level, Derrida’s politics is structured by three key components: justice, law, and the space in-between. On the one hand, justice is impossible because it is a form with no content; on the other hand, laws are inadequate because they are subject to contextual variations, and therefore lack the ideality of justice. The gist of Derrida’s argument is that these two realms are not two separate entities subsequently entering into relationship with each other; rather, their conditions of possibility and impossibility are mutually implicated to such an extent that one is as much constitutive of the other as it is constituted by the other. There is no law without this appeal to justice; otherwise it will lose its legitimacy. Neither is uncontaminated justice imaginable, for this would amount to pure abstraction and have no practical bearing at all.

Given the centrality of this logic of contamination in Derrida’s thinking of politics, we can locate his politics in the intermediate terrain between legal positivism and universal justice. And the key question will be that of movement, which is conceived of as an unceasing process of negotiation and translation without finality or settlement.

To illustrate the working of this logic, let’s turn to Derrida’s discussion of the democracy-to-come. Rather than speaking of democracy as such, Derrida insists on temporizing democracy in order to emphasize its undecidable nature. He contends that no concrete forms of democracy in history can claim to reflect its ideal essence, because it is not the question of approximation that is at issue. He explains:

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\(^8\) Notwithstanding its avowed political turn, deconstruction has not appeased suspicion and criticism from the left. Although the points of contention are no longer the crude opposition between discursivity and an extra-discursive reality, mutual distrust persists nonetheless. For the Marxist responses to Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, see the excellent collection *Ghostly Demarcation* edited by Michael Sprinker.
At stake here is the very concept of democracy as concept of a promise that can only arise in such a diastema (failure, inadequation, disjunction, disadjustment, being “out of joint”). That is why we always propose to speak of a democracy to come, not of a future democracy in the future present, not even of a regulating idea, in the Kantian sense, or of a utopia—at least to the extent that their inaccessibility would still retain the temporal form of a future present, of a future modality of the living present. (The Specters of Marx 81)

The difference between democracy-to-come and future democracy, as Derrida points out, is that between a never fully self-identical democracy and one whose perfection is denied in the present but reserved for the future. A future democracy is only the present in disguise or a modified present because it still alludes to the possibility of future attainment. In contrast, the futurity accorded to the to-come temporality is distinguished from the developmental sequence implied by the word future. It is not that democracy in its present manifestation is a failure, as measured against a perfect model. Democracy fails, necessarily so, because failure is inscribed in the formal definition of democracy.

The same can be said of other terms in Derrida’s political lexicon. For example, justice has “no horizon of expectation” (“Force of Law” 256); it is the opening to the unexpected, a welcoming gesture that announces a renunciation of property and sovereignty. The opening to alterity in justice conditions its to-come temporality; justice will never arrive but remains forever to come. Justice, then, is an ethical demand that sets in motion an ever-renewing configuration of determinate measures. Since there is no determinate content of what justice would signify, the experience of justice is also the experience of the impossible. To traverse the experience of the impossible is to demand that “one calculate with the incalculable” (244). In other words, faced with the impossible, we still need to make decisions. Because these two domains are defined by an aporetic relation, they are connected in such a way that they overlap but never fully converge. This impossibility of being fully self-identical with justice, then, accounts for the proliferation of concrete measures in the political domain.

By way of conclusion, the logic of contamination is premised on an unconditional openness to a figure of the impossible (e.g. the Other’s call). Since the call is unfathomable and therefore impossible to translate, on the one hand it prevents justice from ossifying into a set of laws and rules, while on the other it induces further translations and allows us to effectuate transformation in the domain
of politics. As Derrida sums it up, “Perhaps this is why justice, insofar as it is not only a juridical or political concept, opens up to the avenir the transformation, the recasting or refounding [la refondation] of law and politics” (256-57).

Derrida-for-Žižek

While Derrida’s early concept of différance is clearly linked to the later concepts of justice and democracy-to-come, a careful exegesis would also reveal their subtle differences. The later Derrida’s emphasis on justice would seem to suggest a concrete application of différance. Yet, this gesture toward the politicization of différance is carried out in spite of—rather than because of—its immanent negativity. There is still an unquestionable fidelity to the negative, but the nature of negativity now undergoes subtle modifications. As the horizon that summons political interventions, justice is the fundamental concept in Derrida’s thinking of the political: “For in the end, where would deconstruction find its force, its movement or its motivation if not in this always unsatisfied appeal, beyond the given determinations of what one names, in determined contexts, justice, and the possibility of justice?” (249). We learn that the dynamic of change hinges on the formal impossibility of justice, but what would the political consequences be if the appeal is always unsatisfied and justice always approached obliquely or, as it were, asymptotically?

To be sure, justice exceeds the law in a manner akin to the relationship of différance and the established system. However, their commonality is not informed by the same critical procedure. In fact, a modification of the nature of the limit occurs by virtue of a questionable move, namely, an illegitimate transition from a constitutive undecidability of the One to an unconditional openness to the Other. Most criticisms rightly perceive a continuing fidelity to the force of différance while underemphasizing the different positions from which this critical questioning is articulated. Given that both justice and différance thwart the completion of political ontology, what concerns us here is rather the topological location that gives valence to the limits of political ontology. Thus in his reading of Derrida’s Specters of Marx, Laclau states: “The illegitimate transition is to think that from the impossibility of a presence closed in itself, from an ‘ontological’ condition in which the openness to the event, to the heterogeneous, to the radically other is constitutive, some kind of ethical injunction to be responsible and to keep oneself open to the heterogeneity of the other necessarily follows” (92-93). There is, undoubtedly, a strong Levinasian influence in asserting an unconditional openness to the Other.
However, given his early critique of Levinas, the relatively unproblematic acceptance of this Levinasian position in Derrida’s later works seems, to say the least, dubious.⁹

How does this questionable move bear on the relationship between ethics and politics, between justice and its concrete enforcement? With *différance*, the split is immanent to the One. However, this limit gets externalized when the figure of impossibility is transposed from within the One to an empty category outside the One. While Žižek would agree that the undecidable is the critical lesson we should hold on to at all cost, its topological configuration in late Derridean texts is not without its problems. To understand Žižek’s polemics, we need to situate the issue not on the level of the undecidable but on the level of its cause.

According to Žižek, Derrida’s post-secular, Levinasian-inflected deconstruction turns passivity into a constitutive principle: responding to the call of the Other becomes the fundamental experience of human existence (“The Real” 65). We can refute Žižek’s reading by pointing out that undecidability is different from passivity. Moreover, we can argue that political decision and undecidability are not incompatible with each other. In fact, it is the figure of the impossible that *necessitates* ongoing translation of the impossible into determinate measures. Nevertheless, Žižek presents a convincing argument that calls our attention to two different levels of decision in Derrida:

[T]he gap is not only between the abyssal ethical Call of the Other and my (ultimately always inadequate, pragmatic, calculated, contingent, unfounded) decision how to translate this Call into a concrete intervention. Decision itself is split into the “other’s decision in me” and my decision to accomplish some pragmatic political intervention as my answer to this other’s decision in me. In short, the first decision is identified with/as the injunction of the Thing in me to decide; it is a decision to decide, and it still remains my (the subject’s) responsibility to translate this decision to decide into a concrete actual intervention—that is “to invent a new rule” out of a singular

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⁹ See “Violence and Metaphysics” in *Writing and Difference*, particularly 126. It is unclear how Derrida reconciles the tension between the empirical, personal other (*autrui*) and structural otherness (in the form of rupture). Moreover, Derrida states that “The infinitely other, he [Levinas] would say perhaps, can be what it is only if it is other, that is other than. Other than must be other than myself. Henceforth, it is no longer absolved of a relation to an ego. Therefore, it is no longer infinitely, absolutely other” (126). Then how do we account for the *a priori* postulation of the category of Otherness to which we owe our infinite hospitality in Derrida’s later writings?
situation where this intervention has to obey pragmatic/strategic considerations and is never at the level of decision itself. (69)

Because of our primordial passivity in the face of the Other’s call, the subject is not responsible for the first level of decision, namely the moment of madness that brings the whole symbolic edifice into suspension; rather, the subject, in the Derridean model, is responsible only for decisions that are bound by pragmatic concerns and conditioned by the existing state of knowledge. Two drawbacks ensue: if the decision to decide resides in the Other’s decision in me, the subject reacts before she becomes proactive in a situation. Thus, we have the primacy of passivity over activity. Second, since her practical intervention is always inadequate (due to the impossibility of fulfilling the Other’s ethical injunction), politics becomes a self-defeating enterprise, doomed before it gets started. Radical intervention, as a result of transposing our responsibility from a self-made decision to an other-made decision in me, becomes inconceivable in Derrida’s model.10

Must undecidability find its expression in the politics of constitutive inadequacy? Is there an essential relationship between undecidability and inadequacy? In the first section, we have argued that the logic of contamination relies on the gap between ethics and politics. This gap is the place of movement, the place of taking place. However, for Žižek the opposition between ethics and politics that initiates activities in this intermediary zone is not the strength but rather the symptom of Derrida’s politics (67). For one thing, Derrida de-ontologizes the content without changing the terms of the structure (more on this later). Furthermore, Žižek ties the spectral existence of the Other to a Lacanian theme—the perspective of the Last Judgment (In Defense 224).11 Although Žižek acknowledges that the Derridean model is far from a Stalinist discourse—one which would impose this perspective on the political domain with a brutal rhetoric of historical necessity (“The Real” 66)—it still operates with the same logic. The problem is that the perspective of the Last Judgment turns imperfection into a constitutive principle.

For Derrida, the ethical horizon paradoxically offers itself both as a motivating force for political intervention and a safeguard against radical

10 To avoid misunderstanding, I don’t think Žižek neglects the crucial role of the pragmatic measures to alleviate the predicaments of empirical others (e.g. women, indigenous people, workers, immigrants, etc.). His argument is essentially philosophical, logical and ontological rather than empirical.

11 For Lacan’s account of the perspective of the Last Judgment, see The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 291-301.
intervention. This inherent paradox sets a limit to the extent to which a political sequence is allowed to unfold, thus making the piecemeal reform politics *par excellence*. Consider the following passage in which Derrida touches on the question of praxis:

[T]here is always a measure, a better measure to take. I don’t want to forbid everything, but I also don’t want to forbid nothing. I certainly cannot eradicate or extirpate the roots of violence against animals, abuse and insults, racism, anti-Semitism, etc., but, under the pretext that I cannot eradicate them, I don’t want to allow them to develop unchecked. Therefore, according to the historical situation, *it is necessary to invent the least bad solution*. The difficulty of ethical responsibility is that the response cannot be formulated as a “yes or no”; that would be too simple. It is necessary to give a singular response, within a given context, and to take the risk of a decision by enduring the undecidable. ([emphasis added](For What Tomorrow 76))

The decision is taken in consideration of the event’s contextual singularity. The corollary is that the decision can never stake a claim to its universal applicability. The discrepancy between the two results in the overarching context of the undecidable. Therefore, if a decision must always be made “by enduring the undecidable,” this implies that imperfection is constitutive of Derrida’s politics. If the place of imperfection (“the least bad solution”) is essential to Derrida’s politics, then we are confronted with two questions: first, imperfection has in and of itself no

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12 While arguing against a purely reformist politics that keeps radical acts at bay, it is important to bear in mind that Žižek is not advocating a radical politics merely for the sake of its radicality. This is especially evident in his recent review of Alain Badiou’s *Logiques des Mondes* at Lacan.com. According to Žižek, Badiou’s philosophy does not allow political transformation to take place in any form other than the radical event of a revolution. His dismissal of the reformist project is therefore grounded in an opposition between evental revolution and non-evental reform. However, “One cannot ever be sure in advance if what appears (within the register and the space of visibility of the ruling ideology) as ‘minor’ measures will not set in motion a process that will lead to the radical (evental) transformation of the whole field.” For Žižek, politics proper consists not of a series of radical breaks, but of a “calm contemplation of the details of situations, states, and worlds with an eye to the discerning of ideologically veiled weak points in the structural architecture of the statist system.” In short, if Badiou fails to recognize the possible radicalism of the reformist measure, Derrida’s problem is that he forecloses such a possibility. While it can be argued that Žižek’s assessment of Badiou might be one-sided, the key point is the minimal difference between revolution and reform.
meaning; it is a relational concept as a result of its being measured against a presupposed totality which constitutes the meaning of the resultant condition (e.g. being imperfect or least bad). That is, only when we postulate an external point of view as the horizon of intelligibility can we claim the inadequacy of a specific political ontology vis-à-vis what is to come.

The second question concerns the specific ontological status accorded to democracy. Why democracy? Doesn’t it risk a return to the kind of political ontology that deconstruction sets out to question? As Laclau points out, “from the fact that there is impossibility of ultimate closure and presence, it does not follow that there is an ethical imperative to ‘cultivate’ that openness or even less to be necessarily committed to a democratic society” (93). We have already mentioned Derrida’s own disclaimer with regard to any positive representation or ontologization of democracy. For Derrida, the idea of democracy is to be distinguished from its various historical instantiations. The essence of democracy is “diastema,” a failure or inadequation (Specters of Marx 81). Democracy is a legacy we inherit from the Greeks without fully comprehending the meaning of our inheritance (Rogues 8-9). This problematization of the origin seems, at first sight, a continuation of the challenge to the metaphysics of presence in the spirit of his early writing. However, the extent to which the displacement of the origin can succeed is highly questionable. For Derrida, the ontological status of democracy is “not null and void” but rather has “not yet arrived” (8). The “hauntology” of Derrida’s democracy-to-come thus fails to achieve a radical hollowing out of ontological positivity in différance. Consequently, the late Derridean orientation signals a departure from, rather than a continuation of, his early works.

What would the political implications be if the essence of politics is a constant putting off [revoi] of the arrival of its ultimate meaning? Žižek’s polemics can be stated this way: Derrida still retains the pure form—however de-ontologized—as the virtual point of reference. Two consequences follow: (1) the Derridean ethics of non-realization “is to be opposed to the act in the Lacanian sense, in which the distance between the ethical and the political collapses” (“The Real” 67); (2) by pleading for a return to différance, Žižek is actually making a case for the theoretical proximity between psychoanalysis and deconstruction.

The theoretical proximity between deconstruction and psychoanalysis has received increased attention in recent years. In Derrida vis-à-vis Lacan, for example, Andrea Hurst attempts to yoke together the disparate strains of psychoanalysis and deconstruction. According to Hurst, despite his insistence on their difference, “Žižek inadvertently opens up avenues that lead toward an accord between Derrida
Wu / That Obscure Object (a) of Drive  89

and Lacan” (86). Hurst argues that the logic of aporia in Derrida resembles the Lacanian real in that both mark the limit of the symbolic and are capable of effectuating symbolic suspension. According to her, the opposition between ethics and politics in Žižek’s reading of the later Derrida is erroneous. In fact, the collapse of ethics and politics (or what Žižek refers to as the act) can be found in Derrida’s logic of aporia (87). While Hurst makes a convincing case for the theoretical affinity between the Lacanian real and Derrida’s différance, there are nonetheless some hasty moves in her argument. My reservations are not so much about her suggested linkage between the real and différance as her tendency to level off the topological differences as regards the limits of signification. That is to say, Hurst correctly perceives the theoretical proximity between différance and the real, but her analysis fails to account for the topological difference with regard to the location of the limit in Žižek and Derrida.

Another problem that undermines her otherwise perspicuous argument is her loose understanding of the nature of the Žižekian act. The problem with her account of the act stems from her conflation of contamination and collapse. Hurst’s core argument is that the quasi-transcendental (“the mutual contamination of immanence and transcendence”) already implies a contaminated terrain of the ethical and the political (88). Indeed, the quasi-transcendental evinces the logic of contamination; however, is the Žižekian act also informed by the same logic? Hurst confuses the logic of contamination with the Žižekian act that collapses the two domains. The difference between contamination and collapse, I would argue, is also the difference between desire and drive in psychoanalysis.

Let’s first examine the structural difference between desire and drive by taking a detour through Antigone. An examination of Antigone not only reveals two different modalities of the desire structure, but also anticipates the fundamental difference between desire and drive. Following Lacan, Žižek chooses Antigone to illustrate the ethical act. On the one hand, the choice is handy, for Antigone exemplifies Lacan’s famous definition of ethics by not giving up her desire. On the other hand, this choice poses some problems if we situate it within the general conceptual framework of Žižek’s writing, for Žižek himself repeatedly criticizes his own naming of Antigone, say in The Sublime Object of Ideology, as the ethical figure par excellence, and he regards Lacan’s Ethics seminar as an unsuccessful attempt to formulate a psychoanalytic ethics. On various occasions Žižek concedes that “Far from being the seminar of Lacan, his Ethics of Psychoanalysis is, rather,

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13 See Žižek’s preface to the 2nd edition of For They Know Not What They Do, xvii, xviii, and xli in particular.
the point of deadlock at which Lacan comes dangerously close to the standard version of the ‘passion for the Real” (Puppet 54). Given these well-known renunciations of Antigone, why would Žižek still feel compelled to use her as an example to score a theoretical point against Derrida? Wouldn’t Signe de Coufontane perhaps be a far better candidate to get his point across more forcefully? This question becomes even more vexing if we take into account the fact that Žižek likens both Antigone and Derrida to the structure of desire. If they both evince the same structure, why does he also claim that the Derridean model is unable to achieve the collapse of the ethical and the political as does Antigone?

It should be clear at this point that even desire has to be examined in both its unfulfilled and fulfilled states. And we will find out later that both fail to provide psychoanalysis with an adequate account of ethical responsibility. The choice of Antigone as a counterexample to the desire structure in Derrida’s politics merits our attention for two reasons: (1) It calls into question the fundamental ambiguity of democracy-to-come. The economy of desire serves to keep desire unsatisfied, yet by not giving way relative to her desire, Antigone realizes her desire and actually becomes the truth of Derrida’s democracy-to-come. Although it is true that the divine law Antigone appeals to stands over against the totalitarian state law of Creon, there is no denying that the way Antigone relates to the divine law also contains an element of totalitarianism; doesn’t Antigone behave like a little tyrant who, in her own way, pursues the divine law/the Thing single-mindedly, leaving no room for democratic negotiation and compromise? Thus, when democracy finally comes, it risks turning into its opposite—totalitarianism (Žižek, Defense 100-101; “The Real” 66-68). (2) It expresses an incapacity to engage in radical politics. While the democracy-to-come maintains a gap that precludes the totalitarian short-circuit, it also deprives itself of Antigone’s ethical sublimity (i.e. the ability to momentarily suspend the symbolic order). In Zupančič’s view, even though Antigone’s realization of her desire is inevitably a form of “terrorism,” we cannot deny the ethical dignity of her action (254). This provides a sharp contrast to the non-fulfillment of the Derridean model. Therein resides the theoretical double-bind of the economy of desire: on the one hand, the realization of democracy risks totalitarianism; on the other, the impossibility of radical political transformation is embedded in the very structure of non-realization.

While it is true that ethical dignity can be attained by not relinquishing one’s desire, we cannot equate Antigone’s attainment of ethical dignity with the “ethics of psychoanalysis.” For the relation between ethics and politics must involve at least the following factors: (1) the radical break that suspends the symbolic; (2) the lack
that renders the symbolic susceptible to transformation in the first place; (3) the specific manner in which ontologization takes place.\footnote{See also Ed Pluth’s interpretation of the Žižekian act. In Pluth’s view, Žižek correctly identifies negativity as an essential element in conceptualizing the subject of the act. However, his overemphasis on the negative obfuscates the signifying process from which the subject of the act emerges (117). I agree with Pluth’s assertion of the relation of negativity and signification, but I am inclined to say that Žižek is closer to Pluth’s own position than Pluth allows him to be.} The ethical splendor of Antigone confronts us with the limit of the symbolic; however, the manner in which Antigone relates to the Thing masks, rather than reveals, the fundamental nature of the lack.

A number of critics have noticed that Antigone’s perseverance implies the sheer magnitude of her tragic heroism, inaccessible to ordinary people (Zupančič 239-40). In Lacan’s Ethics seminar, Jacques-Alain Miller notes that the only way of attaining jouissance is through heroic transgression. However, the meaning of jouissance undergoes progressive changes in Lacan’s teaching.\footnote{There are different schools of Lacanian psychoanalysis. My choice of drawing on Miller’s account to elaborate a Žižekian thesis is justified in that Žižek’s Lacan is essentially Miller’s Lacan: “I must say this quite openly that my Lacan is Miller’s Lacan. Prior to Miller I didn’t really understand Lacan, and this was for me a great time of education” (Conversations 34).} Here we would need to focus on the change from the Ethics Seminar to the Seminar on The Four Fundamental Concepts, for it is in this transition that the drive becomes the major ethical reference for Lacan. According to Miller, in the Ethics Seminar, jouissance is impossible jouissance, characterized by its attainment through heroic undertaking and its resistance to signifier (“Paradigms” 21). Jouissance in this phase is construed as enormous and monstrous. It is an enormous void, but this void at the same time introduces the possibility of filling it. Thus, at this stage, Antigone is considered as the ethical figure par excellence.

From The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis onward, however, jouissance is normalized and scattered into pieces:

There is an extraordinary antithesis between The Ethics of Psychoanalysis and Seminar XI; in the latter Lacan arranges a new covenant between the symbolic and jouissance. In The Ethics you have a layout of jouissance’s massiveness as though positioned in a place normally out of reach. It calls for transgression, for a forcing, in an abyssal place, transgression being the only way to access it. In Seminar XI jouissance appears fragmented in objets a. It is not located in an abyss, it is in a little hollow: “the objet a is simply the
presence of a hollow, a void.” There is no accessibility to jouissance through heroic transgression, but by means of drive rethought, by means of drive as it follows a course that returns. (Miller, “Paradigms” 23)

The conjunction of signifier and jouissance signals Lacan’s later return from signifier to sign. A signifier relates to other signifiers. Affect has no place in the relational play of signifiers. A sign, in contrast, is defined in relation to person. Lacan’s renewed interest in sign brings the signifier to bear on the affective side of the subject. The question we posed at the beginning, “Is Lacan merely a philosopher of language?” can be answered now. Aside from the meaning effect, language also produces the being effect, a “new kind of reference which Lacan called object, object a . . . It is a kind of reference which is precisely something, not nothing, and which we cannot get to, which we cannot take as a member of the set of signifier” (Miller, “Language” 34). Following Miller’s reading, the object a is the materialization of a void. This is a rather paradoxical notion, but we should recall what Lacan says about being: “the idea that being is and that nonbeing is not, I don’t know what that means to you, but personally I find that stupid. And you mustn’t believe that it amuses me to say so” (XX 22). Between being and nonbeing there is para-being, or the matter which is at once not-being and not not-being, “a strange form of positivity,” as Suzanne Barnard puts it, that real-izes the gap between the real and the symbolic (178, 183). This is a crucial development because it allows us to build on différence and also go beyond it by bringing together language and being in terms neither essentialist nor constructionist.

We have taken issue with Derrida’s politics of constitutive imperfection. Our claim is that failure is inscribed in the heart of every determinate translation as long as the spectral form of ideality is posited in advance. However, Lacan also says that “the essence of the object is failure” (XX 58). The question becomes: How can we

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16 The common (mis)understanding of Lacan is to see him as a thinker of the symbolic and the imaginary. As such, his accounts of the mirror stage and the unconscious as structured like a language are taken as the definitive statements of his theory as well as the ultimate horizon of psychoanalysis. The past decade has witnessed many admirable attempts to go beyond this limited version of Lacan and bring to light the significance of the real. This is not to say that the symbolic and the imaginary dimensions are less important than the real. Rather, it suggests that a comprehensive understanding of Lacan should be structured in a way resembling a Borromean knot, subjecting each domain to the analysis of the other two, with which each is necessarily imbricated. For the most recent scholarship on this issue, see Charles Shepherdson’s Lacan and the Limits of Language.
distinguish the failure of the object in psychoanalysis from the failure we criticize in Derrida? Are they of the same modality or of different modalities? My contention is that failure in psychoanalysis must be distinguished from the failure Derrida ascribes to the determinate translation of the Other’s ethical injunction. Failure, in the case of object \( a \), is an ontological rather than relational category. It fails \textit{not because of its inadequacy vis-à-vis something yet to come; rather, the object fails because it directly coincides with the ontological limit of reality.} Hence, the relation between the object \( a \) and the realm of determinacy cannot be simply be defined in terms of an asymptotical movement. We have concluded, apropos Derrida’s notion of justice, that the impossibility of being self-identical with justice accounts for the proliferation of determinate measures. Here in Derrida the force of the movement is sustained by the discrepancy between universal ideality and contingent pragmatism. Impossibility, as it were, is actually the \textit{consequence} of their non-coincidence. This formulation appears at odds with the one proposed before. In our discussion of the two levels of decision in Derrida, I have written that the figure of the impossible \textit{necessitates} ongoing translation of the impossible into determinate measures. Justice, then, is a spectral figure that \textit{causes} the failure of any determinate response and induces further attempts. How do we reconcile these two seemingly contradictory formulations? We have ascribed the properties of both impossibility and ideality to justice. Yet, strictly speaking, justice stands for ideality. Justice becomes a figure of impossibility only when it includes in its very structure the unattainability of its fulfillment. That is to say, the place of the impossible still \textit{results from} the discrepancy or non-identity between universality and contingency—only that the failure is now, by virtue of its spectral formality, \textit{anticipated} or assumed in advance.

The failure of the object \( a \), in contrast, does not result from the non-identity of universal justice and legal positivism. In fact, the impossible object serves as a vanishing mediator that allows contingent actions to proliferate (i.e. being the void where things take place) and, \textit{under specific conditions}, coincides with the universal (as in the case of the proletariat in 19th century Europe who, being a particular class, could nonetheless proclaim “what is just” and assert the universal validity of their cause). The failure of the Lacanian object therefore entertains a different relationship with the practical domain: instead of being a resultant aporia, the \textit{immanent ontological failure of the object is itself the positive condition that allows political sequences to unfold in the determinate realm}. The coincidence (or collapse) of something and nothing in the object \( a \) fundamentally changes the way we conceptualize the relationship between language and being. The problem is no
longer that language robs us of being, but that the ontological incompleteness of reality necessarily produces another kind of being in order to fill the lack. Therefore, the rhetoric of constitutive inadequacy needs to be distinguished from Žižek’s creationist argument because the object is in and of itself the failure of the objective reality, not a failure vis-à-vis some spectral form of ideality.

Furthermore, the fact that object a is normalized suggests a move from the extraordinary to the ordinary; jouissance is no longer some extraordinary Thing, but something accessible to everyone. This allows us to make the first distinction between desire and drive. In desire, the category of das Ding is preserved, and jouissance is normalized into bits and pieces as if they were miserable copies of the lost Thing. In drive, it is limitation that precedes transcendence; if desire remains unsatisfied because of the lack, the drive enjoys despite the lack; in this view, object a is no longer secondary or derivative, but acquires a primacy of its own. This leads to the second distinction: “whereas desire is always desire of the Other, jouissance is never jouissance of the Other” (André 289). In desire, the question revolves around the enigma of the Other’s desire. It is, therefore, an Other-centered economy, an economy founded on relationality. Object a as the object of drive, on the other hand, is not a relational concept. The drive-satisfactions pertain specifically to the self. It is not a relational concept because we can never experience jouissance of the other. Even in love, jouissance is always jouissance of the self.

Notwithstanding this remarkable shift in the later Lacan, a case can be made to prove that desire still retains a prominent role in his later writings (Zupančič 238-239). The nature of this shift is much more complex than a relation of substitution. Desire is not replaced by the drive as a new analytic category. Rather, with its accent shifted to the drive, psychoanalysis can no longer see object a either as the object of desire or as the object-cause of desire. It must now situate the object in its

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17 See Žižek’s discussion in Tarrying with the Negative 37; The Ticklish Subject 291.
18 See Joan Copjec’s Imagine There’s No Woman, particularly 64-65. Narcissism is love of the same, but it exists in at least three modalities: the symbolic, the imaginary and the real. Copjec dispels the predominant readings of narcissism according to which what we love in the other is the projection of ourselves, or that we love the other in the hope that s/he would love us back. In both cases, narcissism is articulated in terms either of imaginary projection or symbolic exchange. Copjec, in contrast, offers a reading of narcissism in terms of the real. What matters in love is “a corporeal experience of the self.” From the encounter with the other, we derive jouissance; jouissance here pertains not to the other but to the same. This corporeal experience always pertains to the same because drive is blind to the other, “a solitary business in the sense that one only ever experiences one’s own jouissance” (62).
“rival dimensions of desire and drive” (Dolar 72) and see how the relational dimension of desire interacts with the non-relational dimension of the drive.

In a review of Žižek’s work, Fredric Jameson correctly identifies jouissance as a fundamental psychoanalytic concept, one that makes possible a new conceptual framework for the psychic-political mechanisms involved in such critical political issues as racism and nationalism. However, this is only possible if jouissance is seen in relational terms:

In fact, it is the concept of the envy of jouissance that accounts for collective violence, racism, nationalism and the like, as much as for the singularities of individual investments, choices and obsessions: it offers a new way of building in the whole dimension of the Other (by now a well-worn concept which, when not merely added mechanically onto some individual psychology, evaporates into Levinasian sentimentalism). (par. 11)

Jameson’s observation helps us bridge the rival dimensions of desire and drive. The notion of the drive allows us to understand the affective investment of the self and the group, but it is desire that sets all types of human relations into play.

It should now be acknowledged that the shift from desire to drive is, in a sense, an inaccurate description. I should correct myself and say that the shift from desire to drive involves a parallax view. It is not that we have, on the one hand, the object of desire and, on the other, the object of drive. The objects of desire and drive are not two independent objects, but two fundamentally different ways of thinking the limit.

Now we are in a better position to grasp the materialist potential of différance. Materialism, in Žižek’s usage of the term, “means that the reality I see is never ‘whole’, not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which signals my inclusion in it” (“Plea” 128). Materialism is not the direct inclusion of the self in the objective reality. The reflexivity of Žižek’s formulation posits that the reality is never totally objective because its consistency is sustained by our libidinal investment in the object. The stain that at once eludes and sustains the objective reality is, of course, object a as the object of drive, a self-made libidinal embodiment that directly coincides with lack:

While in the case of objet a as the object-cause of desire, we have an object which is originally lost and coincides with its own loss, which emerges as lost, in the case of objet a as the object of drive, we
pass from the lost object to loss itself as an object. The weird movement called ‘drive’ is not driven by the ‘impossible’ quest for the lost object but is a push to directly enact the ‘loss’—the gap, cut, distance—itseld. A double distinction should be drawn. Not only between objet a in its fantasmatic and post-fantasmatic status, but also, within this post-fantasmatic domain itself, between the lost object-cause and the object-loss of drive. (“Plea” 128)

We have argued that despite Derrida’s claim that it is impossible to speak of democracy without reducing it to the law of calculability, he nonetheless retains the pure form of democracy. If the object in its fantasmatic status denotes a democracy that finally comes, we can indeed say that this is contrary to Derrida’s position. Their difference, however, lies in the way each approaches the object’s post-fantasmatic status—whereas the impossible object (justice, democracy or unconditional hospitality) causes every determinate attempt to differ and defer from its original intention, the object is construed by Žižek as both the enactment and the embodiment of the loss. Žižek’s point is to get rid of the pure form and directly confront the inherent limit (115-16). By relinquishing the virtual reference of the Other, the subject directly confronts social antagonism and assumes the ethical responsibility for her own action. Politics, in this view, is not a series of failed attempts vis-à-vis a spectral ideality; rather, it involves a groundless decision that enacts the reality’s immanent negativity in order to suspend the symbolic and allow new political sequences to unfold.

Instead of “following the necessary outcome of his initial ‘deconstructionist impetus’” (“Plea” 116), Derrida’s political turn actually compromises the radical potential différerance promises. Then how can we salvage différerance and allow it to live up to its materialist potential? At the beginning of this paper, I mention that Žižek positions himself as a Hegelian dialectician, while Derrida sees the danger of the oppositional dialectic and criticizes it accordingly. Obviously, they are not talking about the same dialectical procedure. Žižek’s Hegelianism posits a reflexive dialectic:

The Hegelian Twosome, rather, designates a split which cleaves the One from within, not into two parts; the ultimate split is not between two halves, but between Something and Nothing, between the One and the Void of its Place . . . the opposition between One and its Outside is reflected back into the very identity of the One. (For They Know Not xxvi)
The contradiction Žižek sees in the dialectic is not between two entities (this way, it already presupposes the self-identity of each entity which is subsequently subject to the dialectical movement) but within each entity. The reflexive—as opposed to the oppositional—modality of the dialectic between One and Other is also found throughout Lacan’s *Encore* seminar.\(^{19}\) One is even tempted to say that Lacan’s whole discourse on the feminine is an extended commentary on the dialectic of One and Other. Here we should note that the Other is not another One, not the absolute Other that demands unconditional justice or hospitality, but the Other as One-missing, a lack in the order of the One, and its positivization is called object \(a\).

Žižek’s radicalization of Hegelianism allows us to rethink the dialectic in non-oppositional terms. This new relationship of One and Other avoids the binary logic of the Two and also undermines the centrality of the One, not by enlisting the help of a spectral Other (than myself) but by exposing the One’s internal otherness. Given this new understanding of the dialectic, we wonder what if the emancipatory promise Derrida thinks worth preserving can be mobilized through a self-fissuring and self-engendering Oneness without recourse to the Other? What if the logic of the Two can be thought in a way not incompatible with deconstruction? That is, what if Derrida can be both a deconstructionist and a dialectician? To these “what ifs,” we can only tentatively reply that perhaps Derrida is more ambiguous on these matters than would appear in what turns out to be his definitive statement concerning the politics of deconstruction. Perhaps the materialist potential of *différance* can be salvaged if his radicalization of Marxism goes by way of the Hegelian self-reflexive dialectic rather than the Levinasian fidelity to an absolute Other. This is not as implausible as it sounds:

If we take, for example, that which makes a dialectical process possible—namely, an element foreign to the system . . . this foreign element, more originary than the dialectic, is precisely that which the dialectic is to dialectize, taking it into and including it in itself. This is why the most dialectical formulations of the dialectic, those which in general are to be found in Hegel, are always both dialectical and non-dialectical: identity of non-identity and identity. The non-dialectical does not oppose the dialectical, and is a figure that recurs continually.

I have constantly attempted to single out that element which would

\(^{19}\) See the epigraph for example. Also, in his twentieth seminar on feminine sexuality, Lacan constantly reminds us that psychoanalysis aims at investigating the signifier One: “instead of investigating a signifier (*un signifiant*), we must investigate the signifier ‘One’ (*Un*)” (20).
not allow itself to be integrated in a series or a group, in order to show that there is a non-oppositional difference that transcends the dialectic, which is itself always oppositional. . . . Basically, we are dealing with two concepts or two figures of the dialectic—the conventional one, of totalization, reconciliation and reappropriation through the work of the negative, etc.; and then a non-conventional figure, which I have just indicated. Clearly, between the two figures themselves there will also have to be a dialectic—in this case, between the non-dialectizable and the dialectizable. (“I Have a Taste for the Secret” 32-33)

This difficult and knotty interpretation of the dialectic from Derrida resonates well with Žižek’s view. Both Derrida and Žižek assert a fundamental non-relation of the Same; both ground the standard dialectical process (e.g. the oppositional model) on a pure, non-dialectizable difference; between the non-dialectizable and the dialectizable a second-level dialectic emerges. The non-dialectizable Other ex-ists in the One and de-completes the One. Lacan speaks of this open-ended dialectic of One and Other in terms of three registers: necessity (“doesn’t stop being written”), contingency (“stop not being written”) and impossibility (“doesn’t stop not being written”) (XX 94). The whole keeps inscribing the real with signifiers, but always fails to represent the real. As such, the whole reveals its inherent impossibility. Every attempt to integrate the real into the whole fails because the real impossible “doesn’t stop not being written.” However, every failed attempt induces further attempts. Thus, we have the necessity of a signifier that “doesn’t stop being written.” The whole that poses itself as always-has-been is revealed as a fragile and contingent formation. In the end, there is no permanent whole, but “just contingent punctual, and fragile points of stability” (Žižek, “The Real” 59). Rather than approaching impossibility obliquely, object a as the object of drive provides us a model to directly confront the impossible and turns it into a positive impetus for radical political intervention. Maybe it is when we start reading différance in this light can we unleash the materialist potential of the politics of deconstruction.

**Conclusion**

The possible conjunction of psychoanalysis and deconstruction has been argued solely from a Žižekian point of view. Derrideans might not agree with the materialist reading Žižek proposes here. But what would Derrida think of this new
materialist interpretation of *différance*? This is, of course, an impossible question likely to generate infinite surmises. Nonetheless, the exchange between Badiou and Derrida might shed some light on this matter. In a recent lecture on his second manifesto for philosophy, Badiou said that the decision to write a second manifesto is due to a change in the situation of philosophy today. When the first manifesto was published in 1989, philosophy was under internal siege. “The death of philosophy” was proclaimed by the philosophers themselves. But today the situation is different. The enemies are no longer those preaching the death of philosophy; rather, they are the false philosophers luring us into false security by proclaiming that philosophy is well and alive. When asked how this change affects his relation with Derrida, one of the targets of his criticism in the first manifesto, Badiou said—not without sentimentality—that toward the end of Derrida’s life, they made up and reconciled their differences. In Badiou’s view, there is profound violence in Derrida’s works in the 1960s and 70s. He then proposed to Derrida that he could write a secret book of his own philosophy, a more affirmative book that could initiate a new positive sequence. Derrida fell silent but did not reject the idea. Of course, the project did not materialize and Badiou’s suggestion remained merely that. The fact that Derrida did not reject it, however, already signals the possibility of a new interpretation of Derrida’s philosophy. Taking our cue from their exchange, how should we proceed in the post-Derridean era? Perhaps the first step is to overcome our anxiety over family resemblances and follow Žižek’s lead in envisaging a more productive encounter between Lacan and Derrida by giving a new materialist valence to the notion of negativity. *Perhaps.*

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20 The lecture was delivered on Feb. 5, 2009 at University of California, Los Angeles and was part of *Experimental Critical Theory Project* organized by Kenneth Reinhard.

21 This sentiment is also expressed in “Homage to Jacques Derrida” in *Adieu Derrida*: In fact, whatever the great differences between them [the signatories of the 60s in France], whatever the extraordinarily violent battles they sometimes waged against each other, particularly after May 1968, we can now see clearly, and not just in the abasement that strikes so many of those who pretend to give lessons, the extent to which they were the collective signatories of an exceptional moment of thought. This does not eradicate their divergences but allows us to pronounce, for all of them and each one separately, a renewed praise through a new understanding of what they said and wrote. (Badiou 35)

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