


10-2023

Review Essay: Enjoyment and Ideology Surplus-Enjoyment: A Guide for the Non-Perplexed Slavoj Žižek. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 2022. pp. 400.

Edward Sankowski
University of Oklahoma, esankowski@ou.edu

Betty J. Harris
University of Oklahoma, bharris@ou.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [International and Intercultural Communication Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Political Theory Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Sankowski, Edward and Harris, Betty J. (2023) "Review Essay: Enjoyment and Ideology Surplus-Enjoyment: A Guide for the Non-Perplexed Slavoj Žižek. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 2022. pp. 400.," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 13, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.12.1.1205>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol13/iss1/3>

This Review Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the The Goldstein Center for Human Rights at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Dialogue by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Review Essay

Enjoyment and Ideology

Surplus-Enjoyment: A Guide for the Non-Perplexed

Slavoj Žižek. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 2022. pp. 400.

Edward Sankowski* and Betty J. Harris†

INTRODUCTION

Slavoj Žižek's *Surplus-Enjoyment-A Guide for the Non-Perplexed* is a difficult book. Reading it requires a different approach from what is usual with what seems to us more standardized philosophical or social scientific prose. Our approach initially at least no doubt assumes as our starting point a deploying of our shared norms, shaped by our backgrounds as U.S. based scholars aiming to advance dialogue with Žižek and some of the wide variety of authors with whom Žižek himself engages.

Our approach here is to focus chiefly on the book's overall structure and selected main topics, while acknowledging and respecting its idiosyncratic nature and details. The

* **Edward Sankowski** is professor of philosophy at the University of Oklahoma. He is interested, among other areas, in ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of the social sciences, and philosophy of education (especially higher education). He is particularly interested in the implications of globalization for normative ethics and normative political philosophy. Much of his work focuses on individual and group choice and decision-making. His work consists of both academic study and pragmatic interventions. His Ph.D. is from Cornell University.

† **Betty J. Harris** is professor of anthropology at the University of Oklahoma. Among her areas of academic interest are political economy, globalization, economic development, women's studies, Africa and the African diaspora, China-Africa interactions, South Africa, and race and ethnicity. She is interested in interdisciplinary social science, and in the social functions of universities, as well as political and other organizational activities in the wider world beyond academe. Her Ph.D. is from Brown University.

book has many asides, interjections, and sudden changes of direction. Sometimes widely separated parts of the book across different sections designated by Žižek seem to us profitable to assemble for commentary. Thus, we include our own introduction, our own intermediate interlude, and our own conclusion, in which we assemble our comments on topics not neatly classifiable within Žižek's own divisions of his textual sections. At times we refer to Žižekian deliverances outside this book. We also bring up a few comparisons and contrasts with other authors representing ideological alternatives, outside the usual Žižek collaborative group, the better to situate Žižek in the larger political picture of the world as a whole.

Žižek writes: "So this book is definitely a guide for the non-perplexed: it does not try to clarify things for the perplexed, it tries to perplex the non-perplexed who comfortably swim in the water of everyday ideology, not only trying to perplex them but demonstrating that their newly gained perplexity resides already in the thing itself" (15). Much is puzzling about these remarks, but clearly Žižek wants to trouble those who are, prior to his interventions, comfortable with an ideology.

There is an aspect of ideology under global capitalism (ideology roughly in the sense of false consciousness) that trades on versions of desire, enjoyment, pleasure, happiness. That ideology generates crucial problems, according to Žižek. Even those who question aspects of Žižek's approach can find insights in his writing. He does not try to jettison altogether the potential value of desire, enjoyment, pleasure, happiness. He does criticize and attempt to get beyond contemporary distortions of these values in global capitalism.

As much as offering an interpretation of Žižek here, and criticism, we aim to build on his insights, and amplify them in some ways perhaps foreign to him.

Critique of ideology is central to this book, as in much of Žižek's work, supplemented he says by "critique of critique." We notice that in his various remarks on the book's aims, he does not promise much in the way of description or advocacy of the way beyond global capitalism, towards Communism. He persists in the hope that capitalism can be transcended by something better, but without a very definite or satisfactorily comprehensive notion of what would be better, even less how to get there.

We will for convenience, in this essay, distinguish "communism" from "Communism" in discussing Žižek. The former refers especially to twentieth-century

6 *Sankowski and Harris*

communist regimes, frequently Stalinist, from which Žižek dissociates himself, while the latter is the rather elusive post-capitalist ideal that Žižek supports.

It is worth stressing that Žižek is apologetic about his text, apologetic in the sense of confessing its troubling aspects but also defending them. “There is ... a feature of this book which will annoy many readers, even some of those otherwise sympathetic to my ideas: the style gets crazier and crazier, so that the book itself can appear as a gradual drift into madness... My answer is that, while I plead guilty to this reproach, I consider it a positive feature—a strategy that is essential in unravelling the antagonisms of a text as well as of a historical epoch...” (13–14).

Žižek claims, in some passages, that his last chapter, about “subjective destitution,” includes “hypotheses” apparently prompted by Lacanian “hints” (7), about the political implications of what goes before. That last chapter, while ambiguous in its account of subjective destitution, seems to point to a stance in which individuals and groups are capable of setting aside their psychological burdens, going through a “zero-point,” to live on, “undead” (“until we die”) with an active transformative capability projected into the future. He may favor the viewpoint of the Indian academic and activist Saroj Giri about some of this (9–10, 286). At times, subjective destitution is likened to the end of individual psychoanalysis, at times by implication the coming to consciousness of a revolutionary collective subject and collective agent, presumably best enlightened by class analysis. For Žižek, subjective destitution probably includes dealing with issues about death, but focuses mainly on living intensely as a free individual agent, or member of a group with collective free agency.

If we understand subjective destitution in terms of the main topic of the book, it may describe a condition. The free agent or agents have abandoned the ideology of enjoyment, thus in some cases seeming to be destitute, perhaps at a temporary loss about how to live without enjoyment ideology; and sometimes actually being destitute, e.g., literally immiserated, impoverished, in an ordinary sense of “destitute.” But those in subjective destitution can go on as free agents to act on the world. They may when appropriate affirm the value of desire, enjoyment, etc., but no longer under the compulsion of capitalist regimentation of such phenomena.

Somewhat more concretely, also in his chapter 1, Žižek refers to the necessity for “a state apparatus capable of maintaining minimal welfare of the people in catastrophic conditions” (especially ecological crises).

Žižek in that place writes: “All of these things can—hopefully—be achieved only through strong and obligatory international cooperation...” (95–98). Here he does partially outline his idea of the Communist goal he advocates, though not the means to get there. He continues that what is needed is “social control and regulation of agriculture and industry, changes in our basic eating habits—less beef—global healthcare, etc. Upon a closer look, it is clear that representative political democracy alone will not be sufficient for this task. A much stronger executive power capable of enforcing long-term commitments will have to be combined with local self-organization of people, as well as with a strong international body capable of overriding the will of dissenting nation-states” (96).

These are plausible statements about goals, but it is not clear why it rings true to describe them as a (non-Stalinist) Communism different from parliamentary democracy. In Žižek-speak, the organization he advocates would apparently be a good “big Other,” different from the many bad types of big Other which he criticizes.

Three big internal tensions in the goals he sketches are obvious. There would be a tension between the international body, and the sovereign nation-state that he is, in his writings and talks, ambivalent about but sometimes committed to (e.g., in other writings and talks, he supports sovereignty for Ukraine, but not Taiwan). Second, the stronger executive body he refers to (apparently within the nation-state) would be in tension with local self-organization. As to representative political democracy, we note that he does not here reject it altogether, but says correctly that it is not enough. So the third tension in his outlined goals is between parliamentary democracy and his version of Communism.

The haziness that obscures the communist phase of history in the *Communist Manifesto* is not much better in Žižek’s account of a supposedly modernized anti-Stalinist Communism. Without something more definite, Žižek is in some danger of collapsing back into support for parliamentary democracy (more of a danger about him than the possibility of his becoming a Stalinist, despite his periodic jokes about Stalin in various recorded conversations). And indeed, he shows many signs in his writings of a willingness to acknowledge what benefits might emerge from parliamentary democracy; (he praises Bernie Sanders, despite Žižek’s professed scorn for advocates of “socialism,” despite Žižek’s preference for Communism). Presumably for Žižek, signs of hope may appear under multi-party parliamentary democracy, but are stages along the way to something better.

8 *Sankowski and Harris*

We are still not clear what strategy and tactics Žižek supports as means to his goals. This topic extends beyond questions about violence. It is telling that there are passages in which Žižek wishes to celebrate the uselessness of some subjects (e.g., humanities, presumably including philosophy, with which he primarily identifies), e.g. in universities (51–52). Žižek has a symbiotic but somewhat independent relationship with academe. His comparative independence as a public intellectual, a celebrity, communicating from many venues, is a strength and gives him some leverage in terms of daring originality in style and substance. But readers of a more directly politically activist goal-oriented bent may be disappointed by what seems in this book to be ruminative, free-associating, speculative, somewhat self-indulgent (rather than predominantly action-guiding) about moving beyond the ideology and reality of capitalism.

Elsewhere also, Žižek has at times exhorted: Don't act, think! and: Don't change the world, interpret it! (See his reference here to Heidegger on this—"Heidegger often repeated a critique of Marx's thesis 11: when we want to change the world, this change has to be grounded in a new interpretation..." (295).

Here, in the chapter on subjective destitution, Žižek writes: "The worst thing to do today would be to say that we should focus on solving actual problems and forget about 'eternal' questions" (263). He examines Kant and Heidegger as transcendental philosophers. On the other hand, we the current essayists suggest that we should not forget about solving actual problems.

Quasi-academic woolgathering, in various styles produced by or attended to at universities may go with abandoning the definite effort to advance progressive change and thereby address "actual problems." Abandonment may be the result of lack of interest by an author, co-optation, despairing frustration, or being incapable of practical interventions beyond circulating and exchanging linguistic performances. Maybe this insinuation by us is too harsh, and Žižek is actually liberating some of us from our academic stylistically and ideologically circumscribed cubbyholes with his reflections on eternal questions and his jottings.

Despite its longeurs, patiently reading and re-reading the book has its rewards, both for theory and practice.

Much of the discussion in this essay, as aforementioned, focuses on Žižek's subversion of the ideology of desire, pleasure (e.g., enjoyment, a word which in some contexts, it happens, refers to ownership of property) and happiness. To Žižek, the

subversion of this overall ideology has implications for the critique of global capitalism, after all Žižek's main motivation in much of his work.

A central analogy for understanding the book is Lacan's linkage of Marxian surplus-value with the Lacanian concept of surplus-enjoyment.

Žižek in this book as a whole seems to be expressing interest in revising Lacan and correcting currently collective Lacanian activities, in order to supersede conservative or even reactionary features of Lacan's legacy. This includes Žižek's criticism of an influential Lacanian psychoanalyst, Jacques-Alain Miller, with whom Žižek has had a complex and ambivalent personal association. Also, we have Žižek's detailed discussion of a recent book by a Brazilian Lacanian psychoanalyst, Gabriel Tupinamba, who re-interprets Lacanism in theory and practice.

In the past, informally discussing his own work as a whole, Žižek has at times distinguished between his more general theoretical writing and his more immediately geopolitical and cultural commentary about particulars (This contrast shows up, e.g., in his supposedly political chapter on subjective destitution, which includes lengthy discussions of Heidegger, Kant, et al. as well as timely comments on the pandemic and the movie *Joker*). Moreover, he has expressed an inclination to treat his theoretical work as more important than his politicized interventions. It may be that much of this book, with its many patches of ruminations and free associations (often but not always aspiring to constitute some brand of philosophical dialectic) about cultural referents, including concrete items and abstractions, is the result of this preference for theory.

On the positive side, the prose of the book also probably gives evidence of salutary passing over academic disciplinary and otherwise culturally-defined boundaries, e.g., Žižek is doing philosophy but also contributing what might be described as literary or simply idiosyncratic jottings and musings and remarks about contemporary events. The result is exceptionally challenging reading, even for Žižek. However, though he quasi-apologizes for his style, he defends it, as we have seen. And indeed it is true that Žižek performs a service by daring to offer "philosophy" that challenges the explicit and implicit rules of style that are typically imposed on much contemporary philosophical writing, especially in the English-speaking world.

This book takes up a modest number of main topics, not obviously well integrated, but rather suggesting potentially fruitful interconnections among these topics.

2—THE “OUVERTURE” AND RELATED MATTERS

The “Overture” notes that there will be a discussion of Karl Marx as a thinker who has an ecological dimension in his work, a dimension often neglected in Marx interpretation. Žižek in this phase in the first chapter comments extensively on recent work by a Japanese Marxist philosopher who in some accounts has contributed to renewed interest in Marx in Japan. Žižek claims this is one example of his reading of classics (here, Marx) in view of our contemporary concerns (here, ecology) (9).

A possible outline of the larger sections of this text can be summarized as follows. First, “Overture”, our present concern. “(T)he topic of the book is exactly what its title says: it’s about how the paradoxes of surplus-enjoyment sustain the topsy-turviness of our time” (1–2). And: “The focus of this book is not different crises as such, but how we fight them or reproduce them, sometimes doing both things in one and the same move” (5). Žižek’s main inspirational authors as resources in his critique of the ideology of capitalism (using psychoanalysis) will be, unsurprisingly, the usual suspects: Hegel, Marx, Freud, Lacan. Lacan is particularly prominent in the linkage (both in Lacan’s as well as Žižek’s versions) of the idea of surplus-enjoyment with Marx’s idea of surplus value.

We note here that Lacan and the Lacanian legacy have not been consistently or even typically in service to serious critiques of capitalism, a point of which Žižek is of course well aware. Lacan’s disciple Jacques-Alain Miller downplays Lacan’s conservatism, but Žižek seems ambivalent about Miller’s role in Lacanist activities. This point would lead us to question whether Žižek is wise to look (in his supposedly climactic concluding chapter) for a specifically Lacanian concept of subjective destitution to be constructively political in the critique and projected overcoming of global capitalism.

Arguably, Lacan may better be combed through for some insights and then set mostly aside, with an acknowledgment by Žižek that his own idiosyncratic experience with Lacanian psychoanalysis needs to be de-emphasized for the sake of Žižekian politics. Maybe that could be construed as an aspect of Žižek’s own personal “subjective destitution!” We realize that proposing that Žižek should put Lacan in a subordinate place is proposing patricide from Žižek.

We should add that Žižek’s text refers to, quotes, and reacts to very many contemporary thinkers (as well as past authors) beyond his main inspirational authors. That

starts in *Ouverture* and continues throughout the book. The range of the often historically (and contemporary) German authors he is engaged with is also supplemented by very strikingly varied multi-national contemporary authors. Žižek thereby illustrates what sort of intellectual community Žižek hopes to encourage to advance but perhaps even to qualify and modify his own “Communist” agenda. This is truly international dialogue. (We might question whether the wider wealth of contemporary critical thought is best combined with predominantly German culture). He says he distinguishes his Communism from twentieth century communism, e.g., in that particularly Stalinist “communist” sense, and one would infer, China’s twentieth and also twenty-first century “communist” regime. Judging from other work by Žižek he is more likely now liable to classify China as an authoritarian capitalist society. (We disagree with this classification). But he attempts to include references to Chinese sources in the international dialogue in which he is engaged.

3—“WHERE’S THE RIFT? MARX, CAPITALISM AND ECOLOGY”
(ŽIŽEK’S CHAPTER 1)

In the first chapter proper (“Where’s the Rift? Marx, Capitalism and Ecology”), Žižek critically discusses work by Kohei Saito on Marx and ecology. While politely respectful of Saito, Žižek is critical of Saito’s supposed downplaying of Hegel in Saito’s account of Marx and ecology. Žižek throughout the book displays a fierce loyalty to Hegel, of course.

Žižek’s position is what one might expect in a thinker who stresses critique of ideology, but is thus more distant from detailed attention to infrastructure and its materialist “natural” basics (the “metabolism” that Saito refers to about capitalist production processes), the latter more characteristic of some readings of Marx and Engels. Žižek writes that in his later years, Marx was reading about the chemistry and physiology of agriculture (89). Apparently this is a fleeting attempt by Žižek to bolster his own good-faith interest in Marx as an ecologically oriented thinker, concerned about the natural environment, not encapsulated totally by a Hegelian idealist critique of anthropocentric political economy. For more of Žižek on Marx and the “material base itself,” there are other references by Žižek as well (87). This fleeting attempt may be similar in purport to Žižek’s occasional shakily technical-sounding but probably too often naïve forays into commentary on the physical or biological sciences and engineering.

Žižek on the whole appears to the present essayists to have more of an affinity with a Gramsci-like attention to cultural phenomena rather than serious direct concern

about the limits imposed by the “natural world” on capitalist political economy (However, Gramsci is not a major explicit presence in this book). The Gramsci-like critique of cultural hegemony under global capitalism suggests more of an affinity of Žižek with activist cultural anthropology than with the content of the natural sciences or technological details.

Despite differences between Žižek and Saito respectively in reverence about or mistrust of attributions of Hegelianism to Marx about ecology, we have a suggestion about both authors. We suggest that dealing with contemporary ecological challenges, even if incorporating Marxist insights, is better served by putting Marx textual exegesis or biographical detail in a subordinate position as compared with doing a fresh empirically informed contemporary analysis of environmental problems. The contemporary analysis can, of course, profit from distilled insights derived from Marxism, along with other sources. The preferable contemporary analysis must be in light of present-day conditions in the ever-changing political economy and culture dominated by global capitalism. Žižek well knows and often says that capitalism is constantly morphing, both in its internal features and in reaction to and exploitation of phenomena such as the pandemic, a topic that gets substantial attention by Žižek, in this book and in previous writing.

While Žižek rejects an “ideology of fear” about climate catastrophe, he plainly regards this as obviously a major problem that may spell the end (the “collective suicide”) of humanity, a catastrophe that may not leave more to be done by humans afterwards, but which may end not only capitalism but our species altogether (95). How to reconcile the rejection of the ideology of fear with the real possibility of a final catastrophe and post-human reality is left unclear in this book. More generally, how can Žižek plausibly claim to be reading Marx in light of contemporary ecological concerns when our contemporary socio-historical and “natural” context is so different from that of Marx (Urgency of climate change, energy dilemmas, technological changes, the pandemic, scale of population movements, etc.)?

Žižek tells us in outline what he thinks the goals and outcomes of his version of a Communist approach to ecology should be. He is much less illuminating in filling in the blanks about what processes would further What Is to Be Done (in Lenin’s phrase, to refer to a figure Žižek is more dazzled by than critical about).

It is worth mentioning that like the moderately progressive liberal economist Joseph Stiglitz, Žižek stresses that political solutions are necessary (including the role of the state in addressing ecology) but leaves out how to set in motion or achieve these

solutions. This may be excusable, but it is a notable and unsatisfactory gap. We think it may be useful to understand Žižek's positions through some comparisons with ideological competitors.

In fact, despite his affirmations of Communism, and his agreement with his friend and frequent ally Alain Badiou that "democracy" (as ideology) is the enemy (very unlike Stiglitz), Žižek's position sometimes is hard to distinguish from that of some theorists or practitioners within liberal multi-party parliamentary democracy (e.g., Stiglitz, or Robert Reich). In his vision of a better future, markets play some role, but subordinated to a state. (Stiglitz goes much further in advocating competitive markets subject to a state that is "democratic," with no apologies about his using this signifier. Stiglitz is also concerned but calmer than Žižek about climate change). It goes unaddressed by Žižek how to combine a sovereign state attentive to ecology with more global cooperation beyond the sovereign state, as is necessary to address climate change and other environmental problems.

4—A NON-BINARY DIFFERENCE?

PSYCHOANALYSIS, POLITICS, AND PHILOSOPHY

In chapter 2, Žižek ranges over a wide variety of topics, but what especially stands out is his critical discussion of a book by Gabriel Tupinamba, a Brazilian Lacanian psychoanalyst, with Žižek supposedly engaging in a "critique of critique" as he carries out his project. "Tupinamba's *The Desire of Psychoanalysis* is a ground-breaking masterpiece...Not only does Tupinamba's book spoil the ideological game that predominated in Lacanian circles for decades; not only is a certain innocence lost forever; much more important, Tupinamba compels us to confront in a new critical way the philosophical implications of psychoanalysis" (102). Žižek compares the "surprise" of the book to a scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Nonetheless, the content of the Tupinamba book appears to be most of interest as a critical discussion of the societal role of Lacanian psychoanalysis. As such, it seems to be an ethical/political/epistemological inquiry into various aspects of a set of shifting institutionalized supposedly psychologically therapeutic theories and practices. Topics mentioned by Žižek include: the role of money in therapeutic exchanges and the relationships of analysts to analysands. That includes the possibility of members of the latter group to become authoritative in light of their analyses about such matters as Lacanian psychoanalysis itself, as well as about other, e.g., wider political societal processes.

Since Žižek himself has a complex relationship with the Lacanian Jacques-Alain Miller, whom he criticizes here, and seems to have lingering hurt feelings about that, there was a potential for this part of Žižek's book to become confessional. If it is, it is much more impersonal than might have been expected in its political complaints about Miller (e.g., 114–16). Žižek elsewhere complains about Miller's interventions concerning French politics, such as his allegedly manipulative support of Emmanuel Macron against the French left, supposedly as a defense against the threatened election of Marine Le Pen.

Other than the discussion of Tupinamba's book, the chapter often reads like a series of speculations about sexuality that might properly escape consideration as serious science, only to survive as published personalized meditations about such topics as gender categories, genitalia, and Lacanian "sexuation."

There is also a set of remarks against political correctness and woke ideology that may answer to Žižek's felt need to establish a defense against likely objections and denunciations to follow upon circulation of his speculations, particularly about gender.

We have noted in our other writings about Žižek what we regard as a philosophically objectionable tendency for Žižek to seek to adopt a persona adversarial both to what he labels a failed left or pseudo-left, on one hand, and what he regards plausibly as a predictably vicious and proto-fascist far right, on the other hand. Sometimes Žižek seems to advocate a false equivalence between "politically correct" or "woke" left, and the extreme right. Sometimes he does something similar with political correctness as compared with fundamentalism. Sometimes he associates political correctness with totalitarianism. At times, this might seem like a mere provocation meant to elicit attention. At its best, it can hit on some real difficulties in the current culture wars environment. Žižek presents anecdotes to support his disfavor about political correctness and woke-ism. (For a publication after this book that resumes the argument in *Surplus-Enjoyment*, see 3/6/23-<https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/why-politics-is-immanently-theological-part-ii/>).

We think that a genuine threat of totalitarianism from the right is much more considerable than the supposed totalitarian excesses of political correctness or woke culture. We suspect that Žižek would agree when he sets aside his rhetorical provocations. But in fact, Žižek's verbiage at times sounds like the U.S. extreme right's denunciations of communism and "cultural Marxism" attributed to U.S. liberals. Also notable is that Macron, like Žižek, has objected to supposed U.S.-origin excesses of political correctness,

surely an irony. Žižek is in effect joining Macron's voice (which he otherwise typically rejects) in some respects.

5—INTERLUDE ON VARIED HARD-TO-CLASSIFY FEATURES OF ŽIŽEK'S BOOK UNDER ANY OF ŽIŽEK'S MAJOR TEXTUAL SECTIONS

What follows is an Interlude on some features of Žižek's strategy and tactics in any of the sections of this book, both those already discussed, and on those remaining to be examined.

This is a perplexing book in part because of its combination of Žižek's typical sometimes overwhelming tendency to do two things. He gathers together matter from usually culturally and also historically very separated sources, some intrinsically obscure in meaning (Meister Eckhart, the rock group Rammstein, etc.), and he expects the reader to do work with him to come to appreciate the implications of intrinsically ambiguous communications internally conflicted; and previously unacknowledged connections among disparate materials.

An example is the allusion in the title of this book to Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, a text plausibly said by some academics to be very difficult to interpret. Is this allusion an invitation to an excursus on Maimonides and Judaism? Given Žižek's determination to delve into religion and theology as "an atheistic Christian," there may be a beckoning in the book title by Žižek to do likewise. For the sake of maintaining some order in our discussion, however, we will not steer much in that direction here, beyond some comments on Žižek's exploration of the ideology of Christianity, in terms of theology, cultural practices, etc., which he regards as major topics for philosophy.

Beyond Judaism, Žižek is particularly fascinated by Christ on the cross crying out to God asking why God has abandoned him. To Žižek, who invokes GK Chesterton, who celebrates Christianity, for support on this matter (one of varied Žižek appeals to conservatives), this is an embodied God (Christ) who has a doubt, however momentary, about God's existence. At another point Žižek suggests that in depictions of the crucified Christ it is as if Jesus is making an obscene gesture at God. Of course, Žižek has a taste for provocation, not only of fundamentalists, who are often denounced by him, but also provocation of more centrist believers in Christianity. Žižek appears to have an ambivalent attitude about Christianity.

Another element in Žižek's work on religion is his criticism of Islam, by which he deflects accusations of Islamophobia, dismissing the accusations as political correctness (250).

We the present readers and commentators have indeed previously discussed in our publications about Žižek many key features of his work. We continue in this essay to mine Žižek's text and create new ideas while referring to Žižek's writing, but we also acknowledge the need to sometimes note but decline to elaborate on the substance of some of this book, or even to pass over much without comment or in silence.

In thinking over Žižek's critique of pleasure ideology, some philosophers may be reminded of the supposed hedonistic paradox, referred to, e.g., by Kant. The precise Kantian anti-hedonistic perspective, however, is not explicit in Žižek here, though references to Kant occur throughout the book, often superseded by Hegelian supposed improvements.

There is also a borrowed criticism by Žižek of Rawls, who is often said, in Anglo-American academic contexts, to be Kantian (230–31). While some Kantians might question Rawls as a Kantian, there is no doubt about the anti-utilitarian intentions behind *A Theory of Justice*. While critical of Rawls, Žižek declines to enter into really extensive commentary on the role of Rawls as an ideological spokesperson for U.S. liberal democracy. That is Žižek's privilege, but a Žižek-type critique of Rawls would be worth pursuing. Admittedly, adding anything major to the Rawls literature would, we think, risk enhancing the too-extensive Rawlsian objectionable ideological influence. However, we think that an insufficiently critical ideology about desire and hedonism is central to Rawlsian theory of justice, despite its professed Kantianism.

In the canon of Western philosophy, in hedonistic utilitarianism (or its reformulations in terms of "preference-utilitarianism": e.g., Peter Singer, *One World Now*, 2016 edition, (50), its desire-satisfaction and pleasure ideology would seem to be a plausible target for Žižek's critical program. It comes as no surprise that capitalist ideology often includes a utilitarian outlook. (Singer himself rejects any thoroughgoing criticism of capitalism). Žižek, however, seems not to be interested in critique of academic or real-world utilitarianism. But it is worthwhile here as elsewhere to construe Žižek's philosophical position partly in the context of his ideological competitors.

Nor is Žižek interested in explicit critique of happiness ideology in other philosophically influential forms, e.g., in what is called virtue ethics in the contemporary

Anglo-American, usually “analytic” academic philosophy world. It is common to distinguish supposedly shallow popular conceptions of happiness in circulation in contemporary society (its political economy and culture) and allegedly deeper happiness theory as represented e.g. in Plato and Aristotle as well as their contemporary virtue ethics followers. It would seem possible, however, to extend some aspects of Žižek’s polemic to a critique of virtue theory accounts of happiness. In a more complicated way, a critique of happiness ideology can also be applied to Catholic versions of virtue ethics.

Using Freud-derived ideas about Thanatos and the superego, one might argue in a Žižekian mode that the regulation by political society (the polis) of pleasures and pains in service to virtue exacerbates the excessive or inappropriate sense of guilt. This would suggest a radically different approach to “classical” Athenian-Greek-focused discussions of what has often been classified as shame ethics, supposedly as contrasted with guilt-centered ethics. But Žižek does not go into that; possibly this is a symptom of his reverence for the key classical Greeks. This reverence is apparent, and very conventional in Western circles, though it does not prevent novel Žižekian commentary on the Antigone narrative, which shows up in this book (Žižek, we should remind ourselves, wrote his own version of the play *Antigone*).

We have usually found Žižek’s Freudian debt more intelligible (even if somewhat old-fashioned) than his debt to Lacan. We concede, however, that Žižek manages to extract some newer ideas from Lacan as versus Freud. For example, Žižek finds in Lacan the idea that psychoanalysis is not scientific, that, unlike Freud’s more brain science centered aspirations, a type of alleged scientism, Lacanism (and presumably Žižek) acknowledges that psychoanalytic knowledge requires an awareness of the historical process that has produced such knowledge as insight. This is an interesting if debatable view about Freud’s alleged natural science (especially brain science) foundational attitudes, which Žižek contrasts with Lacan’s supposedly more humanistic and historically aware notion of psychoanalytic understanding. This contrast by Žižek seems to echo once-common and oversimplified contrasts between nomothetic and ideographic sciences. Tradition aside, however, it may be that the natural sciences sometimes need an understanding of their own history in order to understand their own cognitive products. Closer to Žižek’s domain, the social sciences can obviously sometimes gain from engaging in or learning from nomothetic investigations that need not be narrowly positivistic, nor need they abjectly capitulate to natural science paradigms.

For Žižek, in contemporary capitalism, there is a superego injunction to enjoy more and more, an injunction that can never be satisfactorily complied with. A current surplus-enjoyment is never enough, more is continually desired, thus generating ever more a sense of guilt at not attaining enough surplus. Renunciation of enjoyment also supposedly generates some distinctive enjoyment under conditions in which we enjoy some of the processes of oppression of ourselves. Under capitalism, money must beget, is expected to beget, more money. Analogously, enjoyment should in capitalism's system lead to still more enjoyment. Despite various complaints about a "permissive" society, the superego is punitive about our actual enjoyment, and demands ever more.

We do not get into details about the Tupinamba book Žižek both champions and criticizes about Lacanism. That Lacan-focused interpretation we leave to Lacanians and more critical and detached commentators interested in these topics as part of the history of psychoanalysis. Žižek's fascination with the sociology of Lacanism may be an attempt to put Lacan in his place in Žižek's own psychological history, but Žižek also contrives to make a Lacanian idea of subjective destitution the key to subsequent Communist politics. Less clear than we readers wish is how this would work. However, we here do refer briefly to Žižek's often very personal experiences about Lacanian psychotherapy and theory, some of which may need to be left in the past as part of political subjective destitution ready to face the future with emancipatory projects.

We can venture the speculative thought that beyond some of the cult-like features of disputes among groups of Lacanians, there is a connection between Žižek's detailed and admiring but critical discussion of work by Tupinamba (on one hand) and the culminating section of the book about subjective destitution. Subjective destitution can for Žižek assist escape from endless entrapment in one's individual past psychological details, and can emphasize anew one's capacities as an agent to project a better future, not only for oneself individually, but in an emancipatory class-aware sense about humanity currently caught in the throes of global capitalism.

6—"SURPLUS-ENJOYMENT, OR, WHY WE ENJOY OUR OPPRESSION"

The topic of this chapter was anticipated in the Overture. Crediting Freud, Žižek there writes: "(P)ower asserts its hold over us not simply by oppression (and repression) which are sustained by a fear of punishment, but by bribing us for our obedience and enforced renunciations—what we gain for our obedience and renunciations is a perverted pleasure

in renunciation itself, a gain in loss itself. Lacan called this perverted pleasure surplus-enjoyment” (5–6).

Here, as in other places, we wonder if Žižek is trapped in the system of promulgated desires and pleasures expressed in popular culture, e.g., movies and TV. A possible response on behalf of Žižek is that by mulling over fictional worlds, he may hope to reach insights into how the ideology of surplus-enjoyment works, the better to subdue or surpass it. The risk here is however that he may succumb to such ideology rather than evaluate and go beyond it. The small pleasures (as Tocqueville called the allegedly diminished emotions in democracy) when derived from experience of mass-media market commodities may have their interest, but they sometimes seem to distract Žižek from his main political interests. Indeed, this may be an example of Žižek succumbing to the ideological structuring of our everyday lives, enveloped as we are by the vast industry of visually based entertaining narratives in movies, on TV, in video games.

Arguably, the guilty pleasures in mass media narratives, not recognized for what they are, i.e., guilty pleasures, invite us to enjoy our oppression as eyes that observe but cannot change what is observed in or outside the screening experience. Žižek himself opines: “Maybe, what makes *Joker* so unsettling is that it does not engage itself in calling for a political action—it leaves the decision to us” (343). OK, but might the entertainment that is *Joker*, and its like, be part of a media eco-system that capitalizes on the oppressive pleasure ideology that Žižek is criticizing, and indeed furthering? Might we enjoy, take pleasure, like Žižek, in our own oppression?

7—ŽIŽEK’S FINALE—SUBJECTIVE DESTITUTION AS A POLITICAL CATEGORY

In the last chapter of the book, on subjective destitution, Žižek somewhat mysteriously includes extensive discussions of “high culture” (*Antigone*, Shostakovich) and contemporary popular culture. As we suggest, some of the interest of Žižek’s discussions of Heidegger, *Antigone*, and Shostakovich is their dealing with the challenges of death.

While we cannot find space and patience to assay the relevance of Heidegger, *Antigone* or Shostakovich, some commentary here may be in order about the relevance of the Todd Phillips directed movie, *Joker* (2019). Žižek devotes notable attention to this film. Žižek admires this movie for its daring, apparently for its critical subversion of capitalist ideology. The central character is afflicted with a condition that causes outbursts of

laughter often disconnected from his context. He is ironically said to have been a child who was happy and spread happiness all around him. Of course, as Joker, he often wears makeup or a mask with threatening aggressive grins communicating his “happiness,” which conceals internal suffering and despair. He fails in his career as a comedian, and becomes increasingly violent, eventually shooting dead three Wall Street types who are tormenting him in a Gotham subway station. Subsequently, he is invited onto a TV show that had previously made fun of his comedic efforts, and on camera he shoots the host dead. Mass riots are generated in Gotham, in which mobs of rioters dressed and masked as clowns attack the police and property more generally. Joker urges the rioters on in person, publically. Nonetheless, the movie concludes with the Joker in a psychiatric hospital setting, apparently legally confined. Žižek has expressed skepticism in other writings about movies or real-world events in which there are climactic mass phenomena supposedly resulting in replacement of some corrupt societal order; he has asked what would happen the day after mass events, how society would function after the revolutionary upheaval. In the movie *Joker*, the perhaps pessimistic answer seems to be that the Joker is confined to a mental institution within a social order that generated the rebellion against the infliction of the ideology of enjoyment and happiness.

8—BEYOND ŽIŽEK’S FINALE, OUR OWN CONCLUDING REMARKS ABOUT ISSUES ARISING THROUGHOUT THE BOOK

Žižek does not focus on many exemplars of descriptive/explanatory psychological hedonism which could be adduced in the history of philosophy or psychology, beyond his attention to Freud. Žižek obviously has a debt here to Freud’s reliance on Thanatos, the death instinct, and the superego. For Freud, rather than steadfastly pursuing living pleasure, humans and other organisms, under the influence of Thanatos, also aim at their own distinctive deaths, which must be anticipated to extinguish pain. The two basic instincts in Freud are Eros and Thanatos, and Thanatos supposedly takes us beyond the pleasure principle.

Well before and after Freud or Marx, others, through their interpretive and explanatory endeavors, gave us reasons to grasp the typically empty cognitive value of a purely hedonistic scheme for understanding human institutions and actions. Explanatory hedonism by itself neither explains nor predicts, and there is no good reason to assume that pleasure must be foundational to understanding social relations. As “relativists,” cultural

anthropologists have studied many societies that are not subject to the ideology that Žižek is criticizing, and are not intelligible primarily in terms of pleasure ideology.

Beyond descriptive hedonism, philosophy has of course manifested various types of normative advocacy of hedonism. Žižek's critique is both a critique of descriptive and of normative hedonism under contemporary capitalism. Capitalism thrives on the multiplication of desires which demand satisfaction, that when achieved presumably yield pleasure (for Žižek, both in the process of seeking pleasure and in its attainment), but which is never enough, which generates more desires, as well as punishment by the superego. An ideology of happiness also typically has hedonistic underpinnings.

Whether pleasure or happiness is the object of attention, for Žižek what is of most interest is not details about brain processes that might constitute or be correlated with pleasure or happiness. This is so for Žižek despite his speculations about societal dimensions of linking the individual brain to other brains. Žižek is not primarily about pleasure/happiness as related to brain processes, but rather pleasure/happiness as ideological factors in the functioning of capitalism, as functioning in societal practices. Curiously, this may evoke legitimate comparison with some episodes in analytic Anglo-American philosophy, in which there has sometimes been a distinction of pleasure and happiness as social constructs, rather than as studied phenomena intimately connected with investigations of brain processes.

There are also some potentially fruitful comparisons that might be considered arising from ideas of the economist, Branko Milanović. Milanović is no Marxist, (nor Freudian), but hardly an unqualified cheerleader for capitalism. In his *Capitalism Alone—The Future of the System that Rules the World* (2019), there are arresting passages in which Milanović describes, besides the façade of pleasantness in market societies, with their “sweet commerce,” disturbing features of capitalist society that co-exist with the superficially “pleasant” surfaces of some human relationships in a capitalist society (Chapter 5—“The Future of Global Capitalism,” esp. 5.1—“The Inevitable Amorality of Hypercommercialized Capitalism,” 176 *et seq.*). Milanović refers to the hypocrisy, greed, corruption and other ugly traits that he believes arise in hypercommercial societies, where money rules. Milanović seems fatalistic about the future of “capitalism alone” as a global system that erodes morality. Žižek, however, probably mainly because of his version of Freudianism, seems committed to a view that the sense of guilt is not a mere product of surrounding institutions, such as capitalist arrangements (The issues here deserve empirical

investigation). The picture in Milanović is that as capitalism comes to permeate all interpersonal relationships, morality will fade away. For Žižek, for better or worse, often for worse, the sense of guilt persists under capitalism and even feeds on capitalist hegemony and intensifies through the focus on enjoyment and the pursuit of happiness, despite a public veneer of “permissiveness.” Surely Žižek would distinguish acceptable ethics from the insatiable demands of the punitive superego, but he seems to expect the continuation of both under capitalism, even if acceptable ethics has very limited power to constrain or replace capitalism.

Žižek’s book includes passages in which Žižek speculates about gender, about penis, clitoris and vagina, the masculine and the feminine. Again, these might be read as fanciful and to some readers disturbing performances, akin to fantastical imaginings, or as deliberate provocations, or as serious attempts at scientific (or at least proto-scientific) theorizing. Žižek seems to think of these offerings as classifiable under the last alternative, scientific theorizing, but this will strain the credulity of some readers, including the present essayists. As with his detailed attention to movies, Žižek’s musings may be a source of pleasure in the process of musing itself and for some in the products of the process. But as he might remark, the desires and pleasures in play here are not what we are finally after, leaving us dissatisfied and searching for further pleasures. And so long as we fritter our efforts away without advancing the critique and overcoming of capitalism, a supposed Communist such as Žižek may well have an intensified sense of guilt (combined with which, perversely, there is some pleasure in the oppression).