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The Limits of Representation and What Lies Beneath

Abstract

This article attempts to demonstrate that the failure to recognize real conflicts and bring them to representation is the chief yet highly inconspicuous reason behind the regression of ways in which we understand and describe today's reality. Crucially, this shortcoming has helped to elevate the language of economics to the rank of the basic idiom for the development of mutual representations. As my analyses show, the language of economy has become the principal medium of representation for communities separated by great distances and unable to recognize each other's existence as rooted in their respective realities, despite the fact that they are deeply interconnected. For this reason, although global dependence and conflict, including exploitation and exclusion, remain faceless, they do find some expression in symbolic indices of anonymous capital flows, represented and made legible in streams of numbers.

Keywords:

representation, language, symbolic field, conflict, economy, economics, globalization, production, critique

Today, reality is being remodeled in the tightening grip of global conflict, which has clenched the world, its form crystallizing as both immense wealth and abysmal poverty, the latter afflicting entire populations. Moreover, it has given rise to social movements, fostered technological innovation and provoked wars, transforming the languages we use to describe them as well as their underpinning theories and symbols. Today's world is global. This condition has been both invigorating and stifling; vice-like, it clamps humanity and crushes it into a single lump of the real.

Conflict and interdependence can be both productive and perilous. These processes have devastated the natural world replacing it with a quasi-natural force of unceasing production. The intensity of clashes and tensions has set in motion a “cognitive race” breeding concepts which solidify in practices that change the face of the world. This occurs on all levels of social existence from the domain of ideas and scientific pursuits to the drudgery in African diamond mines and on Indian garbage dumps.

Since the late eighteenth century, the defining conflict has simmered in the global North, then called the West. Crystallizing as the struggle between owners and workers, it has had repercussions that reached the far corners of the world where it spread along with colonial conquest and exploitation. However, the heart of this conflict – the place where the vice has been clasped the hardest – has been in the North where change would be squeezed from crushed social matter.

Recently, however, the global conflict moved elsewhere.

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The main reason behind the relocation of the global conflict has been *the outsourcing of production from the West to other world regions*. This statement, however, contradicts the belief that economy is now based on non-productive labor, while in fact the productive one and the jobs it has been creating remain the foundation of human existence.¹ Nevertheless, due to its scale and planetary reach, the invisible barrier separating production from ownership and consumption has brought about irreversible consequences. Even though the North continues to generate numerous ideas and objects, people employed there face the fundamental and diverse consequences of being only a snippet in the global workforce.

One new characteristic of this situation is that immense portions of human reality on both sides of the global conflict – that blends dispute and dependence – remain oblivious to each other, or at least appear highly blurred. Various populations only perceive one another through false clichés that obscure *real* dependencies,² hiding them, as it were, behind a distorting curtain. Europeans regard Africa chiefly through the prism of images circulated in the media, showing war, hunger and desperate mothers holding skeleton-like babies, or fall for visions conjured in all-inclusive holiday offers that lure customers with promises of comfort embodied by politely smiling servants in picturesque seaside resorts. The Chinese, on the other hand, perceive Europe as a noble yet peculiar backwater, where Gucci and Dolce Gabbana bags are made. In the eyes of North Americans, Muslims are the ones that blow themselves up. In turn, Muslims regard North Americans as crusaders and Jews. The global pandemic has only deepened the extent of these distortions, making us all even more myopic.

In consequence, huge swathes of human reality remain largely unrecognizable. This inability to perceive and acknowledge the existence of others can be termed “the limit of representation.”³ Regardless of how the various parties to the global system of interdependences would regard each other or present themselves, or how

1) This issue has been addressed by numerous critics, including Slavoj Žižek. In the book *Žižek, In Defense of Lost Causes*, 350; he polemicizes with Antonio Negri’s claim that work is premised today on immaterial labor in creating surplus value and that it is “carried out by free brains capable of innovation; freedom is the only value that doesn’t simply reproduce wealth but puts it into circulation.”

2) Italics are used in this article to mark concepts derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis as well as ones adapted to its requirements, foregrounding their non-intuitive meaning. In addition to words foreign to U.S. English are also in italics.

3) In the aforementioned text, Žižek addresses one issue that is vital for the use of this term in the context of the opposition between expression and representation: “the logic of political representation (the state – or political parties – as representing people) versus the logic of expression (social movements expressing the free creativity of the multitude)... Philosophically, this means Descartes/Kant versus Spinoza.” See *Ibid.*, 364. For the purposes of this article, the term “representation” is understood in Lacanian fashion as Hegelian mediation of expression with representation, leaning towards Kant/Descartes.

deep their interests and needs would be entangled in brutal conflicts and vital flows, they lack real representations of themselves and are not attentive to one another. Without playing a role in dramas that furnish the imagination, neither side occupies a meaningful place in the other's *imaginary*.

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For many decades, the global conflict was barely noticeable.⁴ Indeed, struggles like these can vanish and resurface. When they escalate, the enemy becomes a notable element in the field of view. At the same time, the social body is torn due to polarization as tribes gather around totems, which Carl Schmitt vividly described. However, when conflicts wane and are cast out of social thought, harmony is not automatically restored. As awareness of current struggles diminishes, social existence is impoverished and thought is fogged with rigid structures of ideological or symbolic hegemony.⁵ This has vital consequences, not only because *real* dependencies remain unacknowledged, but also owing to the fact that they are overgrown with tangles of entirely fantastic hypotheses and narratives. Rooted in traditional *fantasies*, these notions include conspiracy theories and urban legends adapted to contemporary forms of intellectual exchange, meanwhile their promulgation can indicate a regression to archaic justifications of helplessness.

Regressive processes afflicting thought and causing it to wither have been set in motion by one important factor. Because crucial antagonisms are denied recognition and political representation, large social groups – even entire civilizations – are not under immediate pressure, which weakens their motivation to consider their realities. As a result, people evade confrontation with difficult truths that could disturb their identities and incline them to seek remedies by closely examining power relations. It seems they have failed to fully comprehend the gravity of their situation and properly assess the margin of error in their consideration of force.⁶ Owing to the above, citizens of the global North do not feel obliged to take others into account and treat them seriously.

Incidentally, this was the situation faced by the Polish gentry after a wave of crises in the seventeenth century. Oblivious to the poverty and despair of its “others” – peasant serfs – the upper class also turned a blind eye to the increasing power of its neighbors. Today's consumerist societies in the global North likewise suffer from this convenient indolence, enabling them to sleepwalkingly pursue their own fantasies. In the planetary context, the faraway voice of the weaker is muffled by a cacophony of voices invoking dreams of hegemony and emboldening the North to keep consuming the fruits of dominance. This process has been described as a stunning onslaught of ignorance,⁷ the result of impoverishing public debate, a resurfacing of old prejudices, or as an intensification of fiery cancel-culture-style debates about words. Above all, however, it is tied to the blind spot that obscures the *real* nature of global power relations. Jabbering away, the North is dreaming its dream. Crucially, such oblivion to reality creates a strange sense of un-reality, which has been called post-politics, post-truth, or post-industrialism.

This article attempts to demonstrate that the failure to recognize *real* conflicts and bring them to representation is the chief yet highly inconspicuous reason behind the regression of ways in which we understand and describe today's reality. Crucially, this shortcoming has helped to elevate *the language of economics* to the rank of *the basic idiom for the development of mutual representations*. As my analyses show, the language of

4) Gauchet, *La démocratie contre elle-même*.

5) Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

6) The concept of power is used here in the sense outlined by Weil, *The Iliad, Or, The Poem of Force*.

7) Stiegler, *States of Shock*.

economy has become the principal medium of representation for communities separated by great distances and unable to recognize each other's existence as rooted in their respective realities, despite the fact that they are deeply interconnected. For this reason, although global dependence and conflict (including exploitation and exclusion), remain faceless, they do find some expression in symbolic indices of anonymous capital flows represented and made legible in streams of numbers.

The language of economics averages global interdependences and reduces them to homogenized symbols or numbers, papering over the fact that streams of wealth flow yet people struggle to survive, still suffering from colonial ravages – a historical debt that threatens the future. For instance, the term “emerging markets” bundles Poland with China, Chile and Saudi Arabia.⁸ Importantly, signs and symbols that have economic precision are too abstract for the mass imagination. As signifiers, they can never become *sovereign* [*signifiant-maître*], which would enable their decisions about social aspirations and indicate appropriate courses of action. These matters are still settled on the basis of traditional *imaginaries* which were formed within the boundaries of specific *ecumenes*:⁹ imaginative domains delimited by the heritage of past experience.

The Polish *imaginary*, for example, has been shaped primarily by the story of the nation's misfortunes.

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The distance that separates communities can be variously understood: in physical terms of geographical remoteness, and in terms of the utter foreignness surrounding the history and memory of other peoples. This is further complicated by the ethical myopia that arises from lacking a sense of a shared fate with others.

Ways of seeing determine how one regards others. The most common mechanism that causes certain groups to be invisible (although they ought to be noticed) consists in either failing to acknowledge them or distorting the relation between the fates of “us” and “them.” This strips the relationship of ethical and political meaning, or at least misrepresents it. The former occurs when one denies the existence of any connection between their condition and that of others, while the latter, when for instance, the roles of victim and oppressor are reversed.

Consequently, invisibility is not just an epistemological question, but primarily an ethical and political challenge.¹⁰ *One's place in the sphere of the visible is decided in continuous conflicts that distribute importance across the human world.* If anything is to be discernible, it must acquire a disclosing weightiness. If anything is to be remembered, it must be attributed the kind of gravity that enables its discursivization. Gravity can be defined by the volume and intensity of social desires and disinclinations distributed by defense mechanisms in reaction to specific phenomena. When libidinal *cathexes* exceed a certain threshold, the issue in question finds its place in the domain of representation and visibility. This used to happen through books and the press but today this role is played by global information networks, from TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram to Wikipedia and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.¹¹ In this new media environment, the weightiness of any issue is measured in clicks which are a condensed expression of the attention paid by millions of people around the world.

8) *Global Finance Magazine*, “Emerging Markets Hot Spots.”

9) The *ecumene* is the area populated by humans. This term was introduced by the Greeks to differentiate between *their ecumene* and the “*an-ecumene*” – uninhabited territories. In today's geography, *ecumene* denotes the entire human habitat. This article, however, employs this concept in a different meaning as areas connected through shared *imaginaries*, common *symbolic fields* or systems of representation. In consequence, these areas are only visible to themselves, focusing all attention, desire and *cathexes*.

10) Jacques Rancière has conducted pioneering research in this area, developing the category of visibility. See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

11) Stiegler, *States of Shock*.

Every descriptive language is necessarily based on a specific theoretical framework – an *imaginary* or a *symbolic field* based on some kind of ethical paradigm. Every frame of reference invariably foregrounds certain phenomena, relations, and conflicts, while marginalizing others. In the Polish master narrative, the center of gravity is clear: energy is primarily invested in the calamities of Poles, not the misfortunes of others.

The organizing character of all ethical frameworks also underlies discourses that have not been developed in order to pass judgements, specifically that of social sciences, which includes economics. Although their frameworks may appear neutral, these languages decide what emerges in the field of view, often selecting matters of concern on the basis of quantitative criteria and economic indices.

Accordingly, failing to represent certain fundamental conflicts and relations among global communities, as well as disregarding their political and ethical meaning, underpin descriptive languages rooted in a particular *imaginary* or system of signs. This pertains to most discursive orders in the global North. Like any other *discursive anomaly* – a stumble, loophole, or discontinuity – lacking representations of certain aspects of human reality is in itself *meaningful*, indicative of a latent ethical problem that carries political and social consequences.

Some incidents completely overhaul modes of representation causing formerly unrepresented elements to enter the *imaginary*, or correct previously distorted representations. In philosophy, such situations are called events. For example, the global South became visible after September 11, 2001 when the twin burning towers illuminated the irreversible change of the *imaginary* as the West became the global North. The result: war and terror returned after their expulsion in 1945.¹²

For this reason, I would argue that the 2001 WTC attacks mark the real end of the twentieth century.

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The misery and suffering of Islamic peoples whose lives were torn by murderous conflicts in recent decades, have been neglected in Europe's traditional *imaginary*, which is markedly averse to Muslims.¹³ At the same time, the global war waged by Islamist fundamentalism, culminating in 9/11 and conducted in alliance with reactionary Islamic regimes, consolidated their bad reputation owing to countless violent images and stories circulated in the media. As a result, the condition of the Arab world is not in any way an *imaginary* tie with the fact that *cheap energy derived from oil¹⁴ or uranium remains the foundation of Western prosperity and unlimited consumption*. It is the ratio of energy prices to those of grains that directly concerns hundreds of millions living in both the Arab world and the global North.¹⁵

The North seems addicted to energy obtained from fossil fuels. Without it, regardless of how ecological people's views are, their lifestyle would be impossible. However, neither Europe nor Japan control sources of energy and importing them from America or China is relatively expensive. Thus, Europeans need oil, gas, and uranium from countries that have ample supply, primarily Islamic states, which in turn suffer from constant

12) Cold War elicited fear of a different kind. When we consider September 11, responses to it seem to work like the fear of death; we all know that we are going to die, but we live as if this were not true, whereas sickness or death among our closest brings this fact to the surface.

13) Bobako, *Islamofobia jako technologia władzy*.

14) The cost of extracting one oil barrel in the USA amounted to \$36 in 2015 while in Saudi Arabia – \$10. Petroff, "What it Costs to Produce a Barrel of Oil."

15) Robbins quoted in Pobłocki, *Kapitalizm*.

deficits of foodstuffs, forcing them to buy these products on the global market.¹⁶ The problem is that the ratio of fuel prices to those of food is extremely unjust. *Basically, people pay a meager slice of bread for a full barrel of oil*, averting their eyes to avoid seeing the despair this exchange has brought to millions.¹⁷ Everyone in the global North is consuming oil and paying with bread, both the affluent and the poor. “How is this possible?” asks Martín Caparrós, who wrote a book on hunger in today’s world. “How is it possible that we all partake in this?”¹⁸

Most people in the global North would argue that fuel is actually very expensive, as can be easily observed at gas stations, while profits from the extraction of natural resources in Africa or the Arabian Peninsula are reaped by oil and energy companies, their shareholders, and local oligarchs such as the Saudi dynasty. Right-wing libertarians would immediately add that governments also profit from this trade by imposing taxes on fuels. Incidentally, this was the sentiment behind the Yellow Vests protests in France, launched by the excluded for whom fuel prices have become so steep that it no longer made sense to travel to work.

I would nevertheless argue that citizens of the global North buy their energy *relatively cheaply*. In the face of climate change and the collapse of the idea of unlimited growth this does not sound particularly original. Indeed, profits made by shareholders are often excessive while oligarchs enjoy stunningly lavish luxury, but this should not obscure the fact that overall the lifestyle of citizens in the global North is very costly. An average Dane who lives ecologically still consumes many times more energy than a typical citizen of Bangladesh.

In the global North, outrage at high prices of fuel is shaped by notions and defense mechanisms typical for this *ecumene*. *Cathexes* are distributed there by one of two *imaginaries*: that of the traditional left, which opposes greedy oil companies and patriarchal directors, or that of the populist right, which accuses the government, state bureaucracy, and the elites of tax-based fraud committed against ordinary people. What they forget, however, is that everyone in the West partakes in exploiting societies that export fossil fuels, chiefly due to the general level of prosperity enabled by governments *and* businesses (as strange as this may sound to leftist ears). In economics, this mechanism is called the Balassa-Samuelson Effect. Further, a latent sense of guilt may surface as virulent accusations against “other culpable ones.” Although some of these charges may even be right, they have been clearly formulated in bad faith.

The reluctance to seriously consider the people killed, displaced or betrayed in Yemen, Syria, and Kurdistan (in the name of oil), the starved inhabitants of Niger and Mali (in the name of uranium), or the mistreated women of Afghanistan, brings to mind what Giorgio Agamben described as the repugnance elicited by the figure of the *muselman* or “*dokhodyaga*.”¹⁹ Such people may be looked at but cannot be seen, leaving them outside affective circulation and thus making them easily incorporated into traditional *fantasies* of our *ecumene*: the Battle of Vienna, the Crusades, or the Reconquista.

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16) “On average, the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries are importing 90 percent of food products from other countries. Qatar topped the GCC in terms of their dependence on foreign imports at 97 percent, followed by Bahrain (92 percent), Kuwait (91 percent), and the UAE and Oman at 89 percent each.” See Taha, “Kingdom Imports 80% of Food Products.”

17) This poetic metaphor actually proved accurate. If the cost of extracting one barrel of Arab oil amounts to ca. \$10 and one barrel holds ca. 160 liters, then a ten-liter canister costs \$0.625. In Saudi Arabia, a half-kilo loaf of bread costs \$0.78 while in United Arab Emirates – \$1.25. See Numbeo, “Price Rankings of Country of Loaf of Fresh White Bread (500g) (Markets).”

18) Caparrós, *Hunger*.

19) *Muselman* (“a Muslim”) refers to a person dying from hunger in a Nazi camp, while “*dokhodyaga*” – to a similar figure in Soviet lagers. The invisibility of the *muselman* is analyzed by Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*.

The phenomenon of invisibility, which consists in looking but failing to see, is enabled by *negation*, or *Verleugnung* (“distortion” or “disavowal”).²⁰ One of the basic defense mechanisms identified in theoretical psychoanalysis, negation allows images to enter consciousness yet rejects their intellectual processing, leaving behind an emotional coldness and a curious disaffection that stands in stark contrast with the moving character of the images’ content. What is more, the place of missing emotions is often taken by *distorted* feelings.²¹ For instance, being witness to suffering may elicit pitiful yet contemptuous condescension, or plain vengeful satisfaction.

Some say “Muslims represent a culture of passivity and fatalism” pointing to images of the fellahin at the pyramids. “They have not had their Enlightenment.” Such language severs any ties between the fates of people on both sides. As long as Westerners perceive themselves as active, enlightened subjects, images of other people’s suffering cease to carry equal weight for them. If anyone is still discomfited, the distribution of guilt can be easily reversed, as was done by Oriana Fallaci. She was able to discern hatred, vengefulness, as well as urges to dominate and plot invasions among impoverished migrants living in the most destitute parts of European cities. In her vision, emotional *cathexes* are distributed in such a way that Muslims become the oppressors while Westerners are cast in the role of victims.

Certainly, many Muslims do fantasize about launching a Jihad, slaying infidels, and replacing crosses with crescents. There are entire groups led by religious or political leaders (the Saudis) as well as military organizations (Al Qaida, Boko Haram, ISIS) that articulate these fantasies and attempt to realize them. They struggle with the dominance of the former West in their own way. *However, this is not the core of the relationship between billions of Muslims and Northerners* which actually manifests in prices of food, uranium, and oil equally affecting both sides. Still, accounts of this relationship or its representations *are articulated in the language of economics*, and fall within this discourse’s *symbolic field* which possesses a limited ethical framework yet regulates the sphere of the visible. Delegating the representation of crucial problems to the *symbolic field* and language of economics²² makes it possible to avoid potentially unbearable confrontations with otherness.

Negation lies at the foundation of the perverse subjective structure. Relating to oneself and others by inverting relationships and distorting their character forms the basic mode of perverse being-in-the-world. Taking into account the role played by lies in developing today’s social *imaginary* in the global North, I suspect that *negation* has in fact become the fundamental mechanism regulating human cognition. Perverse political leaders, fake news, conspiracy theories, anti-vaccination movements, and flat-Earth hypotheses all distort and obscure the unacceptable truth. In the psychoanalytic perspective, the nineteenth century was the century of hysteria, while the twentieth – that of narcissism. Perhaps the twenty-first century shall be profoundly marked by perversion and distortion.

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Invisibility affects not only people and relations but also figures and territories around the world. Transparency and imperceptibility likewise concern the intensity, density, and scale of various phenomena, their velocity, immobility, the blurring of boundaries between social entities, and also the emergence of vast, new fields of

20) Laplanche and Pontalis, “Disavowal (Denial),” 118–20.

21) This mechanism has been well described by Eric Santner, who coined the term “narrative fetishism.” Santner, “History Beyond the Pleasure Principle.”

22) Fine, “A Question of Economics,” 403–25; and Mäki, “Economics Imperialism,” 351–80.

reality that rapidly coalesce or rip apart.²³ All of these aspects have vanished from everyday thinking covered with a blanket of familiar images formed by the *imaginary* mode of representing issues, people, and things forged in the distant past of the twentieth or even nineteenth century. Zygmunt Bauman discussed this in a lecture delivered at the Polish Academy of Sciences in 2005. He argued that the Hegelian “spirit of history” has moved past another curvature on the time spiral, and has shifted to a level where no language or representational system developed in the last two centuries allows humanity to grasp its current position.

One of the greatest challenges is to capture the incompatibility of the scale, intensity, and dynamism of described events on the one hand, and the character of concepts used to account for them on the other.²⁴ Discord also marks the relation between the semantic scope²⁵ of concepts and the turbulent vagaries of underlying real conditions which can produce huge quantitative changes, bringing forth unknown qualities, logical links, and denotative domains. *Symbolic fields* clash and tear in an endless hurricane-like dance, intertwining, separating, absorbing, thickening, and thinning like clouds on a stormy day. However, *signifiers* – the signs and symbols meant to represent them, especially sovereign ones (*master signifiers*) that organize entire fields – do not keep pace with these changes. They are caught in a web of structural dependencies where the dislocation of one element affects all others, which in turn resist being perturbed at least due to a certain inertia. Ultimately, we are invariably faced with the inadequacy of the representational potential of *signifiers* for rendering vast scales and dynamics,²⁶ causing them to slide and necessitating the introduction of stabilizing sovereign signifiers.

The increasing scale of phenomena causes the symbols we have at our disposal to cover a mere fragment of reality.²⁷ It is as if we were examining a tree that grows right before us – a large baobab, for example – from a distance suitable for the observation of a seedling or a sprout. Although we may observe bark and the veining of leaves, the tree effectively becomes a meaningless blur. Lifted from their context, fragments appear senseless and grotesque. One crucial economic term that has become sovereign yet meaningless outside the global context is financialization. Supposedly explaining the mishaps of world economy, it remains a typical instance of the *ignotum per ignotius* fallacy in reasoning. What needs disclosing is, on the one hand, the very relation between the runaway scales and dynamics of real phenomena, while on the other – our relentless pursuit to capture them in representations, signs, and concepts that are increasingly disconnected from everyday experience.²⁸ Also at stake in this process are social representations that are supposed to correspond to new qualities. Only representations able to capture crucial aspects of dynamic phenomena, properly rendering their scale, intensity, and suddenness can help us to plan adequate actions.

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23) One attempt to diagnose the new field of real dependencies, along with their specific structure and form of hegemony, is the concept of the Empire developed by Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.

24) Virilio, *Speed and Politics*.

25) Understood as extension or denotation: the sum of all individual, named phenomena, their places in systems of signification, and how they are subsumed.

26) The very act of forming a notion, or constituting a phenomenon (in philosophical terms) involves, to a large extent, reduction of disproportion and disharmony within the perceived object causing the phenomenon to avoid self-contradiction. This is well described by Edmund Husserl. See Leder, “Edmund Husserl and Jacques Lacan: An Ethical Difference in Epistemology?,” 133–47.

27) The problem of scale was partly addressed by economic geography in the style of David Harvey and his continuators.

28) Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*.

It needs to be elucidated why the “transparency of things”²⁹ and the question of representation transformed the world since the beginning of globalization’s second wave in the mid-twentieth century. Up until the 1970s, the post-war decades of peace were a unique period. Except for the totalitarian USSR, production was largely concentrated in the West, where social conflict crystallized in political space as the struggle between owners and workers. Notably, these actors occupied the same representational domain and *imaginary* which enabled them to be adequately represented. Moreover, due to the experience of the Second World War, people feared direct confrontation. As a result, the conflict did not descend into the madness of war but received political representation through mediating institutions, distributing libidinal energy by channeling it into projects of social change that would often contradict each other, but nevertheless offered alternatives and were future-oriented. In this way, conflict became fruitful, starting a race for ideas.

In post-war decades, the social *imaginary* provided representations of power allowing specific collective subjects to emerge in the field of social existence and conflict:³⁰ the bourgeoisie, the working class, the middle class, and women as political subjects, *lumpenproletariat*, peasants, immigrants, and later representatives of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. It was more or less clear what the interests of these groups were, which parties represented them, and how they defined their goals. It was possible to name and describe the conflict. *Political subjects would define their identities in relation to their main antagonist.* The worker movement identified its enemy as the bourgeoisie and its political representatives, the middle class opposed revolutionary movements,³¹ and feminism fought patriarchy. There were large social-democratic, Christian-democratic and conservative parties, trade unions, employer organizations, pro-Moscow communist factions, alternative leftists, women’s movements, situationists, advocates of direct action, radical right-wingers, and peasant parties. All would operate in the same parliamentary system, approvingly or not, and share the language in which they could formulate postulates, express hopes as well as vent disillusionment, anger, or resentment.³²

A shared language allowed the conflicted yet interdependent parties (the hegemonic and the subordinated) to name contentious issues as well as elaborate the relation between “spaces of experience” and “horizons of expectations.” Naturally, this language was the site of intense political struggle; after all, there have always been silenced groups and unarticulated needs. However, the point was to *negotiate* and displace certain meanings within a shared semantic reality in an effort to expand the scope of identified problems rather than to address both specific and systemic shortcomings of representation within these *imaginaries*.

The scale of emerging collective subjects matched the scale of the political scene enclosed within the boundaries of the nation state. The scale of economic phenomena was also supposed to be kept in check by the Bretton Woods system.³³ This *commensurability*, or similarity in power or scale between subjects and phenomena

29) Nabokov’s novel, whose title is echoed here, aptly demonstrates the opaqueness of everything. See Nabokov, *Transparent Things*.

30) This is discussed by Didier Eribon in his account of the French political landscape of the 1950s and 1960s: “You became a political subject by putting yourself into the hands of the party spokespersons, through whom the workers, the ‘working class,’ came to exist as an organized group, as a class that was aware of itself as such.” See Eribon, *Returning to Reims*.

31) “The words ‘the Left,’” Eribon observes, “really meant something important. People wanted to defend their own interests, to make their voices heard, and the way to achieve that – aside from strikes of protests – was to delegate, to hand oneself over to the ‘representatives of the working class’ and the political leaders whose decisions were thus implicitly accepted and whose discourses you learned and repeated,” *Ibid.*, 43.

32) Eichengreen and Polanyi claim that in 1944 the development of the market elicited a “political” response in the form of lobbies (trade unions and political parties), destabilizing the free market. Specifically, it was the influence of labor parties on economic policy that must have led to the fall of the international financial market. Eichengreen, *Globalizing Capital*, 13.

33) Eichengreen, *Globalizing Capital*, 133.

in political economy, was the guarantee of real agency. Wage negotiations between IG Metall and the employers' union could lead to a compromise satisfying unionists and only slightly denting the profits of industrialists. Today, however, negotiations between Polish miners and government officials occur in a thick fog. In Poland, neither miners nor political representatives have much influence over the unfolding events that affect them. Neither are in fact represented in a way that would take into account their relations with these processes.

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In this context, the word representation emerges as ambiguous. It simultaneously reveals social subjects and provides them with a platform for realizing their postulates. Representation concerns *visibility* – the capacity to name *real* relations and entities in dominant languages, discourses, and narratives, in this way calling them into existence. When represented, they also begin to affect other subjects and phenomena, developing relations with them, and beginning to partake in a community of shared fate. Norwid's postulate to "give each thing – a proper name"³⁴ was implemented for a brief time, though not fully, in the Western *ecumene*. Relations, subjects, and conflicts could be more or less adequately described, enabling people to orient and position themselves in social space. Recently, however, this has become a daunting task. Important things ceased to be visible forcing people to navigate in a thick fog of theories about reptilians and a flat Earth.

The inability to develop relationships with others, both enemies and allies who dissolve in the world's cacophony, has invited spontaneous adoption of simpler positioning strategies typically ones based on identity, reliant on continuous affirmation of who one is. In other words, *relational social positions are being replaced by ones based on identity* causing relations with others to be supplanted by relations with oneself, forming a solipsistic vicious circle.

This process is fundamentally *regressive*.³⁵ Before it began, however, common languages allowed social subjects to emerge in the shared space of meaning, facilitating the realization of the second, strictly political sense of representation. These subjects could more or less adequately *represent* their *real* interests, needs, and positions within democratic institutions built together or secured in the course of historical struggles. On the one hand, they include *apparatuses* of political representation such as territorial communities, workers' councils, political parties, trade unions, social movements and organizations, parliaments and various bodies of self-government. On the other, they comprise instruments of representation in the *imaginary* specifically in the information sphere that evolved historically from books and the press to radio, television, and today's digital media, and maintain a continuous flow of images and meanings. All of this upholds a sense that large groups of citizens identify with this system of representation, its practices, and *apparatuses*, and that these groups are able to control these *devices* despite actually losing grasp of them.

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Aside from the above "represented" world there was also the East, or "the communist world," which included the half-peripheral region of Eastern Europe, the former Russian Empire, and China. Westerners would consider these areas an anti-world that perhaps did not directly impact the system of representation in the Western *ecumene* but still affected its balance of political power. This would change the importance of individual repre-

34) Norwid, "Generalities," 134.

35) See Leder, "The Concept of De-Sublation and the Regressive Process in History. Prolegomena."

sentations, redefining what may emerge in the sphere of visibility and how. The fall of the communist world, for example, tipped the scales. It is worth accentuating that Poland has its roots in the other, second world, which no longer exists after being swallowed up by the first. However, Poles have retained a unique perspective that facilitates looking at the West sideways.

There is also the third world, or the Other World as Martín Caparrós termed it – today’s global South. Regardless of various initiatives to subjectivize it, such as the now forgotten Non-Aligned Movement, it was never seriously approached by any of the major geopolitical players. As the object of neo-colonial penetration, the third world has been regarded in the West mainly through the lens of images and narratives produced by Orientalist thought and *imaginary*.

Edward Said was the first to comprehensively demonstrate how the Western imagination has embraced Orientalism through travel accounts, novels, official reports, poems, paintings, theatrical and opera pieces, scientific studies in geography, ethnology and physical anthropology, economic activities such as transportation, slavery and trade (including that of opium), institutional decisions, concepts of warfare, efforts to starve entire populations, and finally theories of progress and regress. All these *signifiers* have been fused in an Orientalist framework that has since dominated Western imagination.

Such conglomerates of words and things were termed *apparatuses* [*dispositifs*] by French poststructuralists. As systems of signs, objects, institutions, and fetishized social practices, they saturate *imaginaries*, creating the *symbolic field* of a given *ecumene*. To a degree, methods of studying and describing economic relations are also among such *apparatuses*. Constructs like GDP, which by definition account for profits, production, and expenditure, conceal the exploitation of the global poor behind earnings of corporations and the financial sector.³⁶

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Today’s languages of representation and entire *symbolic fields* were forged in the period of intense social conflicts, wars, and revolutions in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. These discourses enabled the assembling of large-scale social subjects, primarily revolutionary ones. Owing to its structure, language creates vast possibilities of shaping individual and collective subjects who can speak as “I” or “We.”³⁷ Although real and material conflicts give them substance, language determines their position and defines the scope of their actions. Paradoxically, European bureaucratic empires, which changed the face of the world after 1870 by creating the first global order (i.e. colonialism),³⁸ were such collective subjects. Another example is the industrial proletariat who reached the zenith of power in the first half of the twentieth century.

36) FISIM stands for Financial Intermediation Services Indirectly Measured. In the System of National Accounts it is an estimate of the value of the services provided by financial intermediaries, such as banks, for which no explicit charges are made; instead these services are paid for as part of the margin between rates applied to savers and borrowers. The supposition is that savers would receive a lower interest rate and borrowers pay a higher interest rate if all financial services had explicit charges.

See Wikipedia, “FISIM.”

FISIM apply only to loans and deposits provided by, or deposited with, financial institutions. The financial institutions in question need not be resident; nor need the clients of the financial institution be resident. Imports and exports of FISIM occur. The financial institution need not offer deposit-taking facilities as well as making loans. The financial subsidiaries of retailers are examples of financial institutions that make loans without accepting deposits. A money lender who has sufficiently detailed accounts to be treated as a corporation or a quasi-corporation can receive FISIM.

See European System of Accounts, “Financial Intermediation Services Indirectly Measured (FISIM).”

37) Benveniste, “Subjectivity in Language,” 223–30.

38) Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*.

Social subjects shaped in the imperial era did not survive the world wars and the second wave of globalization. The result was traditional narratives that used to represent the world have lost their protagonists. In fact, even communal figures that would traditionally shape these stories fell apart. The working class which impacted twentieth-century history as a collective subject regressed in the global North turning into precariat, while workers reemerged as a giant social body in the Other World of the global South. In the political sense, however, this body has not shown any signs indicating a revolutionary potential to change the future.

The middle classes, which were vehicles of both democratic and nationalist discourses in the nineteenth and twentieth century, are now considering themselves in the mirror of global identity. What they find there, however, is no longer the ideal of individualist consumption, but a face showing fear of “Earth’s wrath” in the form of a climatic Armageddon, a never-ending pandemic, and “the wretched of the Earth” migrating from the global South. Finally, nations united by a shared language as well as an organic connection between territorial dependency and common fate are torn by continental-scale processes such as the increasing reliance on international corporations, or more broadly the financialization of economy accompanied by changing demographics, intense migrations, and the dissolution of cultural homogeneity.

*

Still, the hugely important network of real connections and conflicts developed during recent decades had to find some order of representation for itself. This firstly allowed the strongest subjects of the new *reality* to position themselves in the emerging space and its vital nodes where decisions and actions are taken; and secondly helped others to resist domination and build opposition. Such distribution necessitated positioning one side as finding nourishment in work, resources, and diversity while the other as extracted from former habits and yoked to newly-formed territories, regimes, and *apparatuses* just like peasants tied to land. The new network enabled institutions, organizations, movements, and people (both those in control of the flows of goods, forces, or signifiers, and the dispossessed), to position themselves and others in the rapidly changing *reality* where new territories and subjects began to emerge.

In a series of conflicts and crises that began in the 1970s, the new representational regime took shape, controlling or even setting the direction of flows. In its footsteps came the legal system: the skeleton of any *imaginary*, defining directions and principles as well as mapping the “gravity” of the new reality, or its *deployment*, sometimes even pushing ahead of time. The legal framework solidified and rigidified in international agreements, treaties and directives, from the Washington Consensus to subsequent rounds of GATT. In 2000, Hardt and Negri termed this system “Empire.” Importantly, however, the new order and legal frame of distributing forces and actors in the emerging global system developed on the basis of the language of neoclassical economics.

The new regime of representation had to reflect key forces along with their flows and patterns on the one hand, and evade traditional *imaginaries* on the other. The necessity of flight is connected with the fact that traditional languages which shaped the old *ecumenes*, along with signifying systems and their *symbolic fields* such as the German nation, the West, or the Orient, have influenced flows and *cathexes* of social energy by imposing a certain ethical framework. Redirecting them as they grew in number and scale was a necessary condition for the creation of a new global *order*.

Although in the Polish *imaginary* Germans are regarded from the perspective of Nazi crimes, the fundamental ties that bind these two societies are rooted in the fact that much of the Polish economy contributes to German industries producing goods exported all over the world. Still, these *real* connections do not fit into

the ethical framework built around the experience of the Second World War. Such paradigms of distributing emotional *cathexes* hindered Poles from developing a non-stereotypical image of Germans. This in turn interferes with the new *order*.

What has followed is a conflict between traditional *imaginaries* governing the West and the new *symbolic field*, along with its *apparatuses*, which is developing on a planetary scale. Even though former *imaginaries* have lost their footing in *real* economic and social relations, they continue to shape how social energies are mobilized, often calling into existence bizarre political subjects. In Europe, these processes manifest in the form of Euroscepticism, contributing to events like Brexit. Further, they fuel the anti-vaccination movement, countering efforts to limit the scale of the pandemic.

Deep shifts in the *real* appear as catastrophes.³⁹ This is confirmed by chaotic processes that occur in *symbolic fields*, which may be understood as outlined by catastrophe theory. So far, only one discourse has been able to survive these turbulent changes, despite being slightly shaken: the language of global economy.

translated by Grzegorz Czemieli

39) The real according to Jacques Lacan.

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