

ETHICS AND CAPITAL, EX NIHILO

lorenzo chiesa and alberto toscano

It is well known that, according to Lacan, authentic creation can only be *symbolic* creation *ex nihilo*. What is principally at stake here is the issue of the simultaneity between the initial "fashioning of the signifier" and the introduction of a void, a *nihil* (the Thing) in the primordial real. With the introduction of the first signifier, Lacan says, "one has already the entire notion of creation *ex nihilo*" which is itself "coextensive with...the Thing."¹ The *nihil* must clearly be associated with the void of the Thing, whose emergence is *concomitant* with that of the signifier, and not with the primordial real for which the notions of fullness and emptiness have as yet no sense (120).

The notion of creation *ex nihilo*, as the extraction of the symbolic signifier that concurrently annihilates the primordial real, provides the most conclusive explanation of Lacan's recurrent reference to the opening line of St. John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word." The word that was in the beginning — the Holy Spirit that created the unconscious *qua* "power plant" in *Seminar IV* — is

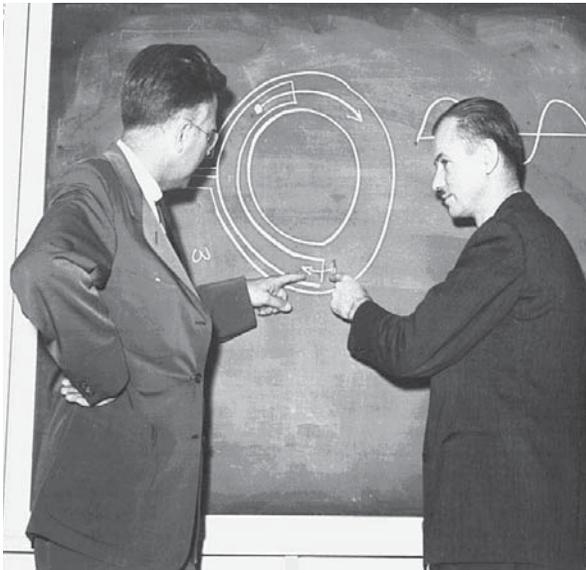
Aside from its muted incorporation into dogma, where it has lingered in a peculiarly uneasy and inconsistent truce with ancient Greek conceptions of physis, poiesis, and techne, the doctrine of creation ex nihilo — duly neutralized by the historical emergence of a science of being, and repudiated once again in the formation of modern, or post-Kantian, philosophy — has insistentlly shadowed political modernity in the twin figures of capital and revolt. As Jean-François Courtine and other contemporary scholars have attested, despite accusations of creationism, ever since Scotus and Suarez ontology proper has been fundamentally based on the bracketing of any real reference or proportion vis-à-vis an instance of creation, divine or otherwise. Ontology treats the being simply in terms of its being, as ens, res, aliquid, or mere object, but never really as ens creatum — which is to say, never as ex nihilo but as extra nihil. In this respect, ontology is logically indifferent to the distinction of infinite and finite, creator and created: it expels the creatural, only deigning, in its scientific zeal, to deal with entities.¹

nothing but “the entrance of the signifier into the world.”² Here one might well be tempted to ask: is there any more need to confirm that Lacan’s naïve “system” is marked by what Derrida names the “ideality of the signifier”?³ Contrary to what Lacan’s provocative formulas often seem to suggest, his creationism does not presuppose any transcendent principle. Indeed, “it is paradoxically only from a creationist point of view that one can envisage the elimination of the always recurring notion of creative intention,” which is instead tacitly “omnipresent” in evolutionism. Evolutionism relies on a divine creative intention in that “the ascending movement which reaches the summit of consciousness and thought” is deduced from a “*continuous process*” (213; emphasis added). In other words, evolutionism is teleological and theological by definition, and derives human thought from an evolution of matter that ultimately depends on the transcendent consciousness of God.

In contrast, for Lacan, the creation *ex nihilo* of the signifier on which human thought depends is truly materialistic; Lacan’s creationism is a form of anti-humanist immanentism, since it is grounded on the assumption that the symbolic is un-natural and not super-natural, the contingent product of man’s successful *dis*-adaptation to nature. Such an unnatural *dis*-adaptation, which obviously dominates and perverts nature, can nevertheless originate only immanently from what we name “nature” and thus contradicts the alleged continuity of any (transcendently) “natural” process of evolution. Matter does

An inchoate, perhaps symptomatic, index of the political persistence of the ex nihilo is to be found in the reactionary modernism of Ezra Pound. In his Cantos, Pound’s desire for anti-capitalist economic reform is invested in the obsessive figure of usury, the Dantean Usura. Like latter-day partisans of a just, adaptive equilibrium for the human oikos, Pound is haunted by the perverse theological resonance not of the commodity per se, but of the capitalist use of money — echoing Aristotle’s concern with the unhinging effects that money qua interest could have on the homeostatic functioning of the polis. Take these emblematic lines, from Canto XLVI: “Hath benefit of interest on all / the moneys which, it, the bank, creates out of nothing.”² For Pound, it is the creation of money ex nihilo by the banks that lies behind the circumambient cultural degeneration, the ravaging of any natural balance and the sterilization of the arts (“Came not by usura Angelico” [XLV, 230]). As Robert Casillo writes, “while Pound is by no means hostile to all forms of money, he obsessively attacks that form of it — namely usury — which he thinks the Jews created and which figures in economics as the virtual equivalent of the abstract and monopolistic Jewish God, who creates reality ex nihilo. At the same time, Pound is certain that Jewish usurers exploit honest labor and impede the forces of production.”³ Incidentally, we encounter here a key theme in the modern preoccupation with the ex nihilo, the opposition of creatio to production

not evolve. As Lacan will explicitly recognize in later years, matter is in fact only retroactively “materialized” by the contingent appearance of the signifier *ex nihilo*. Nature is *per se* not-One.



It is thus not surprising that Lacan explicitly criticizes Darwin as early as 1938. Why is Darwin completely wrong? a) Human evolution is not based on “natural” adaptation; b) human dis-adapted evolution does not depend on a particularly successful “struggle for life” — indeed, “everything tells against this thesis of the survival of the fittest species.”⁴ But the opposite is true: the struggle for life is a *consequence* of man’s — particularly successful — dis-adapted evolution. In Lacan’s own words, “aggressivity demonstrates itself

or fabrication, and its rampant hostility to any proper measure of what is made. Not the least of the objects of the divisive work of usury, the monetary figure of the *ex nihilo*, is indeed coupling, reproduction, the sexual relation: “It hath brought palsey to bed, lyeth / between the young bride and her bridegroom / CONTRA NATURAM” (XLV, 230). The organic community, which is also and above all an aesthetic community marked by the proper circulation of symbols and affects, is thus undermined by the system of “Jewsury,” the phantasmatic clue to Pound’s fascist proclivities. Thus he writes: “it is, of course, useless to indulge in anti-Semitism, leaving intact the Hebraic monetary system which is a most tremendous instrument of usury.”⁴ In other words, *Jewsury*, driven throughout by the abstract figure of the Hebraic God of the *ex nihilo*, is precisely that which hinders the community from being organically counted as one. It is both a force of profane nihilation and of uncontrollable proliferation: “The Evil is Usury, neschek / the serpent /...The canker corrupting all things, Fafnir the worm / Syphilis of the State, of all kingdoms / Wart of the common-weal, / Wenn-maker, corrupter of all things / Darkness the defiler, / Twin evil of envy, / Snake of the seven heads, Hydra, entering all things” (Addendum for Canto C, 798). Tellingly, for Pound it is this Hebraic drive within capitalism that destroys the symbolic stability of all religions, and ultimately “the tradition of the undivided light.” As Casillo perspicuously notes, “Pound blames the process of desymbolization on the usurers and Iconoclasts, a ‘power of

to be secondary with respect to [the human subject's] identification," which is to say that aggressivity cannot be explained in terms of a real vital rivalry ("the Darwinian idea according to which struggle lies at the very origins of life").⁵ That Darwin's "myth" has been so popular "seems to derive from the fact that he projected the predations of Victorian society...and to the fact that it justified its predations by the image of a laissez-faire of the strongest predators in competition for their natural prey."⁶

Certainly, Lacan believes that there must logically be a "moment" of creation *ex nihilo*, a point at which the symbolic emerges as an immanent consequence of the primordial real (213). Yet, the point of creation *ex nihilo* is also the point of infinity: what precedes it can be thought only as impossible (to think) — one cannot think the primordial real or the point of creation. As Lacan puts it, the symbolic "has been functioning as far back in time as [man's unconscious] memory extends. Literally, you cannot remember beyond it, I'm talking about the history of mankind as a whole."⁷ The symbolic started at a specific moment that *will have been* its (immanent) "absolute beginning" (214). This is also to say that the symbolic should be regarded as an asymptotic curve that is both limited in time and equal to the infinity of man as being of language; for the *parlêtre* there is nothing beyond the *parlêtre*. Hence the calculation of the duration or length of the asymptotic

*putrefaction' like 'the bacilli of typhus or bubonic plague.' Usury is a violent plague which infects everything and reduces everything to a state of undifferentiation."*⁵

It is not without interest to note that another reactionary modernist, Martin Heidegger, based his far-reaching diagnosis of the epoch not on the roaming automatism of the monetary ex nihilo — the Hydra of debt and credit — but rather on the techno-scientific foreclosure of the disclosing power of the nothing:

But what is remarkable is that, precisely in the way scientific man secures to himself what is most properly his, he speaks, whether explicitly or not, of something different. What should be examined are beings only, and besides that — nothing; beings alone, and further — nothing; solely beings, and beyond that — nothing....The nothing — what else can it be for science but an outrage and a phantasm? If science is right, then only one thing is sure: science wishes to know nothing of the nothing. Ultimately this is the scientifically rigorous conception of the nothing. We know it, the nothing, in that we wish to know nothing about it....In the altogether unsettling experience of this hovering where there is nothing to hold on to [i.e. anxiety], pure Da-sein is all that is still there.⁶

It is amusing to note that Heidegger — who ominously refers to the human being in the same text as "the lieutenant of the nothing" — did not contemplate what for him might have proved to be the most paralyzing thought, to wit, that science, in the shape of mathematics,

curve of the symbolic does not make sense: no *parlêtre* witnessed the passage from the ape to the *parlêtre*, and no *parlêtre* will be able to count the precise day, month, and year when the last atomic bomb will explode. As Lacan observes, the points of creation and destruction (of history) are a strict logical “necessity” (213), but they can be posited only through either retroactive or anticipatory mythical speculations. This is how the finitude of man *qua parlêtre* engendered by creation *ex nihilo* opens a “limited” space of infinity — the “absoluteness of desire”⁸ — that must be opposed to the eternal immortality of the un-dead, which is to say, the primordial real, pre- or post-symbolic “nature” as not-One.

Lacan famously states that every drive should ultimately be regarded as a death drive.⁹ What does this mean? The death drive contains the purest essence of the drive inasmuch as it corresponds to a subtractive element that emerges in concomitance with the mythical birth of the symbolic *ex nihilo*, that is, with the formulation of the first signifier that transforms the primordial un-dead real into the void of the Thing (or, more precisely, of the object *a*).¹⁰ The *ex nihilo* is therefore nothing but the *ex nihilo* of the death drive. The death drive is thus a name for the irrevocable anti-synthetic trait that forever separates the mythical un-dead (which is “killed” by the signifier) from its symbolic designation. As a consequence, the symbolic order as such relies on the conservation of difference

really wishes to know everything about the nothing. Or rather, as Badiou’s recent meditations on the empty set reveal, that there is a profoundly unsettling and unworldly operative use of the nothing. This nihil is not just what desymbolizes a religious economy of production, as in Pound, but that which undermines the very possibility of a world, of beings as a whole — the possibility which, for Heidegger, was the guiding feature of anxiety as an experience of the nothing borne by “pure Da-sein.”

*The opposition between the organic cycles of production and the irrational, divisive force of creation is not simply the purview of Pound’s fascist poetics. Indeed, the primary reference point or groundwork for any modern philosophy of production, Hegel’s dialectics, is founded in great part on the expurgation of the very idea of the *ex nihilo*. The modern image of production initially appears not as a secularization, but as a repudiation of the doctrine of the *ex nihilo*. The foremost reason for such a repudiation is the fact that, as Gildas Richard has recently noted, “the *ex nihilo* implies and signifies what we could call a nihilum of *ex* — the complete absence of any ‘coming out of.’”⁷ The *ex nihilo* is the denial of any real engendering, production, or fabrication (an argument already rehearsed by Saint Augustine), of any relationality or dialectic at work between creator and created. This means that creationism as such is a doctrine*

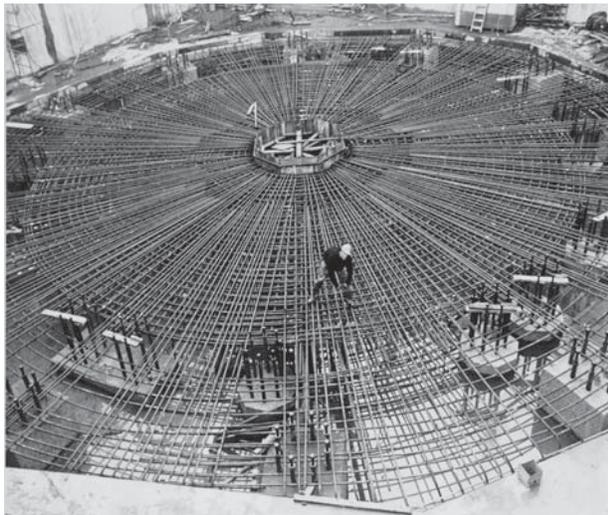
provided by the death drive *qua* subtractive drive. For the sake of clarity we should logically distinguish:

a) the death drive as *the subtraction from the primordial “One” qua absolute zero* (and from its alleged jouissance). This first and unrepeated movement corresponds to the instauration of the symbolic and it should be regarded as retroactive; in other words, it is here possible to consider the death drive as an “anti-synthetic” element only after the (supposed) primitive “synthesis” of the primordial real has been broken due to a contingent “material” change that is immanent to it. This point must be made clear in order to avoid the risk of surreptitiously identifying the death drive *qua* initial anti-synthetic element with any sort of transcendent “will” (212).

b) the death drive as *the repetitive subtraction from that which has become a One sui generis*. More precisely, as Lacan specifies, from the “distinctive unity,”¹¹ the “oneness as *pas-un*”¹² of the symbolic *qua* differential order, the order of the big Other. This is the death drive *stricto sensu*. It is only on the basis of such an abstract (and mainly pedagogical) distinction between these two movements or “phases” of the death drive that one can account for the difficulty that Lacan apparently experienced in deciding whether to assign it to the symbolic (as he did especially in the early to mid-fifties) or to the real (a more common choice in his later work). Indeed, the death drive is both that which retroactively transforms the

of isolation or of singularity, constitutively running the risk of obliterating the very act of creation or creativity itself, of nihilating the creator by not allowing any transitivity or expression between it and the creature. That is why Richard’s spirited, or rather spiritualist, defense of the creation ex nihilo is gnawed from within by this doubt: Does the doctrine of the ex nihilo really sustain a concept of the creator? Is it not rather the harbinger of its abandonment in the guise of a creature-effect (rather than a creature-product) that must turn itself into (the effect of) its own cause? Only thus can a being “become what it is,” become its own (irredeemably secondary) origin. The created being is unbound and abandoned by the nihil to itself in a manner that the product (or the progeny, or even the simple effect) is not. In this sense the ex nihilo is also the decision, the cut or break from any figure of religio, of the bond, or of a web of meaning that would vouchsafe the being’s relation to others. It affirms and articulates the being’s nonsense — precisely that materialist dimension which, in Badiou’s Manifesto for Philosophy, opposes philosophy to any figure of religion (“secular” hermeneutics included). Creating ex nihilo is thus the equivalent of originating an origin. Though the subjectivity delineated in the Hegelian dialectic is also marked by such a movement of retroaction — or torsion, to use the language of the “Lacanian” Badiou of Theory of the Subject — it is nevertheless a subjectivity that, in establishing the structure of historicity and productivity, refuses both creation

primordial un-dead real into the *ex nihilo* of the symbolic as the order characterized by death and, given its subtractive nature, that which *tends* to transform the symbolic into the un-dead “inorganic” real — it is only in the latter sense that Lacan can claim that the drives tend to the Thing (90).



One important point should be made completely unambiguous: during its second phase, the subtractive anti-synthetic principle of the death drive is necessarily, although paradoxically, turned into a *conservative* principle. This is the reason why the drives tend toward the Thing without reaching it — and what is more, are forced to *repeat* this tension. The death drive *stricto sensu* is a conservative drive precisely in that it is anti-synthetic. More specifically, if, on the one hand, the subtraction from the primordial “One” as

and its void as abstractions. *The ontological autonomy or isolation of the created is in no way produced, but rather posited by religious representation: the created, and the nihil from which it emerges, is an abstraction. Creation is thus for Hegel a word belonging to representation, or in Richard’s words, “the radical separation is abstraction and bears witness to a deficit of rationality.”⁸ In his critique of the religious representation of creation out of nothing, Hegel ultimately elides engendering (of the Son by the Father) and creation (of the world) in favor of the former, thereby undoing both the gratuity of the act and the ontological difference between creator and created: the world of production as a world without grace.*

In a long footnote to his maîtrise dissertation on Hegel, Louis Althusser supplemented the opposition of creation and production with a treatment of the former as the mythic alienation of the latter. Here again, creation ex nihilo appears as the foremost representative of an irredeemable break with a supposed circular economy. As Althusser writes, “On the purest conception, God is the circularity of Love; he is sufficient unto himself and has no outside. The creation is literally a rupture in this circularity; God does not need the creation, so that it is, by definition, different from him.”⁹ But this break is also reconfigured in terms of a secondary alienation, that is, as the alienation of the alienation of work — the mystification of productive work

absolute zero causes the formation of a “distinctive unity” that is better understood as a (big) Other, on the other hand, the subtraction from this Other will obligatorily entail a tendency toward a return to the zero that *cannot* be fulfilled. Indeed a complete subtraction from the symbolic Other, which would mean a (mythical) return to the un-dead “One” (as zero), is impossible insofar as the subtractive element is anti-synthetic (anti-One) by definition. Thus the primordial subtractivity of the death drive turns into the repetitive conservation of this same subtractivity.¹³

At this stage, we should be able to isolate four basic consequences of symbolic creation *ex nihilo*:

- 1) The death drive aims at the lost object while, at the same time and for the same reason, it is forced to “circle around it” without ever reaching it — the drive thus de-limits the lack as some-thing (satisfying).¹⁴
- 2) This same movement opens up the field for the “bad” infinity of a continuously unsatisfied desire that, if dissociated from the drive, would ultimately aim precisely at plunging itself into this lack. As long as the drive and desire remain associated in their relation to the real lack, however, they perpetuate the subject of the fantasy who veils this lack.
- 3) In being an inherently thwarted tendency, which is as such compulsively repeated, the jouissance of the drive *qua* partial

through the notion of a creation of nature:

This non-identity of the Creator and his creature is the emergence of Nature. This product of the God-who-works escapes his control (because it is superfluous for him). The fall is nature, or God’s outside. In the creation, then, men unwittingly repress the essence of work. But they do still more: they try to eliminate the very origins of work, which, in its daily exercise, appears to them as a natural necessity...In the creation myth this natural character of work disappears, because the Creator is not subject to any law, and creates the world ex nihilo. In God the Creator, men not only think the birth of nature, but attempt to overcome the natural character of this birth by demonstrating that creation has no origin (since God creates without obligation or need); that the fall has no nature; and that the very nature which seems to dominate work is, fundamentally, only as necessary as the (produced) nature which results from work.¹⁰

It is important to note that in this same passage, written long before Althusser’s much-descried formulation of a theoretical anti-humanism, Marxism is conceived explicitly in terms of the reestablishment of a “human circularity” — this would indeed be, for the young Althusser, something like the emancipatory underside of the myth of creation, as an image behind which revolutionaries can glimpse the attainment of a new circularity and even the end of “natural alienation.” The task of the Marxist revolutionary hermeneutist would thus be twofold: on the one hand, the recovery of the product and the workers’ metabolism with nature from the mystifications of creation; on the other, the practical passage from the mythical

satisfaction of desire through dissatisfaction should be related to a basic form of psychic masochism of the subject.

4) The masochism of the drive is never identifiable with a “death wish,” a will to commit suicide. Although the latter corresponds to the radical possibility occasioned by the paradoxical situation raised by the former, it is nevertheless unable to return to the absolute zero.

It should now be clear how Lacan’s recourse to the “creationism” of the signifier solves many of the impasses in Freud’s discussion of the death instinct. It does so precisely by problematizing Freud’s understanding of the death instinct as that which is *beyond* the pleasure principle. Freud initially formulated the death instinct as a principle that was directly opposed to the pleasure principle (*qua* life instinct that aims exclusively at avoiding unpleasure) in order to explain phenomena of masochistic repetition. This connection, however, was blatantly contradicted by the fact that the death instinct was concurrently regarded as a mere tendency to return to the stasis of the inorganic state, which was deemed to be equally operative in all living beings, from bacteria to humans. In addition, Freud surprisingly conceded that “the pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instinct,”¹⁵ and so the latter was inconsistently located beyond the former while, at the same time, including it. As Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis remark, the only

totality (love) of a self-satisfied God to the real totality of a self-satisfying society qua association of workers. Ronald Boer, in his stimulating commentary on Althusser’s early venture into Biblical scholarship, notes two interesting and interrelated points having to do with the Catholic “overdetermination” of the biblical “myth” in Althusser’s reading. The first is that the themes of self-sufficiency and the ex nihilo, obviously necessary to establish a link with the Hegelian and Marxist doctrines of alienation, are not a part of the story of Genesis. The second is that two millennia of convolutions over this matter are prepared by the “ambiguity of the first phrase of Genesis 1.1., which may be either ‘In the beginning God created’ or ‘When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth without form and void.’ The implication of the second translation, based on the indeterminate first word in Hebrew, bereshith, ‘in a beginning’ is that there was indeed something with which God began, rather than the vast emptiness that the doctrine of the creatio ex nihilo assumes.”¹¹ Ambiguity is also redolent in Althusser’s text, especially in what concerns nature. On the one hand, the myth of the creatio qua Fall (which Althusser intentionally superimposes) alienates men by imposing a domain of natural necessity as the effect of God’s “superfluous” act (natural alienation); on the other, as Boer remarks, “Nature is systematically excised: God is beyond the law, creates ex nihilo, which then becomes the absence of obligation and need, the tautological absence of the origin of creation, and the restriction of nature to the

way out of this impasse was for Freud to implicitly presuppose two kinds of pleasure principle: the pleasure principle *stricto sensu*, which would be in charge of maintaining a constant level of libido *qua* “life instinct,” and the so-called Nirvana principle, which would instead work “towards the reduction of tensions to nil,”¹⁶ thus serving the death instinct *qua* “essence of the instinctual.”¹⁷

Despite the fact that he does not openly confront Freud on this point, Lacan definitely refuses to consider the Nirvana principle in terms of the death drive.¹⁸ Adamant that they must be distinguished, Lacan claims that there is a fundamental “*division* between the Nirvana or annihilation principle, on the one hand, and the death drive, on the other [insofar as] the former concerns a relationship to a fundamental law which might be identified with that which energetics theorizes as the tendency to return to a state, if not of absolute rest, then at least of universal equilibrium,” which is to say, entropy (211; emphasis added). By contrast, the death drive “has to be *beyond* the instinct to return to the state of equilibrium of the inanimate sphere,” and this for three strictly interrelated reasons (212; emphasis added). Firstly, it entails a historical dimension insofar as “it is articulated at a level that can be defined only as a function of the signifying chain” (211). Put differently, the death drive can be applied only to human beings and not to other living beings — the death drive is not a death instinct. Secondly, such a historical articulation of the death drive presents itself in the guise of the repetitive “insistence” of

*product of work which then falls into nature at the moment of its production” — in other words, we are dealing with the alienation of nature.*¹² Of course, the ambiguity lies even deeper, to the extent that in his “Catholic” reading of the myth of Genesis, Althusser effectively fuses the very terms that Hegel, as we have seen, sought to keep apart: production or work, on the one hand, and *creatio ex nihilo* on the other.

We could hazard in this respect that Althusser’s later work, so pregnant with consequences for the likes of Badiou, hinges instead on opting for the break with circularity, the break with a humanity that would come to love and enjoy itself in its metabolic exchange with nature. This entails the “creationist” and anti-productivist realization that, when faced with the key problems of Marxist thought — the problems of (communist) revolution and (socialist) transition — the aleatory dimension cannot be circumvented. As Balibar put it in his 1995 preface to Pour Marx, it is a matter of grasping not just the necessity of contingency, but the contingency of contingency itself. Marxism is thereby reinvented as the science of tracking the nihil and extracting it from the empirical and ideological density of reproduction and its apparatuses, in order to turn it against them in revolutionary practice, in actions that are invariably also retroactions upon the reality of production itself.

the fundamental fantasy — in Lacan’s own intricate words, “of something memorable because it was remembered.”¹⁹ Thirdly, this insistence *qua* principle of conservation should at the same time be linked with a subtractive element that, for the reasons expounded above, must be differentiated from any sort of transcendent Schopenhauerian *Wille*: Lacan defines it as a “will to destruction” and later specifies that it should rather be understood as a destructive “will for something Other [*une volonté de quelque chose d’Autre*],” that is, “a will to begin all over again,” *ex nihilo* (212; trans. modified).

To cut a long story short, according to Lacan, the death drive could thus be said to be beyond the pleasure principle only insofar as we take the latter to express the Nirvana principle *qua* (alleged) tendency to return to an inorganic state. On the contrary, if one considers the pleasure principle as “nothing else than the dominance of the signifier” (134), as Lacan himself has it in *Seminar VII*, it is clearly the case that the death drive — on which the differentiality of the symbolic Other of the signifiers ultimately relies — is *not* beyond the pleasure principle despite the fact that it involves a (domesticated) masochistic jouissance, which itself aims at the “inorganic” un-dead. As a matter of fact, such a “beyond” of the Lacanian death drive always remains *within* the symbolic order (“should we find anything else than the fundamental relationship between the subject and the signifying

The most intricate investigation of the vicissitudes of the nothing in the domain of production, of the (eminently productive) tension between productio and creatio, is doubtless to be found in Marx. Yet another of the theological niceties introduced by capitalist accumulation is that it effectively injects the “abstraction” and “representation” of the ex nihilo, condemned by Hegel, into the materiality of production, exploding any restricted economy of the kind that haunted Pound’s work. Rather than the ultimately fallacious and anti-Semitic concern with the banks, the problem of the ex nihilo is posed for Marx in terms of the creation of value, and more specifically, of surplus value. As Enrique Dussel writes, “The constant irruption of surplus value ex nihilo (aus Nichts: from the nothingness of capital) gives the reproduction of capital a very special qualitative physiognomy.”¹³ Starting from the (very non-Althusserian) premise that the treatment of the value-form in Capital is in many respects a theoretical translation and displacement of the categories of the Science of Logic, Dussel nevertheless wishes to identify those moments when Marx’s “critical attitude” vis-à-vis his dialectical precursor determines crucial breaks, in which the ex nihilo plays a key role. The first index of Marx’s infidelity to Hegel is to be found, according to Dussel, in the lack of isomorphism between the passing over from Being to Essence in the Logic and the transformation from Money to Capital in Das Kapital. While the passage in the Logic is a move that takes place within the medium of a fundamental

chain in what Freud names the beyond of the pleasure principle?”).²⁰ The real of jouissance — that of the object *a* — is indeed always a real-of-the-symbolic. Moving from these presuppositions, Lacan also deduces that the death drive is precisely that which makes it *impossible* for the subject to (tend to) return to the pre-symbolic “inorganic”: Freud’s Nirvana principle should indeed make us “smile” insofar as “nothing is less sure than returning to [the alleged] nothingness [of the pre-symbolic].”²¹

In *Seminar VII*, Lacan enigmatically affirms that the ethical figure of Antigone is attached to the limit of the *ex nihilo*, which “is nothing more than the break that the very presence of language inaugurates in the life of man” (279). Hegel interpreted Sophocles’ tragedy as the struggle between the law of the family (Antigone) and that of the state (Creon). In opposition to this reading, Lacan identifies *three* different laws: the “transparent,” normative *nomos* of Zeus; the unwritten laws of the “gods below” which represent Zeus’ obscene side; and a “certain legality” that is “not developed in any signifying chain or in anything else... an horizon determined by a structural relation [that] exists only on the basis of [language], but reveals [its] unsurpassable consequence.” It goes without saying that both the first and second laws are ultimately represented by Creon; on the other hand, Antigone “denies that it is Zeus who ordered her to [bury Polynices]” and equally “dissociates herself” from

*identity and continuity (we could even speak of a circularity, following Deleuze’s reading of Hegel in Difference and Repetition), the latter “is a jump to infinity: it is an absolute change of nature.”²⁴ But the crucial shift takes place when we are faced with the question of the source of value. Here, in what is admittedly a philologically reckless move, for his clue Dussel turns to the late Schelling, whose lectures were well attended, if often derided, by the left Hegelians and assorted intellectual agitators. In a move reminiscent of Negri’s recent attempt at a materialist recasting of the *ex nihilo* in terms of living labor (in Time for Revolution), Dussel claims that Schelling’s positive philosophy (which argues that “even before the Being, there is Reality, as a prius of Thought and of Being,” such that there is “a creative source of Being from nothingness”) provides, with its doctrine of “the non-identity of Being and Reality,” the categorial source for Marx’s overcoming of Hegel. This Schellingian stance is for Dussel the only way of accounting for Marx’s treatment of surplus-value:*

When a worker works, he “reproduces” the value of salary in the necessary time. The reproduction of the value of salary is production from the Foundation of capital (the value of salary is from capital). But in the surplus-time of the surplus-labour the worker creates from nothingness capital, because he has no value-capital Foundation (works without a salary). This kind of “making” a product (commodity) without being founded in capital is what Marx technically calls: “creation of value” (Wertschoepfung)...The “living labour” is this “Source” (Quelle) from which the “creation”

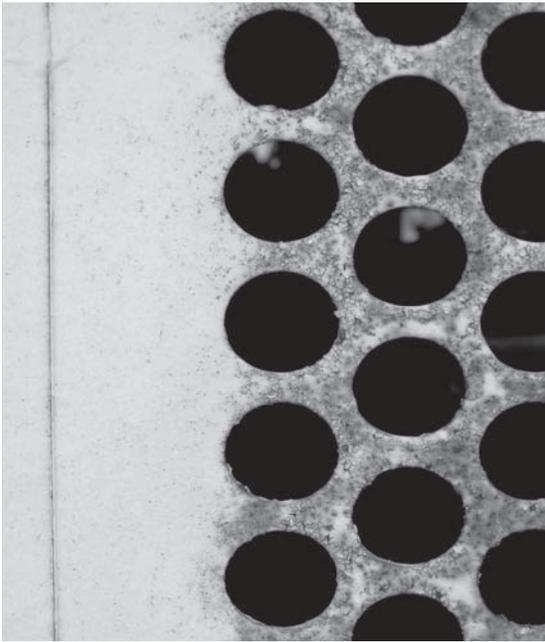
the gods below. Instead, Antigone “establishes herself on the limit” of the symbolic — the real-of-the-symbolic — which is to say, the structural “horizon” of “legality” given by the *ex nihilo* unveiled as such (278). Lacan also affirms that Antigone acts exclusively in the name of the following right: “What is, is.” This mysterious affirmation becomes clearer if we refer to a key lesson of *Seminar VI*, in which the real-of-the-symbolic is associated with the “elective *point*” of the relationship of the subject to his “pure being as subject.”²² Not only does Antigone’s positioning on the “radical limit” of the *ex nihilo* affirm the “unique value” of Polynices’ being independently of any reference to the specific content of his actions, but, more generally, the heroine is also obliged to “sacrifice her own being in order to maintain that essential being” which is the limit as such against Creon’s threat to obliterate it (283).

The most important point to grasp here is that Antigone deliberately embraces her “second death” — symbolic death — only in order to resist the *hubris* of Creon’s law, his “excessive,” unreasonable decision to condemn Polynices’ dead body to a second death. Antigone does not cede on her suicidal *demand* to bury Polynices because this is the only way she can make *desire* appear. In showing the void of pure desire through her “splendour,” she “saves” desire as such from Creon’s totalitarian attempt to obliterate the real-of-the-symbolic (the lack of the law), his imposition of an (impossible) universal good turned into a “criminal” good (240). Thus, we must conclude that Lacan’s *aesthetic ethics* — aimed at temporarily disclosing the void of desire (the void in the symbolic

(Schoepfung) of value derives. It is the Schellingian subject to which we have made reference. It is the creationist theory turned into critical economy.¹⁵

This turn thus involves the introduction of the distinction between creation and (re)production into the economy itself, with the effect of revealing a subject (living labor) that, in Marx’s words, does not produce “reproduction (Reproduktion), but rather a new creation (neue Schoepfung) and, more specifically, the creation of new value (neue Wertschoepfung).”¹⁶ But what does it mean for value to be produced ex nihilo by a subject? Is it not the case that the subject of living labor qua source is also a substance — thus its creation would turn out to be an other pro-duction, not, in Marx’s Paulinian turn of phrase, a new creation? If, as Dussel writes, the “fetish claim of capital is to be the creative Source of surplus value,” is discovering, in something like the absolute poverty of living labor, the alternative source of value, really a manner of revitalizing the disruptive force of the ex nihilo? Is it not, rather, by posing the subject of living labor “in its Exteriority by anteriority,” to say simply that living labor is nothing for Capital, but is in itself open, via a practice of appropriation, to a new circularity?¹⁷ Rather than resort to such an underlying creative source (and sources are, of course, never ex nihilo), perhaps it would be more productive to consider the ex nihilo not simply as a fetish behind which we can locate our own laboring bodies, but as a real feature of capital itself, of capital as subject. In an elegant critique of Dussel’s Schellingian

Other) beyond imaginary specularity — is, at the same time, an *ontological ethics*, an ethics of the preservation of being *qua* void of the symbolic.



Lacan's claim that the only right invoked by Antigone's temporary occupation of the *ex nihilo* (the place of pure desire) is "what is, is" should be read together with his other claim, made in a different lesson of *Seminar VII*, that Sadean suffering — to be understood as the perverse reification of the "edge" or

Marxism, Chris Arthur makes the following remarks:

By this act of constituting labour as wage-labour, capital constitutes itself and embarks on its inherent dynamic of accumulation. This cannot be explained on the basis that "labour is everything" any more than the claim that I am "nothing but" water and carbon explains my life-cycle. Once a system has achieved sufficient complexity, powers emerge that cannot be reduced to those of its constituent elements. The capital system exhibits precisely such emergent powers, regardless of whether or not it emerges from some such original "ontological act" as Dussel maintains. Successfully subsuming living labour, and consistently reproducing the capital relation, capital has a fair claim to assert "I am everything"...albeit that capital is "nothing but" labour, it has become autonomous, labour's own other.¹⁸

While labor may indeed be a source, it is capital that, according to Arthur, can claim to be the (ex nihilo) creator of value (and thus of the very conditions for production and reproduction). Moreover, in its "becoming" autonomous, Capital is both creator and created ex nihilo, in the sense that it is an effect that claims its autonomy and isolation from any other system, positing itself as its own cause.

If we cannot return to the circularity of a humanized natural metabolism, or to the heroic assumption of our own living labor, what would it mean for a politics of the ex

“margin” of the symbolic — is a “stasis which affirms that *that which is* cannot return to the void from which it emerged” (239, 261; emphasis added). In this case, the *ex nihilo* is fully foreclosed: the “static” repudiation of the void through reified pain finally risks losing being and mythically returning to the “un-dead” primordial real. On the contrary, in the case of Antigone, the *ex nihilo* is affirmed as such: being *qua* lack of being and desire as its metonymy are thus reinstated.

The difficult task that Lacanian ethics faces in later years involves resignifying the leitmotiv of the *ex nihilo* in a way that goes beyond the “suicidal” figure of Antigone. In other words, Lacan needs to detach pure desire — the momentary disclosure of the real or void of the symbolic, the *ex nihilo* as such — from (the failure of) tragic transgression, and indicate instead how the subtractive moment of ethics should be conceived as a precondition for a radically new symbolization. As we have seen, the death drive ultimately relies on the law of the *ex nihilo* as the “will” to *begin* again. At the risk of oversimplifying an intricate issue that has only been introduced here, one could go so far as to suggest that any possible political appropriation of Lacan’s “extreme” ethics of the *ex nihilo* should necessarily rely on the equation between what is radically “new” and what is “good.”²³

nihilo to really come to terms with the nihil at the heart of capital itself, to match or divert its creation? If “Capital names what Deleuze and Guattari call the monstrous ‘Thing,’ the cancerous, anti-social anomaly, the catastrophic over-event through which the inconsistent void underlying every consistent presentation becomes unbound and the ontological fabric from which every social bond is woven is exposed as constitutively empty,” who is the subject — the “voided animal,” as Badiou would put it — capable of matching, with its own creation, its own reinscriptions, the power of a symbolic system that is itself founded on, and reproduced by, the ex nihilo?”¹⁹ What kind of new dialectic would permit us to divide the nothing in two, to think an ex nihilo insubordinate to the pitiless axiom of capitalist self-valorization? And would such a communist use of the nothing, as it were, mimic the fundamental (death) drive of capital — creative destruction, accumulation by dispossession, crisis — or could it indeed, leaving all transvaluations aside, whether fanatical, reactionary, or messianic, do away with the form of value altogether? Finally, what collective acts and procedures, ex nihilo, will be capable of matching the new creations through which the Subject of Capital constantly reproduces its planetary hegemony?

1. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 122. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.
2. Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre IV: La relation d'objet, 1956-1957*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 48. See also *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 213.
3. Jacques Derrida, "Le facteur de la vérité," in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 464.
4. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1988), 177.
5. Lacan, "Les complexes familiaux dans la formation de l'individu," in *Autres écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 39.
6. Lacan, "Aggressivity in psychoanalysis," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 26.
7. Lacan, *La relation d'objet*, 50. All quotations from this text are my translation. See also *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 214.
8. Lacan, "The signification of the phallus," in *Écrits*, 287.
9. See Lacan, "Position de l'inconscient," *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 848.
10. The signifier kills the mythical un-dead, thus necessarily giving rise to the non-signified of death, to "that limit of the signified which is not reached by any human being." In this sense, the death drive should also be understood as "the fact that we realize that life is uncertain and ephemeral." *La relation d'objet*, 48, 50.
11. Lacan, *L'identification* (1961-1962), unpublished seminar, 28 February 1962. [My translation.]
12. Lacan, *Le désir et son interprétation* (1958-1959), unpublished seminar, 3 June 1959. [My translation.]
13. Massimo Recalcati points out that the conservative function of the death drive problematizes Freud's widely accepted
 1. See Jean-François Courtine, Suarez et le système de la métaphysique (Paris: PUF, 1990).
 2. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1970), XLVI, 233. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.
 3. Robert Casillo, *The Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism and the Myths of Ezra Pound* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 34.
 4. Pound, *Selected Prose of Ezra Pound: 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1973), 351. See also Casillo, *The Genealogy of Demons*, 34.
 5. Casillo, *The Genealogy of Demons*, 246.
 6. Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" trans. David Farrell Krell, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 84, 89.
 7. Gildas Richard, "Examen critique du jugement de Hegel sur la notion de création ex nihilo," *Les études philosophiques* 3 (2004): 298. [My translation.]
 8. *Ibid.*, 302. [My translation.]
 9. Louis Althusser, "On Content in the Thought of G.W.F. Hegel" in *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*, ed. François Matheron, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 1997), 168, n. 252.
 10. *Ibid.*
 11. Ronald Boer, "Althusser, Myth & Genesis 1-3," *Journal of Philosophy & Scripture* 1.2 (2004): 2. <http://www.philosophyandscripture.org/Issue1-2/Roland_Boer/roland_boer.html> (1 May 2005).
 12. *Ibid.*, 3.
 13. Enrique Dussel, "Hegel, Schelling and Surplus Value" (paper presented at "International Working Group on Value Theory" conference, Eastern Economic Association, 4 April 1997): 1. <<http://www.greenwich.ac.uk/~fa03/iwgvf/files/97Dussel.rtf>> (1 May 2005).
 14. *Ibid.*, 2.

- not least by Lacan himself — libidinal dualism. See *L'universale e il singolare: Lacan e l'al di là del principio di piacere*, (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 1995), 28. For our part, we are not completely convinced that this conservative function of the death drive really applies to Freud: too many issues remain indeterminate in Freud's own account of this notion...However, it is doubtless the case that such a Lacanian interpretation of the death drive undermines Lacan's own alleged fidelity to Freud's dualism and paves the way for a form of monism that would distinguish itself from the ingenuousness of Jung's unitary life energy.
14. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 168.
 15. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 18: 63.
 16. Jean Laplanche & Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1974), 102.
 17. *Ibid.*, 103. See also Lacan, *La relation d'objet*, 47.
 18. Nevertheless, Lacan acknowledges that Freud's notion of the death drive *qua* Nirvana principle is "very suspect in itself." *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 212.
 19. Lacan also makes the claim that "remembering, historicising, is coextensive with the functioning of the drive in what we call the human psyche." *Ibid.*, 209.
 20. Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre V: Les formations de l'inconscient, 1957-1958*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 246. [My translation.]
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. Lacan, *Le désir et son interprétation*, 27 May 1959. [My translation].
 23. As for this last point, one cannot wait for a detailed study of the possible connections between Lacan's ethical subject and Badiou's political subject, especially as expounded in *Théorie du sujet* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).
 15. *Ibid.*, 3-4.
 16. Quoted in *ibid.*, 4.
 17. *Ibid.*, 5, 4.
 18. Chris Arthur, review of *Towards an Unknown Marx: A Commentary on the Manuscripts of 1861-63 by Enrique Dussel*, *Historical Materialism* 11.2 (2003): 258-259.
 19. Ray Brassier, "Nihil Unbound: Remarks on Subtractive Ontology and Thinking Capitalism," in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004), 53-54.

