

**The European Green Deal as an Ethico-Political Act? Identifying Structural Change in
Climate Discourse through Psychoanalytic Political Theory**

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Introduction

The European Green Deal (EGD), the European Union's (EU) plan to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, was presented by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in late 2019 as Europe's 'man on the moon' moment (von der Leyen, 2019). Under the EGD just about everything the EU does will have to, in some way or another, contribute to greenhouse gas (GHG) mitigation or climate adaptation. The Commission claims that doing so will usher in a new era of growth, leaving no one behind in the process (European Commission, 2019). The EGD paints a utopian, prosperous, green future underpinned by the supposition that GDP growth will be absolutely decoupled from material use and emissions through the proliferation of renewables, technological advancements, and a circular economy. It, for example, will compensate and retrain displaced workers (Just Transition Mechanism) as well as renovate buildings with green, efficient technologies (NextGeneration EU Recovery Plan). Honestly, the EGD is just what (almost) everyone wanted to hear; climate change will be solved, and your average person will not have to sacrifice any degree of their comfortable material and energy intensive lifestyle for this plan to work.

Climate change was once this gaping hole in our reality. You could either ignore it or allow it to be one of your reasons for not procreating—but now, according to the European Union, it's an opportunity to forge a "new growth strategy" (Commission, 2019). The EGD presents itself as an "ambitious" plan (2019), even though carbon neutrality by 2050 is more of a necessity than something to be proud of. Claiming the plan to be comparable to the moon landing (in late 2019) before it was even approved (in January 2020) is also dubious. How do you claim something to be significant before it has even taken effect? What kind of significant changes will EGD initiatives require? Will these changes fit within status quo approaches to political economy? Or will the EGD as it develops radically break from the situation in which it was passed?

To answer these questions, we must adopt a theoretical approach that will allow us to conceptualize changes in subjectivity and objectivity. By subject we're not referring to just individuals but also collective subjects—whether a community, a nation, the EU, the Global North, or human civilization. Climate change in this view is not simply an objective externality but something symptomatic of the way subjects relate with each other and to the material world. Everything is interconnected—no one is simply an individual for we are all connected by commons—languages—through which we organize ourselves into systems to exploit each other (social commons) and Nature (ecological commons) in order to create the capitalist society (structure) in which we live. Climate change isn't external to the subject—it's both internal and external—as it is the byproduct of our 200-year-old desire to grow and prosper with fossil fuels. The subject is always in motion, for it's unbalanced—always searching for something 'better.'

Identifying Change through Lacanian Psychoanalytic Political Theory

We'll approach this question from Lacanian psychoanalytic political theory, for psychoanalysis provides a theory of an insatiable subject. It is a theory of discourse that sees all objectivity (the Lacanian Symbolic-Imaginary) to be held together by a radically contingent,

subjective element (the master [or empty] signifier), which means that all subjectivity is prevented from achieving a completely objective structure because there is always some object it cannot fully account for (in Lacanian the *object a*: the object of cause of desire), such as climate change that escapes or is repressed by the master signifier (creating the Lacanian the Real) (Žižek, 1991; Žižek in Butler et al. 2000) . It provides us with dialectics between positivity and negativity or between possibility and impossibility, that keeps subjects, whether individual humans or supranational organizations, in motion (Stavrakakis, 1999; 2007). This motion involves accounting for the impossible—turning it into something that can be measured, used, and controlled—*but never mastered*. This accounting creates the structures in which we live and interact, that limit our agency, yet allow our species to grow and reproduce. No structure or system can perfectly account for everything, nor can it do so without creating more problems, impossibilities, or malicious symptoms. Capitalism, for instance, has led to overall increases in material wealth and welfare but also has contributed to climate change, socio-economic injustices, and—even for those most privileged by it—an array of relatively new mental and physical health problems that can all relate back to having too much (or too little) material wealth or fetishizing consumption.

At the clinical level, psychoanalysis is a form of talk therapy that brings the subject into touch with their unconscious, that allows them to break free from its structures that cause their symptoms and create new ones that don't lead them down similar paths of self-destruction and toxicity. *The subject's breaking free from unconscious structure is known as the act or event* and has been conceptualized by political theorists heavily influenced by Lacanian theory, namely Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Yannis Stavrakakis (among others). The act is a change in a subject's unconscious symbolic structuring of their reality, and is therefore inherently Political (Glynos, 2003; 2014), which makes it an ideal concept for analyzing possibilities for Political change. *So, the question becomes: to what extent is the EGD a Political act or a restructuring of EU's (Symbolic) unconscious?*

The act also has an ethical dimension, which involves commitment to non-domination—or that in an act the subject doesn't simply move from one absolute, totalizing structure to another (Stavrakakis, 2007). Herein lies the need for democracy in any *ethical* political act. This requires accepting negativity, impossibility, and antagonism, which involves commitment to recognizing those elements that were repressed or disavowed. This is to say that an ethical act addresses issues of justice in a democratic way, allowing for the repressed—the exploited unheard voices—an active role in political change.

In the theoretical framework, we will develop the key components of Lacanian discourse theory needed to identify ethico-political acts in discourse. This section will begin by developing the three domains of subjectivity: the Imaginary, Symbolic, and the Real. Then it will investigate the logic of the signifier and how discourse is subjectively anchored by the master signifier yet (de)stabilized by the *object a*. The third section will develop the 'split' subject, its relation to the *object a*, and the role of affect (desire and enjoyment [*jouissance*]) in discourse. With these concepts, we'll then be able to approach the four (or five) types of discourse that will be used as mind maps in this contribution's methodology, Lacanian Discourse Analysis (LDA). In the fifth

section, we will review the ontological structure of an act in both its intertwined Political (restructuring, ideological change) and ethical dimensions (politicization, democracy, non-domination, and justice).

The Ethical & Political Dimensions of the Act

In the remaining parts of this investigation, we will argue that the current shift from fossil-fuel (or brown) growth to green growth cannot be considered an ethico-political act, for this shift, in its current form, represents a shift in content of the same ideological paradigm, (neo)liberalism, structured by the signifiers, growth and/or capital. Neither does this shift address the ethical dimension insofar as depoliticization persists and fails to adequately address issues of justice and democratization.

The alternative to green growth would be found in the variety of growth critical (or post-growth) approaches to climate governance, namely degrowth. This approach would represent a political act to the extent that it would represent a shift from (neo)liberalism to eco-socialism. Regarding ecology, this approach understands limits—that the Earth's finiteness is incommensurate with our economy's supposed infiniteness (Kenis and Lievens, 2015; 2016). Moreover, Nature cannot be reduced to capital or value—for it is a common that humans have an ethical duty to protect. In terms of socialism, it argues that the necessary economic transition must involve a redistribution of power from those actors historically responsible for emissions and pollution to those exploited by fossil fuel growth. This is an approach that puts human and ecological welfare first and growth second.

The ethical dimension of the act cannot be completely addressed by this approach alone, as committing 100% to an eco-socialist, post-growth approach to climate governance would commit the sin of absolutization. An ethical act must always make space for negotiating with negativity and moving beyond the hegemonic discourses behind structure (Stavrakakis, 2007). The act must allow for politicization and a constant dialectical movement between hegemonic (+) and counterhegemonic (–) approaches—this can only be done through democratization. We will argue that for an act to be considered ethical, it must commit to the repoliticization of economic and climate governance (Glynos, 2014). It cannot be an issue managed technocratically, but rather it must involve the very people affected by decisions made during this transition. Representative politics is a necessary foundation for politicization; however, it has become steeped in the logics of capital (Stavrakakis, 2007). To ensure repressed voices and alternatives can (re)politicize climate governance, we need alternative forms of public participation in policymaking (and careful attention to their processes) to prevent the cooptation of being 'green' into hegemonic power structures.

In the analysis, we find that the EGD, for the most part, fails to meet the ethical and political criteria to be considered an act. The discourse of the documents analyzed reflects the technocratic and depoliticized characteristics of a green growth approach, fails to address issues of justice, and only allows for superficial forms of public participation. To get to this conclusion, we must begin with the fundamentals of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Theoretical Framework: Lacanian Psychoanalytic Political Theory

The Three Orders of Subjectivity: the Symbolic, the Imaginary & the Real

To conceptualize the act, we must begin with the basics of Lacanian theory. The subject experiences the material world through three interlocking domains, the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real, which together form a Borromean knot (Figure 1). The Imaginary and the Symbolic constitute our ‘reality,’ while the Real is the domain beyond signification which constantly threatens to destroy or dislocate it. Symptoms are repeated behaviors that allow the subject to account for or foreclose the Real while maintaining the Symbolic structuring of the Imaginary. The act or event constitutes a fundamental change in the Symbolic structure and therefore a new way for the subject to relate to reality.

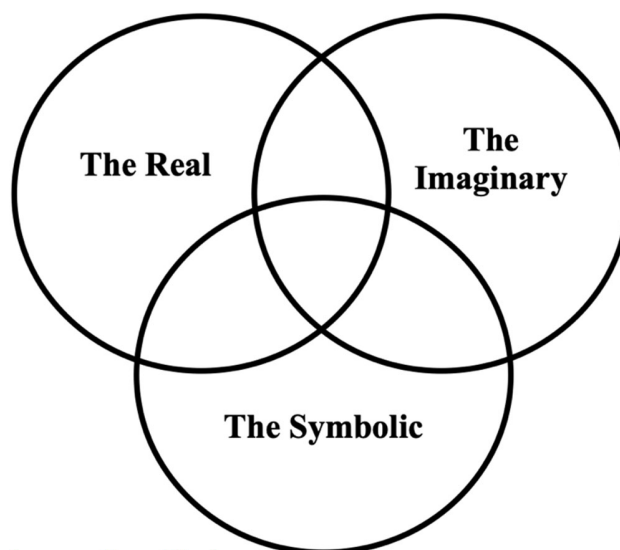
The Imaginary

We understand speech through images. When someone speaks to you, you paint a picture in your head of what that person is saying. This is a process of putting words into concepts that you can visualize and imagine. It is related to representation, the attempt at synthesis, unification, or closure of meaning (Biglieri & Perelló, 2011: 53) in either conscious or unconscious thought. The Imaginary is the surface of subjectivity, it’s what we experience whenever we speak or think, and therefore the home of our ideal-ego—the ideal version of ourselves that we strive to be and portray to others.

The Symbolic

The Imaginary surface of experience wouldn’t be possible without structure. This structure is language. To relay images to another person, we unconsciously follow the rules and patterns of our language, and to find our place in society we unconsciously follow its hegemonic rules. Everyone must go to school, get a job, save money, and retire, etc. No matter what these taken for granted structures are, they wouldn’t be possible without grammar. In this sense, language is the structural condition of speech’s possibility and cannot be altered by it (Boni, 2010/2014: 134). To provide a metaphor: the Symbolic would be our operating system and software programs, while the Imaginary would be our user-interface. Put differently, the Symbolic domain of discourse is both the “content of the real enunciating structure, and the enunciated container of the imaginary content” (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2010/2014: 70). It is in the Symbolic or the ‘Big Other’ that the subject is castrated by the ‘rules of the game,’ and

Figure 1. The Borromean Knot: The Three Rings of Subjectivity



Source: Own Work

moves through life acquiring different positions, roles, and purposes, etc. In this way, the subject always speaks from their unconscious position of enunciation; therefore, the purpose of any type of Lacanian Discourse Analysis (LDA) should be to reveal the Real structure of the Symbolic of any given discourse (2010/2014: 72). The subject of enunciation is produced by being subjected to the Social: the realm of sedimented practices (Mouffe, 2005: 17). This can be distinguished from the Political: the domain of antagonism (2005: 18), in which conflicting Symbolic structures compete for hegemonic status at the Imaginary level. The act or event is then Political and occurs when the subject suspends their faith in the existing hegemonic socio-symbolic order in order to reconfigure its coordinates (Glynos, 2014: 152).

The Real

The Real is impossible, and for that reason totalization of the Symbolic (society) is impossible (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). This is a slippery notion with many conceptualizations; here we'll cover a few. The Real is the domain beyond signification always threatening to destroy our Imaginary-Symbolic reality. It can be thought of as dislocation; it threatens to dislocate the Symbolic structuration of the Social. Climate change is a good example of this insofar as it threatens our existence and will require us to change the way we live one way or another. We will never be able to completely account for the impacts to come.

The Real can also be understood as heterogeneity to the extent that the Symbolic is the logical homogenizing cover, while the Real is the heterogenous region that escapes its grasp (Pêcheux, 1988/2014: 83). While the Symbolic is the “logically-stabilized” space, the Real consists of “things to be known” (1988/2014: 83-84). It is the order of subjectivity simultaneously beyond and produced by signification; it is an effect of language or the Symbolic Order. In this way the Real can only be encircled and represented by the internal limits of the Symbolic Order (Žižek 1991: 112).

Encountering the Real is traumatic insofar as it places the Symbolic structure in crisis mode. Crisis begets new Symbolic structures to retroactively account for the dislocation by heterogenous elements. In this sense, encountering the Real typically has Political implications. With climate change we see antagonism between governance approaches, for instance between the hegemonic green growth/(neo)liberal and the counter hegemonic degrowth/eco-social approaches. Degrowth, whose fundamental notion is to suspend its faith in the economic imperative of GDP growth, may be seen as an act or event, insofar as it is way of transitioning from (climate) crisis to a “new harmony” by reconfiguring or founding an entirely new Symbolic Order (Žižek, 1991: 193). The Real is the domain of negativity, lack, and incompleteness; it is the void upon which our realities are constructed and destroyed. For this reason, all positivity or universality is both tainted and constituted by negativity. Because of the Real, discourse in both its Imaginary and Symbolic dimensions and by its very existence indicates the possibility of the “de-structuring and restructuring” of its “networks and trajectories” (Pêcheux: 1988/2014: 94). In discourse, then, we simultaneously find structure/stasis and act/event. In what follows we will review the basic concepts that constitute discourse's inner workings.

The Logic of the Signifier

Signifier Over Signified: Absolute Difference or Differentiability

The Symbolic Order consists of signifiers, which come from Ferdinand de Saussure's understanding of the sign. In the sign, the signifier and signified are its two equivalent or isomorphic components. The signifier is the material thing that signifies, which could be letters on a page or the phonemes in a word; it is the 'sound-image' produced in the mind upon seeing or hearing a word (Fink, 2004: 79-80). The signified, then, is the concept(s) or idea(s) that the sound-image refers to (or its meaning). Saussure claims that the relation between the two levels is purely arbitrary and *radically contingent*, or there is nothing inherent in the concept (signified) that requires it to have its name (signifier) (2004: 81-82). To refer to his famous example of 'tree,' there is no characteristic of or substance in it (or some type of tree-ness) that leads us to call it a "tree." The reason why we use one signifier versus another is rather a product of hegemonic articulation: it's a social construct. In other words, we say 'tree' rather than 'arbor' because this signifier is what became the most popular amongst English speakers over the course of history.

Meaning is made differentially: that is to say, we only know what a tree is by distinguishing it from what it's not. What a word (or signifier) means (its concept or signified) is purely differential: the content of a word is not determined by what it contains but by what exists outside of it (Stavarakakis, 1999: 46). This is one of Saussure's main contributions to our understanding of language—that it lacks any purely positive foundation and is just a structure or form (hence Structuralism). This parallels with the works of other critical theorists, such as Jacques Derrida's *différance*, insofar as an affirmation of a difference is a precondition for the identity of any signifier (at the level of language) and even of social groups (at the societal level) (Mouffe, 2005: 15). Put more simply, any one signifier has a constitutive outside (2005: 15) or a void-place of inscription (Zizek, 1991); its identity is relational to everything external to it. This outside helps each signifier find its place in the overall structure of language.

But if this is the case (that language is all structure and no substance), and if the signifier and signified have equal value, then how is it possible to differentiate between them without reintroducing some conception of substance (Stavarakakis, 1999: 47)? This leads to Lacan's main critique of Saussure: that he seems to privilege the signified over the signifier, or that concepts come from an external, objective reality that leads us to create signifiers, or the signified has supremacy over the signifier (that the concept precedes the word), suggesting that whenever one sees a tree (the signified), the word 'tree' (the signifier) comes to mind. But is this really the case? This contradiction found in Saussure's "representationalist conception of signification" (1999: 47) is where post-structuralism takes root. Lacan's account instead flips the relation—*the signifier has supremacy over the signified*. The word or image precedes the concept, which can be represented by the algorithm Signifier/signified (S/s) (Lacan, 2006: 414).

Take for instance the example he provides in *The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious* (Lacan, 2006: 415-417). Here we have two signifiers, 'Ladies' and 'Gentleman,' over what they signify, two identical doors with plaques. If one were to see these doors from afar, they'd very likely assume these signifiers to be on the plaques of each door. That is to say that the signifier

would enter the signified. Moreover, it is not the material doors that are signified; instead, it is a far more abstract idea that lies in their difference: ladies must relieve themselves behind this door and men behind the other. This is to say that the signifiers determine the signifieds differentially, they tell us who can use what door.

Now, imagine two children sitting across from each other on a train. When it stops at a station, one sees the door marked ‘Ladies,’ and says, “We’ve arrived at Ladies,” while the other seeing the door marked “Gentleman” says, “No, we’re at Gentleman!” Here, what the two words mean is not relevant; instead, it is their opposition, which produces disagreement between the kids. The signifier, then, is the juxtaposition of these two binary terms (Fink, 2004: 84), and it does not signify anything about “Ladies” or “Gentleman.” Rather, it is the structuring effect of the opposition that takes precedence over any particular significations the signifiers may carry (2004: 84). From this example, then, we can see that signifier and signified are not intimately united. They do not come together to form a whole, and a gigantic void is left to be filled with more signification. We, as humans, are still arguing over what it means to be a man or a woman, for instance. It is by granting supremacy to the signifier that we can accept the notion that language is structure over substance. Where we go to the bathroom is after all determined by juxtapositions between signifiers, which produce the social norms (constructs or practices) we have inherited from our language(s). Men go to the men’s room and women to the women’s room, or at home we must pee in the toilet and not on the floor or in our pants. Think how parents and teachers spend much of their time explaining such rules to their young children or students.

This is to say that the signifier ‘stuffs’ the signified with meaning, yet never completes it; the relationship between them is culinary rather than sexual (Fink, 2004: 83). Here one of Lacan’s most famous statements should be recalled: ‘There is no such thing as a sexual relation.’ This of course is not to be taken literally. What he means is that there is no single formula of sexuation that would absorb the masculine and feminine poles within a unified and complementary whole (Laclau, 2006: 669). Or that the whole, the One, or Hegel’s Absolute Spirit is necessarily impossible, and any discursive structure is necessarily incomplete. This incompleteness or lack appears as the bar separating the signifier (S) from the signified (s) (Fink, 2004: 99). The signifier by itself is lacking, imprecise, and incomplete, since any one word can refer to a multitude of concepts, and when taken together they never achieve complete signification. This produces an “incessant sliding” of the signified under the signifier (Lacan, 2006: 419).

Retroactivity, Contingency & the Point de Capiton

To make meaning, the signified’s sliding is controlled by connecting signifiers through signifying chains. These can be conceived of as interlocking rings that can be infinitely combined to produce an infinite amount of meanings. Meaning is then contingent, for within a signifying chain signification insists, yet none of its components consists in the signification it can provide at that very moment (Lacan, 2006: 419). This is to say that the meaning of any signifying chain grows out of the place in which we situate the signifiers, or that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Fink, 2004: 87). Take the beginning of the following sentence (or signifying chain): “Decarbonization is...” With only the subject and verb, decarbonization’s signified is hard to pin

down. Only after adding "...the only way to solve anthropogenic climate change," is it possible to ascertain what the first signifier signifies. In this way, meaning is not only made contingently but also retroactively, as the effect of the first word in the sentence can only be known after the last word has been heard or read; its meaning is made *ex post facto* (Fink, 1995: 63). Meaning, therefore, is generated by a semantic context (contingency) provided after its utterance (retroactivity), its 'full' meaning being a historical product (1995: 63).

As demonstrated, the last example achieved its signification only after its final term. The end of a signifying chain is what Lacan calls the *point de capiton*, whose translation could either be "button tie," "quilting point," or "anchoring point" (Stavrakakis, 1999: 97-99; Fink, 2004: 89-90) and parallels with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) "nodal point." No matter what we call this concept, we can think of it as a reference point which stops the signified's 'incessant sliding' and retroactively anchors, ties, or quilts a particular concept to each of the signifiers in the chain. The chain (in our Western languages) moves from left to right, the first signifier to the second, while the *point de capiton* is the last term, the signifier which loops from the end of the chain back to its beginning, endowing the first term with a particular meaning. So, the meaning of any one signifier depends on its ability to be referred or reflected back to another signifier that the subject knows. To understand, therefore, means to locate or embed one configuration of signifiers within another, involving a nearly unconscious process where things fall into place within the web of multifarious connections among thoughts already "assimilated" (Fink, 1995: 71). Without these *points de capiton* nothing that we do or say would make sense.

Retroactivity, contingency, and *points de capiton* have important implications extending far beyond the level of the signifying chain in both constituting the subject and how we (as subjects) interpret or historicize the past.

We have seen that the identity of the first term comes to be as the result of the last term—the *point de capiton*—the signifier which must be already known (or have happened) for any signification to be produced. This parallels with how the subject's identity, conscious self, or ego comes to be as a result of their previous introduction into language—this being the traumatic process known as symbolic castration, in which the subject unconsciously believes to have lost their pre-linguistic enjoyment (*jouissance*) as a result of their socialization in and subjection to language. It is whatever they think they lost after being forced to accept the rules of language and society. In Freud's words, *Wo es war, soll ich werden*, which is to say, "where it (the unconscious) was, I (the ego/conscious) shall come to be." Important to note here is that this full pre-linguistic *jouissance* (enjoyment) was never real; this notion or specter of complete signification or perfection only (again) comes to be as a result of language's lack, its imperfection, or its inability to completely signify the subject.

It is in this sense that the subject can be understood as a precipitate of meanings or as a signified (Fink, 1995: 69). This would be to conceive of a subject whose meaning (signified) is represented by the signifiers they identify with (these signifiers, as will be explained, never completely signify the subject). For a human subject these could be "student," "teacher," and/or "believer..." while for an institutional subject—or a locus of power—these could be "liberal,"

“capitalist,” and/or “democratic,” etc. For this reason, the Lacanian formula for the signifier is that which represents the subject (the signified) for another signifier. This is to say that the lack in language (the Other or Symbolic Order) introduces lack into the subject, and with lack—the possibility of some impossible perfection, full *jouissance*, or complete signification that always lingers just out of their reach. *In short, the subject of lack becomes the subject of desire.* Understanding this latter concept, as will be demonstrated later, is fundamental for discourse analysis, since it goes beyond revealing a discourse’s lack and the hegemonic/structural relations behind its articulation and explains—through the concepts of *object a*, *fantasy*, symptom, and *jouissance*—how and why subjects form affective attachments to it.

Retroactivity means that there is no objective history, insofar as we can only interpret it from our position of enunciation in present, which can be only realized under the auspices of language. It’s an attempt to place order on the seemingly chaotic world that we experience, to totalize our realities, and to give significance to our existence. In simple terms, this very logic of contingency and retroactivity (constitutive of the subject) makes possible our ability to interpret, understand, and manage the glimpses we see of the material world, for they make possible our interpretation of past events—or historicization. Put differently, we cannot ever know the true meaning of an event until after the fact.

To illustrate how this works, we’ll turn to one of the central objects of this study, climate governance, starting with the relationship between the Industrial Revolutions and climate change. During these fossil fuel energy revolutions, few considered the potential environmental and climatological impacts of burning coal and oil; it wasn’t until decades later that scientists began to hypothesize how increased levels of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere would affect Earth’s life support system. In fact, it was only after these “traumas”—the exploitation of fossil fuels and the emission of GHGs into the atmosphere—that the signifiers “greenhouse gases” or “climate change” came to be in popular discourse. This interpretation or historicization of the causal chain of events, therefore, has given new meanings to existing signifiers, such as “Industrial Revolution”, “coal” and “oil” etc., and has turned “climate change” into a major *point de capiton* as well. Think about the impact it has had on governance and public policy at all levels, mainly in the form of new institutions, policy tools, and frameworks (hegemony and social construction), and perhaps more importantly the impact it has had on our outlook of the future—as an enemy constantly threatening to dismantle the social, political, and economic system(s) in which we access fleeting moments of enjoyment (*jouissance*).

This retroactive interpretation of contingent events is ingrained in political science and public policy. Take for instance how a policy’s (or policy mix’s) performance is measured—that of measuring how a certain statistic increases or decreases in relation to something already known, such as GHG emissions targets, or the notion that all GHG reductions (knowledge) must be in relation to something else that is already known (the *point de capiton*), namely the amounts in the atmosphere at any given year, whether this be 1990 levels or preindustrial levels. Because of retroactivity and contingency, it’s then impossible to know if these goals have been met until after the fact. The EU, for instance, didn’t know if it met its 2020 climate goals until the early 2020s

and it won't know until after 2030 if its current actions will be sufficient to meet the goals of the current policy framework (e.g. U.N.'s Agenda 2030, the European Green Deal). Likewise, we'll never know if what we're doing right now will be enough to leave our future selves and generations a stable, livable planet; all that can be done is to make predictions and speculations about the Real of climate change based on the very little known about how the planet reacts to rapid increases in emissions and how our available policy tools might mitigate them. Since climate policy discourses operate under different paradigms (e.g. green growth, postgrowth), understanding climate governance thus requires knowledge about how subjects affectively invest in these discourses—or what makes a discourse 'stick'.

Metonymy & Metaphor

It is at level of the signifying chain where we can grasp the logic of the signifier through the two fundamental meaning-makers simultaneously at work behind retroactivity and contingency—metonymy and metaphor. The former is of continuity and concatenation, the property of combination, while the latter is the dimension of possible substitution, applicable to every signifier in the chain (Stavrakakis, 1999: 94). On one hand, metonymy is homologous to Freudian psychoanalysis's displacement and in the fields of linguistics and semiotics, syntagm. While on the other, metaphor is homologous to condensation in Freudian psychoanalysis and paradigm in linguistics and semiotics. In political theory and the social sciences, Stavrakakis (1999) posits that metonymy and metaphor parallel with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) logics of difference and logics of equivalence, respectively.

Metonymic relations between signifiers can be thought of as word-to-word connections (Lacan, 2006: 421). Think of syntagmatic relations at the level of grammar—or how articles connect to nouns, and nouns connect to verbs and adjectives, etc. These concatenations continue at the lexical level; taking Lacan's (2006: 421) example: with "thirty sails" one can't help but think of the signifiers, "ships" or "sailboats," or when I say "climate" you might think "change" and then with 'climate change,' the signifier 'anthropogenic' might come to mind. Taking this notion even further, metonymy can be seen in the study of hegemony and collective identities with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) logic of difference—with the identity "socialist" we might then think 'capitalist' or 'fascist' etc. In this sense, the logic of difference implies expansion and increasing complexity of the political space, as it expands the syntagmatic pole of language increasing the amount of positions (or identities) that can relate to one another (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 130). We know what a "socialist" is—differentially—by what they are not (in opposition to being a "capitalist" or "fascist," etc.), just as we know what a "lady" is in its opposition to "gentleman" and just as we distinguish a noun from verb. It is in this connection that meaning is displaced or deferred from one signifier to the next, and contingent relations arise between signifiers. It is also on this horizontal axis of language that we can again appreciate: *a signifier represents the subject for another signifier*. This is to say that one signifier signifies another, and another, and another... Or, thinking of a dictionary, how are words defined? Not with signifieds but with more signifiers! The signifying chain through its metonymic, horizontal axis knows no limits, except for those imposed by its sibling, metaphor.

This vertical axis can be understood as “one word for another,” essentially one signifier’s ability to be substituted by another (Lacan, 2006: 422). At the level of grammar this would be the ability to substitute any noun for another noun and any verb for another verb. At the lexical level this would involve the commonly understood notion of metaphor—that of juxtaposing two different words to create new meanings. In the social sciences, Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985: 130) logic of equivalence occurs when a collection of different identities can be united under one, particular claim. In this way, it implies a simplification of the political space, since it expands the paradigmatic pole of language allowing for elements to be substituted by another, therefore reducing the number of positions (1985: 130).

Take for instance a hypothetical debate between a “degrowther” (who believes that GHG mitigation is incompatible with economic growth), a “green growther” (who believes the opposite), and a climate denialist. In this debate it would be very likely for the first two individuals, due to their common belief in climate change, to team up against the climate denialist and for their discourse to focus on convincing the denialist to believe in the overwhelming scientific evidence supporting anthropogenic climate change. What began as a debate between three positions would likely be reduced to two—between the believers and the non-believer. Likewise, take the 2023 Spanish general elections when left-wing parties (PSOE and Sumar) and regional nationalist parties (PNV, EH Bildu, and Junts...) set aside their differences and united to form a coalition government due to their commonly held opposition to the right-wing parties (PP and Vox), or in WWII when the communist and capitalist nations did the same and all united against fascist Germany, Italy, and Japan. Metaphor’s creative spark, then, “flashes between two signifiers” (Lacan, 2006: 422). During WWII, finding equivalence between the signifiers “capitalist” and “communist” led to the creation of the “Allies” and during the 2023 Spanish general elections the equivalence between the left and nationalist parties allowed for a new coalition to form.

It is also in metaphor where meaning crystallizes; it is the assumption of the meaning we make when considering any particular signifier within the context of the signifying chain (Lacan, 2006: 422). In this way, behind any *point de capiton* or nodal point is an assumption of meaning; however, if that assumption is questioned or dialectized, then the signifying chain continues its metonymic dance. This leaves us with a predicament: if language’s structure is theoretically infinite, then how do we as humans—finite beings—deal with this? How do we make something that is always already incomplete, lacking, or negative into a complete, full, or positive structure? The answer is we can’t, but we still try to...with more metaphor, in the form of a master signifier(s) which stops the signifying chain by representing the subject for all signifiers.

Anchoring Meaning in Fantasy: Master Signifiers & the Object a

As has been explained in the previous sections, the last term of a signifying chain is what retroactively fills each of the preceding signifiers with meaning (their signifieds), or the incessant sliding of the former under the latter is quilted by the *point de capiton*. In other words, if the formula for a signifier is that which represents the subject to another signifier, then the last term of the signifying chain is the *point de capiton*. The master signifier is a *point de capiton*—yet it is the signifier to which all of the other signifiers represent the subject (Lacan, 2006: 693-4). So, if

this last term is absent, the other signifiers represent nothing since each term's meaning depends or is contingent on the others (2006: 693-4). In Fink's (1995: 135) words, "a master signifier presents itself as a dead end, a stopping point, a term, word, or phrase that puts an end of association, that grinds the patient's discourse to a halt." In this sense, a master signifier is a type of *point de capiton* or nodal point around which the subject organizes all other signifiers, their identities, and their reality (or *fantasy*). Master signifiers, try as they might, never manage to totalize the Symbolic and the Imaginary. The Real always returns in the form of a lack or excess—in the form of the *object a*.

Let's start by looking into the workings of the master signifier of our economy: value/capital. To do this we will turn to Žižek's (1991: 22-27) Marxian reading of the formulas of the signifier. Starting with the simple formula: *a signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier*, one could say, for example, that one apple is worth three bananas. We know the exchange value of an apple in relation to its equivalent number of bananas. The formula for the master signifier appears when a society decides that one can be exchanged for any of the other commodities; for a signifier, any of the other signifiers can represent the subject (1991: 24). The formula is then expanded so that one apple equals two bananas, three melons, or seven Teslas... In making this abstraction, the relationship can then be reversed into the general form. That is: a banana is equal to 1/2 of an apple, 1/3 of a melon, or 1/7 of a Tesla, etc. An apple represents the subject for all the other commodities; a one signifier represents the subject for all of the others. This produces a radical contradiction between the use value and the exchange value of the commodity (1991: 23). Because of its ability to be exchanged for everything else, its exchange value far outweighs its use value. The apple has little use itself (use value) yet much more value as a tool for obtaining other commodities (exchange value). And it is precisely from this logic where money comes into the picture as an object with virtually no use value and only exchange value; it is the one signifier for which all the other signifiers represent the subject (1991: 26). Money in this way becomes a metaphor for value, it is chosen for the sole purpose of exchange and cannot be used for anything else. Insofar as it is pure value, it seems we can never have enough. We save it—making surpluses—it embodies not only our ability to cover our basic needs (pleasure) but also our ability to enjoy life.

Breaking this down further, the only reason why markets function is due to our unwavering belief in the nonsensical tautology that money is money; it represents pure exchange value, which as a result allows money to give value to (almost) everything. Money as a metaphor for pure (exchange) value is then a master signifier around which all other signifiers are signified. Yet, because of its apparent lack of use value or particular meaning it can also be conceived of as an 'empty signifier' or a signifier without signified. For Laclau (in Butler et al., 2000: 56), the more extended a chain of equivalences (logic of equivalence or metaphor) that a particular identity (or sector) comes to represent, and the more its aims become global, the looser its links will be between its name and its original, particular meaning, and the closer it will be to attaining the status of an empty signifier. Money does a particularly good (but never perfect) job at representing value, for it can represent a subject's value in numerous ways and create complex systems of exchange.

In this sense, the master signifier or empty signifier is essentially the placeholder for some impossible pure signifier (that which totalizes the network or battery of all the signifiers), yet cannot ever be this “finally found ‘proper’ signifier, a representation which is not a misrepresentation” (Žižek, 1991: 24). And it is precisely because of this impossibility that this signifier is ‘reflective.’ For a signifier to totalize the battery all the others, it must be, following differential logic, outside of this battery. This is however impossible, for there is nothing beyond language that we can use to describe language, which leads us to appreciate Lacan’s famous statement “there is no meta-language” (Lacan, 2006: 688).

Because the master signifier cannot be outside the set which it gives meaning to, it is bound to find itself within it. If the master signifier tries to be the pure negativity, absence, or void-place of inscription against which all other signifiers in the network achieve positive meaning, yet finds itself in this network— it can then be conceived of as a “negation of the negation” (Žižek, 1991: 30-33). *This is to say that because this signifier overlaps with its absence, void, or constitutive outside, it paradoxically and nonsensically must make difference with itself (i.e. money is money).* The master signifier is then a binary signifier that (mis)represents a mythical unary signifier, which is the nonexistent signifier not included in the set of all signifiers and therefore would be the proper, true constitutive outside or the void-place of inscription for the rest (Fink, 1995: 73-74). As such, it is homologous with Freud’s *Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen* or the representative of the representation, a concept also known in Lacanian terms as the signifier of lack in the Other (or language) (Fink 1995: 73-74; Fink, 2004: 132). In this way, the importance of metaphor can be appreciated; in Žižek’s words:

The ‘original metaphor’ is not a substitution of ‘something for something-else’ but a substitution of something for nothing: the act by means of which ‘there is something instead of nothing’ - which is why metonymy is a species of metaphor, the metonymic sliding from one (partial) object to another is set in motion by the metaphoric substitution constitutive of the subject: the ‘one for another’ presupposes the ‘one for nothing.’ (1991: 50)

It is only through the tacit agreement of nearly every human being that ‘money is money’ that everything else (in a market) can achieve meaning or value.

Understanding this logic of incompleteness and lack introduced by the master signifier has now laid the foundation for approaching the *object a*. It is through the *object a* where we can delimit the Symbolic’s border with the Real. For Žižek the relationship between both orders is fundamentally paradoxical, for:

the bar which separates them is strictly internal to the Symbolic since it prevents the Symbolic from ‘becoming itself.’ The problem for the signifier is not its impossibility to touch the Real but its impossibility to ‘attain itself’ - what the signifier lacks is not the extra-linguistic object but the Signifier itself, a non-barred, non-hindered One. (1991: 112)

It’s paradoxical insofar as the Real doesn’t exist—there is no extralinguistic object, there are just more ‘things to be known.’ *This domain only exists as an effect of language, insofar as we see imperfections in the network held together by master signifiers. In other words, the Real’s presence*

only exists because of the absence of complete signification in the Symbolic. These Real things or ‘things to be known’ lie beyond language’s reach and can only be represented or accessed retroactively through language. More simply put, the Real is the domain of the nonexistent proper or pure signifier (or the Freudian Thing). Since the system is incomplete, there is always something that is not quite right, either a lack or surplus of something. This thing is the *object a*.

The relationship between these two terms is summarized nicely by Slavoj Žižek:

Lacan’s ‘Master-Signifier’ is the ‘subjective’ signifying feature which sustains the very ‘objective’ symbolic structure: if we abstract this subjective excess from the objective symbolic order, the very objectivity of this order disintegrates. On the other hand, the Lacanian object *a* is the exact opposite of the Master-Signifier: not the subjective supplement which sustains the objective order, but the objective supplement which sustains subjectivity in its contrast to the subjectless objective order: object *a* is that ‘bone in the throat’, that disturbing stain which forever blurs our picture of reality—it is the object on account of which ‘objective reality’ is forever inaccessible to the subject. (in Butler et al., 2000: 239)

Because of the master signifier’s incomplete representation of the Symbolic’s totality or universality (objectivity), this reality is *fantasy* to the extent that it cannot ever be 100% objective. *Fantasy* will always retain some particular, nonsensical subjective element that prevents it from reaching a completely objective or universal status, even though the subjective kernel of the master signifier is paradoxically necessary for its constitution. With the term *fantasy*, our Symbolic-Imaginary reality’s incompleteness can be understood as ex-centric to itself; it is always threatened by the Real—a radical exteriority—that dislocates it (Stavrakakis, 1999: 107). ‘Ex-centric’ indicates that reality is never completely enclosed by the Symbolic-Imaginary, for the *object a* as lack or excess always lies beyond its grasp. Therefore, *fantasy*’s purpose in positioning the master signifier and *object a* is to fill in the gaps in the subject’s negotiations with reality, and thus prevents the subject’s consistency from fading (Sharpe & Turner, 2020: 190). In other words, without this particular, subjective, nonsensical element, the Symbolic (and its enclosure of the Imaginary) would disintegrate into chaos, bringing the subject to a state of psychosis—there would be nothing to hold the rest of the signifiers in the battery together, since all of them are connected in some way to this primordial signifier. *The object a is that piece of the Real that incarnates the remaining lack or excess resulting from the master signifier’s incomplete totalization. It is the always inaccessible object of our desire—the ‘objective supplement’ that prevents the master signifier from totalizing the social space.*

Important to emphasize is that *object a* is an impossible object and can manifest as either lack or excess. For a subject, *object a* could be that thing, when eliminated or attained, that would complete their fantasy and make their life perfect. For a political subject, a nationalist discourse might articulate illegal immigrants as the embodiment of this object, and that when all illegal immigration has been brought to a halt, their nation will be once again “free” and “safe.” Another example would be the figure of the Jew as the *object a* under Nazism. In this case the master signifier (Nazism) could not bring about a utopia on its own—so all dystopian elements needed to

be (dis/mis)placed onto a certain group—the Jews, and the solution was the Holocaust. A less extreme example would be management of the climate crisis in the (neo)liberal, green growth approach, in which efforts to solve the problem can all be reduced to a measurable numerical value, CO2 emissions, that can be bought and sold as carbon credits (Swyngedouw, 2010: 220). What becomes clear is that every master signifier underpinning a political discourse or fantasy *needs* to reify the *object a* to account for its shortcomings, lack, or incompleteness.

Fantasy has significant implications for political theory. First, no single ideology is fundamentally right or represents the absolute truth, for “human construction is never able to institute itself as a closed and self-contained order” (Stavrakakis 2007: 73). This means no ideology or paradigm will ever successfully totalize the network of all the other signifiers; the Real will always throw a wrench into the equation (of the Symbolic) or dislocate it. This is to say that the empty (or master) signifier will never be completely empty or objective, it will always retain some particular, subjective dimension, making impossible its complete universalization or totalization. Here, one can find a theoretical affinity between what Laclau term’s the ‘impossibility of society’ and the lack in the Other (2007: 73)—which delineates the inner limit of the Symbolic’s frontier with domain of the Real. Second, politics then comprises all of our attempts to fill in this lack in the Other—the impossible task of trying to account for the Real (2007: 75). Politics involves using knowledge to do this accounting; this impossible task is why governments depend on complex bureaucracies and governance arrangements with private actors to totalize the social space. How we use and interpret this knowledge is a question of the master signifiers that underpin our ideological positions. It is the moment of a *fantasy’s* dislocation that allows for new social constructions to suture the lack it creates (2007: 107). *In other words, its constitutive incompleteness, always leaves room for a Political act or event to change the coordinates of the Social.* These new social constructions, coordinates, or ways of thinking and behaving are the adaptations subjects make to cope with whatever is lost in a traumatic encounter with the Real—they are symptoms to be found in any socially constructed reality, for every reality is based on some sort of traumatic event or encounter with the Real. The following section will take a closer look into the role of affect in a subject’s fantasy.

The Affective Dimension of Discourse: The Split Subject’s *Fantasy*

Desire & Jouissance (Enjoyment)

Although used interchangeably, psychoanalysis distinguishes affect from emotion along the conscious/unconscious division of the subject. Affect refers to the unconscious aspects of emotional experience related to the latent workings of desire and master signifiers, while emotion would be the conscious manifestations of these underlying processes (Yates, 2020: 163). The subject’s unconscious desire for complete signification or *jouissance* (enjoyment) is the unconscious affect underlying all irruptions of conscious emotional states in our pursuit of *jouissance*. The affective dimension then can be reduced to every subject’s desire, which for Fink (2004: 124) is what separate humans from machines; it’s what keeps us from being completely ‘rational individuals.’ This dimension accounted for by psychoanalysis is thus fundamental for discourse analysis as it sheds light as to why some discourses are successful, resonate, stick, and

bring about social and political change (the act or event), while others do not (Stavrakakis, 2007: 22).

Jouissance, nevertheless, goes beyond our common understanding of enjoyment and implies an extreme form of it—namely along the lines of a pleasurable pain or a painful pleasure. Maintaining this signifier in French allows it to retain its sexual connotation (*jouir* is slang for ‘to come’ or ‘to climax’). Moreover, enjoyment in English is a synonym for pleasure, which is problematic insofar as pleasure obeys the laws of homeostasis established in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, while *jouissance* transgresses this law (Sheridan in Lacan, 1981: 281). A person experiences pleasure when they satisfy their hunger, yet would experience *jouissance* when binge eating. Where to draw this line between need/pleasure and desire/enjoyment, however, is unclear in the same way as it is always unclear how much money is ‘enough.’

On their quest for complete identification and signification, desire makes the subject metonymically slide from one identification to the next in search of *jouissance*, and they repetitively fixate on certain signifiers that promise it. This repetitive fixation is another way to understand the symptom. In this sense, “desire is a metonymy” and the “symptom is a metaphor” (Lacan, 2006: 439). Desire is what pushes the subject to find something better; it’s what instills within them this constant sense of incompleteness, while the symptom is a coping mechanism so that they may access an incomplete or partial *jouissance*. It holds their reality together. Understanding how *fantasy*, structured by discourse, manages its economy of desire and *jouissance* (affect and emotion) is fundamental to explaining why certain discourses or ideologies ‘stick’ as well as possibilities for their change through the act or event. For Klepec (2016: 118) discourse is “a necessary structure that conditions and determines every act, action, affect, thought, meaning, sense, etc. of the speaking being...and shapes, defines and creates reality itself. In the following section, we will review how desire emerges through the subject’s Symbolic castration and thereby produces a subject split between its unconscious position of enunciation and its conscious position (ego) of enunciated speech/thought.

Negativity qua Symbolic Castration

Without the Symbolic Order or Big Other, you wouldn’t exist. Symbolic castration brings the subject from a nothing (–) to a something (+) through the primordial master signifier or paternal metaphor/function. This master signifier creates a lacking, split subject, thereby constituting the subject’s desire (Fink, 1995: 50-51).

Symbolic castration refers to two processes: alienation and separation. The former refers to how the subject comes to be a lacking, linguistic subject forced into or interpellated in the Symbolic Order; while the latter refers to how language acquisition and socialization produce a subject of desire (Fink, 1995: 50). Lack and desire, as will be shown in this brief overview of castration, are two sides of the same coin insofar as the subject begins as a lack (negativity) who learns how to desire and to fill this lack with other signifiers or Knowledge (positivity). In other words, these meaningless master signifiers eclipse the subject and introduce the lack which makes possible their constitution as subjects of desire (1995: 77). For this reason, the master signifier can

also be called the signifier of the Other's desire, since it is only by internalizing these meaningless nonsensical tautologies in their unconscious that the subject can begin to desire more (in)complete significations (Fink, 1995: 74-75).

The unconscious acquisition of language produces a split subject, split between its conscious ego—being aware of what it wants and does—and its unconscious desire—a desire simply to be desired by the Other—or other subjects, which means the subject never actually knows what it wants! Any (partial) object on which the subject places its desire is then always already mis/displaced forcing its eventual metonymic displacement onto another. This ontological structure of lack and desire is what powers an individual subject as well as collective subjects (e.g. societies, nations, governments, and political movements).

Before separation, the subject is signified entirely by the maternal figure or the mOther's desire, which forces the child to forgo being in their impossible quest to be the sole object of her desire. This is so until this mother-child unity is interrupted by a third term, the paternal function/metaphor, or another Other (1995: 55). This 'other' Other is a signifier—a 'primordial', master signifier—that when assimilated by the child expels them from their mOther's desire. Identifying with this paternal authority is a "'compromise-formation' which attests to the fact that the subject 'gave way as to its desire,'" so that it may have a Symbolic identity and repress the ultimate impossibility of their desire, for desire unhinged from prohibition (law) is death-drive or being-towards-death, which would represent the ultimate annihilation of their Symbolic identity (Žižek, 1991: 266). To put this more simply, those who transgress basic social law—say for instance someone who is unable to maintain a job and pay taxes—may be pushed to the precarious margins of society—into homeless camps, for example. Accepting the Other's laws and prohibitions and desiring what it finds desirable is then how we adapt and find our place in the Symbolic. This first begins with accepting the imposition of language, forcing us to express our Real desire imperfectly and incompletely through Symbolic demands.

The paternal function is the subject's first traumatic encounter with the Real; it retroactively represents the loss of a fictitious full *jouissance* the subject enjoyed in its union with the maternal figure. This extreme form of Real enjoyment returns in the form of the *object a*. *Object a*, therefore, is the leftover of the process of constituting an 'objective' reality (the Symbolic), the scrap that evades the grasp of symbolization; it is the rem(a)inder of the lost hypothetical mother-child unity (Fink, 1995: 94). In other words, the master signifier's imperfect totalization leaves something to be desired—a remainder—as well as a reminder of the *jouissance* lost before castration. To the extent that this object presents itself as lack or excess, experiences of *jouissance* are typically found in symptoms that bring the subject extreme pain or pleasure—too much or too little. In Tomšič's words:

Enjoyment is non-homeostatic and can only be experienced either as incomplete or as excessive, too little – the this-is-not-it that relates to the metonymic and chain-like structure of desire – or too much – the unsatisfiable encore that concerns the repetitive and circular structure of the drive. The subject assumes an impossible position: either the attempt of

satisfaction leads to dissatisfaction, lack of enjoyment because the object escapes the subject's grasp, or it amounts to an intrusion of enjoyment into the body. (2016:150-151) Fink (1995: 60-61) distinguishes between pre-Symbolic first order *jouissance* (before castration) (J1) from *jouissance* after the imposition of the master signifier, paternal law, or the Symbolic (J2). The former being the supposed sublime enjoyment before the dissolution of the mother-child bond, while the latter being a partial 'second order' enjoyment accessible in the *fantasy* imposed by the master signifier.

Although a legitimate distinction, one must be careful not to project experiences of the latter *jouissance* onto the former, for it's impossible to know what this first-order *jouissance* was like or if it even existed, as it is a retroactive construction only made possible by the castrating intervention of the Symbolic (Stavrakakis, 1999: 82). This pre-Symbolic experience is the Real effected by the Symbolic and therefore represents the Real as one of those "things that can't be said" (Frosh, 2007/2014: 22). The extreme form of painful pleasure when experiencing *jouissance* is also one of those parts of life that seems to escape signification. They are emotions so intense that we typically lack the words necessary to describe the experience. Whether these experiences are horribly traumatic (e.g. witnessing violence) or cathartic (e.g. psychedelics/religion), words never do them justice.

As the subject learns the rules of the Symbolic, the possibility of attaining *jouissance* exists in transgressing its laws' prohibitions. This can be conceived of through Freud's concept of the Primal Father, which espouses the idea that because of the law's prohibitions (of incest for instance), there existed an un-castrated subject that enjoyed to the fullest as these rules did not apply to him. An easier way to grasp this, however, is to think of the self-contradictory character of the authority figures in one's life. For instance, parents punish children for using bad words, yet use bad words themselves. We see similar dynamics in legal systems where violence is prohibited to the citizen, yet enforced by the State (qua the Police) through violence, or in the way that most presidents are immune from criminal prosecution in their official acts. Just as the state must have a monopoly over violence, the subject's master (signifier) must appear as an un-split or un-castrated subject. *Jouissance* is, therefore, structured in language by the signifying chain and gives meaning to our actions. For this reason, Lacan (2006: 696) reminds us that *jouissance*, "is prohibited to whoever speaks, as such—or, put differently, it can only be said between the lines by whoever is a subject of the Law, since the Law is founded on that very prohibition." The paternal metaphor, through its imposition of law, names the lost *jouissance* (that the subject never had), making the subject aware of its lack thereof. "Lack only comes into being by being named. Otherwise, it is simply the way an animal experiences hunger...as soon as it is satiated, it is forgotten" (Fink, 2004: 126). The second order *jouissance*, to the extent that it is mediated by the Other (as language) and framed in *fantasy*, can be nothing but partial or incomplete.

The Split Subject & the Super-Ego's Structuring of Fantasy

The castrated subject, just like their *fantasy*, is eccentric (or ex-centric) or unbalanced because of the master signifier's incompleteness—not all of subject can be accounted for in the Symbolic and Imaginary, as some part is always beyond signification or in the Real (Lacan, 2006:

430; Fink, 2004: 102; Stavrakakis, 2007: 25; Žižek, 1999: 32-33). Moreover, the Other as language splits the subject into two locally separate, yet ultimately connected signifying chains—the unconscious (subject of enunciation) and the conscious (the subject of the enunciated or statement). Although split, these two sides are still connected. This can be represented by a Möbius strip, a topology that when looking at one section appears divided between its top and bottom; however, if one were to walk along its entirety, they would find that the two sides are connected by the twist in the middle. This is to show that although they may appear separate, the unconscious and conscious are connected—the former structuring and briefly surfacing in the latter. What most people would disregard as someone not being able to put their thoughts into words fast enough, is for the analyst a sign of the unconscious signifying chain surfacing in the subject's conscious speech.

The incomplete, eccentric, split subject is not Descartes' inasmuch as subjectivity is not found in the conscious domain of the ego, rather it lies in the subject's unconscious position of enunciation. Put differently, the subject results from the unconscious workings of the signifying chain. Instead of I think; therefore, I am—which is to say conscious thought begets being—the Lacanian subject is an 'either-or'—either I am not thinking, or I am not (Fink, 1995: 44-45). For Lacan, 'thinking' refers to unconscious thought, meaning that consciousness or 'false being' arises when the subject represses or refuses to pay attention to their unconscious signifying chain. This 'either-or' marks the split between the conscious ego, its unavoidable false sense of self and the automatic functioning of language or the signifying chain in the unconscious (Fink, 1995: 44-45).

The unconscious is located between the Symbolic and the Real, while the conscious is located between the Symbolic and the Imaginary. In the unconscious we find the repressed master signifiers (S1) that structure a subject's Symbolic position, while in the conscious register, the Symbolic structures their objective knowledge (S2) and Imaginary *fantasy*. Herein lies the distinction between enunciation and the enunciated or the distinction between full speech and empty speech, Real and reality, truth/belief and knowledge. All 'objective' knowledge is sustained by a nonsensical truth (master signifier). In David Pavón-Cuéllar's words:

In depth, in the real of the symbolic, the enunciating act enables a retroactive signifierization. On the surface, in the symbolic of the imaginary, the enunciated fact makes possible a retrospective signification. This signification depends on signifierization just as the enunciated fact depends on the act of enunciation. (2010/2014: 67)

This repressed, nonsensical, violent, enunciating act or institution of a master signifier—the Real of the Symbolic—retroactively turns the subject into a signifier and allows for them to exist in, retrospectively make meaning of, and become a signified in their Symbolic-Imaginary fantasy. This is seen to the extent that every hegemonic social order is sustained by the state's monopoly of violence, or in how parents keep their children from hitting one another through the threat of violence or punishment. *The unconscious subject of enunciation is the workforce of this initial enunciating act, truth, or master signifier, which then positions the Symbolic conscious subject of the enunciated in their Imaginary reality.* Symbolic castration or the enunciating act is responsible for the creation of both the Real enunciating subject and the Symbolic enunciated subject (Pavón-

Cuéllar, 2010/2014: 68). Our unconscious and conscious registers exist because of and work for the master signifier, thereby allowing its Symbolic structure to reproduce itself.

As will be discussed in greater detail, the act or event requires traversing the fantasy (Žižek in Butler et al., 2000: 124) or piercing the super-ego (Ana Negro, 2013: 102). A true act involves all three registers: 1) a traumatic encounter with the Real qua *object a* (which tends to be a symptom of the existing Symbolic Order) 2) that subverts the master signifier (S1) and is registered as a new S1 in the unconscious Symbolic structure, and 3) produces a fundamental reconfiguration of conscious Symbolic-Imaginary knowledge (S2). Doing so of course implies a reconfiguration of *jouissance* qua *object a*. To see how this might come about, we must now turn to the relationship between the unconscious and conscious dimensions of the Symbolic Order by looking at the how the unconscious structures the conscious through the ideal-ego, ego-ideal, and super-ego.

At the conscious level, the subject experiences the ideal version of themselves—their ideal-ego. This is an Imaginary standard of one’s ‘best-self,’ think for instance of the famous people others have told you that you looked like. This ideal image is complete, un-castrated, and un-split. The ego-ideal is the Symbolic register that tells the subject how to achieve this best-self and how to find their place by following the laws of the Symbolic Order. In Žižek’s (2008: 89) words, the ego-ideal is “this seemingly benevolent agency which leads us to moral growth and maturity,” which “forces us to betray the ‘law of desire’” by making us adopt the “‘reasonable’ demands of the existing socio-symbolic order.” The ego-ideal can be thought of as the emancipatory voice of Symbolic law. In a Kantian sense, the ego-ideal’s voice is that which liberates the subject from its violent instincts. Through law’s prohibition of violence, this Symbolic structure transmitted through the ego-ideal allows subjects to lead lives of safety and pleasure and for economic and political systems to reproduce themselves. In this sense, the ego-ideal is fundamental for social governance.

But what is the flip side of obeying Symbolic law? By doing so, the subject betrays their internal “law of desire” (Žižek, 2008: 89)—their desire for a *jouissance* unhinged by law. This Real desire returns in the voice of the super-ego. Put differently, by disavowing desire the super-ego brings an excessive feeling of guilt (Žižek, 2008: 89). Therefore, any social structure must allow some sorts of quasi-transgressions (Sharpe & Turner, 2020: 192) that allow subjects to access this *jouissance* and quiet their demanding super-ego. This is why all legal systems have both a Kantian categorical imperative of the ego-ideal, and the violent Sadean super-egoic underside—its monopoly of violence. The super-egoic dimension of law is therefore the exception the law makes to its prohibitions. In other words, violence is prohibited unless you decide to be a police officer or soldier, or unless you are disciplining your child. The essence of law therefore is to “divide up, distribute, or reattribute everything that counts as *jouissance*” (Lacan, 1975: 3). This is why in every social system there are ‘accepted’ forms of quasi-transgressions that we not only see in their disciplinary apparatuses but also in cultural manifestations of *jouissance*, whether this be at football matches, alcohol and drug use at parties, raves, and concerts etc., or in other acts of (over)consumption and consumerism. We must remember that the super-ego’s injunction is to “Enjoy!” (1975: 3).

It is through the super-ego injunction that groups of people can be led to commit transgress socio-symbolic law. For instance, by invoking the need for law and order, reactionary and conservative leaders always demand specific transgressions of the law that constitute its super-egoic underside (McGowan, 2020: 147). By invoking the need to secure its territory from Hamas and preserve the Jewish people, Netanyahu is leading the Israeli army to commit genocide in Gaza in the same way as a climate activist's super-ego leads them to vandalize invaluable works of art in the public eye to save the planet; and just as Hitler made it totally OK to exterminate the Jews to make Nazi Germany safe and prosperous. Any law can be transgressed to protect the master (signifier). In this sense, the super-ego “marks a point at which permitted enjoyment, freedom-to-enjoy, is reversed into an obligation to enjoy—which...is the most effective way to block access to enjoyment” (Žižek, 1991: 237).

It is when the super-ego and ego-ideal contradict each other that we can see unconscious desire conflict with conscious knowledge—this is the formula for *disavowal*, and can be conceived of in such statements, “I know (the subject of the enunciated)...but (the subject of the enunciation)...”. Take for instance the following examples:

- I know that killing Palestinians and Jews is wrong, but bombing Palestinian hospitals is justifiable because Hamas insurgents are using them as bases or—because the Jews have been responsible for much of Germany's economic woes.
- I know that vandalism of famous works of art is wrong, but bringing attention to climate change is far more important.
- I know that fossil fuels cause climate change, but nevertheless we must ensure a stable supply of energy to maintain stable economic growth that maintains inflation around 2% of GDP.

Such types of speech can be seen as “lying by way of truth” (Žižek, 1991: 242) insofar as the Symbolic-Imaginary ‘truth’ or knowledge of the second syntagm covers up their desire for the reified *object a*. What each of these statements doesn't say—what they disavow—is that they get off on or enjoy these transgressions of socio-symbolic law because doing so gets them closer to this impossible fantasmatic object of enjoyment. In each of these sentences we see an enunciating act insofar as the ‘but’ makes an exception to universal law and makes their desire to transgress it justifiable. What these sentences actually cover up are the contradictions that hold together their fantasies. What they actually say is that: I know killing Palestinians/Jews is wrong, but it's the thing to right to do (we must), etc.

An act or event is therefore a disruption of the super-ego's close-knit relationship with *jouissance/object a*. When at one point your enjoyment came from the banal activities of eating, drinking, shopping, and watching sports, a new master signifier or enunciating act changes the superego's command by forging a new *object a* that touches on your repressed unconscious desire for *jouissance*. Partaking in such behavior then becomes an essential aspect of your ‘belonging’ to the hegemonic socio-symbolic order. So, what kind of act or event will shift our understanding of *jouissance* qua economic growth to one which allows us to live within the Earth's ecological

limits? This last question will be the focus of the analysis. To answer it we must analyze split-subjectivity in relation to the four discourses, *fantasies*, or social bonds.

The Four (or Five) Social Bonds

The Structure of Discourse

Fantasy can be succinctly reduced to the following matheme Lacan provides: $\$ \langle \rangle a$, which is to express the non-relation or non-rapport ($\langle \rangle$) between the split subject (\$) and the *object a*. The ontological structure for fantasy is a narrative, which structures the subject's lack in relation to the *object a* (that if completely accounted for would complete this lack). In his later teachings Lacan would expand on *fantasy* through his conceptualization of the four discourses or economies of *jouissance* to explain how they maintain and legitimize themselves and how they can be subverted through the act. To summarize all the elements of discourse analyzed up to this point, we'll say the following:

1. Discourse consists of the unconscious enunciating structure on which conscious enunciated speech is possible.
2. In Symbolic castration, the split between language (enunciating structure) and (enunciated) speech produces a split subject (\$).
3. Every unconscious enunciating structure is sustained by some repressed, subjective element—the master signifier (S1).
4. Therefore all 'objective' knowledge (S2) must reflect back to this former element.
5. Those elements which escape the master signifier's totalization (the remainder/excess/product/loss) constitute the object cause of the subject's desire or the *object a* (*a*).

Before delving into each discourse, we'll first review the general structure of his 'matheme' for discourse at the top of the Figure 2 that puts these four elements in relation (or non-relation) to one another. The top of the matheme represents the conscious domain of discourse, the realm of enunciated speech, while the bottom is the domain of the unconscious enunciating structure. The top-right side is the 'agent' or enunciator who does the work of their unconscious 'truth' (bottom-right). The agent can be conceived of as a *semblance* insofar as his role as agent is only made possible by his relation to the other (Vanheule, 2016: 3-4), or a 'signifier represents the subject for another signifier'. One is 'superior' only to the extent that they treat the other as 'inferior' and vice versa. The agent addresses the 'other' (top-left), who in following the agent's orders produces either a product or loss (bottom-left). The position of the other can also be interpreted as that of *jouissance* insofar as it is 'dealt with' through the Other (as language) by making an appeal to the agent/semblance (Vanheule, 2016: 4). *Jouissance* is enveloped or contained by the master signifier's (S1) creation of knowledge (S2) via Symbolic castration. Because the *semblance* cannot completely contain *jouissance*, the product or loss can be interpreted as surplus-*jouissance* (2016: 4). The arrows represent relation between each element; therefore, we should observe *that there is always a non-relation between the positions of truth and the product, loss, or surplus-jouissance*.

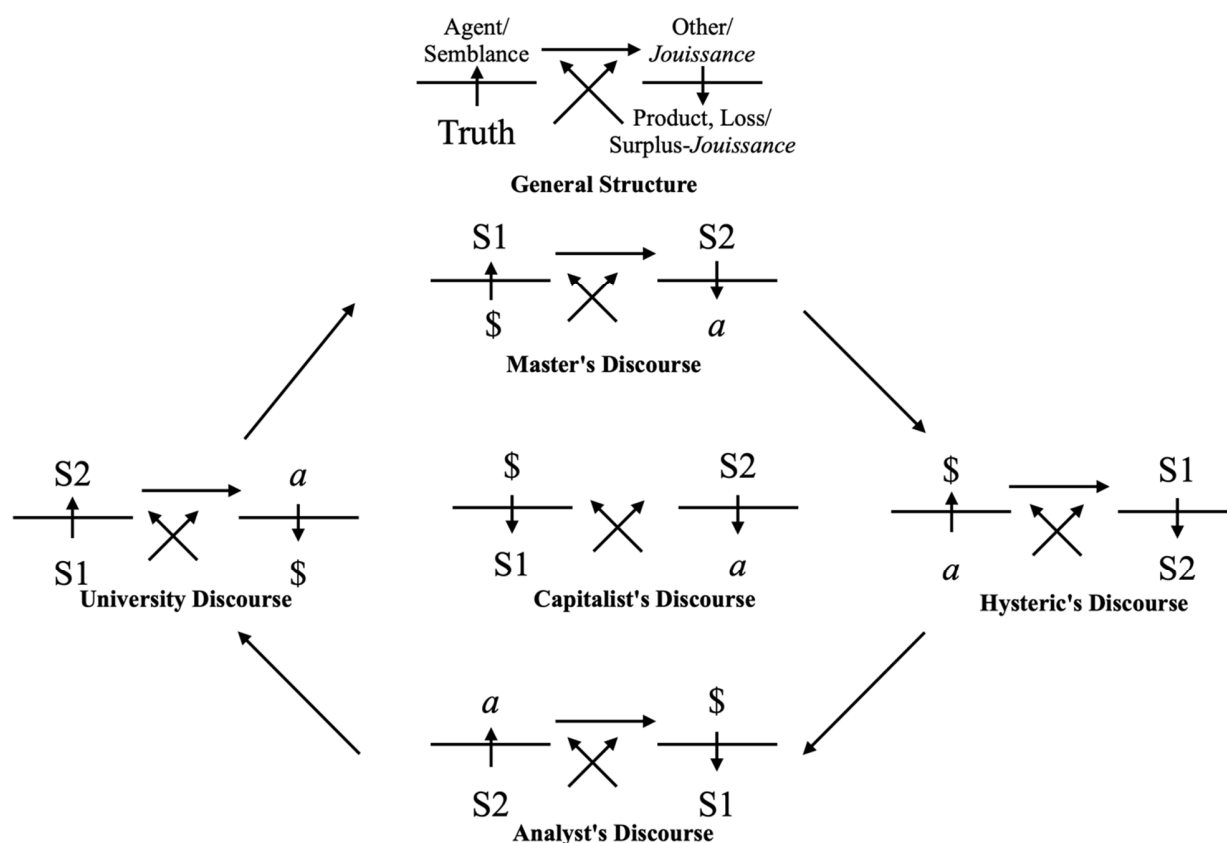
By uncovering this unconscious non-relation, acts or events prevent discourses from being stable or static, creating opportunity for change. In other words (and to reiterate), complete

hegemony is impossible, as excess and lack always allow for the dislocation of the Symbolic Order through events (experiencing the Real qua *object a*) that retroactively reveal the Real of the Symbolic (they are ‘truth events’). For this reason, the structural and evental nature of the discourses are not in any contradiction (Boni, 2010/2014: 133). Figure 2 shows that the order of the elements—the master signifier (S1), knowledge (S2), *object a* (*a*), and the split subject (\$)—remain the same; what changes in each discourse through a clockwise quarter turn are the structural positions of each element. The only exception is the capitalist’s discourse, which cannot be included as a ‘real’ discourse since it doesn’t assume lack’s structural position.

The Master’s Discourse:

When looking at the unconscious of the Master’s discourse (bottom) we notice that it contains the matheme for *fantasy* presented above—meaning the non-relation between the split subject (\$) and the *object a*. We get to the non-relation by following the arrows. The arrow from S1 to S2 indicates that the agent puts the other to work insofar as they are “presumed to function

Figure 2. The Four Discourses and Their Structure



Source: Own work (Based on Lacan, 1972-1973: 16-17 & Vanheule, 2016: 3)

by means of knowledge” (Vanheule, 2016: 2-3). Put differently, all knowledge (S2)—the battery of all signifiers—must relate back to the master signifier. That is also to say that *jouissance* is mediated through knowledge (S2), which refers to a point of authority (S1). This relation resembles Hegel’s master/slave dialectic to the extent that the master (S1) forces the slave (S2) to work (Fink, 1995: 131). The agent’s identity as master is a *semblance*, produced differentially by imposing his will on the slave, and vice versa.

The upward arrow from \$ to S1 indicates that the agent represses their lack (\$) through the master signifier (S1), which is necessary to maintain its dominance over the other, even though the split subject cannot ever be fully represented by the master signifier. This leads to the diagonal arrow from \$ to S2, indicating that the other/*jouissance* qua knowledge cannot be totalized by the master signifier (S1) to the extent that this relation rests on the repression of subjective division (Vanheule, 2016: 3). What remains from this process is the *object a*, which occupies the position of product/loss or surplus-*jouissance*. The diagonal arrow from *a* to S1 allows the agent to maintain his position of mastery, as the surplus-enjoyment qua *object a* “fuels him” (2016: 2). In this sense, the relationship between the split subject and the *object a* is one of *extimacy*—*simultaneously intimate and external to the subject*. Intimate because its position is a product of identifying with the master signifier (Symbolic), yet external in its position as the product/loss that cannot be completely accounted for (Real). Inasmuch as the master makes the surplus-*jouissance* his own free of cost without any effort simply because of his position of superiority and authority, he cements his position as master, yet never manages to address his split. In Stijn Vanheule’s words:

In the end the discourse of the master stresses the fact that there is no hope that subjective division can ever be transcended, or that discontent can be resolved if we address *jouissance* by means of language, which is what we typically do. (2016: 5)

Although the agent cements his position by appropriating the *object a*, neither the master signifier nor the *object a* it produces by means of the other’s work can be brought into relation with his incompleteness. Therefore, we arrive at the fundament of all unconscious knowledge: *the non-relation between the split object and the object a—or the fantasy of the Master*.

Continuing with Vanheule’s interpretation we find parallels between this economy of enjoyment and a capitalist system of exchange. He says that while discourse produces knowledge, capitalism produces commodities; however, in both processes of exchange something is lost (2016: 4-5). Whether attempting to address *jouissance* through knowledge or trying to make profit on another’s labor, one experiences an unarticulated realm beyond signification or beyond our words’ capabilities (i.e. the Real). In other words:

Using signifiers to name *jouissance* confronts the speaker with a dose of corporeal tension that is not inherent to language: a surplus-*jouissance* that can only be located in phantasy or delusion comes to the fore. It is precisely at this point that the function of laughter can be situated. In Marx’s system, laughter refers to the capitalist’s gain of surplus value, and to the process of alienation that this entails. In the use of discourse, laughter refers to the surplus-*jouissance* inherent in our alienation in the signifier. (2016: 4-5)

Just as when someone tells you a joke, you don't have to do anything, but laugh (it's free!), the master enjoys the products of the other's labor for free. In this sense, surplus-*jouissance* is homologous to Marx's surplus value (Fink, 1995; Vanheule, 2016; Tomšič, 2016).

Taking the master as the capitalist and the worker as the slave, *object a* represents the surplus created: surplus value, from which the capitalist procures his free enjoyment (Fink, 1995: 131). This lies in capitalism's ability to signify value through money, which is—like the signifier—pure exchange-value. The capitalist then procures the surplus by paying the worker under the market price of the finished commodity so that they can keep the surplus for themselves. The labor—the (use-value)—then, ceases to be important—all the capitalist master sees in the worker is *labor power*, which through money can be converted into exchange value. Therefore, exchange value necessarily abstracts from and contradicts use-value, thereby concealing that the consumption of labor power implies the extraction of surplus value, which is equivalent to unpaid surplus labor (Tomšič, 2016: 152). In this way, under the imperative (of the master's) enjoyment, work always turns into excess (Wegener, 2016: 178). This excess allows for the master to grow his wealth, for it can be re-invested into the system of production to create more surplus value, even if the other side of such a move produces further human and ecological exploitation and injustice. In other words, money (M) buys commodities (C), which can produce more money (M'). The fetishization of surplus value by means of exchange produces an entirely new discourse—the university's discourse.

The University Discourse

This discourse began with the advent of industrial capitalism and the master's interest in labor as a commodity that could be bought or sold. Able to represent the serf's or slave's labor as exchange value, the master becomes interested in counting, in extracting a surplus value that can further his wealth or power. According to Colin Wright (2016: 138), the advent of such a system saw the transition from a feudal lord, ignorant of practical life so long as it was taken care of by his subjects, to the advent of entirely new apparatuses of knowledge: the booker, the bureaucrat, the statistician, and the performance reviewer, culminating in the university discourse. Néstor Braunstein (2014: 141) parallels this shift with Foucault's 'sovereign societies' under feudalism—structured by the master-slave/serf relation—to 'disciplinary societies' under industrial capitalism. Insofar as land is no longer controlled by the master or lord through slaves or serfs, but rather 'free' men—laborers—who transform raw materials by operating machines, the capitalist master needed new mechanisms of power in the form of 'education' and 'surveillance' to make possible and legitimize the extraction of surplus value (2014: 144). Following Deleuze, Braunstein (2014: 144) argues that these system have further evolved into 'societies of control' of virtual, cybernetic production in which subjects are controlled by new forms of knowledge (e.g. information technology, pharmaceuticals)

Crucial for these transformations has been the role of knowledge (S2) in legitimizing the extraction of surplus value; therefore, 'university' doesn't necessarily refer to universities, rather it should be understood as any knowledge (S2) that legitimizes the master signifier (S1). Think, for instance, of the close ties between economic production/management and knowledge

production, such as the close relations between university research programs and public and private funding (whether by executive agencies or by multinational corporations). In this discourse, the arrow from S1 to S2 shows that the agent's power rests on the acceptance of dogmas and assumptions (e.g. economic liberalism, capital), yet they are excluded and covered up by its knowledge (S2) (e.g. scientific and technological innovation, efficiency, etc.). The arrow from S2 to *a* indicates that knowledge interrogates and inspects the *object a* (the master's surplus value), which produces discontented/unknowing subjects (arrow from *a* to \$), thereby fueling the production of more knowledge (arrow from \$ to S2) (Vanheule, 2016: 3). Put differently the knowing subject (S2) in its knowledge of the *object a*, produces unknowing subjects (\$) (Fink, 1995: 132) unaware of knowledge's radical contingency and who then must capacitate themselves (in schools/universities/think tanks etc.) to find their place in the socio-economic system, which produces more knowledge. The effect of S2/S1 is that of foreclosing the master signifier, producing a final suture between knowledge and truth (Boni, 2010/2014: 136). *By immersing themselves in the world of 'objective' knowledge the subject blinds themselves to the nonsensical subjective kernel that sustains this system. Therefore, important to notice here is the non-relation between the split subject and the master signifier.* By doing so, they put themselves in the position of surplus-jouissance to be enjoyed by agent in furthering its production of knowledge.

The Capitalist's Discourse

Being able to give everything a price, the masters of the economy have changed. The period in which the economy served the sovereign gave way to one that ultimately served the nation/ideology. Now, it seems that the economy serves itself. Governments and their populations have thus become servants to maintaining a stable growing economy to avoid making fundamental structural changes to the system. The dominant ideology of the market is that more growth (production and consumption) will solve all the problems or losses (qua *object a*) the system of exchange produces. The climate crisis and other ecological crises are less seen as 'externalities' that must be solved via systemic change of production and consumption and more seen as problems that can be solved with more investment of surplus value into knowledge (S2). Instead of addressing emissions by thinking about how we can reduce our energy consumption, the easier solution is to attack the problem with the very same logic that caused it. That is to say: mobilizing surplus value into the creation of new green technologies that will allow us to continue as we were. Even though we recognize that rising temperatures, ocean acidification, and increasing rates of natural disasters (to name a few) have been caused by fossil-fuel based economic growth, Slavoj Žižek observes:

we silently already surmise that the solution is to rely again on technological innovations: new 'green' technology, more efficient and global in its control of natural processes and human resources... Every concrete ecological concern and project to change technology in order to improve our natural surroundings is thus devalued as relying on the very source of trouble. (1999: 11-12)

Because we are so steeped within the (neo)liberal ideology supporting the capitalist system, it's nearly impossible to be able to imagine something outside of it, for it is in this system that we

access *jouissance*. Furthermore, in making this critique, many will accuse you of being hysterical and lacking any viable alternative. Nonetheless, the real crisis won't be climate change or economic collapse resulting therefrom, the real crisis will face us if these catastrophes don't occur, which would mean the logic of capitalism has succeeded in totalizing the social space (1999: 12). This is the true evil: *the evil of absolutization*. For this reason, Žižek concludes that fascism is a necessary outcome of capitalism's inner dynamics taken to their extreme (1999: 12). In what follows, we'll see how these inner workings of the capitalist master have been fundamentally changed and perverted by the capitalist's discourse.

Here we see three changes from the master's discourse: 1) the \$ and the S1 swap positions; 2) the upward arrow between \$ and S1 in the former is now pointing down, meaning that the truth is no longer unattainable to the agent; and 3) the arrow disappears between agent/*semblance* and other/*jouissance*. What results is a closed circuit: the non-relation between truth and surplus-*jouissance* disappears! These changes have implications in both processes of consumption and production; however, they both share something in common—they reject the ontological status of lack or incompleteness of the subject's Symbolic castration. *That is: they reject negativity by believing that the split subject can be transcended in its union with the object a.*

The first arrow from \$ to S1 indicates that there exists a master signifier that answers the subject's lack, thereby functioning as their truth (Vanheule, 2016: 7). Here we see a complete reversal of cause and effect to the extent that now the master signifier is the answer to the subject's lack, whereas before it was the master signifier (via castration) that caused it. So instead of seeing the lack at the heart of subjectivity as a structural consequence of using signifiers it is rather “an accidental frustration that can be remedied within the market of supply and demand” (Vanheule, 2016: 7). The diagonal arrow from S1 to S2 then indicates that the master signifier orders knowledge to innovate—to produce newer and better products to quench the subject's thirst, thus constantly growing—producing more attractive products than the last (arrow S2 to *a*). The arrow from *a* back to \$ circumvents the non-relation indicating that the subject unconsciously believes that the product will satiate them, when really once the consumer possesses it, its symbolic exchange value is reduced to use-value. The intense dose of surplus-*jouissance* vanishes, leading to a process of sobering-up and a reopening of the subject's lack (2016: 9). This leads the subject to continue the process, metonymically sliding from one S1 to the next. The law of this economy is therefore unquenchable like one's desire/drive: the more you drink the thirstier you are; the more you consume the more you 'need' (Koren, 2014: 249-250).

The social and political implications of this discourse are disturbing, for at the conscious level we are aware of our own incompleteness as well as the incompleteness of our political 'masters,' yet despite this knowledge we continue to submit to their command to produce and consume. According to Matthew Sharpe and Kirk Turner:

Likewise, in later capitalist societies, we all know well that 'the emperor is naked'. Cynicism about politicians and the system is utterly normal, and sometimes-biting political critique and satire is a taken-for-granted part of the media ecosystem. Yet, again, we act as if we did not know this. (2020: 190-191)

Disavowal reappears creating a disjunction between conscious knowledge and unconscious belief. Just as a drug addict knows that their next fix won't solve their problems, they do it anyway. Just as we know the iPhone 15 won't make us complete, its enigmatic allure tempts us anyway. On top of this, we are constantly given narratives that we *can* make it, despite our subjection to its structure; we simply must work harder and be smarter by doing a better job at our self-creation and regulation (Walkerdine, 2020: 382-3).

A great example of this narrative can be found in the recent popularity of the idea that consumerism and capitalism are two very distinct concepts, thus giving the message to many that they have the choice between being a capitalist (who spends their money well) and a consumerist (who doesn't). Spanish economist Juan Ramón Rallo (2021) in an opinion piece published in the periodical, *La Razón*, argues that capitalism doesn't need an unhinged and growing level of consumption to subsist and prosper. He concludes that citizens can spend a small percentage of their income (saving the rest) and the accumulation of capital will continue its course trying to optimize the processes of production, improving productivity, and multiplying the quantity of goods that can be acquired with that small portion of income that we choose to spend (2021). Capitalism isn't consumerism, it's 'ahorrismo'—saving-ism (2021). While it's not incorrect to say that being frugal with your money is better than spending it wildly on stupid products, it fails to address a few realities of the system's structure. Sure: a capitalist economy would certainly readjust to decreased demand from frugal spenders; however, Rallo fails to explain why it hasn't. It's like telling a heroin addict that they can solve their problem by simply not doing heroin. Such a perspective rejects the collective addiction to surplus-value/*jouissance* that makes subjects disavow the very knowledge he proclaims (while for others who can hardly make ends meet, saving might even be impossible). The message has a superegoic dimension in its shaming of the consumer for their overconsumption; and one of the ego-ideal: through hard-work and self-sufficiency you can go from being a 'stupid' consumerist to a 'smart' capitalist.

Rallo (2021) also fails to acknowledge what people save their money for: precisely to create more value (i.e. M-C-M'). A capitalist is someone that consumes labor power via capital to access surplus value. Hence, there is 'consumerism' on the side of production insofar as when a capitalist invests their money into a project, they are consuming the other's labor power, which allows them to enjoy the surplus value of the labor. They, just like the consumerist, are equally addicted to consumption. And as we have all experienced in our lifetimes (e.g. the 2008 housing crisis), debt-fueled investments into labor-power can have devastating consequences for all. Subjects of consumption and production are equally to blame and can be equally addicted to surplus-*jouissance*. Paraphrasing Samo Tomšič's (2016: 160-161) interpretation of production through the capitalist discourse, we observe that in the master's discourse capital (S1) buys surplus-value (*a*), yet the torsion in the capitalist's discourse brings \$ into direct relation with *a*. *It's as if the use value of the worker's labor disappeared, thereby painting the picture that money does all the work*. This belief is what leads to our fetishization and fundamental belief in capital, which of course has seeped into the political realm to the extent that politics has been "entirely subsumed under the economic demand and to private interests of the capitalist class" (2016: 161).

The problem with this rejection of lack and loss is that it always returns. The repressed always returns: the invisible hand of the market will always come back and slap you in the face—in the form of crises. Fortunately, these encounters with the Real can ‘hystericize’ the existing hegemonic social bonds, making room for political acts—or the Symbolic restructuring of the Social. Opportunities for structural change can be found in the following analyses of the Hysteric’s and Analyst’s discourses.

Hysteric’s Discourse

Going back to the Žižek’s (1999: 11-12) passage cited in the previous section, we observe the distinction between the Capitalist/Master’s discourse and that of the Hysteric. The first sentence manifests what the hysteric would accuse capitalist master of: how we unconsciously resort to the same logics that caused the *object a* (qua ecological crisis) by subsuming it under the logic of capital (S1), which involves investing surplus value into new ‘green technologies’ (S2) that will allow us to continue extracting surplus-value (*a*) and maintain the system while ignoring any losses from doing so (*a*) (e.g. exploitation of miners and ecological harm to communities near deposits of lithium, coltan and other rare earth elements). The second sentence nearly contradicts the first (which is very typical of Žižek) to the extent that it espouses what the master would say to the hysteric: all you do is criticize our solutions, so show me yours!

No matter what knowledge the master signifier produces (arrow from S1 to S2) in responding to the hysteric’s criticisms and accusations (\$), nothing is good enough. The master’s knowledge only deepens the split in the agent’s subjectivity. In other words, this discourse represses the truth that all desire is founded on a lack that cannot be filled (*a*) and results in narratives (S2) that don’t solve the fundamental lack, but further engender the subject’s discontentment (Vanheule, 2016: 3). For this reason, the matheme shows non-relation between S2 and *a*. Furthermore, with knowledge in the position of surplus-*jouissance*, the hysteric subject *gets off on* (enjoys) picking apart and constantly criticizing the master’s knowledge. According to Boni (2014: 133), the hysteric wants to cause anxiety in the master and show him the power of her enjoyment. For this reason, the hysteric’s discourse is the exact opposite of the university discourse and so maintains the contradiction between the conscious and the unconscious, thereby revealing the conflictual, self-contradictory nature of desire (Fink, 1995: 133). Nothing is good enough in the discourse of the hysteric!

We see this discourse in political movements whether on the left or right, whether anti-capitalist or anti-immigration, for instance. They may complain about the injustices of both, but where are their viable solutions/alternatives? Although, remaining in this discourse doesn’t solve the problems created by the master—it is a necessary first step for the subject to traverse their fantasy and pierce their super-ego. By rotating each element, a quarter-turn clockwise, however, we can observe the necessary requirements for the political act—made possible through the analyst’s discourse.

Analyst’s Discourse

The analyst’s discourse has two effects: on one hand this discourse serves to hystericize the university and master’s/capitalist’s discourses (Fink, 1999: 136), while on the other it

encourages the hystericized analysand to work through, “rehabilitate truth,” and develop a new master signifier (Zwart, 2022: 1368). Here, the analyst presents themselves as the enigmatic *object a* of “pure desirousness” which represents their knowledge (S2) of the unconscious (Fink, 1995: 136) (arrow from S2 to *a*) which does not belong to the analysand’s S1—hence the non-relation between S2 and S1. *This non-relation is fundamental, for it prevents the analysand from remaining trapped in the hysteric’s discourse or being lured back into the Master’s/Capitalist’s discourse with new knowledge produced by the University or the market.* It is through this discourse that ‘real’ change becomes possible for the analysand in its laying the foundation for the act. In this sense, this discourse can be understood as leading to a subjective event, opening a door to desire rather than to repetition (the symptom) (Koren, 2014: 253)

The agent/analyst occupies the “logically notated” *object a* (Vanheule, 2016: 3), as the analysand looks to them for answers. For them, what analyst knows will help them overcome their symptom. However, this is misleading, for it is the master signifiers produced by the analysand’s speech (arrow from \$ to S1) that will ultimately make possible the understanding of their symptom (hystericization) and their moving past the problematic master signifier to the development of a new one (arrow from S1 to *a*). To do this, the analyst (*a*) interrogates the split subject (\$) in his or her division, precisely at those points where their unconscious shows (arrow from *a* to \$). This implies subjecting the other discourses to a symptomatic reading, pointing out their inconsistencies and exposing their ideological enframing (Zwart, 2022: 1361). The knowledge (S2) emitted through the analyst (*a*) is almost mythical, consisting of disjoint, half-said, and disquieting insights (2022: 1361). In this sense, this discourse makes the analysand face the Real of their unconscious. The intended result of this is to isolate and eliminate the master signifier structuring their ideologico-political unconscious (Žižek, 2006).

For this reason, the analyst’s discourse is ‘political’ (or even revolutionary) in its ethical commitment to non-submission, of a possible opening to something beyond the super-egoic, blame inducing, masochistic submission (Koren, 2014: 149). While this discourse can help individuals traverse their fantasies structured by our current political-economic situation at a clinical level, how might such ethics be possible at a societal level? The authors belonging to the ‘Lacanian Left’ (namely Yannis Stavrakakis, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Jason Glynos) insist on the institutionalization of radical democracy and an ‘infidel fidelity’ to political acts or events.

The Act or Event & Radical Democracy

The Act or Event

The terms act and event are nearly synonymous, both referring to a rupture of the Real in the Symbolic Order and the retroactive development of a new master signifier. The act would be specifically referring to a disruptive action carried out by the subject while the event would be one that the subject experiences. Both refer to how we account for the Real in its destabilization of the Symbolic, yet without resorting to hegemonic signifiers; therefore, a ‘real’ act/event in its accounting for the Real is one which produces a ‘new’ counter-hegemonic master signifier around which to organize knowledge. For this reason, the terms will be and have been used interchangeably. The event emerges in language, and language embraces the event; therefore, the

introduction of the event is the event itself (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2014: 332). This is how we deal with the Real, by accounting for it in the Symbolic. So, the event is an impossibility that becomes a new possibility in its own discursive irruption (2014: 332). *In other words, it negates the existing positivity and establishes a new one—it's a form a creative destruction.*

At the clinical level, an encounter with the Real involves facing a certain traumatic signifier that has been repressed into the unconscious, which can be conjured through the analyst's discourse. For instance, in a case described by Ana Negro (2014) this would involve the subject's recognition of her symptom resulting from being abused by her father. This repressed event (negativity, *object a*) caused the subject's physical and emotional trauma as she continued to visit with her father out of her sense of familial obligation imposed by the universality (positivity, master signifier) of her super-ego's (the Social's) law (that one must be loyal to their father). The act manifested as a break in her conscious speech (enunciated) allowing the subject to integrate a new subjective position (enunciation), which was along the lines of: all daughters must be loyal to their fathers, except when they are abusive (2014: 103). However, this statement couldn't be determined an act in that very session, rather it had to be retroactively determined. The analyst could only be sure that she had assumed a new unconscious position of enunciation (positivity, a new S1) until the proceeding sessions when her speech focused on other figures (such as her mom); she stopped visiting her father; and when her physical symptoms (blacking out, panic attacks) had subsided. In the act, the superego is what is reached and touched; its pretension of universality is perforated (2014: 104). This clinical example is much easier to grasp and occurs over a much shorter period than would be required to fundamentally alter the political-economic structure of our society through democratic institutions. *Nevertheless, the ontological structure is the same; in both, the act must traverse the fantasy structured by the superego.*

So how would an act appear at the societal level? Of course it would be easier to start with dramatic revolutionary change, such as wars, *coup d'états*, mass civil disobedience and other violent uprisings. To paraphrase Žižek (1991: 192), the act is performative insofar as it exceeds the act of speech (enunciated): its performance is retroactive, redefining the network of its own presuppositions (enunciation). Retroactivity plays a huge role, for what political actors do now in founding a new Symbolic Order can only be concluded after they take note of the true dimension of what they have already done (1991: 222). This means that the act pierces the enunciating structure (language) on which speech is possible, yet such a determination of the act is only possible once it has achieved 'global' changes to the Symbolic or once it has become a subject to all signifiers (S1).

So, in the view of existing laws (not necessarily state law, but more generally Social law), an act appears as a Crime to the extent that it violates the Symbolic limits, introducing an unheard-of element which turns everything up-side down (1991: 192). It seems like a Crime because such a change appears impossible, it is fundamentally antagonistic to the current Symbolic Order. The act then has a Real dimension in its antagonistic relation with the master signifier and the 'dislocatory' effects it would have on our world view. It involves the Freudian notion of the 'return of the repressed,' or the return of the *object a* qua excluded, heterogenous object—and the

registering of its negativity so as to establish a series of Symbolic coordinates based on a new master signifier. Therefore, we should recognize that “the very genesis of society is always ‘political’: a positively existing social system is nothing but a form in which the negativity of a radically contingent Decision assumes a positive, determinate existence” (1991: 194) What this means is that there is no essence behind either the master signifiers that structure the Social, nor is there any essential truth behind their reified *object a*'s. Therefore, the proper determination of any act requires thorough analysis of the situation in which it is performed, for Lacanian ontology—just like Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory—in its radical contingency is negative.

After the conclusion of a political struggle or the onset of a ‘new harmony’ the victorious hegemonic project effaces the scandalous, empty character of the new master signifier (1991: 193). The impossible *object a* becomes possible, forever changing reality. So, after the political act, a new updated Social or ‘new harmony’ of socially sedimented practices becomes instituted; the Political becomes politics. Therefore, politics is a sub-system of the Social that represents within it its own forgotten foundation—or politics as a sub-system of the Social represents the Political (subject) for all other social sub-systems (1991: 194). The Political subject only emerges through the act, through a break in the enunciating structure of the Social/politics, so “every positive law is in a way already its own mocking imitation, a violent overthrow of a previous unwritten law; a crime turned into law” (1991: 209).

When considering the question of economic growth versus climate change (and other ‘wicked problems’) many people take for granted the notion of ‘growth’ as the Law. Its hegemony based on ‘hard facts’, and common sense (at the conscious level) disavows the radically contingent nature of its imposition—that exponential growth was only made possible through the technological exploitation of fossil fuel energy. Nevertheless, despite this radical contingency, many would outright gawk at the notion of ‘degrowth’ as being totally absurd or stupid, considering an intentional shrinking GDP to be a Crime. Yet, perhaps what we are seeing with its growing popularity in both academia and political movements (e.g. eco-social political parties) is perhaps the emergence of an adversarial counter-hegemonic movement (an act)—the birth of a new master signifier. But there is a fundamental predicament or fuzziness with Žižek’s (1991) conceptualization of the act: if a Political act is what constitutes politics, and an act is what establishes a ‘new harmony’ or a ‘new politics,’ does that mean that the act must always have a revolutionary or absolute character? His logic seems to suggest that authentic acts cannot occur within democratic institutions and must represent an uncompromising antagonistic movement against the situation of the pre-existing hegemonic ideology.

Žižek’s obsession with distinguishing authentic acts from inauthentic ones has led Stavrakakis (2007: 110) to claim that his thinking entails a very clear danger of ultimately disavowing the dialectics between positivity and negativity central to Lacanian theory, replacing it with a positive politics of the event/act as miracle. This can be clearly seen in his fetishization of suicide as the ultimate ethico-political act as described in his analysis of the figure of Antigone (2007: 139). Instead, we must recognize that there exists no perfect act if we desire to maintain the systems of governance that we are subject to (democratic institutions). So, instead of an

uncompromising fidelity to the act's evental nature in dislocating the previous universality—'event-ness'—we must instead assume a position of 'infidel fidelity' (2007: 127). *'Event-ness' would involve the very same sin of absolutization of the hegemonic order a political movement wishes to change. This is at least the ethical principle we must assume if we wish to bring about radical change democratically (ethically) and avoid the vicious cycle of repeatedly claiming an essential universality.*

Instead Stavrakakis argues that we should take a few cues from Alain Badiou's conceptualization of radical political change and consider Laclau's concept of 'situation-ness'. For Badiou, the truly ethical act or event is one which avoids the potential Evil of excessive positivization in every Good (2007: 155). Badiou's event is one which destabilizes the pre-existing order or the 'situation.' An event is inextricably tied to the aporetic void of the Real or the 'evental site' and therefore an ethical event should involve a registering of negativity or the lack in the Other (2007: 154). Moreover, instead of having an immediate revolutionary global impact as expressed in Žižek's work, Badiou's event has a local character whose after procedure is impure and therefore becomes increasingly important (2007: 156). *For any negation of the Symbolic to be realized and turned into a new positivity or universality, one must commit to a continuous negotiation between negative and positive if one wishes to avoid disaster* (2007: 156). So instead of an uncompromising fidelity to event-ness, Stavrakakis (2007: 156-7) argues we should instead consider the ethical act as possible through Laclau's notion of 'situationness' or the ontological principle of ordering. To avoid absolutization we should not seek a complete negation of the Social, for Žižek's event-ness runs the risk of the new order grafting its own permanent renewal beyond his miraculous act/event; instead, there should always be some minimum of positivization—a situationness—beyond the dislocated event, (2007: 156-7). The truly ethical act is therefore one that remains open and self-critical. For radical democrats the situationness should involve a fundamental commitment to the signifier 'liberty' and 'equality.' When talking about climate and environmental politics we could add the signifier 'sustainability' to this list.

The Ethico-Political Act & Radical Democracy in the Post-Political Era

If we wish to avoid violent conflict, radical change of economic and climate governance may be realized by simultaneously supporting counter-hegemonic 'degrowth' policies (e.g. environmental protection, increased welfare spending) and forging new forms of political participation (e.g. citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting) at the local level with the hope of their proliferation to the global level. These new forms of participation in their promised politicization of governance are fundamental for maintaining an 'infidel fidelity' to any counter-hegemonic project. Failing to do so runs the risk of continuing post-political governance or regressing to the utopian/dystopian discourses of the ever more influential rightwing populist political parties. According to authors belonging to the 'Lacanian Left,' radical democracy is the only form of governance where such an 'infidel fidelity' or intellectual distance from absolutization can be maintained insofar as it avoids this by requiring every act/event to be articulated on the grounds of the master signifiers liberty and equality for all. This minimum of positivization prevents any hegemonic project from universalizing the social and foreclosing

alternative projects. In psychoanalytic terms, radical democracy is where the constitutive lack in the Other or Symbolic can be inscribed. That it is only through democracy where society can ensure the permanent inscription of the analyst's and the hysteric's discourses.

The 'crisis of democracy' has been analyzed from a variety of different theoretical approaches. Think for instance of Habermas's deliberative democracy that calls for an understanding of democracy beyond aggregative models and thereby the need for institutional changes that would improve the quality of discourse in governance institutions. The approach taken by psychoanalysis, however, displaces these institutional conditions for a vibrant democracy to conditions conceived of as a function of subjectivity, modality, or ethos (Glynos, 2003: 191). That is to say that for democracies to be truly democratic, they must not only complete institutional requirements but also maintain institutional cultures or ethos which allows for purely negative gestures of breaking out of the previous constraints of the enunciating structure of the hegemonic social bond (2003: 201). This ethos means that democracies must have the capacity and willingness to make authentic political acts (2003: 201). *The empty place of democracy occupied by filling out the meaning of the signifiers 'liberty' and 'equality' is the institutionalization of the analyst's discourse; it allows for the return of the repressed qua object a—it ideally makes it possible for unheard voices to hysterically call out the injustices (a) of the enunciating structure and institute a new order (the act or event) (S1).*

According to Chantal Mouffe (2005) the empty place of democracy institutes the Political (the Real as antagonism) in the Social (politics) as agonism, such that antagonistic conflict between enemies becomes agonistic conflict between adversaries. *Democracy, in this sense, is an ethical commitment to the Political.* In her words:

While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are 'adversaries' not enemies. This means that, while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place. We could say that the task of democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism. (2005: 20)

Instead of a complete negation of politics, the act must remain faithful to the signifiers, liberty and equality, as a 'conflictual consensus' not based around rational choice and high-quality deliberation (à la Rawls and Habermas) but around non-relation or non-rapport. Thus, at the heart of radical democratic theory there is a commitment to dissensus, echoing Lacan's assertion that there is no sexual relation—or that no matter what ontic content fills the positions of his four discourses there will always be a fundamental non-relation between the truth and the surplus value.

It is only through an agonistic approach to democracy that this can be guaranteed and allow us to grasp the dialectics of the 'democratic paradox'—or the simultaneous registering of positivity (sedimented social structures) and negativity (awareness of their radical contingency), necessity (what's possible) and impossibility, situationness and event-ness. (Stavrakakis, 2007: 256-7). The radical democratic project taken up by these authors is itself symptomatic of the hegemonic trend

of depoliticization in our late-modern era of post-politics or post-democracy to the extent that it (re)emerged in contestation (hysteric's discourse) to these trends and has since developed a new political ethos (master signifier) around which politics should be structured. Stavrakakis characterizes the post-political/democratic era in the following way:

since the 1970s and 1980s decision-making has been gradually de-politicised and to a large extent, entrusted to supposedly neutral organizations and authorities (such as 'independent' central banks), market regulation has been abandoned or severely limited with an increasingly globalized horizon, business principles have invaded all aspects of public life, and centre-stage politics has entered the post-political era of professionalized 'governance' beyond left and right. (2007: 254)

Thus, from this perspective what is impossible to integrate into agonistic politics is any doubt towards neoliberal capitalism or any serious reference to redistribution or increased welfare spending (Glynos, 2003: 204).

This has been possible through fundamental changes in the social bond—in how we access *jouissance* through the capitalist's discourse. It is no longer the case that we must sacrifice our enjoyment for the functioning of society; it's now something encouraged. So, instead of making sacrifices for our community, family, nation, beliefs, etc. we are now encouraged to compete with others in our pursuit of private enjoyments—to paradoxically be 'capitalists' but not 'consumers' all the while maintaining an image of material wealth (e.g. smartphones, vacations, dinners) to fit in with the rest of our social groups. With the reign of the capitalist's discourse and our addiction to surplus value there is no need for a political registering of negativity since agreement can be reduced to capital—money talks (and works). Thus, negativity and affect are displaced from our internal political field and re-inscribed either as a "clash of enjoyments" between civilizations or domestically reduced to a lack of particular products (Stavrakakis, 2007: 266). All these lacks can be solved if we consume the "right" products, fantasies, and even politicians (2007: 266). This logic sounds like: you'll feel better about life once you can buy that iPhone 15, and the Russians—well, they just need to 'wake up' and become more liberal and democratic, and everything will be all good!

To find our way out of the grips of the capitalist's closed-circuit, democratic politics must find *jouissance*—not in achieving the universality of an alternative political project (e.g. degrowth)—but in negativity itself. This refers another form of *jouissance* (other or feminine *jouissance*), which is fundamentally incommensurate, unquantifiable, disproportionate and cannot be recuperated into a phallic economy or simple structuralism (Fink, 1995: 122). To attain this form of enjoyment it must be detached from its fantasmatic support. It is only available once we traverse our fantasy structure. In other words, the *object a* must be seen as it truly is—as the immense Real void that we'll never master. According to Stavrakakis

Emptiness and lack can indeed acquire a positive/institutional expression and can be enjoyed. Instead of functioning as a support for fantasy (for hegemonic fantasies), the partial drive can become the leading force towards a reorientation of enjoyment faithful to the positive/negative dialectics. (2007: 282)

To illustrate, other/partial *jouissance* at the individual level this would perhaps be the difference between the researcher who only gets satisfaction in their relation to the Other and one who just really enjoys (the incompleteness of) researching itself. This former would be the researcher who chases clout—publications, awards, recognition, and results. While someone defined by “other” *jouissance* would simply enjoy the process of their research—the satisfaction in learning something new all the while humbled and inspired by the fact that they will only ever scratch the surface as to what is knowable. To be sure, the former and the latter are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Other *jouissance* perhaps might be accessible for the democratic subject outside of electoral politics and in innovative and experimental forms of governance, such as workers’ cooperatives, democratized pension funds, social inheritance systems, and participatory budgeting (Stavrakakis, 2007: 281-2). Radical democratic change therefore requires thinking beyond electoral politics and procedural fairness and looking more into the way actors seek enjoyment in these systems. Therefore, in determining a radical, ethical, authentic act from an inauthentic one, we must not only look at the difference in policy paradigm or approach, but we should also pay close attention to the promise for new means of participation and citizen engagement. Without such experimentalism and innovation to institute lack, we could easily find ourselves in a de-politicized mode of governance structured around aspects ‘degrowth’ or eco-socialism.

Research Questions

To What Extent is the European Green Deal an Ethico-Political Act?

Regarding climate change and its related ecological crises, we will advance the following arguments: 1) they are encounters with the Real that have been accounted for by the Symbolic Order with an array of signifiers such as global warming, climate change, etc. These words signify the extimate limits of our knowledge of what will come to be as a result of our past and current fossil-fueled economic growth. “Climate change” in relation to the master signifier (S1) ‘growth’ is therefore one of the many products or surpluses of our knowledge and its work (S2). That is to say that climate change is an *object a* produced by the relationship between S1 and S2.

2) Solving climate change through regulation and market-based policy mechanisms serves to maintain this master signifier. A great example of this knowledge produced by the university discourse would be emissions trading, green or ESG finance, sustainable development, etc. This has led to a self-revolutionization, from fossil-fuel based growth into ‘green’ growth, whose success is purely based on the concept of decoupling—or that with new green technologies (e.g. renewable energy, artificial intelligence, nuclear fusion, etc.), it will be possible to continue growth all the while reducing GHG emissions to the necessary level, thus avoiding the impacts of a hotter Earth. These green growth discourses advance the capitalist’s discourse insofar as they present the idea that money does all the work and that we can essentially have our cake and eat it too. The *object a* of this green growth discourse is evidenced (to name a few) by ‘greenwashing,’ the fact the fossil fuel industry continues to grow and expand, and the continued rise of global emissions.

3) Climate change has also garnered alternative ways of thinking about our relationship with the world. The scientists, namely Meadows, Meadows, Randers, and Behrens's (1972) *Limits to Growth*, who first warned of the relationship between growth/fossil fuels and ecological disaster, hystericized the growth paradigm, which has led to alternative growth critical paradigms (e.g. degrowth, a-growth, postgrowth, "doughnut economics"), which can be understood as the creation of new master signifiers (S1). If/when such growth critical, eco-social policy prescriptions become hegemonic, the Symbolic structuring of the Social would fundamentally change and could be considered a Political act. Such determinations can only be made retroactively, and these counter-hegemonic, growth critical proposals are not without their risks of totalization or absolutization.

4) The risk of absolutization leads us to consider how these new approaches will be mediated through democratic institutions—this refers to the ethical dimension of the act. One of the main ways the growth paradigm has become hegemonic has been through the process of depoliticization of economic governance. So, even if such radical changes to economic/climate governance are enacted, current methods of governance would not be sufficient to avoid the "evil of absolutization." Hence, any fundamental Political act must be accompanied by (radical) democratization (the act's ethical dimension) and/or new forms of public participation, such as participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, energy cooperatives, etc. And even these innovative methods of governance would require close analysis of their structure, discursive culture, rules, and procedures to prevent totalization and ensure agonistic struggle between opposed ideological camps. Only through radical democratic reforms, will it be possible to maintain a healthy intellectual distance from any totalizing ideological project or an 'infidel fidelity' to the "revolutionary" act—and perhaps allow us to shift from partial & surplus *jouissance* to 'other' *jouissance*—an enjoyment of the very limits of our knowledge and the processes we use to create new alternative approaches.

Analysis of the European Green Deal (EGD) will then require close attention to all the elements of discourse previously detailed, as well as a careful characterization of the situation in which it was enacted. Therefore, in the proceeding Lacanian Discourse Analysis (LDA) of the EGD this characterization of the situation and textual analysis of EGD documents will focus on two pairs of related master signifiers. *On one hand, it will assess their ethical dimension or democratic character. This variable will be operationalized along the axis of politicization/participation vs. depoliticization/technocratic management. On the other hand, we will assess the Political dimension and operationalize it along the axis of green growth/(neo)liberal vs. growth-critical/eco-social approaches.*

We are not looking to provide a complete answer to the proposed research question, for that would be impossible, as the EGD was passed in January 2020, and many of its components are still being developed. Nevertheless, this analysis provides insight into possibilities for radical political change that may come to be in the near term. For instance, will EGD welfare programs such as the Just Transition Mechanism become center pieces of climate governance? This might suggest a shift from measuring growth as GDP to measuring growth as human welfare and development. Put differently, this could represent the beginnings of a dislocation of the master

signifiers (e.g. surplus value, neoliberalism, and growth) toward an economy focused on use value, commons, and eco-socialism. Likewise, could new forms of participation supported by this framework also play an increased role in climate governance at all levels of the EU? The recommendations of the citizens' panels under the Council on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), for instance, could potentially repoliticize the climate crisis and pressure EU institutions to open the policymaking process to a permanent, standing citizens' assembly, which would require the Commission to consider citizen demands. Such a move perhaps would mark a shift from a depoliticized technocracy toward a politicized (radical) democracy with a greater institution of lack/negativity at its very core.

Nevertheless, such potential beginnings for radical political change can only triumph if they can effectively resist the hegemonic order's depoliticizing effects. For this reason, this analysis will focus on the dislocatory potential of the EGD's promised changes in "approach" (the political dimension) and "politicization" (the ethical dimension) to determine whether they will be successful or if they will be coopted into the dominant trends of green growth (politics) and post-politics (ethics). These two dimensions of the act are intertwined. For instance, will we see genuine increases in participatory democracy under the EGD? Or will they simply be superficial, giving citizens a false sense of stake in the policymaking process? Likewise, will shifts in approach become effective ways to ensure human and environmental welfare as jobs are displaced in the transition and ecological crises worsen? Or will these programs lack funding and resources to do so? In what follows, we will detail the aspects that the analysis of situation and act/event will require.

Methodology

Why Lacanian Discourse Analysis?

Since this contribution seeks to determine authentic acts from those inauthentic, we cannot resort to using discourse analysis that considers the subject to be whole or stable, for doing so would make it difficult to account for change. Such a theoretical approach to analysis considers the subject as a passive entity constituted by their participation in language (Alcorn 1994: 29), thus making it impossible to locate and explain the act/event. In other words, if the subject is simply a product of discourse or ideology, then one cannot determine the point at which a discourse's contingency was rendered invisible (Solomon, 2015: 18). In other words, a subject completely identified by the structure of the system would be unable produce change in it. Viewing the European Commission in this way, for instance, would then foreclose any further analysis—and the proposed research question would be unanalyzable. For this reason, common traditions of post-structural discourse analysis are limited in their ability to account for change since they fail to account for the subject's ability to reconfigure the coordinates of the Symbolic Order.

Lacanian theory, however, provides the eccentric, split subject—extimate in its relation to the Real (qua *object a*), which rejects all notions of a pre-social or unified self that simply donates their agency to the structure (2015: 19). The affective dimension of discourse—desire, *jouissance*, and the *object a*—makes it possible to explain the contingency of discourse and conceptualize the

“whys” and the “hows” of (radical) Political change. This can best be understood through the notion of resistance to hegemony or domination (found in the Hysteric’s and the Analyst’s discourses), for it implies agency and the ability to counteract hegemonic forces through the subject’s ability to deny, dismiss, or deform them (Alcorn, 1994: 29). For this reason, this contribution will employ Lacanian Discourse Analysis (LDA) to analyze the potential for radical political change qua act or event.

To account for the split subject and the incompleteness of discourse Glynos, Howarth, Flithcroft, Love, Roussos, and Vazquez (2021) detail a “logics” approach to post-structural discourse analysis. Even though Glynos et al. (2021) don’t refer to the logics approach as a form of LDA, it has strong a theoretical grounding in Lacanian theory. For these authors, instead of viewing discourse as simply an “articulatory practice,” the term “logics” captures the processes that structure said articulatory practices or the hegemonic regimes of practice (2021: 5). For them, the signifier ‘logics’ would capture the unconscious dimension accounted for in Lacan’s conception of discourse. This approach analyzes discourse from social, political, and fantasmatic logics. Social logics naturally parallel with the Social to the extent that they characterize practices by elucidating their rules and the properties of the objects presupposed by the practice (2021: 3). This would be tantamount to mapping the relation between the master signifier (S1) and its relation to knowledge (S2) (i.e. the anchoring of the discourse). Political logics are naturally found in the domain of the Political qua antagonism (and therefore the Real), which then help the analyst explain and criticize the emergence, formation, and maintenance of practices or regimes (2021: 3-4). This is where the analyst would look for logics of difference or equivalence to see how political frontiers are built up and broken down (2021: 4). In Lacanian terms, we can elucidate from these first two logics how a discourse is anchored in its relation between S1 and S2, and how different S1’s compete for hegemony through the axes of metonymy (difference) and metaphor (equivalence). Last, fantasmatic logics aim to capture the affective dimension of discourse insofar as they allow for the researcher to describe, explain, and criticize the way subjects are ‘gripped’ by discourses through the concept of enjoyment (*jouissance*) (2021: 4). In this logic, we therefore can analyze the (non)relation between the (split) subject and the *object a*, or what the Glynos (2003; 2014) terms fantasmatic objects, which can have both beatific/utopian or horrific/dystopian dimensions.

Analyzing Discourse: Interpreting Text/Speech

What differentiates the logics approach from LDA would be the latter’s use of the four discourses to map a text or speech. The use of the four discourses in LDA finds its roots in discursive psychology and has been established as a methodology for text/speech analysis by Ian Parker (2005/2014; 2010/2014) and Calum Neill (2013). The only author to formally apply these methodologies to political science research has been Valeria Tolis (2023), who coincidentally has applied this methodology to EU climate governance. Parker (2005/2014), Neill (2013), and Tolis (2023) propose similar components of LDA, which can be synthesized as follows.

1) Elucidating the *formal qualities of the text* (S1): involves paying attention to how meaning is constructed through absolute difference, or how a ‘signifier represents the subject for

another signifier' (Parker, 2005/2014: 39). Doing so, allows the analyst to determine the nonsensical signifiers or the points where meaning (S2)—the metonymic signifying chain—is produced from non-meaning—metaphor (S1).

2) From the formal qualities, the analyst is then able to determine *the anchoring of representation* (S1—S2) (Parker, 2005/2014: 40). This is done by retroactively determining the positions of mastery (2005/2014: 40-1) or isolating the master signifiers (Neill, 2013: 343).

3) These first two processes then make it possible to *separate the Imaginary from the Symbolic* (Neill, 2013: 342), so that we may ascertain a discourse's radical contingency. This means that the entry point for analysis is the 'enunciating act' (Tolis, 2023: 7). For instance, this would involve our Imaginary interpretation of a EGD proposal—a utopian future of smart technologies/infrastructure, solar panels, electric cars, and locally grown food—from its Symbolic structure—that all of these representations perhaps relate back to the signifier "growth" and/or "welfare." Here we can identify the social logics of the discourse. This allows us to discern that the subject (\$) of discourse does not speak their own discourse, but rather the discourse of the socio-symbolic structure and fantasy that sustain their reality (2023: 7). This reflects Lacan's assertion that "the unconscious is the Other's discourse" (Lacan, 2006: 436). In this way, we must see both the agent of discourse and the receiving other as loci of discourse (Tolis, 2023: 5); therefore, the unit of analysis here is not the individual but rather a collective subject united by an unconscious symbolic structure.

4) From this separation, we can then determine which signifier(s) occupies the position of the *object a/fantasmatic object* (and their utopian or dystopian representation). In other words, what/who is the agent of the discourse trying to account for? In the present example, the *object a* could manifest (or be reified) as climate change, emissions, greenwashing, pollution, inefficiency, etc. With this move, we can then see the extent to which the subject is split by discourse (\$), and perhaps their *agency*—or how the subject might forge a new master signifier to overcome this split. In pursuing the mentioned objectives, the subject of discourse might propose policies that go against the standard (technocratic) notions of green growth, and aim for more collective (versus depoliticized, technocratic forms) of governance (e.g. standing citizens' assemblies and/or funding renewable energy cooperatives).

5) Having identified the signifiers that constitute the four ontological components of discourse (S1, S2, *a*, \$) and their position in language, whether at the level of unconscious/enunciation or conscious/enunciated, we can then *interpret the discourse through the four discourses, and locate the "deadlocks of perspective"* (i.e. negativity or non-relation) (Parker, 2005/2014: 46). Put differently, the discourses can be used as mind maps that enable us to reflect on any produced fractures and assess whether they can challenge or subvert a given discourse (Tolis, 2023: 4). That is to say that they can shed light on the relation between the subject and discourse, the relation between the Symbolic and the Real (2023: 4-5). In other words, how does the subject address antagonism, impossibility, and heterogeneity? Are they avowed or disavowed? By observing the non-relations or deadlocks in each discourse, we can then identify where cracks are produced.

A discourse's disruptive or dislocatory nature would be found in the hysteric's discourse, while the possibilities for revolution would involve the analyst's discourse. The latter can be summarized in Lacan's assertion that the analytic act is where the "sender (analysand) receives his own message from the receiver in an inverted form" (Lacan, 2006: 246). This is to say that the response may reveal some truth concealed in the original message (Parker, 2005/2014: 45-46). That is to say that in encountering the *object a*, the subject is exposed to the radical contingency of the master signifier (S1) and, if successful, forges a new one. The key point here is to look at how *jouissance* is manifested and "trapped" to observe if it returns to be traumatically disruptive and make possible its revolution (Tolis, 2023: 6). For instance, technocratic climate governance (depoliticization, S1) might worsen perceptions of legitimacy (*object a*), thereby threatening the Commission's ability to pass climate legislation, which may encourage the implementation of new forms of participatory democracy. Here the S1 would be uncovered and perhaps shift the Commission's priority to re-politicizing the policymaking process (the new S1). Of course, such a determination could only be made retroactively.

6) The last aspect of LDA to keep in mind is that there is no metalanguage or universe of discourse. This accounts for the fact that the discourse analyst never does their job from some neutral, objective position outside of the text or speech they are interpreting. In Neill's words:

To assume to access an objective plane which somehow transcends our investment or identification in the text is to deny what we do and, from the off, to produce a disingenuous discourse. We cannot put ourselves out of our reading, and to pretend that we can is, well, to pretend. To consume is to identify. The act of consumption is already the act of identification and nowhere more so than in the consumption of discourse. (2013: 337)

No matter how the analyst interprets the text through LDA they are doing so from the discourses of psychoanalysis, non-essentialism, and perhaps even post-Marxism. These theoretical biases cannot be ignored. Furthermore, neither can we ignore the context of the enunciating act if we wish to determine its potential for radical change.

The Situation & Act/Event

This means that before mapping the texts via the four discourses, the analyst must characterize the situation in which it the articulations took place. This methodological approach is present in Stavrakakis's (2000/2014) application of "the theory of dislocation" to the emergence of Green ideology. This assumes a type of political analysis based on contingency, with dislocation being used to facilitate an analysis of the conditions of possibility for a new ideological articulation or master signifier (2000/2014: 32). This means that we cannot limit our analysis to the selected documents, for we must interpret them in the context of the signifying chain's contingency. In his analysis of the situation (the context) and the event (emergence of green ideology) he determines that:

what was needed, besides environmental dislocation, was the dislocation of a certain political tradition or ideological field (it was the radical tradition that happened to perform this role), a dislocation partially resolved by making nature...the core of a new ideological rearticulation. (2000/2014: 32)

Glynos (2014: 158) as well posits that LDA of political acts demands a detailed analysis in characterizing the regime in which the possible act took place. Although capitalism is present in every political-economic regime, it is not homogenous—it's heterogenous, and so too is the state's management of it. So, the grounds for an act need not reject the regime nor the economic system *tout court*; instead, analysis must look for possible transformations toward participatory democracy (repoliticization) and new approaches to economic (and therefore climate) governance (2014: 157). When analyzing climate discourse, then, we should be looking at changes in two interlinked signifiers—the (Political) approach (i.e. a change in “politics” from degrowth/growth critical approach to green growth) and the approach's politicization—the ethical dimension (e.g. post-politics vs. radical democracy).

For this reason, the analysis will begin with a comprehensive characterization of the situation—of EU climate governance along its dimensions (S1's) of “politicization” and “approach” to climate governance. This means that the grounds for an ethico-political act would require changes to both master signifiers. From this characterization (via literature review), we will identify the components of EU climate governance discourse (\$, S1, S2, *a*) and map them through the four discourses. This will establish a baseline from which we can compare the analyses of the proposed materials. To the extent that we aim to determine whether the EGD can be considered an act we will focus on two items: 1) the *Commission's European Green Deal Communication* (2019) and 2) the a factsheet titled the *Achievements of the von der Leyen Commission—The European Green Deal* (2024).

The *Green Deal Communication* was chosen insofar as it details all the Commission's policy initiatives it will be working on to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, revealing the ways in which the subject accounts for the Real. To track changes in politicization and approach up to the present, we will compare the results of the Communication's LDA with the 2024 Factsheet's discursive structuring. Through the analyses of these documents we hope to reveal changes in the ethical and political dimensions of this policy framework (qua act/event): the ethical dimension will be understood as the degree of commitment to democracy and justice—or the extent to which negativity is recognized, institutionalized, and politicized—and the political dimension will be understood as the extent to which the master signifier underlying the approach has changed (e.g. from green growth to degrowth).

Analysis

The characterization of the situation will be divided into three sections. The analysis in the first two sections, will be used to develop the baseline, situation, or context in which we can locate the European Union's approach to economic governance in general and its climate/energy governance in particular and how this approach affects (and has affected) European populations' capacities for democratic self-rule and political change (the third section). This analysis of the situation seeks to explore the relationship between politicization/democracy and approach/ideology to climate governance. What is seen is a connection between depoliticization and green growth/(neo)liberalism and a connection between (re)politicization and post-growth/eco-socialism. To be sure, these connections are not immanent relationships. In these three

sections of characterization, we'll be able to situate where the European Union's Green Deal Framework (the fourth section) stands in relation to the post-political/growth situation, allowing us to assess its commitment to re-politicizing and changing the approach underlying this area of governance, thereby making it possible to determine whether it can be considered an ethico-political act. The last part of this analysis (the fifth section) will discuss how these findings compare with other relevant literature on the EGD.

Characterizing the Situation (1): The Master's, University's, Capitalist's Discourses & the Post-Politics of the 'Green' Transition

Clothing the Emperor: The Post-Politics of the University Discourse

For many subjects, if you are critical of the 'greening' of society and the 'green' economy, then you're simply against science, environmental protection, and saving the planet from climate change, which, therefore, means that you have no place to express your opinion and/or criticize the way this 'greening' should be carried out. That is to say that the person who disagrees on non-technical/scientific, but social, moral, or political grounds must take extra efforts to forge a space where their point can be seen as a legitimate perspective (Kenis & Lievens, 2015: 27). The same happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, when it was extremely difficult to hold critical views of lockdowns, vaccine mandates, and other regulations of human behavior, since doing so would simply make you 'unscientific.' This doesn't mean that scientific knowledge should be rejected *tout court*; however, we should remember that scientific knowledge's seemingly objective, neutral appearance is always utilized in relation to a subjective, radically contingent, ideological stance. This is seen in the university discourse's positioning of knowledge (S2) over the master signifier (S1), where the former hides the subjective structuring role of the latter. This produces an unknowing subject (\$)—unaware of the radical contingency of the master signifier, thereby making scientific knowledge one of the most effective discursive strategies for any ideological regime. For instance, the signifiers "science" and "technology" in both aforementioned crises have been an effective tool at depoliticizing inherently political issues and delegitimizing critics as 'denialists' or 'conspiracy theorists' whose concerns have no place in the public sphere. This is effectively the power of an ideology's hegemonic status in the Social/Symbolic—that it can totalize this domain to the extent that its subjects can be completely ignorant of their own ideological positions, for they are subjects of 'science' and 'rationality' and not subjects of any '-ism'.

This is a clear-cut example of 'the evil of absolutization' discussed in the final section of the theoretical framework. For both Erik Swyngedouw (2010), Anneleen Kenis and Matthias Lievens (2015; 2016) the politics of climate change and sustainability are not only examples of the post-political, but they are also key areas through which the post-political frame is entrenched in the Socio-Symbolic Order. In Kenis and Lievens' (2015: 31) words:

Invoking nature as a foundation for a vision of society shifts the discussion from the political to the scientific plane. This threatens to undermine the terrain for the genuinely political encounter of a plurality of positions. Moreover, it leads to a misrecognition of the

indeterminacy and contingency of society, as a result of which society's democratic quality is damaged.

Such misrecognition of the master signifier is damaging for democratic governance to the extent that it forecloses discussion of alternatives and, therefore, the Political. This is the inherently post-political nature of the university discourse. You are either on team science or team 'denialist', and by choosing team 'science' you must accept the dominant forms of employing scientific knowledge to solve the ongoing ecological crises. Here, we must appreciate the polarizing effects of using scientific and technical arguments to totalize the Symbolic.

In what follows, we will see how hegemonic forms of energy and climate governance have depoliticized these primordial political issues through the capitalists' and university's discourses since the West's or Global North's turn to oil in the mid-1950s and how these discourses continue to dominate our transition from a fossil fuel-based economy to a supposedly 'green' economy. This analysis will reveal the radical contingency of the green growth fantasy in order to subvert this approach's claims of totality by revealing the ways in which their promises for a zero-tradeoff transition are likely too good to be true and risk reproducing the same patterns of exploitation and domination experienced in our current fossil fuel-based economy. In Lacanian terms, this means revealing the 'deadlocks of perspective,' non-relation, or non-rapport implicit in every ideological fantasy produced by the master's discourse ($\$ \diamond a$) that the capitalist's discourse tries to hide through its reliance on the 'objective' knowledge (S2) of the university discourse. Put differently, we'll see how green growth disavows negativity, symbolic castration, or the Real qua antagonism/Political, impossibility, and heterogeneity.

Energy and the Political

For these reasons, we argue that the hegemonic alternative to fossil fuel growth—green growth—cannot be considered an ethico-political act. Although it seeks to reconfigure the Symbolic with its implementation of new 'green' technology and forms of international governance and cooperation (e.g. the UN's COPs), it ultimately fails to democratize society, institute lack in the Other, or ensure the Political in politics. Instead, green growth (or the green economy) must be seen as a 'false transgression' or a Gramscian 'passive revolution' (Swyngedouw, 2010; Kenis & Lievens, 2015; 2016) in which the ideals of ecological movements have been coopted to allow the very same actors who have caused the problem (i.e. the Global North, fossil fuel industry, MNCs) to maintain their hegemonic positions and 'save' capitalism from itself.

To begin, fossil-fuel growth was initially a radically contingent, political decision, which since the discovery of coal/steam power, has gone together with economic growth and political change in liberal-capitalist societies. Timothy Mitchell (2011: 19) in *Carbon Democracy* argues that modern mass politics were made possible by the exploitation of coal to the extent that the new forms of living it produced destroyed previous forms of authority (e.g. the sovereign or king). He argues:

The ability to make democratic political claims, however, was not just a by-product of the rise of coal. People forged successful political demands by acquiring a power of action

from within the new energy system. They assembled themselves into a political machine using its processes of operation. (2011: 19)

In the era of coal and steam, energy production was decentralized, so laborers could sabotage its production and transport, paralyzing the economic system. In Lacanian terms, coal made it possible for subjects to challenge the authority of the master and make radical demands that instituted lack (qua *object a*) in the Symbolic through democratic reforms/demands. Put differently, this event made it possible for subjects to perform ethico-political acts, by giving voice to those unheard and fighting against their exploitation, leading to reforms of the economic system and reconfigurations of the Symbolic (e.g. extending suffrage, labor reforms, health/safety regulations, etc.). Although, the green energy transition will not involve a return to coal, we could argue that a decentralized energy system, controlled by many, would be an effective way to re-politicize and democratize climate and energy politics. This organization of political power was, however, weakened by the transition to a de-nationalized, centralized social and technical world built increasingly on oil (2011: 19).

The switch to oil made the energy system more difficult to sabotage, and was promoted in the post-WWII/Cold War era in Western Europe by the United States under the Marshall Plan to curb socialist/communist workers' movements (i.e. the radical left) (2011: 236-7). *Herein lies our energy system's radical contingency—there is no a priori reason why Western society has become oil dependent; it was a geopolitical decision.* Oil extraction relies on pumps and ships and far less human labor (i.e. labor-power), therefore, allowing developed nations to consume energy under a far more centralized and less accountable system run by large (public or private) oil companies (2011: 237). It was in this switch from coal to oil where we can locate the shift from the sovereign/national 'disciplinary' master to that of the market or 'control' where our energy supply is not simply a national matter; it is something that is beyond the grasp of democratic politics and determined by the decisions of an array of public (e.g. state oil companies) and private actors (e.g. BP, Shell) around the globe. Oil's characteristics made it an ideal object for commodity fetishism, as it could be seen in terms of pure exchange value, thus rendering invisible the social relations of power and conflict that lurk behind its production (Kenis & Lievens, 2015: 144). Like money, it is easy to transport, which allows for its abstraction from local ecologies and its lubrication of the global economy (2015: 130). In this transition, the national master is replaced by the market, thus setting the groundwork for the post-political era that emerged under Reaganism and Thatcherism in the 1980's. This meant that citizens were (and are) no longer subjected as much by their nation as they are by the logics of the market. Energy production—the backbone of any politico-economic system—could no longer be utilized to wager ethico-political acts as the switch to oil foreclosed such opportunities of disobedience and sabotage—allowing powerful actors to totalize economic governance under a single ideology—(neo)liberalism—removing energy consumption and production from the Political. Since everyone was a consumer of energy and far fewer worked in its production, its political dimensions could be ignored—and they were externalized. (Many) consumers don't care where their energy comes from, as long as it's cheap and affordable.

The Real of Climate Change

We must always interpret approaches to climate change through the master's discourse with the nation, sovereign or market's demand for growth assuming the position of agent/S1, fossil-fuel consumption as knowledge (S2, other or *jouissance*), and climate change as *object a* (surplus-*jouissance*, product or loss). Climate change, therefore, as a symptom of our economic activity, is one of the many surpluses, excesses, or losses that prevents a capitalist system (S1) from completely representing the Western economic and political subject (\$, truth). What this means is that the climate crisis should not be seen as an externality but as a symptom, for it is extimate—paradoxically both internal/intimate and external to the subject. Climate change and related ecological crises have been the surplus value/*object a* of both coal and oil-based growth, meaning that it must be considered an encounter with the Real. In Western countries this encounter with the Real qua *object a* was first theorized, and it is now something experienced in the form of extreme weather, rising temperatures/sea-levels, etc.

Exemplary of this is Levin, Cashore, Bernstein, and Auld's (2012: 126-30) and Lindvall's (2021: 31-33) characterization of climate change as a wicked problem due to the crisis's uncertainty and the incompleteness of information necessary to solve it. In this sense, this crisis can be understood as the Real qua dislocation, as it is always threatening crisis or even collapse of our politico-economic system. Here, we can observe the non-relation between the split subject (\$) and climate change (*a*)—the formula for fantasy—to the extent that identification with the master signifier always produces an extimate excess or loss that prevents the master signifier from totalizing reality and completely signifying the subject. Climate change is one of the repressed elements that will always return to dislocate the master signifier, splitting the subject. Even when it is accounted for or signified, there will always be some heterogeneous element—to be known—beyond its reach that will return to haunt the split subject. For example, while it's true that climate change requires, on one hand, mitigation policies to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, it's impossible to know which ones will be the most effective, as calculating the relationship between present emissions and future warming is not an exact science. Climate change is the Real qua impossible—always already beyond signification.

Disavowing the Real as Antagonism (1): Climate Justice

Unlike the exploitation of labor, gender, or race, climate change is an issue that lacks a clear subject and object (Kenis & Lievens 2015: 28-32) since it ultimately will affect everyone and require a reconfiguration of almost everything. This makes it an opportune vehicle for depoliticization since in viewing the issue as “a global-humanitarian cause” (Swyngedouw, 2010: 217), we can ultimately erase any ‘us-them’ distinction, creating a thoroughly apolitical, consensus-based version of climate and energy politics.

Regarding subjectivity, viewing climate change as a global humanitarian cause is problematic insofar as it makes us ignore the issue of justice—the Real as antagonism/political. Climate change is an issue in which those least responsible will ultimately suffer the most. This injustice can be seen across time, space, income-level/class (Lidskog & Elander, 2010; Lindvall, 2021; Koch, 2018), and gender. Time refers to intergenerational climate injustice. In other words, younger people will suffer the from the effects of emissions produced by older people. In this way,

the emissions that made possible previous generations' economic development are likely to limit development for future generations. In terms of space, the Global South will ultimately face the worst impacts of a global temperature rise—it will be too hot to live there—even though the Global North consists of the countries who were the first to industrialize and who are effectively those who started the problem. As parts of the South become uninhabitable, Northern countries will be tasked with the challenge of managing flows of migration. This will present a huge problem for the EU, given the effects of the arrival of 1.8 million migrants in 2015, which motivated authoritarian, rightwing, populist parties, contributed to political polarization, and gave rise to debates on identity, religion, and values (Lindvall, 2021: 25). Apart from migration, climate change will likely cause the prices of basic goods and services to increase, such as food and electricity. As a result, those with lower incomes will have to sacrifice a much higher proportion of their salaries to pay for them, while the wealthier will pay a smaller proportion. Considering that wealthier individuals on average have larger ecological and material footprints, Walker (2012, as cited in Koch, 2018: 36) considers this to be a “double injustice.” In this way, climate change is likely to aggravate existing socioeconomic inequalities and/or create new ones. In sum, failure to implement effective social welfare policies to address these injustices risks tearing apart the social fabric of any democratic state and disintegrate its legitimacy. An ethical climate politics, therefore, cannot gloss over the intrinsically political and antagonistic dimensions of this issue and must address these issues democratically.

Disavowing the Real as Heterogeneity and Impossibility: Science, Technology & Commodification

Nevertheless, the Real can be easily masked or glossed over by the capitalist's discourse. The positioning of signifiers 'green' and 'growth' itself is exemplary of this social bond because it suggests that those who identify with or consume it can have their cake and eat it too. Put differently, they seemingly don't have to submit to any master to complete themselves. Aware of their split, produced by the climate crisis, the subject unconsciously trusts the S1 (green growth) to produce knowledge (S2) creating consumable objects and ideas (electric cars, renewable energy, circular economy, nuclear fusion, etc.), thereby totalizing and completely accounting for the *object a* (climate change) without requiring acknowledgment of sacrifice, loss, or antagonism. Yet, green growth cannot totalize climate change for there will always be elements that cannot be accounted for. Put differently, although one can conceal certain tensions or oppositions through this discourse, these oppositions always threaten to return (Kenis & Lievens, 2015: 34).

For instance, another aspect of wicked problems is that the origins and the solutions of the problem are interdependent, so addressing one aspect of it may reveal another problem (*a*) (Lindvall, 2021: 34). This is the Real as heterogeneity in pure form. Renewable energy is a great example of fossil-fuel growth's imperfect (perhaps impossible) transition to green growth. While investing in wind and solar energy (as well as batteries to store it) may help reduce overall emissions, it's necessary to look at the bigger picture. Batteries and photovoltaic cells (in solar panels) need to be manufactured and require the extraction of rare earth minerals (i.e. critical material, which is typically imported). So, GHG reductions from these technologies must be seen in relation to their overall ecological and material footprints and consider the emissions and social

costs involved (i.e. labor exploitation) at all levels of a given supply chain. In other words, we cannot ignore the master's discourse, for incorporating this surplus back into the of the master signifier (S1) (capital/growth), via knowledge (S2), always creates more problems (*a*).

Despite this inextricable relationship between the subjectivity and objectivity of climate change politics, its extimacy is disavowed by the common tendency to externalize the *object a* through the fetishization of GHG emissions, which for Swyngedouw (2010: 227) is a form of populist discourse. Instead of recognizing and emphasizing the connection between everyday human activity and emissions, the *object a* is externalized or reified as an issue of gas, exemplifying commodity fetishism (Swyngedouw, 2010: 220). In a society's pursuit of mastering the *object a*—knowledge (S2) (e.g. universities, state bureaucracies, think tanks, NGOs, etc.) in the position of agent (i.e. the university's discourse) investigate the effects of climate change (*object a* in the position of *jouissance* or other) so that it can be tamed, managed, and accounted for while maintaining the master signifier (S1), growth, in the position of truth. Such relations produce split-subjects (\$ qua product/loss or surplus-*jouissance*), for investigating climate change reveals a far more abstract and complex reality than what can be experienced firsthand. To understand the phenomena in the Imaginary, we signify it by (Symbolically) condensing its processes into graspable images through, for instance, the metaphors 'greenhouse effect' or 'global warming.' *Such metaphors reduce our understanding of the crisis to gas, which makes market-based solutions or emissions trading systems appear to be the most appropriate way to manage the crisis. This can be seen in the fetishization of GHG emissions (especially CO2) and their modeling, which makes the issue appear as an external enemy—covering up the fact that emissions come from our everyday activity and that not all emissions are the same.* According to Kenis and Lievens (2015):

Underlying these technically equal emissions of CO₂, lurk difficult social and political realities and choices. Moreover, if all CO₂ emitted is considered equal, it becomes impossible to think in terms of strategic priorities and their social and political implications. Cap and trade systems and similar policy mechanisms which are central to the green economy paradigm therefore tend to render invisible the deeper social and political stakes of the ecological crisis and its solutions. (p. 30)

For instance, GHG emissions from a plane taking tourists to Cancun are not the same as GHG emissions required to build a wind or solar farm (2015: 30). However, this seemingly objective knowledge (S2) is always based on some radically contingent master signifier (S1), or according to the authors (2015: 145), apparently neutral descriptions (S2) always hide underlying political realities (S1). In this case, it hides the capitalist economic system's resistance to limiting surplus-value/*jouissance*.

Disavowing the Real as Antagonism 2): Supra-Nationalization and Aversion to Democracy

One of these underlying political realities is that this form of climate governance has negative effects on democratic self-rule. Governance of GHG emissions, therefore, has become a vehicle for new forms of governmentality, in which the traditional 'disciplinary society' has become a 'society of control' through democratically dis-embedded governance networks (e.g. the

Kyoto Protocol) (Swyngedouw, 2010: 227). For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC, 2023) report indicates that the Earth is definitely on track to warm by 1.5°C (and already has) relative to 1850-1900 levels, yet maps out four different scenarios—the best remains around this 1.5°C mark, while the worst surpasses 4°C. Accordingly, measures to adapt to climate change become increasingly complex, for the true impacts of the events climate change will trigger can only be known after they have happened (i.e. retroactively). *Through this concept, we can observe the non-relation or non-rapport inherent in the university discourse between the master signifier and the split subject: no matter what knowledge (S2) is produced by the master signifier (S1) to account for climate change (a), it forecloses the split subject's awareness of the S1's contingency.* For instance, most people don't have a clue about how climate scientists model the relationship between GHG emissions and warming, yet they tend to trust their determinations because of their scientific authority (i.e. *semblance*), even though these determinations are always imperfect. *By placing knowledge in the position of agent we can live in a seemingly objective reality while remaining ignorant to the master signifier's radical contingency and, thus, potential alternatives to solving the crisis.*

Attempts to highlight the political dimensions of the issue are foreclosed in climate change's conceptualization as a super-wicked problem, in which there is no time for disagreement because time is running out and we all contribute to it (Levin et al., 2012: 127-129). Instead of focusing on meaningful forms of participation that focus on the Political dimensions of the issue, we can no longer afford to withdraw into our own camps (us-them) and lose our time engaging in partial struggles, meaning that we should all work against the universal threat of rising GHG emissions (Kenis & Lievens, 2015: 19). Such ideas, coming from university and capitalist discourses, effectively depoliticize the public sphere and allow for the creation of institutions (e.g. COP, UNFCCC, EU) that are increasingly beyond democratic control.

In fact, representative democracy is often seen to be a barrier to effective climate governance, namely in the problem of electoral short-termism. This refers to the relatively short election cycles in relation to the long-term impacts of climate change (Held, 2009; Lindvall, 2021). Since these cycles are short—typically between two and four years—politicians focused on reelection are more concerned with developing policy programs that will keep them in office. As such, they must tailor their programs to their electorate's priorities. *Nevertheless, perhaps the capitalist's discourse is more to blame than democratic institutions themselves to the extent that consumption culture has permeated into representative politics, for in the eyes of political parties, citizens are tantamount to consumers.* In electoral politics, according to Stavrakakis (2007: 230) citizen activities are increasingly reduced to consumer behavior to the extent that consumer culture imposes its rules on politics and shapes dominant forms of the social bond. Voting is essentially an act which seeks surplus-*jouissance*, which creates a passive political subject. In this way, we can observe the intrusion of the logic of capital into our political life. Instead of working toward a better future, the capitalist's discourse reigns in electoral politics—all the voters must do is consume the correct politician to have a brighter more prosperous future and fully enclose the Symbolic-Imaginary from the Real. In reality, this never happens, for no political party's policy

framework can ever completely suture the socio-symbolic field. It's no wonder then that some are drawn to the counter-hegemonic project of the far-right and their promises to fundamentally reverse the post-political status-quo.

This consumer-citizen, of course, has pitted the debate between green growth parties (e.g. the European center left/right) and anti-regulatory (and even climate denialist) parties on the far-right (e.g. the European Conservatives and Reformists). Moreover, there have even been fissures within this green growth faction between the center right People's Party (less regulation) and center-left Party of European Socialists (more regulation)—and even within the socialist contingent there isn't agreement. Take for instance Emmanuel Macron's call for a 'European regulatory break' in May 2023 out of fears that EU regulations on harmful chemicals would hamper industrial competitiveness, since they lacked worthy replacements. Such examples of non-relation, symptomatic of a post-political approach, highlight more than ever the need for alternative forms of political participation and (re)politicization—or new ways to institutionalize the Political into politics and instill lack in the Symbolic—so that they are not simply debates to be had between politicians, executive actors, and experts but also between the very people who are (and will be) affected by their decisions.

Characterizing the Situation (2): Politicizing Climate Governance through the Hysteric's & the Analyst's Discourse

The Emperor is Naked! Is it Time for a New One?

As we have just seen in the previous subsection, scientific knowledge via the university discourse can be used to legitimize the master signifier—in this case economic growth—and cover over it with layers of objectivity and neutrality. The perverse capitalist's discourse complements the former by taking this knowledge and telling the subject that, basically, it will make everything alright and that no action, sacrifice, or loss will be required on their behalf. This, for lack of a better word, 'bullshit' social bond is what keeps power and wealth in the hands of the powerful and wealthy and prevents alternative approaches to solving the 'super-wicked' problem from emerging. Such use of scientific knowledge cannot be considered ethical. *This isn't to say that the science behind climate modeling, renewable, and efficiency technologies is bad; what's bad is the way it is framed in public discourse so as to discourage involvement and maintain the very same power structures that are effectively responsible for the problem in the first place.* Fortunately, recognition of the Real can challenge a subjects' 'common sense' beliefs through the hysteric's discourse and push them toward new master signifiers through the analyst's discourse.

We'll begin this subsection in the hysteric's discourse by challenging key aspects of the green growth/economy paradigm (e.g. decarbonization, biofuels, and efficiency, circular economy, decoupling) and even go as far as to challenge its main rival—degrowth—so as to highlight the importance of not placing our bets on one way of thinking and not forming any rosy, utopian, or overly optimistic notions of what could be. *Nevertheless, the degrowth approach is crucial for subverting the green-growth discourse insofar as it recognizes the negative dimensions and extimacy of the object a qua lack, limits, and/or entropy in its potentially subversive policy prescriptions,* which include de-commodification of the commons, banning planned obsolescence

and advertising, steady-state economics, etc. (Hickel in Hickel & Hallegatte 2021: 10-11). Degrowth policies would constitute a political act in forging a new master signifier, which according to Kenis and Lievens (2015: 154-161) involves using ‘the commons’ (whether social or ecological) as the anchoring point for all climate, energy, and environmental policy bringing us beyond the capitalist fetishization of surplus-value/*jouissance*. The subject would no longer be neurotically worrying about how policies would make GDP rise while emissions fall (decoupling) and instead be concerned with democratically extending and managing common resources (e.g. air, water, energy, healthcare, education). *This would be an ideal beyond the public/private binary that strives for democratic management of what humans need to live and reproduce*. For the authors (2015: 160), a democratic society is one which allows citizens to transform public spaces into communal spheres (such as protests in a city square), and also one where public officials support such transformations.

This argument, will then lead us to the analyst’s discourse—looking for trends in climate and energy governance that advocate potentially new ways of signifying climate change beyond the signifier ‘growth.’ The question underlying both analyses is whether these new frameworks and decision-making structures can contribute to thinking of climate change in terms of the ‘commons.’ For instance, does a citizens’ assemblies recommend banning oil drilling in a nature reserve to primarily halt emissions from increased economic activity (growth)? Or do they do so in their moral commitment to maintaining an ecosystem that everyone some way or another depends on (commons)? This means thinking beyond numbers, values, and emissions. Beginning with the Green New Deal for Europe (not to be confused with the EGD), we will determine whether this new policy framework can be considered a proper method for re-politicizing the climate, energy, and environment nexus. Last, we’ll explore the potential for re-politicization in new forms of participatory democracy by reviewing findings from the French and Irish citizens’ assemblies. If such forms of participatory governance can potentially serve as ways to turn public decision-making into common decision-making, then they are perhaps a way out of the capitalist’s discourse, responsible for electoral short-termism, and an opportunity to cultivate other *jouissance*—enjoyment not of results but of the impossibility and negativity of the participatory process itself—and, therefore, a way to move beyond the post-political frame’s fetishization of intrinsically ‘good’ science-based policy output.

The climate crisis’s dislocatory effects emerged in the Symbolic through the hysteric’s discourse—in the form of scientists who theorized the potential effects of increased quantities of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (along with population growth and resource depletion). This ‘calling out’ of fossil-fuel based growth is best exemplified in Meadows et al.’s (1971) *Limits to Growth* insofar as these authors (\$) split by their knowledge of climate (and other ecological crises related to economic activity/growth) challenged the market’s imperative for expansion (S1). In response, the master signifier via the university discourse has produced more knowledge to address the challenges, which further splits the agent, as knowledge (S2) and the *object a* are always already in non-relation. So, in sum, *Limits to Growth* (\$/a) has challenged surplus value/growth/capital accumulation (S1), which in turn has produced green growth (S2). Green

growth, insofar as it maintains the same master signifier, further splits the subject and the process continues.

Hystericizing the Green Economy

Green growth, as previously stated, is a win-win scenario that is unfortunately too good to be true, since every promising new technology or policy always has its *object a*. While an exhaustive account of all potential setbacks of new technologies/policies would far exceed the scope of this investigation, we'll limit analysis to some fundamental claims of the green growth approach: 1) energy efficiency improvements equal emissions reductions; 2) liquid biofuels can replace fossil-fuels; and 3) electricity can be decarbonized through renewable technologies (Giampietro & Bukkens, 2022).

Regarding the first claim, energy efficiency reduces emissions only if consumption/production remains the same. Oftentimes, however, efficiency in its reduction of costs encourages users to consume/produce more—this is known as Jevon's Paradox. In Giampietro and Bukkens words:

If we accept that metabolic systems are generated by autocatalytic loops in which secondary energy is invested in order to get more secondary energy (a concept very compatible with economic narratives: money spent to make money), we should expect that if a system learns how to better use secondary energy carriers in order to get a larger quantity of secondary energy carriers—becoming more efficient in what it does—the consequence will be the expression of a stronger autocatalytic loop and not a reduction in the use of secondary energy carriers. (2022: 6)

This idea is essentially that of Marx's formula for commodity fetishism: M-C-M'—producers invest their money into labor power/commodities expecting a return on their investment (i.e. more money). We would be unwise to think that efficiency related savings will necessarily lead to emissions reductions, for it's more likely that subjects will use these savings to consume and produce more.

Another related “unknown known” (2022) or *object a* is the impossibly and utter inutility of determining an economy's overall efficiency. We are sold the idea that as societies transition from industrial to service-based economies, GDP continues to rise while emissions fall (i.e. the Environmental Kuznets Curve). This would be true if somehow economies were magically closed systems isolated from global trade. The *object a* qua repressed unknown known is that in this transition such service-based societies became import dependent, consuming embedded carbon in the products purchased from abroad. In this way, large amounts of energy uses and related emissions are externalized to foreign countries, so obviously the more production is externalized, the lower its emissions will be (2022: 6). Doing so, however, neither can be considered an efficiency improvement nor a step towards solving climate change because exporting energy consumption doesn't count as reducing it. In fact, the replacement of human labor by machines and computers always results in an increase in energy intensity (Kenis & Lievens, 2015: 147).

Biofuels promise another win-win situation to the extent that it gives one the idea that we can recycle cooking oil or use biomass instead of fossil fuels—a quick and easy fix to the problem.

However, isn't the entire point of using fossil fuels precisely that it's already there and one doesn't have to spend lots of energy and time growing, harvesting, and processing it for it to be usable? Hasn't oil and natural gas become the standard precisely because of the relatively low cost/energy inputs required for its extraction and transportation? To propose now, in a post-industrial society, to reduce the dependence on fossil energy by using more land, labor, and power capacity in the primary sectors seems an unpractical idea (Giampietro & Bukkens, 2022: 7). The only way to replace fossil fuels with biofuels would be to again rely on imports of these resources from abroad, something the EU has been doing to grow this nascent industry (2022: 8). Again, exporting energy consumption does not address the root cause of the problems and only worsens issues of climate justice and environmental degradation.

We can see a similar structure in the claim that energy grids can be decarbonized through renewables. In the first place, wind and solar are extremely inefficient. They are considered intermittent sources, which means they only produce energy when it's sunny and when it's windy, meaning that at times you'll have too much and at other times you'll have too little. The only way to make it a viable replacement to fossil fuels is to have sufficient storage capacity, which can:

dramatically change the usefulness of intermittent sources by allowing to store electricity produced when it is not needed and release electricity when required in excess of the available supply. However, for the moment we do not have large scale solutions. (2022: 9)

We lack large scale solutions due the limited availability of critical material (2022: 9), which again must be extracted and is typically imported. Furthermore, lacking storage capacity may even increase costs of maintaining the grid (2022: 9). These setbacks, although they shouldn't dissuade governments from investing in such technologies, should be politicized, and citizens should be aware of the potential social and ecological realities and impacts involved in the green transition. We cannot ignore entropy, non-relation, negativity, and lack.

What these issues point to is the debate over economic decoupling, with the growth-optimist camp believing that GDP can be separated from carbon emissions and material use and the growth-pessimist camp thinking otherwise. We would likely situate Giampietro and Bukkens (2022) in the latter grouping in their finding that no matter what green technology policy we develop, there will always be some form of energy and material use that is conveniently ignored, such as the embedded carbon that sustains the 'greening' of our economic systems.

Now, the green growth answer to this reality is circular economics—that being the claim that an economy can reduce material inputs by essentially recycling everything it possibly can, thereby reducing emissions and environmental degradation involved in the extraction and transport of resources. Currently, however, only a fraction of material use can be recycled and has circular potential, for 44% of it consists of food and energy inputs, which irreversibly degrade as we use them, and 27% of material use is net addition to stocks of building and infrastructure (Haas et al., 2015, cited by Hickel in Hickel & Hallegatte, 2021: 15). Moreover, even if we recycle as much as we possibly can, economic growth will continue driving up resource use, negating any gains, which is what has been happening over the past few decades (Hickel in Hickel & Hallegatte, 2021: 15)—that we keep using more materials (material footprint) despite making dramatic

improvements in recycling (PACE, 2020, cited in 2021: 16). This is just another example of Jevon's paradox—that recycling, in reducing the cost of materials, actually encourages more consumption! *In the case of material footprint, although there is some evidence for relative decoupling of material use/GDP growth, there is no evidence of absolute decoupling.*

The same can be found in GHG/GDP relationship (2021: 16)—what's even more worrisome about this issue is the modeling involved that has predicted increased rates of decoupling. These IPCC (2023) scenarios that predict high rates of relative decoupling assume exogenous technological change that appears out of nowhere, without cost but with immediate diffusion, thus delivering 'free' growth (2021: 16). Whether we look at this from the perspective of thermodynamics as Giampietro and Bukkens (2022) do, or whether we look at this issue from that of Lacanian psychoanalysis, we cannot accept the validity of these claims, for nothing on this planet is purely external—it's extimate. In fact, Lacan's (1975: 16-17) development of the discourses was heavily inspired by the thermodynamic principle of entropy insofar as each *matheme* produces non-rapport between the position of 'truth' and the position of product/loss or surplus *jouissance*. *This doesn't mean that we shouldn't pursue circular economics, renewable proliferation, and improving battery storage capacities; however, we should be aware of their entropy (qua object a) or the Real as the heterogeneous and impossible element that cannot be accounted for.*

Growth Critical Approaches: Toward a Self-Conscious Emperor?

For the growth-pessimist movement—or the Malthusians—the only way to make green technological improvements work is to limit growth, so that cheaper more efficient resources do not encourage more consumption. Such recognition of lack has led to alternative approaches to economic management—*approaches that recognize the impossibility of infinite growth on a finite planet*. Most notable would be Herman Daly and Joshua Farley's (2004) *Ecological Economics* and Kate Raworth's (2017) *Doughnut Economics*. What their arguments share is the recognition of the limits to growth and their commitment to developing a new master signifier rooted in the welfare of social and ecological commons. Here, we can appreciate the analyst's discourse, insofar as these authors (*a*) representing the impossibility of growth's totalization (S2) address the economic system's incompleteness (\$) so that it may produce a new S1, which can be seen in the (primarily academic and grassroots) movements for post or degrowth shifts to political economy.

Since these approaches or paradigms to economic management are far from holding a hegemonic status in any public administration, it's impossible to determine *a priori* the *object a* this master signifier will produce. Nevertheless, its potential limitations have been theorized. To begin, intentionally limiting GDP is not a politically viable option, as doing so would cause income levels to drop (van den Bergh, 2010: 887; Hallegatte in Hickel & Hallegatte, 2021: 15)—which seems like an impossible policy initiative in following the capitalist logics of traditional party politics. This can be seen as a form of austerity for especially working-class people (Naudé, 2023: 58). Furthermore, GDP is not necessarily the enemy—it's environmental/climate degradation—so policies should be focused on emissions/pollutants, not GDP (2023: 46). Climate & environmental regulation may ultimately lead to GDP reduction; however, solely focusing on this economic

indicator distracts us from the core of the problem. For these reasons, Naudé (2023: 47) asserts that “democracy and degrowth are inherently uncomfortable bedfellows.”

If following the degrowth principle of reducing GDP so as to re-embed production and consumption patterns into planetary limits through a decrease in material and energy throughputs (particularly in rich countries) (Koch, 2018: 38), then we risk cutting the private investments and public tax revenue necessary for the fiscal space to fund welfare programs and ‘green’ technologies necessary to decarbonize the economy and ensure human well-being throughout this transition (Hallegatte in Hickel & Hallegatte, 2021: 19). For this reason, Raworth (2017) and van den Bergh (2010) propose approaches revolving around a different master signifier—agnostic to growth yet committed to social and ecological welfare spending—hence their plea for a-growth. Yet even these alternatives to the alternative won’t be perfect. All these examples represent just a few of the antagonistic dimensions at the heart climate governance.

Given this paradoxical relationship between climate, economy, and democracy, Carlos Taibo (2017) posits that climate change and our dependence on non-renewable resources will lead to the collapse of civilization, unless nations and their populations significantly reduce their patterns of consumption. In his view, economic growth is a real obsession that generates absurd behavior and is based on a dramatic lack of foresight as far as the future is concerned (2017: 101). He paints eco-fascist and eco-social scenarios of such collapse. The former refers to the possibility of dystopian, hierarchical, and authoritarian groups that would form under the premise that the Earth cannot sustain everyone, so they must save themselves at the expense of others, potentially leading to an ecological holocaust. The latter perhaps utopian scenario envisions completely decentralized communities based on the principles of solidarity, altruism, and direct democracy, in which the majority of economic activity would be focused on local agricultural production. No matter what the future holds, nevertheless, climate change presents itself as an existential threat to democratic states. Perhaps, then a degrowth future will be a subjective event, something imposed by climate related economic crises, or perhaps we have already entered a degrowth era, yet we haven’t sufficient evidence to make the retroactive determination.

Unfortunately, despite the highly antagonistic nature of this debate, climate governance approaches remain mainly in academic and technocratic circles, highlighting the need for spaces of public debate so that whatever policy mix employed has sufficient backing. Climate policy, due to its necessarily redistributive, effects must be developed in a politicized manner from the bottom up and not depoliticized from the top down, for we can use scientific evidence and economic arguments to justify both sides of the issue. Important to know is whether new policy frameworks and governance mechanisms acknowledge the fundamental, antagonistic non-relation in every form of discourse that tries to approach the climate issue. To answer this, we will turn the situation’s analysis to the Green New Deal for Europe policy framework and citizens’ assemblies.

Green New Deals: Returning to Welfare Statism is Not Revolutionary

The Green New Deal for Europe was a policy package championed by the UK think tank, the Green New Deal Group, whose main objectives are the ‘greening’ of taxation and investment to simultaneously solve the credit, climate, and energy crises (Kenis & Lievens, 2015: 72). The

approach represents a shift away from neo-liberalism and has a much more Keynesian flavor as it seeks to stimulate demand through wages and government spending (2015: 72). Its proposals aim to limit the wealthy's pursuit of surplus value in its call for controls on capital flow, tackling tax havens, and introducing taxes on capital (2015: 72). Additionally, it seeks to cancel the debts of millions of people and of governments (2015: 72). Such a package would represent a significant shift toward a more regulatory state; however, it cannot be considered a revolutionary proposal, as it fails to conceive of a new master signifier beyond growth or surplus value.

'Green New Deal' refers to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, in which the American economy became increasingly Keynesian. Kenis and Lievens (2015: 73, citing Negri, 1988) consider the policy package to be a 'passive revolution,' as it was a way to save capitalism by absorbing working class wage demands into a new regime of growth or capital accumulation. Therefore, we shouldn't forget that this package brought forth a wave of economic growth that preceded the neoliberal turn that was just as ecologically catastrophic as the current neoliberal era, as emissions in Western Europe increased faster during the period from 1945 to the 1960s than in any other point in history (2015: 73). The Green New Deal in mirroring the New Deal's Keynesian approach, therefore makes no guarantee that emissions will be reduced, unless the issue of planetary limits and boundaries are recognized; this would only be possible with a Green New Deal without growth (Hickel in Hickel & Hallegatte, 2021: 9). Furthermore, without properly addressing antagonism, the Green New Deal:

presupposes the depoliticisation of this [the ecological] struggle and its integration into the consensual logic of green economy governance. Partly because of the current weakness of the labour movement and the left more in general, many environmental organizations seem to be easily seduced by the potential allies among 'green' and 'socially responsible' businesses. They finally see an opportunity to mainstream their concerns. (Kenis & Lievens, 2015: 73-74)

That said, the GND does seem to have an ethical dimension insofar as it seeks to address the issue of climate justice and redistribute power from those most responsible (e.g. the ultra-rich) to those most affected yet least responsible (e.g. the working class). The GND in this sense could be considered an ethical proposal insofar as it could politicize the issue of justice; however, it fails to genuinely reconceptualize the master signifier underpinning political economy. *In other words, it would be a more ethical form of green growth, but not achieve truly Political change in the psychoanalytic sense.* For this reason, the act or event cannot be found in simply altering the economic approach to capitalism (regulation vs. de-regulation). Regulation must not be seen in terms of monetary value but in terms of preserving the intrinsically valuable commons, whose value cannot and shouldn't be expressed in millions, billions, or even trillions of dollars/euros.

This is because, an act or event is something which challenges the status quo; it is the process by which the unthinkable becomes thinkable or the absurd becomes common sense. The first step in this process is to reveal (via the hysteric's discourse) the nonsensicality of the master signifier underlying the objective world of knowledge in which we live—our *fantasy*. The second step is to recognize the repressed *object a* or 'unknown known' and use this knowledge to forge

a new anchoring point or master signifier around which to traverse the fantasy and pierce the super-ego. For instance, growth critical approaches challenge us to do what is seemingly impossible—to not think of Nature as a commodity or something that can be given a price and to try to imagine a world that is not determined by capital accumulation. This is a structuring point that goes far beyond a Keynesian (public spending + regulation) or a Hayekian approach (private spending + deregulation) insofar as these two approaches are both different ways to keep a capitalist economy on the path of infinite growth.

Institutionalizing the Analyst's Discourse through Citizens' Assemblies?

One possible way to break away from the commodification of the commons and capital accumulation is to break away from consumer-oriented representative democracy; enter citizens' assemblies or sortition-based, deliberative mini-publics (DMPs). Perhaps by turning democratic institutions into common spaces, it will be possible to view nature and human welfare beyond the public/private binary and as commons.

An act is possible when the enigmatic *object a* occupies the position of the agent. So, what better way to institutionalize this concept than by making governments directly accountable to policy frameworks and recommendations based on institutionalized forms of public deliberation in which the logics of capital are limited in their ability to sell citizens totalized versions of reality? Torney (2021) analyzes both the French and Irish Climate Assemblies' potential for generating policy turbulence—a concept which he defines as pushing the boundaries of what is considered politically feasible or acceptable (2021: 382). Here, we can see parallels with the concept of the act/event. For the author, DMPs can be used as institutional mechanisms to engage diverse publics—including marginalized parts of society (2021: 382). Citizens' assemblies or DMPs are deliberative in the sense that participants reach conclusions after receiving relevant information and engaging in careful and open discussions, and they are representative to the extent that participants are selected to be representative as much as possible of the wider population (Torney, 2021: 382). The value in such design is that:

Rather than simply aggregating atomized preferences of the population through elections or opinion polling, the process of deliberation can serve to transform the preferences of participants by exposing them to a wide variety of views and engaging them in conversation with those whose views they may not share. (2021: 382)

This means that such mechanisms can potentially reveal the non-relation and antagonism at the bottom of every political issue, and for this reason they can be considered ethical ways to bring forth political change (qua a new master signifier) insofar as they allow for unheard voices to be heard. Furthermore, since participants aren't career politicians seeking re-election, the issue's complexity can be approached rather than covered over by utopian/dystopian fantasies.

Nevertheless, maintaining the enigmatic will of the people as the principle agent/*object a* in the policymaking process and going beyond representative and capitalist logics requires careful attention to the design of the assembly and commitment to its conclusions. If, for example, the conclusions are disregarded by lawmaking authorities, an assembly's potentially subversive and turbulent effects will be null. According to Torney (2021: 383) this means that participants must

be given sufficient agency in shaping the process; the assembly must be closely coupled and integrated into the policymaking process; it should aim for specific policy recommendations; and have unconstrained framing of the issues. In both the French and Irish climate assemblies the key factor was their respective governments' commitment to the assemblies' recommendations. In Torney's words:

In the Irish case, albeit over a longer timeframe, the Citizens' Assembly resulted in significant policy turbulence, most notably through a major overhaul of the 2015 climate law. In the French case, by contrast, President Macron did not follow through on this commitment to submit the Convention's recommendations "unfiltered" to a referendum, to parliament, or to direct regulatory application. He rejected three of the 149 recommendations from the start, and the final version of the legislation designed to implement the convention's recommendations, the Climate and Resilience Bill, has been criticised by civil society for not going far enough to honour the spirit of those recommendations. (2021: 387)

This means that citizens' assemblies can only function as the empty center of democracy if they are allowed to; however, this would require legislators and executives to give up significant control over policymaking. Nevertheless, even if not all recommendations are adopted, such issues are at the very least brought into the public's eye and (re)politicized. To further strengthen these innovative forms of governance, Mulvad and Popp-Madsen (2021: 93) advocate for a formal prohibition of assembly recommendations from being ignored by politicians; that the assemblies are co-organized by participants to prevent cooptation by hegemonic discourses; and that the practice is turned into a permanent form and on a scale large enough to allow for active participation of the citizenry (i.e. through webcasts/livestreams).

Ultimately the participatory turn allows for democracy to save itself from an ideology's totalizing tendencies, whether this be in the form of the post-political center right/left or far-right populism. What both of these opposing projects share is their desire to totalize the Symbolic and eliminate the Real. Participatory democracy is a much more difficult bet, for it requires citizens to do the difficult work of facing contradictions, dilemmas, trade-offs and ultimately that the Symbolic-Imaginary cannot be sutured. *We'll only commit to new forms of democratic and climate governance if we dare to recognize, accept, and even enjoy negativity. Perhaps it is in citizens' assemblies where this process of forging new master signifiers based on other jouissance can take root.*

Characterizing the Situation (3): Depoliticized by Design—The European Union

The Commission as the Agent of Knowledge (S2/S1)

To finalize this first part of the analysis—the characterization of the situation—we must situate where the European Union stands in relation to the processes of depoliticization and (re)politicization. This analysis will begin with a more general look at the EU and conclude by looking at trends in its climate governance. The fundamental argument here is that the EU is both a symptom and source of depoliticization, for much of the discursive trends elaborated in the past two sections can be considered cornerstones of EU policy. Put differently, the EU's power lies not

simply in its budgetary force, but in its central position as an agent of knowledge (S2) primarily in the EU Commission's role as the primary legislator and enforcer of policy—this being the knowledge of a capitalist system; therefore, meaning that, since its inception, it has been focused on maintaining economic ties between member states (MS) and encouraging economic growth and integration. *To hold the Union together, the Commission must constantly avoid antagonism, covering it over by selling MS its policy initiatives via the capitalist's discourse—i.e. win-win situations. This has led to a climate approach that embodies green growth to its fullest extent.*

European economic integration began in the post WWII-era, as political leaders of the European neighborhood sought ways to prevent future armed conflicts. This began in 1951 with the integration of the steel and coal industries of Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands through the European Coal and Steel Commission. By integrating key industries necessary for waging war, no European nation would be able to build an army and attack another. National economies became further integrated in 1957 through the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) via the Treaty of Rome. This created a customs union and a single market, thereby establishing a common external trade policy, as well as the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital across Member State borders. The Maastricht Treaty (1992) effectively created the EU through the Economic & Monetary Union (EMU), where 19 of 27 member states share a common currency and monetary policy, committing all to a common budgetary and fiscal policy and coordinating economic policy.

Regarding political integration, the Maastricht Treaty established European citizenship and a common foreign and security policy. In this way, political integration can be viewed as a gradual transfer of national government competences to the EU level. At this level, policies begin in the EU Commission and are typically passed with the approval from the Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers or Council) and the European Parliament (EP). EU laws operate on the principle of conferral, proportionality, and subsidiarity. Conferral is the idea that the EU only can act in the areas that the treaties allow; proportionality means that EU actions cannot exceed what is necessary to fulfill treaty objectives; and subsidiarity only allows the EU to intervene only if it can act more effectively. Once a law has been passed, Member State governments are responsible for their implementation. Failure to implement could result in sanctions from the Commission. Unlike a normal liberal democracy, its governance structure is more horizontal, interdependent, and thus more network-like. Under the Ordinary Legislative Procedure (OLP): the European Council (consisting of the 27 heads of state from each Member State [MS]) establishes the general policy objectives; the Commission—turns these goals into more specific policy proposals; and the Council of Ministers (representatives of MS public administrations) and the Parliament (directly elected by Europeans) debate, amend, and eventually approve or disapprove the proposals. As such, this structure of interdependence can be understood as a system of general-purpose multi-level governance by which policies are made at the EU level and primarily implemented by MS (and lower levels of government) (Hooghe and Marks, 2001; 2004).

Designed to Disavow the Real: Depoliticization and the Democratic Deficit

The EU and especially the Commission as an agent of discourse speaks from the enunciated position of knowledge (S2) (i.e. the university discourse) insofar as it counts on a complex bureaucratic system that pools resources and information from the MS to maintain growth and stability (position of enunciation, S1) by neurotically accounting for all the problems, turbulence, and/or crises (*a*) that the single market experiences. What it produces are split subjects (\$),—whether MS, regions, municipalities, or even just individual humans—paradoxically dependent on the benefits membership provides yet (at times) critical of their subjection to this supranational authority. As we have seen in the previous sections, when knowledge eclipses the master signifier, depoliticization is likely to occur.

Symptomatic of depoliticization in the EU is its institutional structure and culture, conceptualized in academia as the ‘democratic deficit,’—a signifier proposed by Follesdal and Hix (2006), consisting of five features that focus mainly on aspects of representative democracy: 1) national parliaments have little oversight over EU policymaking; 2) the European Parliament (EP) is weak in relation to the powers of the Commission and Council; 3) there are no ‘EU’ elections insofar as EP elections tend to be extensions of MS politics; 4) the EU is too distant from the public sphere; and 5) all of these factors result in policies typically to the right of average citizen preferences.

What this approach then suggests is that improving representative politics (i.e. giving the EU and national parliaments more power) would fix these issues; however, as we have seen depoliticization thrives in representative democracies, due to the commodification of votes. If anything, we should see these five democratic deficits as symptoms of much more ingrained processes of depoliticization that have been prevalent throughout this supranational institution’s history of integration.

In fact, depoliticization is always the easiest solution to policymaking—it’s a form of political gaslighting that so strongly rejects negativity (or Symbolic castration) that it can make subjects even despise the very idea of politicization. Symptomatic of this aversion to conflict can be found in both Majone’s (1993) and Moravcsik’s (2002) defense of the democratic deficits. Majone (1993) argues that the policy competences of the EU don’t require input legitimacy because they are simply an extension of executive regulatory functions that seek to increase the pareto-efficiency outcomes of policies, and for that reason have non-redistributive effects. The author basically starts his argument from a position that rejects negativity in his claim that there exists ‘somewhere’ a line that divides the Political from the Social. Concerning Lacanian subjectivity, this is a claim that we simply cannot accept—for a signifier represents the subject of another signifier—meaning that one person’s ‘common sense’ is only ‘common sense’ insofar as it is not another’s (i.e. absolute difference). While the single market may have seemed to be a win-win situation for some, it certainly wasn’t for private producers for domestic markets (Follesdal & Hix, 2006). Just as there is no such thing as an (objective) sexual relation—there is no such thing as an objectively non-redistributive policy. Grounding arguments on this notion of neutrality and non-redistribution doesn’t hold.

Andrew Moravcsik (2002) argues that the high-consensus requirements of policy-making and low issue salience prevent the policy shift described in the common conceptions of the democratic deficit. He writes:

constitutional checks and balances, indirect democratic control via national governments, and the increasing powers of the European Parliament are sufficient to ensure that EU policymaking is, in nearly all cases, clean, transparent, effective, and politically responsive to the demands of European citizens. (2002: 605)

In other words, policymaking requires such a high consensus between a plurality of actors that controversial, potentially redistributive policies of high salience are unlikely to make it past the Commission, and even if they do, these policies would enjoy indirect input legitimacy via national governments. In this way, policies are generally in the common interest and redistributive effects are kept at a minimum. High-consensus requirements, however, are another driving force of depoliticization. To pass legislation, discourses must be articulated in such ways that disavow the potential Political dimensions of a decision. Doing so can produce crises in the future, or redistributive effects may come to be known only retroactively, such as what was seen during the Sovereign Debt Crises—produced by the fact that MS all shared a common currency despite having very different models of political economy, thereby a government’s insolvency (e.g. Greece) risked placing the entire monetary union in crisis by devaluing the euro. Not politicizing an initiative as ambitious and far-reaching as the EMU can have devastating effects on the very subjects who voted for it.

This is why when analyzing the EU’s democratic character, we would be unwise to simply make determinations based on changes in its institutional structure and employ a much more discursive/psychoanalytic approach. Robert (2021) argues that EU discourse since its very inception has been averse to the Political; however, to be fair, the EU (qua subject) rejected/repressed antagonism in the wake of one of the bloodiest and most traumatic wars of the 20th century. In this sense, the EU’s complex institutional structure is a coping mechanism to avoid conflict and encourage consensus—this is driven by a reliance on expertise, informal negotiation, and the permanent consultation of interest groups in making EU policies (Robert, 2021: 201). Here we’ll present a few examples.

To begin, Lo Bianco (2016) analyzes pluralism and accountability of the informal and opaque trialogue discussions that occur under the OLP. These ‘fast-track,’ first-reading agreements between the Commission, Council, and Parliament accounted for 85% percent of legislative proposals between 2009-2014 (Lo Bianco, 2016). In terms of the Council’s behavior, the negotiations are dominated by unelected expert officials from the Presidency (a role assumed by each Member State government on a 6-month rotating basis) (Lo Bianco, 2016). While this form of representation may be acceptable for technical issues, the OLP also addresses sensitive subject matters and should be handled by elected politicians (or DMPs). Similarly, Parliament typically sends representatives from its three biggest parties, rather than the issue’s rapporteur (Lo Bianco, 2016). This is problematic considering the rapporteur is chosen by the other MEPs and prepares the Parliament’s position. Once the representatives of the Council and Parliament have come to an

agreement, it is typically presented as a take-it-or-leave-it deal to the rest (Lo Bianco, 2016). In the context of the OLP's extension and its high consensus requirements, EU institutions have opted for efficiency over democracy.

Comitology is a practice under the Delegated and Implementing Acts (DIA), by which Member States send unelected expert representatives to oversee amendments and updates to legislation. This practice is problematic because there is no oversight from Parliament or other elected officials. In Burns and Tobin's (2020) analysis of DIA, they found that comitology was responsible for three cases of climate policy weakening, two of which involved the weakening of the Emissions Trading System (ETS)—by excluding types of air travel from the definition of aviation and by allowing 95% of allowances to be distributed for free (Burns & Tobin, 2020).

The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) shows democratic potential in that it allows for policy coordination of competencies exclusive to national or subnational levels government. These networks experiment with different policies to reach predefined goals established by the Commission. As such, best practices can be established, and through peer pressure poor performance can be reprimanded (Cohen & Sabel, 2004; Büchs, 2009). The main criticism of its democratic character is that there is no common procedure for the selection of stakeholders, as this right has naturally been reserved by Member States. As a result, representation and accountability in these multi-level networks is not guaranteed (Büchs, 2009).

In this light, it's as if the EU has repressed negativity (through depoliticization) after this encounter with the Real (WWII), which has resulted in the democratic deficits described above, yet in doing so this repressed negativity has returned in a variety of forms. This return of the repressed is what European integration scholars would call the transition from functionalist integration theory to post-functionalist integration theory, or the transition from a 'permissive consensus' to a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), seen in the form of far-right Eurosceptic movements who feel their voices aren't heard by the post-political elite and desire (to name a few of their objectives) to retake control of their nations' borders and economic governance. According to Stavrakakis:

In fact, a whole heated debate is mounted at a separate level, in which dry European identity, its institutional arrangements and big words, are seen as agents of castration, not only indifferent but hostile to the structures of enjoyment that operate in the various national contexts and engaged in a process of standardisation which has to be resisted. The discourses of resistance differ from the standard Euro-jargon not only in terms of their content but also in terms of their style: they are aggressive, visceral, and funny, ranging from the obscene to the violent, often via the grotesque. This may be, however, the secret of their success. (2007: 222)

The secret of their success is their manipulation of *jouissance qua object a*. For these subjects, the EU is the paternal metaphor who has castrated national subjects by taking away their identity and threatening their forms of enjoyment. Only by weakening the EU's reach or leaving it outright may these subjects be able to regain their lost 'full' *jouissance*. Depoliticized forms of climate

governance will likely fuel the far-right's advance, especially if EGD environmental regulations are seen to affect growth and employment.

EU Climate Governance: The Foreclosure of Real in Mitigation and Adaptation Policy

Climate governance leading up to the Green Deal was firmly in the green growth or green economy approach, which is not surprising considering the EU's (neo)liberal approach to economic governance. On a global scale, however, the EU is typically seen as one of the pioneers of climate and environmental protection. The policy framework before the Green Deal consisted of 1) the Emissions Trading System (ETS), a cap-and-trade system at the European level targeting industries; 2) the Effort Sharing instrument, which set individual MS targets in non-ETS sectors; 3) the Land Use, Land Use Change, and Forestry (LULUCF) Regulation, accounting for emissions and removals from land-use activities (Alberton, 2023: 2). This policy architecture was designed to meet the binding objectives on emissions, energy efficiency, and renewables for the year 2020 through its "2020 Climate and Energy Package" mandating a 20% reduction in emissions relative to 1990 levels, a 20% improvement of energy efficiency, and 20% shared of renewables in the EU's final energy consumption. Instead, of revealing the inherently Political nature of climate change, the EU's mitigation framework is a product of 'objective' knowledge that hides its position of enunciation. This can be seen in the development of the ETS.

Compared to carbon taxes, the ETS appears advantageous insofar as it ultimately caps emissions, while taxes allow for continued pollution as long as the polluter is willing to pay (Kenis & Lievens, 2015: 85). Yet perhaps the ETS has even more significant effects on climate governance than simply the politics of its management and design, for nothing is ever merely technical and always embodies a conception of how society should be organized (Kenis & Lievens, 2015: 86). For instance, as previously mentioned, the distribution of 95% percent of the emissions allowances at the launch of the ETS in 2005 undermined its capacity by devaluing the carbon price (Burns & Tobin, 2020: 538). This involved the EU issuing emissions allowances to the companies responsible for the problem in the first place. Moreover, these allowances were first given based on their levels of emissions, which was self-reported (Kenis & Lievens, 2015: 85-6). This not only makes polluters the center of GHG mitigation, but it also establishes the idea that instead of 'the polluter pays' the 'polluter earns,' as they are the only ones to receive the free allowances (2015: 86). So, the consequence of ETS is that industries can now commodify and fetishize a gas to continue their pursuit of surplus value.

This means that CO₂ is no longer simply waste but a by-product that can be used for a variety of different profit-making strategies (2015: 88). Looking at the master's/capitalist's discourse this is the diagonal line from the *object a* back to the split subject (capitalist's) or master signifier (master's discourse). In the capitalist's discourse the cap-and-trade works without flaw and the *object a*, now accounted for, completes the subject, and produces no further entropy/loss. Yet, we're always working in the master's discourse, which always produces something that the system cannot account for. For example, companies have threatened governments with delocalization to get more allowances (2015: 88). Or, they have reduced emissions in an ETS country and compensated the reduction by increasing emissions in a non-ETS country, which then

allows them to sell their allowances at profit on the stock market, even though their total amount of emissions doesn't change (2015: 88). Such pitfalls highlight more than ever the need for politicization of mitigation policy and a skeptical view of any policy initiative that claims to be an easy fix.

Regarding adaptation policy, Remling (2018) employs a logics approach to discourse analysis of Commission documents, finding a strong trend of depoliticization across all documents. In terms of social logics—or the anchoring of discourse—she finds that the Commission's approach is wedded to an economic rationalist approach (S1) where the economy becomes the metabolism for everything, which is evidenced by their emphasis on signifiers such as 'green technology' and 'market innovation' (S2) (2018: 485). Across the three documents she found a decreasing role of political logics (i.e. metonymy/logics of difference) insofar as the most recent document doesn't mention maladaptation anywhere and public participation becomes less of a concern over time (2018: 487). For instance, the documents only make vague mentions of supporting participatory mechanisms, yet they fail to explicitly state the involved stakeholders (2018: 487). The decreasing role of the Political is symptomatic of the Commission qua agent of knowledge, which requires it to avoid potential conflicts at all costs. Last, we can find instances of depoliticization in their fantasmatic logics—or their manipulation of *jouissance* qua *object a*. On one hand, we can look at the utopian dimension of the *object a*—beatific logics—which in her analysis are closely tied to the social logic, economic rationalism, in which prosperity will be had in generating business advantages, saving costs, and the omnipotence of management and international leadership (2018: 487-488). The other side of the *object petit a* is its dystopian, horrific dimension of *fantasy* in which they paint a grim picture of climate impacts and the scenarios involved in mitigation failure, stressing the high future costs of inaction that would occur if their policy suggestions were not followed (2018: 488).

In these discourses, Remling locates three trends of depoliticization discussed in the first section of the Analysis. First, the Commission documents externalize and universalize responsibility for climate change. Although they recognize the EU's contribution and the need for mitigation, Remling identifies a parallel process of neutralizing the causes and objectifying climate change as some external threat to the bloc's stability (2018: 489). Second, they depoliticize issues of climate justice—or differentiated impacts and vulnerability. None of the documents inquire about why certain groups are disadvantaged and whether this needs to be addressed (2018: 490). Since vulnerability results from GHG emissions, it (and adaptation capacity) become apolitical concepts (2018: 490). Third, in framing adaptation as an environmental rather than a social or political issue, its costs and benefits are depoliticized (2018: 490). We see in all three findings a fundamental negation of negativity, antagonism, and the overall extimacy of the climate crisis. This results in a mismatch between their declared ambition to act, the apocalyptic impacts of inaction, and their weak remedial measures that arguably do little to prepare the region (2018: 491).

From this analysis of the EU's depoliticizing tendencies, we would expect little promise for radical change \ in the master signifiers underlying the political (i.e. green growth vs growth-

critical approaches) and ethical dimensions (i.e. depoliticization vs politicization) of the EGD. In the following section, we will employ LDA to determine how the EGD framework compares with this situation. Does it promise a radical break from the situation (an act)? Or does it promise more of the same green growth, post-political governance? The political act from our analysis of the situation would call for a radical break from using economic growth and rationalism to justify policy approaches toward a recognition of limits/negativity to their proposed strategies and a shift from an emphasis on economic logics to an emphasis on protecting the commons. The ethical dimension of the act would require a commitment to democratization, non-domination, and politicization—again this evolves a recognition of limits (i.e. antagonism, impossibility, heterogeneity)—and would institute new forms of meaningful citizen participation.

Lacanian Discourse Analysis of the European Green Deal

Based on the characterization of the situation, we will determine the extent to which the EGD framework represents continuity or rupture with the depoliticized green growth situation. To do so, we will employ LDA on two documents published by the European Commission: 1) *The European Green Deal* (2019) and 2) *The Achievements of the von der Leyen Commission: The European Green Deal* (2024).

The European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019) is a 24-page communication addressed to the other EU institutions in December 2019 (i.e. Parliament, Council of Ministers, European Council, etc.) outlining the policy initiatives to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. It was released amid fervent youth demonstrations, namely Greta Thunberg's Fridays For Future protests, and can be seen largely as a response to these grassroots demands as well as the growing popularity of Green New Deals in the public sphere. Despite these ambitious goals, however, the document unsurprisingly does little to (ethically) (re)politicize the Political aspects of the climate crisis and the societal changes it requires. Its emphasis on economic rationality and growth, suggests that the framework is largely a continuation of the green growth/economy paradigm. The document simultaneously commits to social/ecological welfare and justice, yet claims that these objectives are commensurate with green growth. Nevertheless, the text's greater emphasis on economic logics suggests growth/opportunity/competitiveness will likely be prioritized over the commons. In these respects, we will argue that the Green Deal Communication shows little potential for shifts in the ethical and political dimensions of the situation necessary to be considered an act.

The Achievements of the von der Leyen Commission is an 8-page factsheet published in April 2024 on the Commission's Green Deal webpage that details the progress made on the EGD framework's objectives that were approved in early 2020. The LDA of this document reveals further trends of depoliticization, a greater emphasis on economic rationality and growth, and a lesser emphasis on the social/ecological commons and participation, thereby limiting the radical potential of this policy framework.

We will argue that hoping for such change from the EU Commission is overly optimistic, considering its structural position—its unconscious position of enunciation—in the complex system of EU governance. The variety of interests it must address prevents the institution from

addressing the Real qua antagonism (the Political), the impossible, and/or heterogeneity. This is seen in its vague recognition of challenges and difficulties, yet its unwillingness to elaborate on them, for doing so would imply making ‘us-them’ distinctions (avowing antagonism) or recognizing uncertainty, its own shortcomings, and limitations (avowing impossibility/heterogeneity). In both texts, the enemy is always externalized whether in reference to climate change, CO₂, environmental degradation, pollution, or natural disasters. Any further recognition of responsibility is avoided so that all stakeholders can ‘work together.’ Last, the Commission’s commitment to democratizing the green transition and addressing issues of climate justice is weak, suggesting little change in the ethical dimension of this framework. As a result, the LDA of these two documents reveals the EU’s disavowal of the Real—symptomatic of the post-political situation and sustained primarily by the university’s and capitalist’s discourses. Following the discourse analysis, the final section of the analysis will conclude by comparing the results of the LDA with other publications that have analyzed the EGD’s potential for political change.

The European Green Deal Communication (European Commission, 2019)

The document is divided into four sections. The introduction (section one) is titled “Turning an Urgent Challenge into a Unique Opportunity.” Section two, “Transforming the EU’s Economy for a Sustainable Future,” is the bulk of the policy initiatives/objectives and is divided into two subsections: 1) “Designing a Set of Deeply Transformative Policies” and 2) “Mainstreaming Sustainability in all EU Policies.” Sections three and four are respectively named “The EU as a Global Leader” and “Time to Act - Together: A European Climate Pact.” The introduction, which can be found in Annex I, will receive a formal paragraph-by-paragraph analysis, as it sets the general tone and establishes the network of signifiers. This analysis will apply the approach described in the methodology, and its findings will serve as the ‘situation’ for the remaining sections. In other words, the latter will be analyzed along the dimensions of continuity/rupture with the symbolic structure established in the introduction.

Introduction: “Turning an Urgent Challenge into a Unique Opportunity.”

1) Formal qualities of text. The title begins with a metaphor: the interlaced crises—biodiversity loss and climate change—are an opportunity. In paragraph one, these crises, or the *object a* (the Real as impossibility/heterogeneity), however, will be possible to solve through the EGD framework. The first paragraph indicates urgency—an ever-warming climate, species at risk of being lost, forests and oceans polluted and destroyed, manifesting as a super-egoic voice that structures a dystopian fantasy: science is telling us that we must act now, for there is no time for to waste (in disagreement).

Paragraph two responds with a “new growth strategy” as opposed to an ‘old growth strategy,’ which is a careful choice of words insofar as it doesn’t specifically differentiate itself from ‘brown’ or fossil-fuel growth. This makes for an unclear political frontier, as for an ecologically minded subject (e.g. Greenpeace) this signifier ‘new growth’ could represent ‘green growth,’ while for another subject (e.g. a Fossil Fuel MNC) this signifier could represent their inclusion in the transition. The only clear political division (to state the obvious) is that it will not

be a ‘degrowth’ strategy—the EU will not impose forms of economic austerity on itself to meet its climate goals, since this new economy will be structured by modernization, resource efficiency, competition, and emissions/resource decoupling. Lacking clear political frontiers, the issue of responsibility is repressed, such as Europe’s current and historical role in producing emissions and driving biodiversity loss from its patterns of consumption and production, for instance. This signifying chain’s overall effect is that of externalizing the crises and of disavowing their intimacy to the subject—or a disavowal of extimacy. So far, all proposed knowledge (S2) can be drawn back to the signifier, growth.

Paragraph three expresses that the other aim of the framework involves increasing the protection of the social and ecological commons (although they do not have recourse to such language)—in its commitment to protect “natural capital” and the “health and well-being of citizens.” Nevertheless, referring to nature as capital suggests it must be preserved as a means for future growth, and likewise the health and wellbeing of citizens could ultimately be interpreted as means to the same end. The transition must be “just and inclusive,” put “people first,” and pay attention to those “regions, industries, and workers” who will face the greatest challenges. This transition will require “active public participation and confidence” and a new pact to “bring together citizens in all their diversity.” Here we see an attempt at distinction (metonymy/logics of difference)—a recognition of the need to address climate injustices yet no clear demarcation of who these people might be (metaphor/logics of equivalence). Will these references to the social and ecological commons be subsumed under the priority of new growth? Or will these initiatives be seen as ends in themselves? Does reference to active participation signal a potential redistribution of power to historically excluded subjects? Here, the subject’s reliance on metaphor over metonymy avoids producing any concrete meaning or clear political frontier. For instance, the signifiers in this chain “just and inclusive,” “people,” and “regions” could represent the subject to just about any other signifier. *We could assume that almost everyone reading this document is a person, who lives in a region and has an idea of what just and inclusive should mean. This is a clever strategy—a revolutionary tone that could mean just about anything to anyone.*

In paragraph four, the EU is a collective body that acts as a global leader of sustainability: (again) another metaphor that covers up the known divisions and antagonisms within this subject. Making the necessary reductions of course will be a challenge, but it can be solved with “massive public investments,” by “directing private capital,” and playing a role in “building a coherent financial system.” All these investments will bring forth “sustainable and inclusive growth.” This wording suggests that all the necessary changes and responses to the social, economic, and environmental problems can be solved through money, whether government spending or private spending and that these investments will then bring about more growth. *So, it seems that the protecting the commons is less an end itself, but a means for growth, which reflects the idea that protecting the commons is an economic opportunity. For this subject, the ecological and social crises triggered by climate change represent the signifier, opportunity/growth. In other words, for the Commission, protecting the commons (justice) is always already commensurate with growth, opportunity, and competitiveness.* This logic suggests that public and private spending (capital)

solves problems, which is partly true. This, however, represses the truth that money buys labor—and that labor consumes time, energy, and resources to produce the knowledge necessary to achieve the EGD's goals. This metaphor (money = solution) *condenses* a whole lot of meaning into one idea, ultimately giving the reader the impression that this transition will be easy, and no sacrifice or work will be required on their behalf. Here, we can appreciate a strong disavowal of the limitations and challenges (the Real qua impossibility or heterogeneity) inevitable in any act of consumption or production. The message of this paragraph is clear—money does the work.

Paragraph five addresses the global dimension of the problem, yet excludes the issue of responsibility the EU and its MS have had in causing these problems; instead, the global dimension is even more reason to build alliances and defend its resource and energy infrastructure from those “unwilling to act.” Again, ambiguous, indeterminate language manifests as a call to come together with the “likeminded” along with firmness against the “unwilling to act.” *This is another example where ambiguity avoids and represses the Political dimensions of the crises, and is effectively empty speech rather than full speech—the EU's position in relation to other nations/regions regarding issues of justice is unclear or nonexistent.*

Paragraph six expresses that this framework, of course, will represent the subject for all other signifiers—every action and policy must contribute to its objectives because everything is interlinked and complex—which is more reason to *find synergies* between them and “maximize benefits” between welfare, resilience, and competitiveness. This implies that through the investments under the EGD, everything can be accounted for and can work in union, meaning that there won't be any conflicts between these ideals. This echoes the message in paragraph four—there will be no significant trade-offs between the dual goals of protecting the commons and maintaining growth.

The introduction concludes by saying that the EGD is a sustainable development strategy to implement the UN's 2030 Agenda and sustainable development goals. Macroeconomic coordination will put sustainability and welfare at its center, which seems to express that economic activity will make protecting the social and ecological commons its objective. This could suggest the commons has become an anchoring point for growth—growing industries and sectors that will improve human and environmental health. What is not addressed is the issue of shrinking or degrowing industries and practices that are harmful to the commons. So, when there is a tradeoff between the two objectives, which will take priority? The greater emphasis on economic logics and rationality suggests that the commons will rather come second to economic opportunities and competitiveness (growth).

2) Anchoring of text. As expected, at the Imaginary level the text is firmly anchored in a depoliticized, green growth discourse. To begin, the crises and problems are presented as opportunities and win-win scenarios. These opportunities are anchored in economic rationality, ambiguous references to the groups involved (i.e. everyone is European and should cooperate), and an avoidance of addressing the inevitable trade-offs between protecting the commons and economic growth, all of which blur inevitable conflicts. Moreover, the solutions to these problems are seen in terms of spending and investment, ignoring the real labor and physical changes that

such spending entails. So far, we can identify two main anchoring points—growth/capital, and (obviously) Europe. Although the Commission claims to hold both the commons and growth in equal regard, appeals for protection of and justice for the former anchors the discourse only as long as it is commensurate with the latter. In this text, it is impossible for the two to be incommensurate. As a result, the crises are externalized and demand everyone's cooperation.

3) *Separate Imaginary from Symbolic.* Through these anchoring points, the text reveals its radical contingency. First, the text reveals the Commission's belief that growth (S1) is an *a priori* good and that economic growth will be necessary to transform the economy significantly and rapidly in just a few decades to ameliorate the climate and biodiversity crises, or that growing 'green' sectors is necessary to protect the commons. *What is repressed is the Commission's opinion regarding whether unsustainable industries must be shrunk. The effect of this anchoring and ambiguity is ultimately depoliticization—(almost) all major parties necessary to implement the EGD can agree on 'growth' insofar as it is 'new' and doesn't create any losers.* Such rhetoric, however, is to be expected considering the Commission's position of enunciation or their position in the overall structure of the EU. To gain approval, they must present their policies in a neutral and objective way—the demands must come in the form of knowledge (S2) that claims to fully account for the challenges (*a*), without creating any distinct political frontiers, even though ignoring/repressing them will only fuel ongoing and future conflicts, further splitting all (\$) who are subject to the framework. The promised transformations and structural changes, therefore, resemble changes in the content within the growth discourse's structure more than a structural shift to a new master signifier; however, the appeals to environmental protection, biodiversity, and social welfare (eco-social commons) could, however, be tied to a growth critical orientation. This equating of growth and commons, however, is an effective, depoliticizing technique to gain support from all stakeholders.

4) *Object a.* The introduction of the document lays out the general aims of the framework—in other words it tries to account for all aspects of the *object a*. This subject's incompleteness is externalized, producing a *fantasy* that pits the EU (\$) against climate change and biodiversity loss (*a*). These problems can be solved through economic incentives, regulations, price signals, funding, counting emissions, increasing efficiency, conservation, welfare, yet ultimately *decoupling*. This anchoring of knowledge predominantly in growth and opportunity is incomplete, for it cannot account for other major 'elephants in the room,' such as justice, redistribution, and hegemony—the inevitable consequences of any action. No matter what action is taken—there will either be a continuation/strengthening or dislocation/weakening of the balance of power, thereby splitting the subject between what they repress (unconscious) and what they recognize (conscious). In other words, the split subject is extimate to the *object a*; however, the external dimensions are emphasized, while the internal dimensions are repressed. This can be interpreted as follows: climate change and the other signifiers that account for the *object a* will always already misrepresent this ontological category, just as the master signifier (growth, Europe) will always already misrepresent the subject (the EU) and prevent knowledge (S2) from adequately addressing the problem (*a*). This results in a utopian fantasy, in which we can all work and grow together and

solve the crisis, even though doing so, for instance, disavows the reality that Europe is split in more than 27 different ways. Will the Commission politicize these conflicts (e.g. class, gender, ideology, economic sector, etc.) in the public sphere? Or will they be subject to debate only within the policymaking process? The EU's track record would likely indicate the latter. *Such disavowal of negativity is to be expected given the high-consensus requirements of EU policymaking: the Symbolic's objective structure limits the subject's agency (subjectivity), determines what it can say (subject of the enunciated), and makes the communication take the path of least resistance.*

5) Mapping the Discourses & Non-Relation. The Commission (as the agent/producer) is in the university's discourse—the EGD (S2) speaks on behalf of (primarily) the signifiers, growth/capital, and Europe (S1) whose knowledge addresses the *object a*, yet produces (or will produce) more discontent (\$) in its inability to fully account for it, given the limited possibilities provided by the S1's structuring. This results in a repressed (unconscious), non-relation between S1 and \$—the signifiers, growth and Europe, will never fully represent the subject. This impossibility is disavowed, evidenced to the extent that negativity is kept to a minimum, which is seen in the vague references to “challenges” and “changes” and a constant emphasis on growth, opportunities, and working together. *Quite naturally, the Commission must at all costs avoid non-relation or deadlocks of perspective—it will neither support nor oppose any fundamental shift in political economy in this initial presentation of the EGD. For that reason, the discourses of change (the hysteric's/analyst's) are nonexistent.*

The reader/recipient/consumer of the document, as the agent, is drawn into the capitalist's discourse: the master (growth/Europe), in the position of truth, is eclipsed by the split subject in the position of agent. The subject (the reader), split by the crises, demands the Commission take action (S2) from a ‘neutral’ position; however, this objectivity is ultimately a product of the S1. This ‘objective’ knowledge totalizes the Social giving the illusion that it will fully account for the *object a* and complete the subject. This is possible insofar as money and policy lubricate the relation, so no work, sacrifice, loss, or change in structure is required to overcome these challenges. *This is ultimately the message everyone wants to hear—we can bring about structural change without sacrificing anything, making a discourse that operates on a rejection of negativity.* Taking into account the Commission's position of enunciation, this is unsurprising; however, this LDA provides warning that the Commission's promises for transformation and fundamental change to the EU's existing governance structures are likely to be ‘empty’ from a critical viewpoint insofar as the Commission doesn't sufficiently recognize or try to account for the impossibilities and antagonisms that must be addressed for such change.

Section Two: “Transforming the EU's Economy for a Sustainable Future” (Commission, 2019: 4-19) Section two lays out the bulk of the policy initiatives. We will not employ the same paragraph-by-paragraph analysis as was done in the introduction; instead, we will analyze the principal policy instruments/initiatives, summarizing key points of continuity/strengthening of the depoliticized, green growth approach while paying close attention to potential rupture/weakening of this logic that would be seen in politicized, post-growth appeals to protecting the commons and managing it communally or democratically.

The “deeply transformative policies” that show likely points of continuity with a green growth strategy are: 1) “increasing the EU’s climate ambition,” 2) “supplying clean affordable and secure energy,” 3) “mobilizing industry for a clean and circular economy,” 4) “building and renovating in an energy and resource efficient way,” 5) “accelerating the shift to sustainable and smart mobility,” and 6) “From ‘Farm to Fork’: designing a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system” (2019: 4-15). In all six initiatives we see continuity with the introduction: economic logic predominates; addressing conflict is kept to a minimum; collaboration, cooperation, and consensus are kept to a maximum; subjects to the policies are either consumers or producers; and there’s an emphasis on technological solutions and modernization—all of which foreclose the antagonistic and impossible dimensions of the Real. We see a necessary ‘greening’ of their green growth approach (e.g. the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism [CBAM] to account for embedded carbon in imported products, reform and extension of the ETS, and a proposal for a circular economy), yet little thinking beyond this master signifier. In other words, in these six objectives we see little shift from the university’s/capitalist’s discourses and the master signifiers (growth, Europe) that sustain them.

The objective, “preserving and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity,” (2019: 13-14) indicates a potential shift in discourse from a focus on growth to a commitment to the commons. This ideal is, however, presented in economic terms—ecosystems provide services to societies and “all EU policies should therefore contribute to preserving and restoring Europe’s *natural capital* [emphasis added]” (2019: 13). Such economic justification, therefore, suggests that this aim is ultimately tied to growth—and not to a moral duty beyond growth to protect and manage the commons, a justification to be expected from a post-growth perspective. This, however, doesn’t mean that such objectives could in the future become hegemonic signifiers (structuring points or master signifiers) or that these ‘local’ changes to the situation could over time have global restructuring effects.

Related to this objective is “a zero pollution ambition for a toxic-free environment” (2019: 14-15) to protect Europe’s citizens and ecosystems. Here, we see a strong appeal to regulate industry with the goal of protecting the ecological and social commons. Nevertheless, the political dimension of this issue is hidden as a zero-pollution action plan and a toxic free environment will: both help to protect citizens and the environment better against hazardous chemicals and *encourage innovation for the development of safe and sustainable alternatives* [emphasis added]. All parties including industry should *work together* to combine better health and environmental protection and *increased global competitiveness* [emphasis added]. (2019: 15).

Ultimately the political boundaries between Society/Nature and industry are blurred, as the solution is to develop alternative sustainable technologies that will make the EU a more competitive and sustainable economy. For the recipient, this message remains in the capitalist discourse as there will be no losses or trade-offs from these measures.

In part two of this section, “Mainstreaming sustainability in all EU policies” we see a similar growth logic in its initiatives for 1) “green finance,” 2) “greening national budgets” 3)

“mobilizing research” and 4) “activating education and training” (2019: 15-19). Two initiatives could perhaps indicate a shift from depoliticization/growth (green growth) to repoliticization/commons (post-growth)—the Just Transition and the Green Oath to do no harm. The Just Transition Mechanism and Just Transition Fund seek to address issues of climate justice resulting from the transition by providing funding and resources to workers displaced and making MS commit the resources necessary to “leave no one behind” and realize a “socially just transition.” The oath to “do no harm” is another potential shift to a commons-oriented approach—as realizing this goal will be based on participation—public consultations—to identify and correct inconsistencies in current legislation to ensure the EGD initiatives are most effective and least burdensome. The extent to which this opening of the EGD to the public and its focus on welfare is genuine is, however, indeterminable in this initial communication and will be followed up later in this analysis.

Section 3: “The EU as a Global Leader” (2019: 20-22). This is the EGD’s dimension of foreign policy. Here, much of the same logic depoliticization/green growth persists. The focus is on cooperation, green finance, trade policy, and setting global environmental standards. The EU recognizes the potential that climate change and related environmental crises can increase instability; however, the ethico-political issue of aid or justice (to the Global South for instance) is noticeably avoided in this section.

Section 4: “Time to Act - Together: A European Climate Pact” (2019: 22-24). This last section is perhaps where there is the most notable potential for a shift in master signifier from a depoliticized growth economy to a (re)politicized commons. First, we see a specific recognition of limits and climate (in)justice (the Real):

People are *concerned about jobs, heating their homes, and making ends meet*, and EU institutions should engage with them if the Green Deal is to succeed and deliver lasting change [emphasis added]. Citizens are and should remain *a driving force* of the transition [emphasis added]. (2019: 22)

This passage subtly alludes to the dimension of class, as we can assume that the ‘people’s concerns’ will have greater impacts on those with less income. Thus, the transition will not be easy and will require the ‘people’s’ input in the policy process. They propose increasing “citizens’ dialogues,” “creating real and virtual spaces,” and “building capacity to facilitate grassroots initiatives” to democratically address these crises (2019: 22). Furthermore, it appears the Commission will commit to the politicization of the green transition by ensuring that it features prominently in the debate on Europe’s future. To do so, it will build on the on-going citizens dialogues and assemblies across the EU.

This perhaps is the one initiative in the EGD that cannot be directly tied to growth or a common, homogenizing European identity, and instead tied to the ethical, radical democratic, or Lacanian principle of non-domination. Such commitments could suggest openness to proposals for radical change and instituting more republican rather than liberal forms of citizenship via innovative forms of participatory governance. This initiative could potentially institute the analyst’s discourse at the heart of EU policymaking. That would be in Lacanian terms to institute

the *object a qua* enigmatic ‘will of the people’ at the heart of the EU governance. This of course wouldn’t be complete chaos, as such institutionalization would be based on a degree of situationness—i.e. continuity with the underlying principles of equality, liberty, justice, and sustainability, yet allowing for agonistic debate as to what these signifiers should mean and how subjects’ opposing interpretations may produce new master signifiers. As mentioned in the previous section, citizens’ assemblies can make room for challenging hegemonic approaches to climate governance, however, only if designed correctly to avoid the (pre)dominance of hegemonic logics. This will be further explored in the last section.

In sum, the EGD shows more continuity than rupture with the situation, so this communication shows little promise for radical change to the hegemonic structures surrounding the EU’s green growth discourse and its depoliticizing effects. However, the very last section expressing the Commission’s commitment to participatory governance, perhaps might be a local shift in discourse—not necessarily tied to the signifier growth—that if developed following radical democratic ethics could have substantially revolutionary effects in the near term. This, however, is not something that one should expect the Commission to spontaneously do given its role as being the ‘neutral’ center of EU policymaking.

Achievements of the von der Leyen Commission: The European Green Deal (European Commission, 2024)

We will now briefly compare this April 2024 factsheet on the EGD’s progress with the trends seen in the Green Deal Communication (the situation). In general, it could be said that the recent developments have been largely in line with the greening of growth. Since its approval in January 2020, the EGD has made progress mainly on the economic/technocratic front of the crisis: the Climate Law committing MS to climate neutrality and 55% reductions per 1990s levels was passed in 2021; the EU revamped the ETS; the Green Deal Industrial Plan has committed to acquiring a sustainable supply of Critical Raw Materials; and it passed the CBAM (European Commission, 2024: 3-7). Although ‘good,’ necessary policies from a green growth standpoint, they cannot be considered in themselves revolutionary.

Regarding welfare, the EGD has allocated 19.7 billion euros for the Just Transition Fund (JTF) and has already begun funding projects in Estonia and Sweden to reskill and ‘upskill’ displaced workers (2024: 3). It has also provided relief from climate related natural disasters through the EU Solidarity Fund (2024: 4). In terms of protecting the natural commons, we see lesser emphasis—the Commission’s Zero Pollution Action Plan resulted in *proposals* for standards so that pollution falls less on taxpayers, and these standards will ramp up in the coming decades (2024: 8). This language effectively covers up the antagonistic dimension involved in regulating industry, especially when sustainable alternatives remain more expensive. Regarding biodiversity, progress was made on the international front with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (which set global targets) and with a global deal on protecting ocean biodiversity in the 2023 UN High Seas Treaty (2024: 8), yet little concrete action at the EU level is reported. In general, we see significant progress where there are economic opportunities (e.g. Just Transition’s upskilling, Green Deal Industrial Plan) and urgent needs (e.g. natural disaster relief), yet weaker

progress in protecting the ecological and social commons when economic opportunities are absent. This suggests a firmly short-term, growth-oriented path.

In terms of politicization, the fact sheet's last section briefly mentions "clean transition dialogues to listen to relevant stakeholders," (2024: 8) which is an attractive title yet far from being a democratic reform that would repoliticize the debate or bring the Political into politics. These were dialogues with the hydrogen sector, energy intensive industries, clean tech industries, and the mobility sector. Ultimately, these dialogues seem to be a way for the historically responsible actors to greenwash their names and become part of the transition—this is not a sign of progress from the viewpoint of radical democracy or Lacanian ethics, as ultimately such dialogues between these actors will not ethically restructure the Symbolic Order or change the hegemonic distribution of power and resources. *Overall, there the Commission's achievements show little sign of rupture with Green Deal Communication. If anything, there is a greater emphasis on growth, opportunities, and progress. The commons only take priority when it is necessary (such as in the case of disaster relief), yet for the most part it continues to work commensurately with growth.* Hence, the document continues in the University discourse's claims to account for all aspects of the *object a* and the Capitalist's rejection of the Real. The title itself, beginning with the signifier 'achievements,' is symptomatic of this insofar as it makes no space for addressing the antagonisms and impossibilities.

Following Up: Comparing Results with Other Contributions.

Based on the LDA of the EGD Communication and the 2024 factsheet, we cannot conclude that the framework represents a shift in master signifiers whether in terms of post-politics/repoliticization or green growth/post-growth, and therefore cannot be considered an ethico-political act. The remainder of the analysis will compare these findings with other academic contributions on the EGD.

Perhaps the most scathing critique comes from David Adler and Pawel Warren (2021) who consider the EGD to be a form of 'tennis ball politics—green on the outside but hollow on the inside.' First, to compare the EGD with the Green New Deal for Europe (GND, discussed earlier) would be misleading insofar as the EU's EGD bears no resemblance to the former's Keynesian approach. When compared to the GND, the EU's program has no intention of confronting the failure of speculative capitalism and drive a new worker-based economic transformation (2021: 6). Second, the package avoids the issue of justice—it is incommensurate with Europe's current and historical contribution to global emissions and pollution (2021: 7). Third, the program is structured to primarily mobilize public funds to incentivize private sector investment—or "to siphon public wealth in private hands" (2021: 13). Fourth, it excludes workers—the Just Transition Fund's initial budget proposal was nearly halved (from 40 to 20 billion euros) which pales in comparison to city of Berlin's Coal Commission budget of 40 billion euros (2021: 15). Furthermore, these just transition policies:

necessarily reflect the coalitional forces that shape them. In excluding workers and communities, superficially consulting with activists, and including lobby groups in substantive deliberations about the shape of the Green Deal, the Commission has fatally

constrained its political ambitions, while foreclosing strategic possibilities for advancing a more robust plan for the just transition. (2021: 15)

By disavowing the Political dimensions of the transition, key voices are kept silent. The authors' analysis provides further support for the trends identified in the LDA of the Commission's documents. Ultimately, this plan attests to the EU's capacity to coopt grassroots movements (e.g. Fridays for Future) and improve its public image despite the policy agenda's defects (2021: 17). *Behind the conscious level of discourse, there is always strategy—which the authors suggest is that of using utopian imaginaries and inclusive, seemingly revolutionary language to gain support for maintaining the power relations of the existing structure (i.e. the situation).* In other words, despite appearances, there is little hope for change whether ethical or political from EU politics.

Marinus Ossewaarde and Roshnee Ossewaarde-Lowtoo (2020) investigate the EGD's approach, asking where it can be placed on the green growth/degrowth spectrum. Like the results of the LDA, the authors find certain elements that might suggest a very subtle movement from a green growth to a degrowth approach to the extent that in its biodiversity strategy and zero-pollution objective they recognize the importance of ecosystems for human health. Although they don't have recourse to language of the ecological or social commons, these parts of the EGD suggest that the Commission might seek transformational change that would prohibit and prevent the privatization of the commons and therefore new laws, institutions, measures, and sanctions to deal with oligarchical private actors (2021: 8). The authors also notice that the Commission's reference to an inclusive transition and public participation may suggest alteration of existing power structures and more democratization (2020: 11). Nevertheless, the Commission doesn't problematize capitalist lifestyles, and instead assumes that they can be maintained with new sources of energy and technologies. Moreover, they take for granted collaboration with the prevailing brown growth economic system, which results in a neglect of community-based solutions (2020: 10) Taken together, they argue that the EGD is not simply a reiteration of green growth discourse yet certainly not a degrowth proposal. Given the framework's development since 2020, however, it could be argued that the EGD has maintained a green growth approach, doing little to democratically (re)politicize or address issues of justice and ethically redistribute power in the economic system.

Similarly, Samper, Schockling, and Islar (2021), focusing on (de)politicization in the EGD, argue that we see a split in the Commission between traditional and progressive approaches to climate governance. On one hand, at the levels of discourse and strategy, the Commission's approach to financing and justice resembles traditional (depoliticized and technocratic) approaches to climate politics (2021: 14). However, on the other hand at the level of (conscious/enunciated) discourse there's an embrace of more progressive welfare and environmental policies (2021: 14). However, in either case they expect little structural change from it, since antagonism is eliminated, which closes the door for democratic channels to counter-hegemonic articulations of climate politics (2021: 14). This finding resonates with the Commission's 2024 factsheet insofar as it shows progress on initiatives that promise economic opportunities (e.g. ETS, financing) yet little progress on concrete policies for welfare and environmental protection, nor any strong emphasis

on democratic public participation. It's again likely that where EU institutions experience deadlocks or trade-offs between growth and the commons, they'll most likely follow the logic of the situation, which is to value the former over the latter.

To conclude this section, we'll turn to EU's most innovative form of public participation—the citizens' panels under the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). Initially pitched by French President, Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen proposed the idea to the European Parliament to gain political support for the parliamentary approval of her Commission in 2019 (Oleart, 2023: 5). This two-year exercise of deliberative democracy began in 2021 and was divided into four different citizens' panels. The third titled "Climate Change, Environment, Health" was held between December 2021 and February 2022. In sum, Oleart (2023) concludes that these panels were disintermediated and depoliticized forms of democracy. They were disintermediated because the panels were driven toward consensus by 'neutral' facilitators and experts that excluded relevant political and civil society actors. Such a top-down organization by EU institutions prevented the political dimensions from arising, resulting in a depoliticized approach removed from the public sphere (2023: 9). Ultimately, this form of citizen participation is a form of deliberative democracy without democratization (2023: 11), as such alternative approaches to the issues related to climate change are unlikely to result from this apolitical discursive culture.

As was seen in both the Irish and French citizens' assemblies, potentially transformative approaches were able to arise by placing these deliberations in the wider public debate. In this way, the CoFoE's citizens' panels would benefit if they were organized by parliaments or non-executive actors and allowed the participants themselves to determine key aspects of the framing and organization of the panels. Moreover, such expression of democracy would more likely lead to politicization if they were standing, permanent parts of EU policymaking. *Without these changes, the CoFoE's citizens' panels will continue to be used as a cheap justification for the Commission's policy responsiveness and furthering its political agenda—all the while repressing the Political dimensions of climate and energy governance, whose depoliticized and technocratic approaches have become key issues that drive the climate and euro skeptic, far-right political agendas. The far-right's growing success, like climate change, is a return of the repressed.*

Conclusion

Given these preliminary reviews of the EGD, it's unlikely that the framework itself will bring about deeply political or ethical changes. We conclude that this legislation cannot be considered an ethico-political act, and is—if anything—a continuation or even strengthening of the symptoms of the situation: a depoliticized, technocratic approach to green growth. Although the EGD does indicate some shifts toward protecting the social and ecological commons, welfare and biodiversity can equally be aims of a green growth approach, as they can be subsumed into the logics of capital and seen in terms of opportunities and growth. That's not to say that these initiatives should be scrapped altogether; however, their framing in discourse precludes thinking outside of the logics of capital/growth, and conceived of this way, these shifts will likely not be a source of a new master signifier in the near term.

When it comes to experiences of deliberative democracy, the same can be said, as the citizens' panels under the CofOE were incapable of politicizing the issues in the broader public sphere. *What these authors have confirmed has been a locked-in dynamic between the university and capitalist's discourses since the EGD's passage. For most middle-class European citizens this means no action is required, as they indirectly fund the solution to climate change with their taxes. They can continue with their day-to-day lives knowing that the Commission has put the EU on track to carbon neutrality, and that they will enjoy the new modern technologies that this transition will produce.* In the documents, we see a complete suturing of the subject's fantasy—yet in a capitalist mindset, that money will do all the work.

Unfortunately, this represses the Real in all its dimensions blinding subjects to the limits of the EU's (and the World's) current approach to climate governance. Such disavowal will further the 'constraining dissensus' threatening the EU's policymaking capacity in the near term unless the Commission (and the other institutions) makes genuine commitments to redistributing power through new forms of public participation. The French and Irish experiences indicate that standing, autonomous citizens' assemblies might be a way out of the post-political state of climate politics, whether at the EU or MS level. The fundamental lesson, however, is that we should not be afraid to confront the traumatic, uncomfortable, antagonistic Real present in every discourse. Nevertheless, for political and economic actors, doing so obviously represents a huge risk that they will unlikely take on by themselves.

So, we've arrived at a conclusion that is unlikely to surprise anyone with a critical view of Western politics and European integration: *the European Green Deal is a continuation of the post-political transition from one form of growth to another, doing little to repoliticize or democratize its policymaking.* The question we must now ask is this: where does this discursive culture come from? Why and how does it persist despite criticisms from both sides of the political spectrum?

A potential answer is that most subjects don't want more democracy and freedom. Our subjection to the logics of capital and its knowledge is our way of establishing firm borders to foreclose the Real. This coping mechanism is a form of voluntary servitude. Recall that the master is a *semblance*—the master is only our master insofar as we behave towards it in a subject-like way (Žižek, 1991: 264). In the capitalist's discourse this relation has become so ingrained in the subject's psyche that they are not typically aware of their subjection to the master. In this discourse, the subject dupes themselves into thinking that the *object a* is attainable through capital, and even though many subjects are consciously aware that this is not true (that money cannot complete them) they behave as if it is. This is the paradox of democracy and freedom. Too much freedom and democracy threaten the destruction of the subject's *fantasy*—yet too little and they're no longer free or democratic. From this analysis, it appears that the EU prefers the latter.

In other words, a subject must *want* (desire) political change at both levels of consciousness. This means not simply criticizing capitalism and its pretension to grow (from the hysteric's discourse), but also not treating capital as their master—not acting as if money will grant them access to the object-cause of their desire. This is the *fantasy* that we must traverse if we desire real political change and new approaches to tackling the ecological crises, until then we'll remain

stuck on a depoliticized, green growth trajectory. Traversing this fantasy requires sufficient courage to face the negativity immanent in subverting any hegemonic ideology. It would require making drastic changes to our economy, and, therefore, our reality. Shifting from a public/private binary to a commons-oriented society is a change that humans are unlikely to *want* to do quickly or on their own, for such an act would risk a subject's Symbolic death. This means that in choosing not to partake in the capitalist system, the subject risks exclusion from the socio-economic system and the material wealth it provides, for an act is a suspension of the subject's faith in the Symbolic Order. Think of the character, Bartleby, in Herman Melville's (1884/2004) short story, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, whose refusal to do anything led to sheer chaos in the Wall Street law firm where he worked. Bartleby had to sacrifice what most would consider a normal, comfortable life and identity to remain true to his desire. His slogan "I'd prefer not to" represents for Slavoj Žižek (2008) one of the most effective forms of a political act—not doing anything (i.e. radically refusing to play the game). It is for this same structural reason that nations or regions are very unlikely to take this risk—for governments are risk averse. When it comes to the notion of degrowth, no country will voluntarily degrow its consumption and production, while others do not. *What this boils down to is a paradox: a subject recognizes the need for structural change, but is unwilling to do so. This leads to disavowal of the paradox's first syntagm, which has led to our current situation. We repress this knowledge, and all we do is justify how our system of growth will be able to adapt by following the same logics that caused the problem. This is the easiest solution—the path of least resistance.*

The paradox of freedom and democracy prevents any society from ever being completely free or democratic—they depend on unquestionable yet nonsensical sources of authority to function. Symptomatic of this paradox is a recent editorial by Idrees Kahloon (2024) published in the *New Yorker*, in which he takes a critical stance toward a politicized, growth critical approach. In particular, he criticizes the argument (discussed at length in this investigation) that we should have less regard for growth and more concern for the ecological and social commons and that these competing measures (non-relations) should be debated in citizens' assemblies or other innovative forms of participatory governance. In his view, this proposal "gains power from defeatism," and that these new forms of participation are "curiously utopian" (2024). However, it could be argued that Kahloon's critique of degrowth doesn't come from his enunciated opinion that it is too utopian; instead, it's more likely that he cannot or doesn't *want* to imagine a world beyond growth, for this would subvert the very ground on which he stands (which is a totally understandable position). *We could, however, argue just the opposite: that green growth gains power from defeatism and new forms of public participation should be far from utopian.* First, green growth is essentially a form of staying in the comfort zone or foreclosing the Real by accepting our subjection to the structure, while a subject who commits to degrowth risks their place in society. An authentic act requires courage and certainly cannot involve repeating past behaviors. Second, a commitment to radical democracy would not be utopian, for politicization is supposed to be agonistic—far from what Kahloon has understood citizens' assemblies to be. A democracy is a place for adversarial groups with incommensurate views to argue.

In his view, complaining about growth is like complaining about too much democracy: once you consider a world without it, you might regret what you wished for (2024). He fails to see, however, that no one complains about having *too much* democracy, nor is it true that degrowth complains about too much growth. *Degrowth points out the numerous blind spots of the green growth wager and that a shrinking economy could easily be something imposed by a structural failure when economic growth hits the Earth's physical limits. In terms of democracy, it's more likely that we'd prefer to not think of these possibilities, for they're much easier to ignore and allow technocrats, politicians, and academics to grapple with.* And when they don't handle them correctly or fairly, it's then quite easy to criticize them for it. It's no surprise that these issues receive far less media attention than the ongoing wars, Donald Trump's prosecution, Begoña Gomez's accusations, or Javier Milei's antics. Few want to be bombarded with news stories that make them question their existence and the very narratives that structure their *fantasies*; most people would rather spend their free time *enjoying* within their *fantasy* than getting involved in grassroots movements, political activism, or acts of civil disobedience (à la Bartleby).

The purpose of this theoretical exploration and discourse analysis was to demonstrate how ingrained subjects are in the logic and structure of capital, and how they are very unlikely to willingly change it no matter how unjust or exploitative it might be. *We have a love/hate relationship with the master; we simultaneously despise it for the way it has harmed the commons and perhaps has ruined our future, yet we lack the courage to delegitimize its rule, for doing so would require us to face negativity and fundamentally rethink our subjectivity.* The only way forward then is to overcome our disavowal of negativity. For this to be done within democratic institutions, we must commit to ethical politicization, which would require enjoying indeterminacy and lack in processes of democratic participation. *Viewing climate, energy, and welfare as a deeply political and impossible (rather than technocratic) issues is the only starting point. If we are unwilling to recognize this, then we'd be better off thinking that the European Green Deal is a revolutionary policy framework, and that the EU is an exemplary form of supranational democracy.*

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Annex I: Introduction to the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019: 2-3)

1. INTRODUCTION - TURNING AN URGENT CHALLENGE INTO A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

This Communication sets out a European Green Deal for the European Union (EU) and its citizens. It resets the Commission's commitment to tackling climate and environmental-related challenges that is this generation's defining task. The atmosphere is warming and the climate is changing with each passing year. One million of the eight million species on the planet are at risk of being lost. Forests and oceans are being polluted and destroyed.

The European Green Deal is a response to these challenges. It is a new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use.

It also aims to protect, conserve and enhance the EU's natural capital, and protect the health and well-being of citizens from environment-related risks and impacts. At the same time, this transition must be just and inclusive. It must put people first, and pay attention to the regions, industries and workers who will face the greatest challenges. Since it will bring substantial change, active public participation and confidence in the transition is paramount if policies are to work and be accepted. A new pact is needed to bring together citizens in all their diversity, with national, regional, local authorities, civil society and industry working closely with the EU's institutions and consultative bodies.

The EU has the collective ability to transform its economy and society to put it on a more sustainable path. It can build on its strengths as a global leader on climate and environmental measures, consumer protection, and workers' rights. Delivering additional reductions in emissions is a challenge. It will require massive public investment and increased efforts to direct private capital towards climate and environmental action, while avoiding lock-in into unsustainable

practices. The EU must be at the forefront of coordinating international efforts towards building a coherent financial system that supports sustainable solutions. This upfront investment is also an opportunity to put Europe firmly on a new path of sustainable and inclusive growth. The European Green Deal will accelerate and underpin the transition needed in all sectors.

The environmental ambition of the Green Deal will not be achieved by Europe acting alone. The drivers of climate change and biodiversity loss are global and are not limited by national borders. The EU can use its influence, expertise and financial resources to mobilise its neighbours and partners to join it on a sustainable path. The EU will continue to lead international efforts and wants to build alliances with the like-minded. It also recognises the need to maintain its security of supply and competitiveness even when others are unwilling to act.

This Communication presents an initial roadmap of the key policies and measures needed to achieve the European Green Deal. It will be updated as needs evolve and the policy responses are formulated. All EU actions and policies will have to contribute to the European Green Deal objectives. The challenges are complex and interlinked. The policy response must be bold and comprehensive and seek to maximise benefits for health, quality of life, resilience and competitiveness. It will require intense coordination to exploit the available synergies across all policy areas.

The Green Deal is an integral part of this Commission's strategy to implement the United Nation's 2030 Agenda and the sustainable development goals³, and the other priorities announced in President von der Leyen's political guidelines. As part of the Green Deal, the Commission will refocus the European Semester process of macroeconomic coordination to integrate the United Nations' sustainable development goals, to put sustainability and the well-being of citizens at the centre of economic policy, and the sustainable development goals at the heart of the EU's policymaking and action.