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Missing Misrecognition

Michael Kaplan

Abstract *This essay seeks to explain a riddle peculiar to the contemporary nexus of post-Marxism and Cultural Studies: the improbable return of the misrecognition thesis. For traditional Marxism, misrecognition denoted the definitive ideological effect that concealed objective conditions of exploitation, and the critical task was to unmask this reality, fostering revolutionary consciousness. By contrast, for the Frankfurt School and Althusserian Marxism misrecognition was a constitutive element of domination itself. The critical task was to undermine the dominant power by exposing its reliance on misrecognition. For critics of this tradition, such as Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard, the misrecognition thesis was itself an error impeding critique. Yet the misrecognition thesis has returned as a pivotal feature of post-Marxist cultural critique that rejects the concept of false consciousness. In the work of theorists as different as Jameson, Laclau and Žižek, misrecognition persists in the mode of a nostalgia for a lost object which, though fictitious, is therefore deemed indispensable. To account for this predicament, I draw on the work of Niklas Luhmann to argue that compelling the appearance of misrecognition is the very mode of performative efficacy and legitimating force characteristic of reflexive operations comprising social life. In effect, misrecognition is (re)produced as a kind of virtuality whose discursive existence takes the form of an endlessly unmasked object, appearing in the course of its own disappearance. This means that politically engaged cultural critique must confront its investment in the misrecognition thesis as a product of the very discursive processes it aims to transform.*

Society is impossible. (Laclau and Mouffe)
There is no such thing as society. (Thatcher 1987)

A specter haunts the contemporary nexus of (post-) Marxism and Cultural Studies: the unexpected and untimely return of the misrecognition thesis. To see its contours, consider the following crude periodisation. For traditional Marxism, the concept of misrecognition corresponded to the problem of false consciousness. Misrecognition was the definitive ideological effect that concealed objective conditions of exploitation, and the critical task was to unmask this underlying reality, thereby fostering revolutionary consciousness. By contrast, for both the Frankfurt School and Althusserian structuralist

Marxism ideological misrecognition was constitutive. Not simply a mask, it was a key component of domination itself. The critical task was not simply to peel off this mask but to expose the reliance of domination on it. For critics of this tradition, such as Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard, the misrecognition thesis was itself a problem, since it implied a reality that could be known if the veil of false consciousness were removed.¹ Accordingly, they argued that contemporary culture is marked by the disintegration of meta-narratives claiming to account for this reality, rendering the misrecognition thesis obsolete.

Yet the misrecognition thesis has returned as a pivotal feature of post-Marxist cultural critique premised on a sharp break with the axiom of false consciousness. Thus, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, Laclau and Mouffe, Stuart Hall, and Judith Butler stipulate in different ways that misrecognition is a rudimentary feature of social objectivity that ensures the latter's phenomenal coherence, intelligibility and efficacy, while Slavoj Žižek asserts that misrecognition of ordinary reality as the medium and alibi for subjective fantasy is essential for the operation of the symbolic order. Indeed, like Fredric Jameson before him, Žižek claims that this misrecognition has been 'lost', with the consequence that we have entered a post-political world organised around a fetishistic disavowal that ensnares our desire in the disabling circuit of drive (Jameson 1990; Žižek 1999). In effect, the misrecognition thesis ironically returns in the mode of a nostalgia for a lost object which, while fictitious, is deemed indispensable precisely for this reason. The question, then, is: What accounts for the unlikely, paradoxical and even (from the standpoint of post-Marxist thought) anachronistic persistence of the misrecognition thesis in the very course of its disintegration? And what are we to make of the narrative of its loss that pervades post-Marxist cultural critique?

I propose that the evident compulsion to return again and again to the concept of misrecognition is not a methodological error but a symptomatic feature of contemporary culture.² Drawing on the work of Niklas Luhmann, I contend that social life today is shaped by discourses that routinely 'unmask' the artifice, contingency and (occasionally) undecidability of social institutions and signifying activity, preempting the possibility of misrecognition ostensibly essential for the totalisation these require.³ More radically, I

¹ It is worth recalling the Marxist credentials of all three: Foucault was a student of Althusser, Lyotard was an early member of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and Baudrillard was mentored by Henri Lefebvre.

² Of course, the irony is not lost on me that the same can be said of symptomatic readings themselves – including the one offered here. Like the metaphysics of presence critiqued by Derrida, the logic of the symptom is difficult if not impossible to escape. But the reflexive gesture of preemptively highlighting this logic in the course of deploying it has become a functional device for systems whose self-reproduction relies not on this logic as such but on the reflexive gesture itself. Owing to its genetic link to the problematic of ideology, post-Marxist thought has yet to confront the far-reaching political and methodological consequences of this shift. For the very same reason, this incapacity is itself symptomatic.

³ It is not my aim to argue for the superiority of systems theory over the work of post-Marxist theorists and cultural critics. Rather, I marshal Luhmann's framework

argue that compelling the (dis)appearance of misrecognition is the very mode of performative efficacy and legitimating force characteristic of what Luhmann designates autopoietic social systems. Accordingly, misrecognition relentlessly 'returns' as a kind of specter, a virtuality whose discursive mode of existence takes the form of an endlessly unmasked object. It is what must seem to have been there to be discovered, a process that systematically (re)produces the ephemeral experience of loss paradigmatically identified with the rise of 'cynical reason'. Put another way, what post-Marxism and Cultural Studies encounter (not to say misrecognise) as a paradox or impasse – the inevitable return of misrecognition – functions as a paradigmatic principle of social reproduction. A clear methodological implication of this analysis is that politically engaged cultural critique must interrogate its enduring investment in the misrecognition thesis as the product of the very discursive processes it aims to transform.⁴ Only by confronting the nostalgic impulse animating the ultimately reassuring narrative of a lost fiction can such critique move beyond the compulsion to repeat the very gestures of unmasking that generate the appearance of loss in the first place. Indeed, advancing the project of social critique and political transformation would seem to require a rigorous examination of the impediments these gestures pose to it.

Whereas approaches rooted in traditional Marxism sought to overcome misrecognition, whether by eliminating it or by compensating for its deleterious effects, contemporary approaches highlight it as the key to political agency. Perhaps the clearest turning point is marked by the work of Antonio Gramsci, who rejects the notion of false consciousness and ascribes both a validity and a necessity to ideological systems (Gramsci 1971: 138). For Gramsci, the classical Marxian distinction between the ideal and the material is untenable, since 'popular beliefs . . . are themselves material forces', while material

strategically in order to explain and transform the confrontation of such work with its own characteristic impasses. Notwithstanding the significant limitations of systems theory, Luhmann's analytic protocol is particularly well suited for this task because in many crucial respects it comports with post-Marxism's theoretical and methodological commitments, if not its political orientation. Moreover, in its assiduous reflexivity concerning its own role in creating its objects of analysis, his approach sheds useful light on the sources and implications of the tell-tale impasses post-Marxism confronts. Far from undermining the insights post-Marxist thought generates, this confrontation can extend and intensify their critical purchase – provided the impasses can be grasped not only as infrastructural paradoxes impeding that which they enable but also as historically specific devices mediating vital social operations. Accordingly, in pursuing this line of argument, I seek to push Luhmann in a direction that he himself is not prepared to go. In particular, his account of modernity's emergence repeats the standard narrative according to which functional differentiation replaces its hierarchical predecessor, which haunts modernity as a wistfully remembered (or imagined) lost alternative. By contrast, I argue that this loss is not a mere vestige of historical transformation but a necessary, continuous effect of reflexive systems. Furthermore, whereas Luhmann steadfastly refuses to regard social systems as forms of power, my approach makes it possible to deploy his theory in the service of just such an analysis.

⁴ An investment that endures or returns precisely because it grasps these processes as hinging on misrecognition.

forces are incapable of producing social and political effects directly, without being mediated by thought (1971: 165). The only alternative is to examine the 'historical bloc' constituted by the contingent but hegemonic unity between the material and ideal, base and superstructure (137). This bloc will be institutionalised in the various systems comprising a society, systems invariably composed of both material and ideal elements and thus incapable of being 'false' in any simple sense. Today, of course, the critical analysis of such blocs – or conjunctures – is the avowed project of cultural studies derived from the work of Stuart Hall.

This approach marks the point of transition between the identification of misrecognition with false consciousness that exhausts itself with Lukács's (1971) reification thesis and Althusser's (1971) reinterpretation of misrecognition as a constitutive feature of social institutions (which in turn gives rise to Foucault's genealogical critique of discourses as materialisations of discrete forms of knowledge/power). Following Gramsci, and challenging most of the Marxist tradition, Althusser asserts that 'ideology is not an aberration or a contingent excrescence of History: it is a structure essential to the historical life of societies' (1969: 232). In this, he is in agreement with Adorno, for whom 'The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather . . . it produces consciousness' (Adorno 1980: 111).

Among Althusser's key postulates is the notion that the primary task of any given social order is to reproduce itself. In this, the post-Marxist turn rhymes with systems theory, as it evolves from Weber to Parsons to Luhmann.⁵ Unlike the latter, however, Althusser follows Hegel in insisting on the irreducible necessity of ideological – that is, imaginary and pernicious – totalisation. Whereas Lukács had argued that the fragmentation of experience under capitalism was an illusion concealing the underlying unity of commodity exchange, Althusser claims that the mundane practical projection of an underlying unity enabling the subject's activity is the definitive ideological illusion (Lukács 1971; Althusser 1971). And as in Gramsci, this imaginary totality conceals the central antagonism, or class struggle, structuring society.

Insofar as social reproduction requires the propagation of subjects who experience reality only as mediated by a totality, society must project itself as a coherent whole capable of accommodating the subject, which in turn can only emerge as fully dependent on this projection. Thus while Althusser regards the subject as an inherently ideological category (i.e., an imaginary construct whose function is to reproduce the existing order), the central place he accords to it ensures that social reproduction requires totalisation and, with it, the subject's misrecognition of its artifice. It is for this very reason that Althusser identifies ideology with totalisation, paving the way for the now prevalent forms of ideology critique animated by skepticism toward universalising claims (such as those of Habermasian critical theory).

The pervasive influence and characteristic limitations of such critique are evident in the divergent yet overlapping approaches of Pierre Bourdieu and

⁵ It is no coincidence that neither Foucault nor Bourdieu fully breaks with the functionalism they disparage in the likes of Parsons and Althusser (Brenner 1994; LiPuma 1993).

Judith Butler. Rejecting what he regards as deterministic conceptions of social life promulgated by structural Marxism and functionalist sociology, Bourdieu proposes an open-ended model in which the success of social transactions is precarious, constantly at risk of failure. The fulcrum of this model is the *habitus*, a ‘durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisation’ (Bourdieu 1977: 3). Exceeding consciousness and belief, the *habitus* comprises ‘a commonsense world endowed with the objectivity secured by consensus on the meaning . . . of practices in the world’ (1977: 80). And it does so ‘without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them’ (72).

While the *habitus* operates ‘materially’ and unconsciously, it does not function mechanically. Rather, practical action reproduces its conditions of possibility only by soliciting responsive action, which does not follow out of any causal necessity or compulsion. This means that social coordination – the reliable reproduction of social practices – must routinely overcome the gap inherent in this reproduction itself as its condition of possibility. For Bourdieu, this is accomplished through misrecognition, which facilitates coordination by concealing the improbability of each social transaction. This is the principal lesson of his renowned analysis of gift exchange, which ‘presupposes (individual and collective) misrecognition of the reality of the objective “mechanism”, – i.e., a mandatory delay in reciprocation – ‘a reality which an immediate response brutally exposes’ (Bourdieu 1977: 81). Ironically, then, by decentering consciousness in favor social objectivity, Bourdieu does not obviate but vastly inflates the efficacy of misrecognition by relocating it to the embodied practice of *habitus*. This is because *doxa*, or the practical knowledge of social agents, accurately corresponds to the mundane experience that both gives rise to and depends on it. *Doxa* ‘reproduce . . . the power relations of which they are the product, by securing the misrecognition . . . of the arbitrariness on which they are based . . . when there is a quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization’ (1977: 164).

Yet if practice is always at risk of misfiring, why doesn’t the requisite misrecognition also falter? The answer hinges on what Bourdieu describes as the ‘collective labor of maintaining misrecognition’ (Bourdieu 2000: 192). In its guise as *habitus*, then, misrecognition appears as both cause and effect – it both maintains and is maintained by practice. For example, in the paradigmatic case of gift exchange, the transaction itself bears the eventuality of its failure: merely reciprocating the gift annuls it, so the practice consists precisely in staging the delay. But this means that the interval that mediates misrecognition is not only the catalyst of the transaction but in effect its very aim. With this, Bourdieu’s *doxa* becomes paradoxical, as it is no longer clear whether misrecognition serves to sustain practice or practice amounts to reproducing misrecognition and the (often hierarchical) social bond that requires it.⁶ As Bourdieu himself puts it, ‘Schemes of thought and perception can produce the objectivity that they do produce only by producing misrecognition of

⁶ Which is not to say fatally self-contradictory. On the contrary, the structure of paradox is intimately linked to the logic of misrecognition I am tracking here.

the limits of the cognition that they make possible, thereby founding immediate adherence, in the doxic mode, to the world of tradition experienced as a “natural world” and taken for granted’ (1977: 164).

In sum, the concept Bourdieu marshals as explanation must now itself be explained.⁷ Otherwise, political hope can only rest on the chance disruption of misrecognition, or the fortuitous failure of social agents to dupe themselves by effectively reproducing their practices – hardly the dignified alternative his theory seeks to recover. This is why Bourdieu invests heavily in the likelihood of crises to break the cycle of at once improbable and yet inevitable self-deception he has established. By the same token, if the exceptional moment ‘when the social world loses its character as a natural phenomenon [and] the question of the natural or conventional character . . . of social facts can be raised’ (1977: 169) becomes the rule, the smooth functioning of practice should become impossible – yet this question is routinely raised today without in the least endangering the social order or class hierarchy. Turning as it does on misrecognition, Bourdieu’s approach cannot account for this development.

Similarly, in what she thinks is a critical departure from both Althusser and Bourdieu, Judith Butler stakes her approach on the unanticipated but inevitable misfires of performativity. She too endorses the misrecognition thesis, stipulating that both social norms and subjectivity are constituted through it. Accordingly, in one of her recurrent readings of Althusser, misrecognition designates ‘the incommensurability between symbolic demand (the name that is interpellated) and the instability and unpredictability of its appropriation’ (Butler 1997a: 96). That is, social subjectivity emerges not as a direct (‘sovereign’) effect of interpellation but as an inevitable *deviation* from it, just as, in a different context, the efficacy of (hate) speech presupposes the misrecognition of its sanctioned meaning – what Butler follows Derrida in calling its iterability (1997b: 80). If Althusser saw in misrecognition the performative force of ideology, Butler sees in it the glimmer of agentive independence he vainly struggled to detect. Here, she is much closer to Bourdieu than she would like to admit, for while she criticises him for failing to take account of the iterability of social performance, she rehearses a version of his account of agency as the inevitable disruption of the habitus in the very course of its reproduction.

For Butler, I act on my own behalf precisely to the degree that, *despite* my good-faith efforts, I necessarily *fail* to live up to my symbolic obligations, persisting as an always already ‘bad subject’ (1997a: 119). Yet from this vantage, the political value of iterability and performative misfires is precisely that they unmask and thereby destabilise taken-for-granted symbolic norms, exposing and thus thwarting the complex agency of misrecognition in the production of social life. In this way, Butler herself posits the intractable power of norms as a precondition for her project of (re)claiming agency for the subject. Through the figure of constitutive misrecognition, the myth of (always already

⁷ Or, to put it in Luhmann’s terms, the distinction through which Bourdieu conducts his observations inevitably re-enters those observations and so undermines its own efficacy. What is called for is another distinction, one that observes the misrecognition thesis itself as an effect of observation.

failing) totalising power ironically becomes that which emancipates Butler's subject. In the absence of this figure, her theoretical project and the politics it underwrites verge on incoherence.

Bourdieu and Butler thus exemplify the trajectory along which, in post-Marxism and cultural studies, misrecognition has shifted from posing a formidable political obstacle to serving as a vital political principle to be affirmed and sustained. Work in the field can be mapped according to the different strategies for determining and engaging this challenge. However, in addition to being paradoxical (a blindness that sees what it does not see), this is only a challenge for perspectives tethered to misrecognition as a methodological and political investment; it is a challenge post-Marxism invents for itself. Though it breaks with the notion of false consciousness, post-Marxism does so precisely by ascribing an irreducible necessity to misrecognition. It thus retains a tacit continuity with the so-called postmodern turn, which otherwise defines itself in explicit opposition to Marxist ideology critique. Activating a supposedly repressed Nietzschean tradition of skepticism regarding the possibility of founding social life on universal truths, figures such as Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard go beyond Gramsci, Adorno and Althusser to argue that, while misrecognition – which Nietzsche conceives as a necessary product of the 'faculty of forgetfulness' (Nietzsche 2007: 35) – is essential, it is today fatefully disintegrating.

Accordingly, for Foucault, the emergence of liberal capitalism transforms sovereignty by exposing an irremediable gap in the sovereign's capacity to know – a blindness that, *because it is stipulated*, undermines the very possibility of collective self-determination through democratic institutions (2008: 283). Contra Habermas (but also Bourdieu and Butler), this 'exposure' of constitutive misrecognition, far from liberating us, deprives us of the active freedom promised by republicanism and subjects us to economic rationality. For Lyotard, too, the problem concerns knowledge, arising when the imperative to legitimate scientific findings leads to the discovery that no ultimate foundations for this legitimacy are possible. Science's incapacity to include itself in its observations corresponds to a structural misrecognition that necessarily renders scientific knowledge partial, derivative, and incapable of living up to the scientific definition of knowledge. Science deconstructs itself, undermining the foundations of reason by depriving it of the misrecognition on which its claims to universal validity relied. Meanwhile, Baudrillard (1994) despairs that the fictional but indispensable distinction between the real and the artificial, the true and the false, has all but vanished, effaced by the spectacle generated by the capitalist economy of the sign. The result is hyperreality, or a depthless, aggressively self-revealing logic of signification that reduces reality to a vestigial residue of its own autonomous activity. Once misrecognition is preempted, reality itself is forever lost.

In sum, along the arduous path from 'naïve' ideology critique to the wholesale obliteration of both the concept and the (supposed) reality of false consciousness, the misrecognition thesis has not only survived but emerged as indispensable, gaining exponentially in theoretical status. As false consciousness, it was a lamentable error to be corrected; but as the precondition of meaning, subjectivity and sociality, it has become a precious lost object that secures the very possibility of critique and political agency. Nowhere is

this more evident than in the widespread influence of post-Marxist theorists Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau.

In his pathbreaking early effort to reinvigorate the theory of ideology, Žižek inverts the key terms and signature procedures of traditional Marxism, arguing that misrecognition consists not in false consciousness that conceals material reality but in the veiling function of this reality itself, which conceals the fantasmatic subjective investment that lends to it its ostensible coherence, intelligibility and binding force (1989). The critical task, then, is to 'traverse the fantasy' that constitutes the subject as the support of the ideological edifice. A decade later, in the course of refuting prevailing critiques of subjectivity, Žižek reformulates the Nietzschean thesis of the death of God (and its postmodernist avatar, the end of grand narratives) as the 'demise of symbolic efficiency', or the eclipse of the big Other:

... today, in a sense, 'the big Other no longer exists' – but in *what* sense? One should be very specific about what this nonexistence actually amounts to. In a way, it is the same with the big Other as it is with God according to Lacan (it is not that God is dead today; God was dead from the very beginning, only He didn't know it . . .): *it never existed in the first place*, that is, the nonexistence of the big Other is ultimately equivalent to the fact that the big Other is the *symbolic* order, the order of symbolic fictions which operate on a level different from that of direct material causality. (1999: 322)

His point is that the big Other, while fictional, is indispensable for the effective operation of language and reality tout court. Consequently, its retreat in post-modernity, far from liberating or decentering the subject, generates a crisis of both subjectivity and collective political agency. But since 'it never existed in the first place', this retreat is actually the cunning ideological suspension of the *misrecognition* that sustained the efficiency of the symbolic order. Žižek identifies this suspension with the rise of what Sloterdijk famously called 'cynical reason', wherein 'To act against better knowledge is today the global situation in the superstructure; it knows itself to be without illusions and yet to have been dragged down by the "power of things"'. Thus what is regarded in logic as a paradox and in literature as a joke appears in reality as the actual state of affairs' (Sloterdijk 1987: 6).

This paradoxical 'enlightened false consciousness' knows perfectly well that the prevailing order is unfounded and maintained through deception in the service of power, yet continues to collaborate with this order: 'The compulsion to survive and desire to assert itself have demoralised enlightened consciousness. It is afflicted with the compulsion to put up with preestablished relations that it finds dubious, to accommodate itself to them, and finally even to carry out their business' (1987: 7). Moreover, cynical reason is melancholy, nostalgic for the lost mystification undone by enlightenment: 'Always a bit unsettled and irritable, collaborating consciousness looks around for its lost naïvete, to which there is no way back, because consciousness-raising is irreversible' (7).

For Žižek, this pseudo-enlightenment is not only paradoxical but in fact a new form of self-delusion whose debilitating effects can only be grasped by reference to the reconfiguration of misrecognition:

The cynical reduction [of the symbolic dimension] to reality . . . falls short: when a judge speaks, there is in a way more truth in his words (the words of the Institution of Law) than in the direct reality of the person of the judge – if one limits oneself to what one sees, one simply misses the point. This paradox is what Lacan is aiming at with his *'les non-dupes errent:'* those who do not let themselves be caught in the symbolic deception/fiction and continue to believe their eyes are the ones who err most. What a cynic who 'believes only his eyes' misses is the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, the way this fiction structures our experience of reality. (1999: 323)

It follows that, while the politically salient function of misrecognition has shifted, it persists *as lost*. The fictional constitution of reality is openly stipulated, but this stipulation itself enacts the incapacitating cynical reduction Žižek identifies as the decline of symbolic efficiency, which 'concerns the minimum of "reification" on account of which it is not enough for us . . . to know some fact in order for it to be operative – "it", the symbolic institution, must also know/"register" this fact if the performative consequences of stating it are to ensue' (1999: 326).

In sum, at first, Žižek discovers that *misrecognition has been misplaced* by the theory of ideology and its postmodern critique. Misrecognition, he argues, is not a failure to discern the true nature of social reality but inheres in social reality itself, which serves to occlude the lack in the subject and the irreducible antagonism around which this reality is organised as a kind of compromise formation. Later, however, Žižek begins to argue that this indispensable *misrecognition is being undermined* by late capitalism, which itself performs a critique of ideology that cultural studies (such as work that relies on Foucault and Butler), Third Way theory (Beck 1997; Giddens 1998) and politics (Tony Blair and Bill Clinton), and certain competing variants of post-Marxism (particularly those of Deleuze, Rancière and Laclau) repeat within their domains. If in the earlier approach reality is ideological because it is a screen blocking the subject's view of irreparable lack (and the truth of its own desire), in the second case it is ideological precisely because it *reveals* this lack, stipulating it as part of late capitalism's cynical organisation of enjoyment. The later account would explain the 'error' described by the first: it is not that ideology critique misrecognised the true locus and function of misrecognition, but that the critique of this critique itself belongs to the 'post-ideological' ideology of late capitalism.

However, this means that *misrecognition returns, or persists, in the mode of its own exposure*. By Žižek's own logic, this paradox cannot be resolved by claiming that misrecognition has simply shifted, so that, within the regime of cynical reason, we continue to misrecognise in the mode of fetishistic disavowal – 'I know very well that . . . but nevertheless . . .' (Žižek 1991). The problem is that the corrosive effect of the cynical exposure cannot be contained but

must inevitably pervade the entire social order as well as the psychic domain, and ultimately turn on itself. Simply put, fetishistic disavowal immediately undermines itself, as Žižek's own account of postmodern perversity tacitly confirms. The superego injunction to enjoy, which has replaced of the deposed big Other, directly preempts the enjoyment it promises and demands. Far from encouraging an ever-intensifying quest for enjoyment, this injunction simply dissipates its own force, appearing as the false promise that it is and thereby relinquishing its performative efficiency as a command (Kaplan 2010: 113–49). The very rhetorical form of fetishistic disavowal renders it an allegory of its own impotent vacuity.

To see this, consider Žižek's own example of the Monica Lewinsky scandal:

The big Other is . . . the order of the lie, of lying sincerely. Take Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky: we all know (or at least surmise) that they did it; nevertheless we support Clinton as long as this can be concealed from the big Other's gaze . . . So here we have the paradox of the big Other at its purest. The majority of people believe there was something between the two of them; they believe that Clinton was lying when he denied it; none the less, they support him. Although (they assumed that) Clinton lied when he denied his sexual affair with 'that woman', Monica Lewinsky, he *lied sincerely*, with inner conviction, somehow believing in his very lie, taking it seriously – this paradox itself is to be taken quite seriously, since it designates the key element of the efficiency of an ideological statement. In other words, as long as Clinton's lie is not perceived/registered by the big Other, as long as it is possible for him to keep up appearances (of presidential 'dignity'), the very fact that we all know (or presume) that he is lying serves as a further ground for the public's identification with him – not only does the public awareness that he is lying . . . not hurt his popularity, it even actively boosts it. (1999: 329)

For Žižek, Clinton's lie implied the real possibility of his guilt, or the binding authority of the rules he was violating. So the reason to support him was the lie itself, since it tacitly upheld the moral code (the symbolic order or big Other) we desperately need. Ironically, had he simply admitted to the affair, he would have confirmed our worst fear, namely that the symbolic prohibition is no longer in force, and we live in a cynical world without universally valid and binding rules. This would have been underscored when it turned out that no investigation could be justified by the mere fact of adultery. It was only the lie that authorised the impeachment proceedings, which were conducted precisely by the sort of committee whose very existence exemplifies the absence of authentic authority. This, in turn, explains the irrationally excessive anger at Clinton, which extended well beyond partisan hostility. Rather, the excess was due to his failure to do his most profound public duty of maintaining the fiction of binding authority by exposing his own lie as a mere expediency rather than a token of belief in the big Other.

However, *why* was Clinton unable to maintain this fidelity? The simple answer is that *it was not his to maintain*. Not only did 'we already know' (as Žižek affirms), but the *form* of this knowledge is of decisive importance. It is not that 'we' had empirical evidence of the affair and cynically 'believed our eyes;' on the contrary, we 'presumed', or inferred from what we already know about the contingency of symbolic prohibitions. But *how do we know* this? It is not by reading Nietzsche, Lefort or Lyotard; that is, it is not by assimilating a theoretical account of the death of God, the transformation of sovereignty or the demise of metanarratives. We know because the conventional genesis of social rules is routinely, even tediously stipulated. Yet even this understates the case, deferring and perhaps begging the question. Žižek's many examples aptly substantiate his thesis that the big Other is conspicuously absent, but whence the experience of this absence as *loss*? How does the frustrating deferral of reference and symbolic authority, beyond thwarting the performative efficacy of speech acts produce the *temporal* sense that something *once* available has *now* disappeared. Why does the *absence* of transcendental authority present itself as deterioration or protracted *demise*?

Žižek takes quite seriously the triumph of cynical reason, but he focuses on the content of post-ideological rationality while overlooking its rhetorical form. He thus responds to the claims of cynicism, revealing the misrecognition apparently left untouched by its relentless unmasking of ideology. Yet in so doing, he misses the way *cynical reason solicits the staging of misrecognition* to unmask. Of course there will always be more misrecognition – that is what cynical reason rigorously presupposes as its own condition of possibility. Žižek is, ironically, the paradigmatic symptom of cynical reason, insofar as the impetus to recover misrecognition is itself an effect of reflexive social systems, which stage it as a lost object that appears precisely at the moment and in the mode of its disappearance. These systems function – that is, reproduce the conditions of possibility for their own operations – by performing the dis/appearance of misrecognition.

This is perhaps the most underappreciated implication of systems theory – even by Luhmann himself. Though he presents his theoretical approach in extensive detail in his magnum opus, *Social Systems*, he outlines its major features in virtually every publication (1995a). Explicitly following G. Spencer-Brown, Luhmann develops his theory of social systems as complex, self-reproducing assemblages arising out of the recursive application of binary distinctions. A distinction establishes a boundary between a marked and an unmarked side. The mark that constitutes a distinction is an 'observation' that can itself be observed by being subjected to a new distinction. Accordingly, 'any kind of observing system, whatever its material reality . . . can be described as determined by the distinction it uses' (Luhmann 1993: 767).

To achieve the capacity to reproduce itself by means of its own activity, a system must become reflexive by introducing the distinction between self-reference and other-reference. That is, it must be able to represent its *unity* as a *distinction* on *one* (marked) side of this unity, to use this representation as a source of information to guide its operations, and to perform operations on this representation itself. Accordingly, *autopoietic* systems are cybernetic, or self-steering. To understand such a system, 'an observer has to focus on

the self-determined and self-determining distinctions a system uses to frame its own observations' (Luhmann 1993: 768). Such observation of observations is what Luhmann, following Heinz von Foerster, calls *second-order* cybernetics. If distinctions create the objects on which systems act, second-order distinctions take these distinctions themselves as their objects: 'On this level one has to observe not simple objects but observing systems, that is, to distinguish them in the first place. One has to know which distinctions guide the observations of the observed observer and to find out if any stable objects emerge when these observations are recursively applied to their own results' (1993: 768).

To be clear, 'observation' designates only the application of a distinction; it does not refer to the perception of pre-existing entities. The two sides constituting a distinction comprise what Spencer-Brown calls 'form'. Forms are inherently but productively paradoxical: they include what they exclude, and their unity is both internal and external to them. Put another way, they are different from themselves, and this difference *is* their unity. This notion of form amounts to a deconstructed version of Hegelian synthesis, so that '. . . At the level of second-order observing, everything becomes contingent, including second-order observing itself' (Luhmann 1993: 769). The emergence of second-order observation as the operational principle of social systems is the lynchpin of Luhmann's account of modernity, and his own sociological studies examine such systems (see Luhmann 1982; 1996; 2000; 2004). In each case, he demonstrates how reflexive systems function by observing – i.e., producing – the contingency of their own operational distinctions. They are, in short, inherently 'cynical'.

The political implications of this become clearer when Luhmann contrasts his approach with the revised republicanism endorsed by much of the Marxian tradition. This tradition presumes that social cooperation requires some sort of unifying principle, which may take the form of consensus, contract, the dictates of reason, common cultural presuppositions, religious belief, universal pragmatics, popular sovereignty, or a shared lifeworld, any of which may serve to maintain the stability of a given order. Against this, Luhmann asserts that modern society requires not the maintenance of order but the capacity to perform new operations. This capacity, in turn, 'is based in the first instance on the generation of *objects*, which can be taken as given in further communication . . . Objects arise out of the recursive functioning of communication *without prohibiting the opposing side*. And they only leave residual problems for deciding the issue of whether one wants to agree or disagree' (Luhmann 1996: 100).

If the problem of stability has become the problem of reproduction and therefore a question of communication, the question of social coherence has been displaced by the question of discursive operations. Whereas the public sphere materialised the process of integration, reproduction through differentiation is transacted through the mass media, which produce the objects that sustain communication through the communication process itself. Not only is this process independent of any preexisting consensus – real or fictive – but, 'On the contrary: every explicit communication poses the question of acceptance and rejection anew, puts consensus at stake, knowing full well

that it is still possible to communicate further even and especially where dissent exists⁸ (Luhmann 1996: 100).

And insofar as the objects – including ‘society’ itself – generated by media observations (i.e., distinctions, or what mass communication theory calls ‘frames’) necessarily produce differences, ‘In the system itself, there is no final figure of the ambiguous “observing system”, no autological realisation that whatever is true for observers is also true for the system which is observing them’ (Luhmann 1996: 118). That is, while any given system can treat its own operations as objects, it cannot render them contingent without undermining its own operations. This is another way of saying that systems are operationally blind: ‘Every distinction makes the observer invisible – but this is precisely what we can still know’ (1996: 119). This is because, insofar as it observes the operation of distinctions, second-order observation takes this very blindness as its object. For this reason, ‘The problem of transformation and of contingency has been digested and can be expressed with the normal schematisms of the mass media’ (1996: 119). This is why we cannot avoid unending confrontations with the contingency of the objects – observations and their blind spots – on which we rely: ‘the last observer cannot be identified’ (119).

Luhmann’s insistence that the media cannot observe themselves as an observer does *not* mean that media cannot and do not raise the question of their own status as observer. Plainly, this happens all the time and is a standard media trope. His point is that the infinite regress of observation is irreducible, just as the inquiry into the origin of legal authority is interminable. There cannot be a ‘final figure’ of observation because this figure itself could only be one side of a distinction that would leave its other side invisible.

This corresponds neatly to Laclau’s Derridean account of political articulation as the production of a fictional totality predicated on the exclusion of some heterogeneous element, and it matches precisely Žižek’s Lacanian thesis that the big Other is ‘not all’, marked by lack. But it also clarifies Žižek’s claim concerning the ‘decline of symbolic efficiency’. Simply put, Luhmann’s analysis demonstrates both that there is no such decline *and* that, insofar as the social totality is an impossible object at once produced and precluded by reflexive media discourse, *the big Other insistently appears in the mode of its own ceaseless disappearance, or decline*. It is not only that the last observer cannot be identified, but also that the necessity of identifying it is relentlessly imposed by second-order observation of this impossibility, as this observation’s unmarked or ‘repressed’ side.

So the totality of ‘society’ as an object that consists of the paradoxical unity of its self-observation is, for this very reason, impossible. But as Luhmann points out, ‘this is precisely what we can still know’. In fact, his account of the social function of the media supports a more radical claim: this knowledge is mainly what the media produce. Put another way, they actively *project* the ‘final figure of the ambiguous observing system’ *as missing*, or unobservable. But this is another way of saying that media discourse produces *observations*

⁸ Compare Bourdieu’s thesis that social transactions necessarily presuppose the eventuality of their own failure.

of *misrecognition* as the cognitive counterpart of the infinite deferral of the 'final observer' capable of containing its own (self-) observation.

One memorably apt example is the minor uproar that broke out when, on the advice of jury consultants, L.A. County prosecutor Marcia Clark changed her hairstyle in the middle of the O.J. Simpson trial. The 24/7 television coverage of the trial briefly turned into a heated debate over the prosecutorial 'do, with Clark being accused of succumbing to vanity, pandering to outmoded gender stereotypes. Clark was depicted as hyper-sensitive to the intense media attention directed at the trial. That is, the media found Clark guilty of responding to their own intervention into the legal proceeding. She *failed to remain unaware* of, or indifferent to, her own involuntary transformation into a TV character. In acquiescing to act the part, she violated media conventions governing it. Or, by *observing herself being observed*, she indicated, in and to the media, the media's status as observer. In the guise of her hair, then, the media were observing the media, but aggressively (if comically) *resisted observing this fact*. Audiences, however, were presented with a clear opportunity to *observe the media's misrecognition of itself as an observer*.

In this way, media audiences are routinely confronted with the basic features of 'cynical reason', compelled to observe the fact that observation always constitutes its own blind spot. More importantly, in the course of packaging audiences for sale, this observation is what media produce. But this is simply to say that media discourse *stages misrecognition as an object of observation*. Nor is such staging strictly confined to the media system. Luhmann distinguishes this system from other social systems, such as science and law, arguing that the mass media are solely responsible for generating the (paradoxical) unity of social reality:

In contrast to the function system of the mass media, science can be specialized in cognitive gains, that is, in social learning processes, whilst the system of law takes on the ordering of expectation which is normative, held onto in spite of the facts and to this extent unwilling to learn. However, the cognitive/normative division between science and law can never divide up among itself and thereby cover the entire orientational requirement of social communication. (1996: 99)

This latter task falls to the mass media and constitutes their unique social function. However, it could plausibly be argued that scientific discourse shares with media a propensity toward staging the (dis)appearance of misrecognition. To see why, recall Lyotard's argument that postmodern de-legitimation is the logical outcome of the modernist imperative to legitimate (1984). The problem arises when the process of legitimation turns upon itself, or takes itself as the object of legitimation. The result is a paradox and a corresponding crisis, followed by the fracturing of the Enlightenment meta-narrative into a plurality of language games. Put another way, the progressive *exposure of constitutive misrecognition* subverts the older meta-narratives and replaces them with normative incredulity that necessitates circumscribing knowledge claims and limits legitimation to the context of performative operations.⁹ Each language game at once raises and defers the transcendental question of

legitimacy in the very act of its self-limitation. Its performative efficacy *depends* upon stipulating the impossibility of firmly securing its own presuppositions and basic distinctions.

For Lyotard, this is an inevitable side-effect of the reflexivity science requires. But if such reflexivity is constitutive of scientific discourse, the exposure of misrecognition cannot be regarded as a problem that overtakes science in the course of its normal operation and that must be managed accordingly. On the contrary, it must be integrated within this operation itself – and therefore within the operations of the language games that result from the fracturing of knowledge in postmodernity. This, in turn, means that *compelling the appearance of misrecognition is the very mode of both performative efficacy and legitimating force* characteristic of these language games, or what Luhmann calls second-order observations. Like Lyotard, Luhmann himself tends to miss this implication of his work. In *The Reality of the Mass Media*, he offers a fairly conventional account of framing as the primary operation of journalism, without taking note of the fact that the *news functions by exposing the misrecognitions at work in the operations of other social systems* – markets, political institutions, law, love, entertainment, etc. – and even its own. Most standard news frames are nothing but schemas for marking the limits of these systems (compare Cappella and Jamieson 1997: 38–57).

This helps explain the genesis of cynical reason, in which misrecognition is rendered impossible; but it also shows why the production of its impossibility becomes the condition of possibility for modern social systems. More to the point, second-order observations of reflexive do not ‘discover’ pre-existing operational blindness; this blindness is the product of the distinctions that constitute such observations. It is what must seem to be there to be observed, at once revealed and corrected.

To grasp the consequences of this dynamic, recall that, in Lacan’s revision of Saussure, the signifier triumphs over the signified, so that the referent ‘itself’ is always missing. Language, then, amounts to a double-bind: on the one hand, the referent is *promised* by the chain of signifiers (as presupposition and requirement); on the other hand, the chain of signifiers intervenes, infinitely defers and so *precludes access* to the referent. This double-bind must be repressed in order for signification and subjectivity to function – for Lacan, this labor of repression is part of the subject’s role in imbuing signification with *significance*, or meaning. Hence, rhetorically staged *misrecognition of the referent’s absence* is the precondition for communication. This is why Žižek speaks of the decline of symbolic efficiency as the loss of the misrecognition that sustains the fictional referential ground represented by the big Other.

Yet communication continues despite the suspension of this misrecognition. Indeed, the apparent paradox is that historically the massive

⁹ This is easily confirmed by a cursory glance at the format of scientific journal articles, which invariably begin by summarising the research methodology in a way that restricts the claim of validity to narrowly framed conditions and scrupulously defined variables. Findings are thereby immediately relativised, or rendered significant only within the explicitly artificial framework of a rarefied methodological apparatus.

intensification of communication has coincided with this suspension, and in fact both requires and actively (re)produces it. Far from depending on misrecognition, 'society' now consists in the activity of staging its impossibility. By Lacan's own logic of retroactivity, the projection of this loss is an effect of second-order observation – that is, of the unmasking of 'ideology' performed by reflexive systems. Misrecognition is produced *as* the blind spot exposed and thereby immediately ameliorated by second-order observation. Or, more radically, it is the undecidability or incalculability that results when reflexive systems observe their own operations. It thus appears precisely at the moment, and in the mode, of its disappearance, as a phantom (or 'vanishing mediator') that reproduces the operations of reflexive discourses. This is its rhetorical function.

But the form of post-Marxist critique advanced by Žižek and his allies construes this feature of reflexive systems as a kind of ideological ruse. For example, Jodi Dean follows Žižek in her astute analysis of neoliberalism as the post-ideological involution of liberal democracy, describing the transformation in the structure of sovereignty effected by liberal political economy. She approvingly cites Foucault: 'Just as individual economic actors cannot see the whole, neither can the sovereign: a visible hand would be no hand at all. It would be partial, distorted. It would fail to combine the multitude of economic interests. Political economy thus announces: "There is no sovereign in economics. There is no economic sovereign"' (Foucault 2008: 283). The problem of politics is here figured as an irremediable gap in knowledge, so that the limitation imposed on sovereign power is not the outcome of a political struggle or ideological transformation but arises directly out of 'an essential, fundamental, and major incapacity of the sovereign, that is to say, an inability to master the totality of the economic field' (2008: 292). Dean concurs with Foucault's rendering of this historical shift, asserting that 'Liberalism's embrace of political economy hollows out juridical sovereignty by positing a field of processes, a terrain of actions and interactions, an ensemble of mutually conditioning choices and decisions, knowledge of which necessarily eludes the sovereign' (2010: 8).

For Dean, neoliberalism functions as a cynical post-political ideology that asserts a constitutive gap within knowledge/power to justify capitalist hegemony. Accordingly, neoliberalism corresponds to the Lacanian logic of drive: by foreclosing the possibility of effective collective agency, the exposure of incapacity within popular sovereignty redirects political desires to various substitutes that extract enjoyment from endlessly missing their own 'impossible' objects. However, this is only possible insofar as neoliberalism does not conceal but precisely asserts the presence of constitutive antagonism – this is why its slogan is 'there is no such thing as society'. Either we live under a neoliberalism premised on the impossibility of society *or* 'society' is constituted as a screen concealing its own impossibility. The claim that neoliberalism entails the 'loss' of misrecognition sustaining sovereignty (qua symbolic order) excludes the possibility that misrecognition sustains neoliberalism.

Nevertheless, Žižek insists that cynical reason itself rests on misrecognition. What this insistence overlooks is that liberal reflexivity does not simply result in the exposure of sovereignty as a myth but designates sovereignty as a myth in order to achieve a wholesale transformation in social logic. The

'loss' appears as an effect of what is already a second-order observation. So it is not a matter of demonstrating that this loss has not *fully* eliminated misrecognition, since the loss is *itself* the product of operations that incessantly posit the inevitability of misrecognition. From this vantage, it is clear that Žižek's own analysis exemplifies the paradoxical unity of the two sides comprising this operation: on the one hand, asserting and lamenting the loss of misrecognition; on the other hand, continuing to proliferate observations of misrecognition.

The same impasse arises in the work of Ernesto Laclau. For Laclau, too, misrecognition is an irreducible feature of any possible objectivity. Unlike Žižek's, his appropriation of Lacanian theory dispenses with the dimension of fantasy, transforming the problem of desire into a subjective correlative of the structural requirement for symbolic coherence. The founding premise is that discourse is '... the primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity as such' (2005: 68). Laclau extends the concept of discourse beyond linguistic activity, defining it as 'any complex of elements in which *relations* play a constitutive role. This means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it. Thus "relations" and "objectivity" are synonymous' (68).

Every objective element emerges as such through its relation with other elements, and 'only two types of relation can possibly exist between ... signifying elements: combination and substitution' (Laclau 2005: 68). Contra Saussurean structuralism, no ensemble of elements can be totalised, because 'all identity is constructed within this tension between the differential and equivalential logics', so that 'in the locus of the totality we find only this tension' (2005: 70). Consequently, '[T]otality ... is both impossible and necessary. Impossible, because the tension between equivalence and difference is ultimately insurmountable; necessary, because without some kind of closure, however precarious it might be, there would be no signification and no identity' (2005: 70). This paradox admits only one solution: '[O]ne difference, without ceasing to be a *particular* difference, assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality ... This operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification is what I have called *hegemony*' (70).

A differential element that performs this totalising function 'becomes something on the order of an *empty* signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness' (Laclau 2005: 71). As a result, all signifying and social totalities are characterised by an 'essential contingency, for they consist of relational ensembles that do not obey any inner logic other than their factually being together' (Laclau 2006: 672). And insofar as the totality secured by the empty signifier is impossible, the signifier itself directly constitutes this 'missing' object.

For Laclau, then, the definitive political task is to produce a hegemonic equivalential ensemble precariously totalised by an empty signifier. However, the very logic that makes this task necessary simultaneously precludes it, because a *democratic* order or project must, by definition, stipulate its own hegemonic contingency, marking its empty signifier as empty: '*... democracy is the only truly political society*, for it is the only one in which the gap between the (universal) place of power and the substantive forces contingently occupying it is required by the very logic of the regime' (Laclau and

Mouffe 2001: 10). This means, however, that democratic politics *deprives itself of the misrecognition* that sustains a hegemonic signifier's power to totalise a signifying ensemble. For if such a signifier appears as what it really is – empty, a mere symbol standing in for a missing unity – it cannot perform the totalising function. It follows that the only truly political form of society is strictly impossible. Insofar as democracy obviates misrecognition, it rules out the very sort of discursive operations that it stipulates as political.

Despite crucial differences between their approaches, then, Žižek and Laclau inevitably confront the impasse resulting from the 'disappearance' of misrecognition. By contrast, the theoretical vocabulary provided by Luhmann (1995b) makes it possible to approach this impasse as an index of a wider problematic that eludes post-Marxism. If the discursive activity comprising contemporary society systematically deconstructs its own fictive totality, it begs the question to ask how society emerges through ideological totalisation (Luhmann 1995c). It is not misrecognition but the *staging* of its necessity/impossibility that now constitutes society as the 'impossible object' of its own recursive operations of self-observation. Put another way, the (re)production of misrecognition is the constitutive operation of reflexive social systems – their 'ideology'.

Accordingly, Žižek's consternation concerning the decline of symbolic efficiency exemplifies the rhetoric of second-order observation. If it names a problem, it is the very one repeatedly postulated by reflexive systems as the medium of their self-reproduction. As a result, Laclau's injunction to hegemonic articulation proves to be self-canceling. Second-order observation 'exposes' the contingent, artificial and particular character of universal empty signifiers, materialising what Laclau stipulates as the condition of possibility for politics – but this very gesture preempts the misrecognition that sustains the binding force of hegemonic articulation. In premising his theory on the misrecognition thesis, Laclau submits it to a Catch-22: misrecognition cannot be generated strategically but must by definition arise 'behind the backs' of political subjects, in which case it cannot be the aim of a political project.

These considerations reveal an underlying continuity between the apparently antithetical approaches of Habermasian deliberativism and post-Marxism. Recall that Habermas rejects the claims of systems theory on political grounds, arguing that democratic or emancipatory politics can only be predicated on some sort of social integration (1981). His objection to Luhmann is precisely that in systems theory there is 'no place [for] the construct of a public sphere that could fulfill this function' (Habermas 1987: 378). On the contrary, functional differentiation precludes social integration, as well as the sort of collective identity presupposed by the republican model. For Luhmann, the recursive operation of social systems proliferates difference with every assertion of unity. Reacting against this intolerable condition, Habermas (1998) thinks he has found in linguistic pragmatics an immanent normative principle capable of underpinning a democratic integration of autonomous functional systems. In fact, however, he transfers the ostensible *political* requirement to the domain of language use, insisting that coherence, in the form of inter-subjective understanding, is an inherent precondition for communication. Among the insights of systems theory (as well

as deconstruction) is precisely the fact that communicative operations can, and commonly do, reproduce themselves in the *absence* of such a precondition.

Notwithstanding their sharp critique of Habermas, Žižek and Laclau effectively reproduce his error in reverse: the former insists on the material intrusion of this absence as a kind of negative presence that takes the form of lack or desire; the latter insists on producing the impossible totalisation by orchestrating a fictional, 'rhetorical' consensus mediated by affective investment in an empty signifier. Consequently, where Habermas proposes to overcome misrecognition, Žižek and Laclau propose to accommodate it. The central problem nonetheless remains the same: how to generate the requisite, politically felicitous forms of meaning, identity and agency despite their paradoxical conditions of im/possibility. Lacanian Marxism and deconstructive post-Marxism – including their progeny within cultural studies – thus represent alternative solutions to a specious problem in which they needlessly enmire themselves. Misrecognition is only an obstacle if it is assumed that operations – including those of communication and political action – necessarily require transparency or its functional equivalent. But this assumption is itself the product of recursive operations whose very existence restricts its applicability.¹⁰ It is this recursivity that conditions communication, not its contingent totalising effects.

From this vantage, post-Marxism is knocking on an open door. For example, Laclau writes that 'There are no longer ultimate criteria of the law, nor ultimate criteria of knowledge, which are separate from power' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 186–87). Accordingly, the 'moment of tension, of openness, which gives the social its essentially incomplete and precarious character, is what every project for radical democracy should set out to institutionalize' (190). Of course, this tension *has* been institutionalised, though not by radical democracy but rather by reflexive systems. Lefort's (1986) narrative of the passage from hierarchical and closed to differentiated and open society is part of modern society's self-description; that is, it is not an empirical claim to be falsified or an interpretive claim to be (con)tested, but is immediately its own referent and performative enactment. Modern society is not the society that emerges at the end of this narrative but the society that describes itself in this mode. Or again: it is not the object to which this description refers but the *form* of the description itself. And it is this description that constantly reproduces itself, or the form of the observation of its form. If society is impossible – unrepresentable as a self-identical unity or totality – it is because it consists in the reiterative demonstration of its unrepresentability, its own rhetorical self-deconstruction. What post-Marxist thought misrecognises

¹⁰ It does not, however, altogether obviate this assumption, for if misrecognition remains the vanishing mediator of second-order observation, it cannot simply be eliminated. Rather, it becomes necessary to shift the focus of analysis from the semiotic or somatic registers, where misrecognition figures as an irreducible feature of communication, subjectivity and sociality, to the operational register where the drama of misrecognition is endlessly reenacted, only to be misrecognised by the prevailing protocols of cultural critique. Put simply, even if misrecognition is irreducible, it is not the sort of obstacle post-Marxism and Cultural Studies commonly imagine it to be – neither a constitutive illusion to be overcome nor a missing object to be restored.

in its own critical drive is that the society it observes is the paradoxical unity of the distinction between 'society' and everything else, and for this very reason it differs from itself as both one side of a distinction and the distinction itself. But this means that misrecognition, while constitutive, does not betoken a loss, whether real or imagined. It is, ultimately, a phantom.

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