



# The ironist as the destitute subject

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**Abstract** Rorty’s belief in the priority of democracy over philosophy severs the connection between liberal politics and the transcendent. By recovering the political potential of the Freudian death drive that is missing in Rorty’s poetic culture, this article aims to reveal how Rorty’s ironist theory is the symptom of his failure to gentrify the transcendent. Embodied in obscene enjoyment, the abyss of freedom, the imagination, the primordial crime, the traumatic kernel, and the destitute subject, Žižek’s transcendental materialism helps understand how Rorty’s public/private split fails to restrict radical subjectivity to the private sector, how Rorty’s ironist culture is a liberal hope rather than the reality, and how Rorty himself oscillates between the ironist as the destitute subject and the ironist as the hysteric.

**Keywords** ironist · public · private split · self-redescription · the transcendent · destitute subject · radical subjectivity

## Introduction: The Absence of Lacan in Rorty’s Edifice

Rorty’s neopragmatism offers us a simplified picture of human beings as well as politics: humans are human animals in search of pleasure; “cruelty is the worst thing we do” (Rorty, 1989, p. 82); politics is “a matter of pragmatic, short-term reforms and compromises” (Rorty, 1996, p. 17), a matter of narrative and description that helps us “see other human beings as ‘one of us’ rather than as ‘them’” (Rorty, 1989, p. xvi), a matter of increasing tolerance and reducing suffering. Richard Rorty advises leftists to “start talking about greed and selfishness rather than about bourgeois ideology, about starvation wages and layoffs rather than about the commodification of labor, and about differential per-pupil expenditure on schools

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and differential access to health care rather than about the division of society into classes” (1998, p. 229). What is missing in this harmonic picture is the otherness of the other, the unresolvable value conflicts. As Mouffe points out, Rorty’s piecemeal social engineering misses the dimension of confrontation among conflicting rights that cannot be relegated to the private and cannot be solved by the consensus approach (Mouffe, 1996, p. 9). In this sense, Rorty’s insistence on dialogue, conversation, narration, and persuasion is no different from the ideology of political correctness: both of them depoliticize politics in the name of cultural tolerance.

The lack of complexity stems from Rorty’s dismissal of philosophical inquiry, for which a dose of Lacanian psychoanalysis is helpful. Why? Because Rorty’s interpretation of Freud is problematically pre-Lacan: Freud is regarded as a strong poet (along with Proust, Joyce, Shelley, Newton, Darwin, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, etc.) who changes how we speak and think by changing our self-description, and thus democratizes the Nietzschean self-creation, while Freud’s real theoretical breakthrough—the death drive as a compulsion to repeat beyond the cycle of life and death—is utterly neglected. This negligence explains why Rorty puts Freud and Kant in opposition: Freud is regarded as the one who helps us break Kant’s Platonism (Rorty, 1989, p. 35). This opposition comes from a double misunderstanding: first, it is Kant that wedges a gap into universality via the thing-in-itself, which was conceived by Lacan as the starting point of the idea that gives rise to psychoanalysis; second, the Freudian death drive is cousin to the Kantian thing-in-itself as the inaccessible and uncanny kernel—when Freud puts forward the death drive as universal and unconditional, he does not de-universalize Kantian imperatives, but is in line with Kant’s transcendental turn.

A dose of Lacanian psychoanalysis from Slavoj Žižek is needed to recover the rich political potential of the Freudian death drive that is missing in Rorty’s ironist culture. Though both Žižek and Rorty write on the left, acknowledge radical contingency, and firmly reject any form of the big Other that would endorse our decisions, Rorty and Žižek are in stark opposition. Žižek clearly opposes Rorty’s liberal ideology of victimhood that regards people as potential victims and the right to narrate as the fundamental right, opposes Rorty’s equating the ultimate truth with the truth of the unmeasurable individual’s pain, opposes Rorty’s prioritizing tolerance over emancipation, and opposes the Rortian “politics that centres on the struggle to prevent the rich from ripping off the rest of country” (Rorty, 1999, pp. 260–261). For Žižek, Rorty’s pragmatic approach to reality itself is ideological—one which refuses to admit that the structural social inequities are the very symptom of the late capitalist system and thus cannot be remedied through welfare-statist moves. It is “better to take the risk and engage in fidelity to a Truth-Event, even if it ends in catastrophe, than to vegetate in the eventless utilitarian-hedonist survival of what Nietzsche called the ‘last man’” (Žižek, 2010, p. xv). In a word, not only does Žižek’s Lacanian psychoanalysis address Rorty’s simplification and complacency, but it also breaks the impasse of the Left in today’s worldless world.



## The Freudian Unconditional Blind Impress

Let's start with contingency, a concept that is prominent in both Rorty and Žižek. Emphasizing contingency is Rorty's way of playing with "something capitalized: Being, Truth, History, Absolute Knowledge, or the Will to Power" (Rorty, 1989, p. 107), and a means to "debunk authority without setting himself up as authority, to debunk the ambitions of the powerful without sharing them" (p. 103). But where does contingency come from? Instead of brushing away this question as metaphysical longing, Rorty elaborates upon it by citing Freud's blind impress:

Anything from the sound of a word through the color of a leaf to the feel of a piece of skin can, as Freud showed us, serve to dramatize and crystallize a human being's sense of self-identity. For any such thing ... can symbolize the blind impress all our behaviors bear. Any seemingly random constellation of such things can set the tone of a life. Any such constellation can set up an unconditional commandment to whose service a life may be devoted – a commandment no less unconditional because it may be intelligible to, at most, only one person. (Rorty, 1989, p. 37)

So contingency is not a self-based autonomous act emerging out of nowhere, but the inevitable product of the Freudian blind impress. What remains unclear is how to understand this blind impress. Why is this blind impress unconditional? Rorty and Žižek provide different interpretations. Žižek identifies the blind impress with the death drive that "persists beyond the (biological) cycle of generation and immortality, beyond the 'way of all flesh'" (Žižek, 1999, p. 294), and thus elevates the blind impress to the transcendental level. While for Rorty (1989), the Freudian blind impress aims to de-divinize "the self by tracking conscience home to its origin in the contingencies of our upbringing" (p. 30), to treat "everything – our language, our conscience, our community – as a product of time and chance" (p. 22).

These two interpretations are strictly opposites: one is metaphysical, the blind impress as the transcendental universal source of contingency, while the other is anti-metaphysical, the blind impress as the suspension of the transcendental universality. For Žižek, Rorty uses one contingency (the contingency of one's upbringing) to explain the other (the contingency of one's language, conscience, or community), daring not to bring the logic of contingency to the end, namely, the source of the contingent. Recall that in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek points out how a sublime object is nothing but a mundane object that contingently occupies the place of "the impossible object of desire" (2008b, p.221). The vital connotation that needs to be unfolded here is that for Žižek contingency is always related to the dimension of the transcendent, to which Rorty comments: "A desire for such an object cannot be made relevant to democratic politics ... the yearning for unconditionality ... is unhealthy, because the price of unconditionality is irrelevant to ... democratic politics" (Rorty, 2000, p. 2). Rorty specifically mentions Žižek in the notes to his paper "Universality and Truth" when he makes this comment, which severs the connection between liberal politics and the transcendent, and signals the fundamental difference between Rorty and Žižek.



For Rorty (1989), the transcendent is nothing but “one more vocabulary, one more description, one more way of speaking” (p. 57), because “language speaks man” (p. 50), and “truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths” (p. 21). In Rorty’s words, “we Deweyans think we have a perfectly good way of describing our own behavior ... in ways which eschew terms like ‘universal’ and ‘unconditional’ and ‘transcendence’” (2000, p. 10). For Žižek, language is already secondary—the possibility of language is always opened up by the blind impresses as the impossible-real kernel that forever prevents the closure and totalization of language, and all kinds of different redescriptions are nothing but the effort to deal with the rift of this negativity. Žižek claims that the transcendent as a linguistic effect holds only if language is defined as a sealed totality, in which there is a full overlap between causes and effects; what is missing in Rorty’s mansion is the gap inherent in language, without which what we get is not “a signifying structure but a positive network of causes and effect” (Žižek, 1991, p. 216).

When Rorty claims that “everything to do with our life is chance” (1989, p. 31), Žižek might add that the chance itself comes from the gap, “the inhuman core of being-human”:

All reality is transcendently constituted, “correlative” to a subjective position ... the way out of this “correlationist” circle is not to try to directly reach the In-itself, but to inscribe this transcendental correlation into the Thing itself. The path to the In-itself leads through the subjective gap, since the gap between For-us and In-itself is immanent to the In-itself. (Žižek, 2012b, p. 906)

This inscribing a limit from outside into an inherent limit is the typical Hegelian strategy: the fact that we do not understand something is not due to the limits of our understanding, but because of the immanent limit of the thing itself. The project of Enlightenment stays unfinished not because of any contingent limit from outside, but because the fulfillment will impede the notion of the Enlightenment as such. Žižek’s philosophy inscribing the transcendent into the Thing is called transcendental materialism by Adrian Johnston: “Žižek’s work doggedly pursues the holy grail of a transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity” (2008, p. 16). Žižek admits that his transcendental materialism is “religion without religion,” “the form of religion deprived of its content” (1991, p. xxvii). There are different names for this transcendence: the Freudian death drive (*das Ding*), the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the Kantian thing-in-itself, the Hegelian absolute negativity, and the Schellingian abysmal X. No matter the name, it refers to the non-all logic: a negativity arising from a natural substance but “irreducible to its material base/grounds” (Johnston, 2008, p. 275), a gap as a non-coincidence and non-consistency separating the Being within and making the Being out of joint, a non-dialecticizable immanent point as the very motor of the dialectical process. The application of the transcendent involves extreme ambiguities and radically different concepts such as enjoyment, the abyss of freedom, the traumatic kernel, the primordial crime, and the destitute



subject, which we will encounter later in this article to reveal how ironist theory is the symptom of Rorty's failure to gentrify the transcendent as radical subjectivity.

## The Remainder of the Public/Private Split

Rorty's ironist culture is characterized by the public/private split. People can be "as privatistic, 'irrationalist,' and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time – causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged" (Rorty, 1989, p. xiv); "sexual perversion, extreme cruelty, ludicrous obsession, and manic delusion" as "the private poem of the pervert, the sadist, or the lunatic" (38) is "private, unshared, unsuited to argument" (p. xiv), and "largely irrelevant of public life and to political questions" (p. 83). "We should," Rorty urges, be "content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable" (p. xv). But for Žižek,

The problem with this liberal dream is that the split between the public and private never comes about without a certain remainder ... the very social ... is always already penetrated by an obscene, "pathological," surplus enjoyment. The point is thus not that the split public/private is not possible, but that it is possible only on condition that the very domain of the public law is "smeared" by an obscene dimension of "private" enjoyment. (Žižek, 1992, p. 159)

In short, "an ideology implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy" (Žižek, 1989, p. 125). Since every public ideological edifice has a core of enjoyment, to critique an ideology is not to reveal its hidden meaning or truth, but to confront and traverse the fantasy providing enjoyment; for example, to debunk the patriarchal discourse is not to attack the male patriarchal cliché about women, but to renounce the very enjoyment provided by males such as protection and bill paying. The non-irrelevance and incommensurability between the public and the private disintegrate once one includes enjoyment that operates even in extreme situations: cutting the clitoris is cruel to the eyes of a liberal, while it is the very way for a woman to organize her enjoyment; what keeps a servant in bondage is the surplus-enjoyment brought by the servitude, through which the servant achieves his own freedom. National myths best exemplify how the public law is smeared by obscene private enjoyment: the collective enjoyment and political enthusiasm are organized by the fantasy of the other—"the 'other' wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our 'way of life') and/or it has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment" (Žižek, 1992, p. 165). Here we can add the classic Freudian example of displacement to reveal the interpenetration between the public and the private: rather than feeling sad at a funeral (the public), the dreamer experiences a state of enjoyment for meeting an old lover at the funeral (the private).

Enjoyment as the destabilizing excess strictly connects to the transcendental drive circulating around a gap: lack and excess are two sides of the same coin; both of them stand for the indivisible remainder sticking to everything we do. Lacan directly identifies enjoyment with drive: "drive equals *jouissance*, since *jouissance*



is, at its most elementary, ‘pleasure in pain’, that is, a perverted pleasure provided by the very painful experience of repeatedly missing one’s goal” (Žižek, 1999, p. 297). The abyss of freedom can only be understood through this constitutive excess: the unpredictability of the consequences of freedom is the very condition of freedom; freedom “is not a blissfully neutral state of harmony and balance, but the very violent act which disturbs this balance” (Žižek, 1991, p. xlvii); antagonism, violence, and terror are already freedom as such. Society is always traversed by an inherent antagonism that is embodied as class struggle, and Rorty’s public/private dichotomy is the disavowal and avoidance of this irreducible antagonism. In Rorty’s ideal liberal society, freedom means “persuasion rather than force” and “reform rather than revolution” (1989, p. 60);<sup>1</sup> people can freely reinvent themselves on condition that their inventions do not question or disturb the predominant liberal consensus. For Žižek, the Rortian freedom is fake for it precludes any serious imagination or invention—“today, actual freedom of thought must mean the freedom to question the predominant liberal-democratic post-ideological consensus—or it means nothing” (Žižek, 2002, p. 545). Since there is no freedom without the radical excess, no politics without irreducible antagonism, Rorty’s public/private split is tantamount to presuming freedom without freedom, politics without politics.

Rorty (1989) himself admits that the ironist culture is a liberal hope and ideal rather than a reality: it is “about how things might get better” (p. 86), how society “will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisured, richer in goods and experiences” (p. 86). But when Rorty believes “imagination is the chief instrument of the good” (p. 69), he does not realize that imagination, as a transcendental spontaneity, cannot be placed in the duality of phenomenon and noumenon: imagination is neither phenomenon nor noumenon, but a gap separating the two. In this sense, imagination and freedom coincide.

What lies behind this hope strategy is the trick discussed by Lacan: my fiancée is never late, if she is late she is not my fiancée; the ironist is the one who freely invents herself without causing harm to others, for if she did, she is not an ironist; the liberal society is the one where the excess and the obscene can be confined in the private field, or it is not a liberal society. Here we witness the tension between the subject of the enunciated (the freedom) and the subject of enunciation (the intolerant way of asserting freedom): the ironist and the liberal society are reduced to an empty symbolic mandate.

In sum, the neat public/private split is not a solution, but the very avoidance of the problem by transferring irreducible enjoyment/antagonism/excess into apolitical administration. The key is that there is always a leftover that resists the symbolic mandate. Once we separate the obscene enjoyment from the liberal ideology and seal it in the private, the liberal ideology disintegrates; without the radical excess of freedom and irreducible antagonism, the poetic culture itself is a misnomer.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharing the same belief in liberal democracy with Habermas, Rorty thinks violent revolution applies to countries like South Africa, Paraguay, and Albania, for in these countries “power swaggers naked,” and “it is hard to imagine a diminution of cruelty,” but in a liberal country that “already contains the institutions for its own improvement,” revolution is not needed (1989, p. 63).



## The Traumatic Kernel of Self-Redescription

Self-redescription is based on Rorty's (1989) neopragmatist belief in the power of language that "anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed" (p. 73); "all awareness is a linguistic affair" (p. 10); "we revise our own moral identity by revising our own final vocabulary" (p. 80), and changing the way we talk can thereby change "what we want to do and what we think we are" (p. 20). Rorty himself is the archetype of the ironist. His autobiography shows how the self-transformation happens, how "a Nietzscheanized James or a Wittgensteinian Derrida or a Heideggerianized Dewey" is fabricated (Llanera, 2017, pp. 112–113):

I have spent my life rummaging through libraries, hoping to be bowled over—transformed—by some fiercely imaginative, utterly original book. Exalted by one such book, I would then come upon another, hard to reconcile with the first. Then I would try to bridge the gap between them, to find ways of restating what was said in each so as to allow for what was said in the other, to do what Gadamer calls "fusing horizons." (Rorty, 2010a, p. 3)

We get a vivid picture of the operational mechanism of self-redescription: bridging the gap between conversation partners and remodeling them "into a shape which will serve his own purpose" (Rorty, 2010b, p. 131). What is missing in this upbeat picture is the non-historical traumatic kernel resisting mediation and revision, which can only be understood via the primordial repression of an absolute crime that lays the ground for every reign of law:

The absolute crime cannot be properly "forgotten" (undone, expiated and forgiven); it must persist as a repressed traumatic kernel, since it contains the founding gesture of the legal order – its eradication from the "unconscious memory" would entail the disintegration of the very reign of law; this reign would be deprived of its (repressed) founding force. The reason why even the absolute power of the Spirit ... is helpless in face of this supreme crime is that this crime literally enforces the reign of Spirit: it is the Negative of the Spirit itself, its hidden support and source. (Žižek, 1991, p. 208)

The primordial crime, for a specific order of being, is exemplified in Jacobinical horrors cleaning the slate for a pluralist democracy; for a single person, it is embodied as the Freudian unconditional blind impress discussed above. Let's not get confused here. The primordial crime that grounds every order is nothing but the Freudian death drive as the abyss that "engulfs everything beyond hope of return," and thus has to be tamed and subdued if the order wants to function well (Žižek, 2014, pp. 206–207). The key point is that the primordial crime repressed into a traumatic kernel is not something that can be mediated or revised by self-redescription, but is the very hidden support and source of self-redescription. Self-redescription cannot redescribe this kernel, rather, it is itself both the result of encountering this kernel and the effort to cover up this kernel. In Žižek's words, "all my positive consistency is a kind of 'reaction-formation' to a certain traumatic,



antagonistic kernel: if I lose this ‘impossible’ point of reference, my very identity dissolves” (2008b, p. 219).

Rorty has clearly realized the existence of this traumatic kernel. When he quotes Freud that random constellations such as the sound of a word, the color of a leaf, and the feel of a piece of skin can set up an unconditional commandment to one person, he is incredibly close to Žižek’s view of “the crucial role of contingent encounters in triggering a traumatic crackup of our psychic balance: overhearing a passing remark by a friend, witnessing a small unpleasant scene, can awaken long-forgotten memories and shatter our daily life” (2008a, pp. 13–14). When Rorty claims that “strong poetry, commonsense morality, revolutionary morality, normal science, revolutionary science, and the sort of fantasy” are different ways of dealing with the Freudian blind impresses (1989, p. 37), he is in accord with the Žižekian view that masculine and feminine, the leftist and the rightist, are nothing but the very endeavors to deal with the inner traumatic antagonism (Žižek, 2008a, p. 253). Rorty’s elaboration upon Winston’s disintegration in Orwell’s *1984* is another unerring proof of his awareness of the existence of the traumatic kernel:

The ultimate humiliation of saying to themselves, in retrospect, “Now that I have believed or desired this, I can never be what I hoped to be, what I thought I was. The story I have been telling myself about myself ... no longer makes sense. I no longer have a self to make sense of. There is no world in which I can picture myself as living, because there is no vocabulary in which I can tell a coherent story about myself.” For Winston, the sentence he could not utter sincerely and still be able to put himself back together was “Do it to Julia!” and the worst thing in the world happened to be rats. But presumably each of us stands in the same relations to some sentence, and to some thing. (Rorty, 1989, p. 179)<sup>2</sup>

Some sentence and some thing are other expressions of the traumatic kernel. To function well individually or collectively, the traumatic kernel as genesis must be hidden by retroactive narration (Žižek, 1991, p. 215).<sup>3</sup> In Žižek’s words, the self “exists only on the basis of the misrecognition of its own conditions; it is the effect of this misrecognition” (2008b, p. 73); once we are too close to the traumatic kernel, we will lose our very ontological consistency—“in getting too close to it we observe

<sup>2</sup> The existence of the traumatic kernel challenges Rorty’s public/private split in the sense that the ironist’s self-redescription can destroy the other’s fragile equilibrium at any moment without awareness. If each of us presumably stands in the same relation to some sentence and some thing, self-redescription without causing harm to others is impossible, given the harm that Rorty claims includes “mute despair, intense mental pain” that “can cause us to blot ourselves out” (1989, p. 40). This is not only because “the unconscious trauma repeats itself by means of some small, contingent bit of reality” (Žižek, 2008a, p. 14), but also because “something which was at first perceived as a meaningless, neutral event changes retroactively, after the advent of a new symbolic network that determines the subject’s place of enunciation into a trauma that cannot be integrated into this network” (Žižek, 1991, p. 222). Given this, Žižek replaces Rorty’s humans-can-be-hurt with humans-can-suffer, and makes “a plea for Leninist intolerance.”

<sup>3</sup> This invisible traumatic kernel is primitive accumulation in the case of capitalism, the social contract in the case of civil society, and national identity in the case of anticolonialist liberation ideology. In the case of Rorty’s ironist culture, the invisible traumatic kernel is the class struggle hidden by the public/private split.



suddenly how our consistency, our positivity, is dissolving itself” (2008b, p. 73). Even at the level of speculative philosophy, to invent arbitrarily a Nietzscheanized James or a Wittgensteinian Derrida or a Heideggerianized Dewey is not easy—sooner or later, Rorty will encounter the resistance of the traumatic kernel inherent in different philosophical systems. At the level of reality, this arbitrary invention is totally impossible—sooner or later, the ironist will encounter the traumatic kernel that prevents her from fusing horizons further.

One is lured to raise a question: if presumably each of us stands in the same relation to some sentence and some thing, what is some sentence and some thing for the ironist—at what point is the ironist not able to tell a coherent story about herself? The only consistent explanation is that self-redescription is the defense mechanism that prevents one from encountering the traumatic kernel: self-redescription does not touch or change the traumatic kernel of being an ironist, instead, it serves to shield the ironist from getting too close to the traumatic kernel—keeping her at a distance from it. In Rorty’s (1989) words, the final vocabulary is “the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives” (p. 73); self-redescription is “a matter of imaginative identification with the details of others’ lives” (p. 190), a matter of “playing off of figures against each other” (p. 80), and a matter of “scenarios against contrasting scenarios, projects against alternative projects, descriptions against redescrptions” (p. 174). As a defense mechanism, self-redescription provides the framework of fantasy giving consistency to the ironist’s desire to be unique and guaranteeing the ironist’s own fragile equilibrium.

## **Between the Hysteric and the Destitute Subject**

The ironist we see is a hysteric always trapped in the domain of doubt and uncertainty. On the one hand, the hysteric desires through others’ desire. The ironist does not directly desire through others’ desire, but in a reversed way—the ironist makes others’ desire her reference point and desires something strange. In other words, the ironist’s desires to achieve uniqueness based on how others desire, which explains why the ironist spends more of her time “placing books than in placing real live people” to “get acquainted with strange people (Alcibiades, Julien Sorel), strange families (the Karamazovs, the Casaubons), and strange communities (the Teutonic Knights, the Nuer, the mandarins of the Sung)” (Rorty, 1989, p. 80), and thus to get the minimum guarantee of her final vocabulary and to avoid posing serious threat to the existing order. On the other hand, the ironist hesitates to fully identify with any symbolic mandate. She is afraid to get stuck in any specific identities—what bothers the ironist is the question: “Why am I the one you think I am?” No matter what final vocabulary is achieved, her reaction is always negative: it is not what I want to attain. Rather than fulfilling the desire, the hysterical ironist maintains the desire by keeping it unsatisfied, and thus reverses “the impossibility to satisfy desire into the desire to keep desire itself unsatisfied” (Žižek, 1999, p. 290).



From the perspective of psychoanalysis, everyone is inherently unique given “the uniqueness of each subject’s mode of enjoyment, a uniqueness which resists scientific universalization as well as democratic egalitarianism” (Žižek, 2012a, p. 445). Those who are versed in the Lacanian triad can easily discern the source of the ironist’s “horror of finding oneself to be only a copy or replica” (Rorty, 1989, p. 29) and the self-defeating nature of the desire to be unique.

[The ironist] spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. (Rorty, 1989, p. 75).

The desire to redescribe is the desire to transgress, which stems from the inherent need of capitalism to reproduce itself—the global market has to constantly provoke stronger shocking effects via transgression to make constant profit. In other words, the ironist’s “horror of finding oneself to be only a copy or replica” (Rorty, 1989, p. 29) is already encouraged and capitalized; her reference—the dull mass stuck in the inherited final vocabulary daring not to redescribe themselves—is nothing but an illusion: she is no different from the dull mass driven by capitalism.

The hysterical question—why am I what my inherited vocabulary is saying that I am?—perhaps successfully escapes the interpellation of her community, but falls into the trap of the interpellation of neoliberal capitalism. The moment the ironist thinks she is freely redescribing herself and declaring “thus I willed it” (Rorty, 1989, p. 97) is the very moment she effectively sustains the neoliberal ideological interpellation: the fierce competition and minimum welfare protection imposed on the individual by the global market is accepted by the ironist as self-redescription, and inequality and exploitation are naturalized into the interplay between the contingent growing environments and personal free choices of a set of idiosyncratic vocabularies.

The image of the hysteric is opposed to the image of the destitute subject. By definition, the ironist is the destitute subject—“the experience that ‘the big Other doesn’t exist’, and ‘subjective destitution’ are strictly equivalent” (Žižek, 2007, p. 145). When the ironist thinks that “anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed” (Rorty, 1989, p. 73), she has already understood the shifts of perspective out of the inherent gap of the Being; when she claims that one’s language, moral deliberation, conscience, community, and highest hopes are nothing but accidental and contingent human artifacts (p. 61), she has already accepted the nonexistence of the big Other; when she declares she does not want “to befriend power nor to be in a position to empower others” (p. 102), she has already debunked the subject supposed to know. We get an image of the destitute subject who is like the psychoanalyst occupying “the impossible place of the abject, of the excremental remainder of the symbolic order” (Žižek, 2000, p. 35).

It is unlikely for the destitute subject to harbor the horror of finding oneself to be only a copy or replica, because the desire to be unique only exists and prospers when the big Other is fully recognized, while for the destitute subject traversing the fantasy and identifying with excremental remainder, the big Other does not exist.



Instead of redescribing herself endlessly, the destitute subject dares to take a radical ethical act and thus invalidates Rorty's public/private split.

Now we understand why Rorty himself vacillates between the ironist as the destitute subject and the ironist as the hysteric. Flinching from the monstrous inhumanity of subjective destitution, Rorty has to revise the destitute subject into the hysteric. However, Rorty's revision is not successful—we readers can easily find the inherent inconsistency of the ironist. In the beginning, Rorty gives us an image of the destitute subject who identifies with the Lacanian *objet petit a*. Then the ironist turns into a hysteric who desires through others' desire. Later, the destitute subject emerges again when we read the sentence that "ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated" (Rorty, 1989, p. 88). This "have-to-have" is by no means insignificant: there is a clear excess inside, an inner impulsion beyond the pleasure principle that has to be performed. The ironist is not the compromising subject of desire, but the uncompromising being of drive; self-redescription as the path to a goal changes into the goal itself bringing its own satisfaction; the final goal is no longer to be unique, but the very activity of self-redescription repeatedly encircling the goal to be unique. William M. Curtis gives us a vivid image of the being of drive: the ironist is "an intellectually restless, seemingly neurotic character ... She feels impelled to challenge and transform her final vocabulary by perpetually seeking out and comparing it to, and reweaving it with, alternative final vocabularies" (2015, p. 95).

Rorty's vacillation symptomizes his disavowal of transcendence.<sup>4</sup> The blind impress, enjoyment, the abyss of freedom, the traumatic kernel, and the primordial crime is not something that can be avoided, hidden, removed, or gentrified, but "designates a blind persistence which follows its path with utter disregard for the requirements of our concrete life-world" (Žižek, 1991, p. xvi). Rorty's ironist theory dismisses the death drive via the public/private split, and the dismissed death drive returns and gains a positive substance and existence in the form of hysterical self-redescription. The ironist's incessant seeking for a new final vocabulary is an effort to convert the denial of the symbolization into the embodied symbolization: though the blind impress invades life in the form of total contingency, it is up to ironist to transfer the traumatic invasion into something to be deciphered by projecting meaning into it. The ironist's utter impotence of dealing with the transcendent converts into the omnipotence of manipulating language.

So far the analysis of this article still conceives the absolute negativity as substance, not as subject. It is time to take a decisive step further to conceive of the substance as subject, which has a double meaning. First, as discussed above, the transcendent is inscribed into the subject itself—something in us more than ourselves. We need to go further to identify the transcendent with the subject—the subject is not the one caught in the repetitive movement of the death drive, but is the

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<sup>4</sup> As Rorty explains in the preface to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, his book is based on two sets of lectures: "A lot of people thought that the book was just carelessly thrown together: essays on this and that ... The most devastating review came from Bernard Williams, one of the best analytic philosophers in the business. He trashed it, saying that the book had no unity, that it was just a mess" (Rorty et al., 2002, p. 65). We may add that this carelessly organized book offers the spontaneity of Rorty's symptom.



death drive itself, the absolute negativity itself. In this sense, subjectivity goes beyond one's status and position, and thus every subject is potentially radical, a political subject.

Second, the subject is the gap in the substance: "Subject designates the 'imperfection' of Substance, the inherent gap, self-deferral, distance-from-itself, which forever prevents Substance from fully realizing itself, from becoming fully itself" (Žižek, 1997, p. 7). The symbolic is structured around a traumatic impossibility that is the subject—"subjects' are not the 'effective' presence of 'flesh-and-blood' agents that make use of language as part of their social life-practice, filling out the abstract language schemes with actual content; 'subject' is, on the contrary, the very abyss that forever separates language from the substantial life-process" (Žižek, 1991, p. 201).

## Conclusion: Replacing Hope with Courage

Now we can see how far Žižek's transcendental materialism is from Rorty's pluralist-pragmatic liberalism. For Rorty, truths are relative and plural, but for Žižek, "in every plural field a particular point which articulates its truth and as such cannot be relativized; in this sense, truth is always One" (Žižek, 1991, p. 196). The political application of truth-is-always-One directly leads to radical act: the effect over its causes—power cannot control itself; the gap in the power causes its own demise (Žižek 1999: 257). A question: how to make a change—can the symbolic change the symbolic? For Rorty, making a change is a matter of redescription: "progress, for the community as for the individual, is a matter of using new words as well as of arguing from premises phrased in old words" (1989, pp. 48–49); "it is more like refurbishing a house than like propping it up or placing barricades around it" (p. 45);<sup>5</sup> "the method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways" (p. 9), for example, to refute Nazis is not to confront the absurdity of the Nazi narrative directly, but to provide a new description making the Nazi narrative unappealing and untenable (Rorty et al., 2002, p. xi).

For Žižek, the naivety of refurbishing a house lies in its inability to understand that language itself is secondary: anti-Oedipus is the ultimate Oedipus myth, and anti-oppression itself is a component of the narrative of oppression. To oppose oppression the first thing to do is not to oppose the oppressor or to redescribe things in new ways, but to recognize that one's position has always been mediated by the oppressor: the position of the African American mediated by the white man, the position of the woman mediated by the man, the position of the worker mediated by the capitalist (Žižek, 1999, p. 72). The mechanism of oppression itself is sexualized, producing libidinal satisfaction, and anti-oppression itself becomes hysterical provocation instead of fighting for the truth. To fight against power effectively, we

<sup>5</sup> For Žižek, the problem with refurbishing a house is that both the subject and the new vocabularies are still mediated by the existing hegemonic symbolic, therefore to make a change is to overturn the hegemonic order in its totality, which is rejected by Rorty as the longing for total revolution: "As soon as you think that total reconceptualizations are necessary for political thinking, you've already separated from reformist politics and are on your way toward Leninism" (Rorty et al., 2002, p. 65).



must abandon the mode of enjoyment that accompanies oppression, and pass through the zero point of the death drive to symbolic rebirth.

Rorty's book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) aims to explain how "ironist theory can be privatized, and thus prevented from becoming a threat to political liberalism" (p. 190), which is nothing but the domestication of the transcendent: on the level of liberal society, the neat public/private split hides the inherent antagonism as class struggle, and thus make politics into apolitical administration; on the level of the ironist, self-redescription functions as a defense mechanism that prevents the ironist from encountering her own traumatic kernel, and thus guarantees the consistency of being an ironist. In this sense, Rorty's ironist culture is no different from "the Foucauldian 'culture of the self,'" which "is ultimately nothing but a constant endeavor to set measures to the monstrous excess called 'the Kantian subject,' to introduce a semblance of harmonious design into it, i.e., to master, to contain, to reduce to a bearable level its incommensurability" (Žižek, 2008a, p. 210).

Rorty reduces politics to an other-way-of-life issue and rational expert social administration, while Žižek reasserts the universal truth and the radical anti-capitalist political act. Rorty argues that we are clever animals whose primary need is to be made happier by the enlarging version of ourselves, while Žižek claims that "we already are free while fighting for freedom, we already are happy while fighting for happiness ... Revolution is ... its own ontological proof" (Žižek, 2002, p. 559). Rorty wants to replace philosophy with hope—"The essential thing is to dream of a better world. Hope doesn't require justification, cognitive status, foundations, or anything else" (Rorty et al., 2002, p. 58)—while Žižek wants to replace hope with courage—the courage to confront the cold fact that the subject is the absolute negativity itself and society is divided by this negativity. The difference between Rorty and Žižek is ultimately their different notions of subjectivity—the Rortian self-shaping subject and the Lacanian barred subject, the subject of desire and the destitute subject, the reflexive subjectivity and the pure subjectivity: the former is always already mediated by the symbolic, while later stands for the unconditional excess identical to a lack in the symbolic; the former leads to the inner transgression, while the latter leads to the radical act. For Žižek, Rorty's effort always ultimately fails, because

there is a certain left-over which cannot be integrated into the symbolic universe, an object which resists subjectivation, and the subject is precisely correlative to this object. In other words, the subject is correlative to its own limit, to the element which cannot be subjectified, it is the name of the void which cannot be filled out with subjectivation: the subject is the point of failure of subjectivation. (Žižek, 1990, p. 254).

In this way, different self-redescriptions can be regarded as different ways of subjectivation, and there is always a point of failure of this subjectivation, because the self-relating negativity is ultimately the subject; what the hysteric tries to evade is exactly herself; herself is the catastrophic gap as the failure of subjectivation; all different final vocabularies are just failed efforts to avoid the catastrophe that is herself. At this point, the ironist goes beyond her positions and becomes her own



cause, achieving pure subjectivity whereby extreme self-withdrawal overlaps with extreme openness, extreme passivity overlaps extreme activity, extreme subjectivity overlaps extreme objectivity (Žižek, 2016, p. 84).<sup>6</sup> Only from the point of failure of subjectivation can we understand the fundamental premise of Rorty's book: "a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance" (1989, p. 189). This premise is only mentioned once, in a concise sentence, in the entire book. Rorty's reformist political stance does not allow him to say anything more than one sentence on this; once he does, he has to face the subject as the abyss of freedom, and the inner inconsistency of his ironist theory, because what lies behind Rorty's belief is nothing other than the death drive.

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<sup>6</sup> The remaining question is, after experiencing subjective destitution and traversing the fantasy, how is human solidarity still possible? For Žižek, human solidarity is still possible, not via diminishing cruelty, but via the common experience of confronting the traumatic kernel inherent in everyone. The narrative of this union will not be the Rortian narrative of progress, but the Žižekian narrative of tarrying with the negative.



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