

## Research Article

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# The Politics of Unification in a Fragmented World: Metapopulism and the Precariat<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Neoliberal capitalism intensified the social fragmentation, which resulted in the upswing of heterogeneous communities without a unifying meta-language that was liberal universalism of citizenship. Our society shows “paralogical” traits and paralogy reverberates in the new populist policy I call metapopulism (Trump, Putin, etc.)—witness their inconsistencies. Metapopulism establishes unifying principles as a substitute of liberal universalism. These are allegory and the Real. An allegorical signifier (“patriotism” etc.), which is separated from the signified (the meaning), is a common representation of heterogeneous communities and simultaneously maintains their paralogy. The Real appears as the signifier that is excluded from “correct” liberal discourse and promises to enhance the experience of a system’s failures by attributing a social meaning to it (sublimation). These principles work on the condition that their promises are permanently thwarted and deferred, which is their spectrality. However, another type of unification may be feasible. It is a unifying discourse and practise that is grounded in a specific position of the “precariat” as the hegemonical class as formed by neoliberal capitalism (the Lukácsian concept). Here, a unification is borne by the praxis of sublimation.

**Keywords:** fragmentation, unification, metapopulism, precariat, sublimation, Lukács

If I negate the situation in Germany in 1843, then according to the French calendar I have barely reached 1789, much less  
the vital centre of our present age.  
Karl Marx (1844)

## Introduction

Presently, it becomes more and more apparent that political power goes through metamorphosis. The new populism, such as Trump, Putin, and the proponents of Brexit, can be seen to represent this metamorphosis. It is symptomatic that these policies are being explained in radically different terms. Some authors understand it to be neo-fascism that somewhat echoes fascist and authoritarian movements in the twentieth century (Foster, *Neofascism in the White House*).

Others such as Paul Taggart separate the new populism from neo-fascist movements stressing its hybrid nature: respect for liberty and the market, anti-party ideology, no direct link to the fascist parties of the previous era, an anti-immigrant stance conflated with other salient issues (Taggart, *New Populist Party in Western Europe*). In this view, the new populism lacks core values and has a chameleonic quality (Taggart, *Populism*).

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And there are authors such as Joel Whitebook and Peter Pommerantsev who unveil postmodern traits of Trump's and Putin's populism as fostering the inconsistency and non-linearity of messages, heterogeneous discourses, subversion of our sense of reality, and the fluidity and never-ending transformation of political doctrine (Whitebook, *Trump's Method, Our Madness*; Pommerantsev, *The Hidden Author of Putinism*).

I propose to conceive the emerging form of political power as “metapopulism” that involves the Greek notion “metaxy,” which means a state in-between. Accordingly, metapopulism is found in-between democracy with the particularised logic and populism with the hegemonised one. Metapopulism combines a tendency towards social fragmentation with heterogeneous communities (social paralogy) and a tendency toward unification that has been re-emerging in new forms. This tendency is diminished by a sense of communality; a search for a unifying principle and identity; longing for a renewed grand narrative. These manifestations of the inconsistent character of contemporary populist ideologies and strategies cease to correspond to Laclau's theory of populism, which constructs its people through equivalential and differential articulations that create hegemonization of a particular demand. Present-day populism develops another way of structuring the elements and operates by means of keeping inconsistencies, cleavages, and antinomies. An equivalential articulation of demands transforms into the paralogical chain that establishes cleavages in semantic relations among communities. There are mere “opening bids” among communities without universal dimension as a result of hegemonization of a particular demand (Hauser, *Metapopulism in-between democracy and populism*).

I argue that the new populism is linked up to the changes in our society that presently shows the upswing of heterogeneous and fragmented communities without a common communicative code. In this respect, I understand the new populism similarly to Enzo Traverso who conceives it as a product of the transformations of capitalism in recent decades. In his view, it is not a resurgence of fascism, but something new and not yet realised (Traverso 17).

In this article I put forward three theses as follows:

- Neoliberal capitalism tends to create heterogeneous communities without a “meta-narrative” that was liberal universalism of citizenship as a unifying discourse and a common communicative code. The contemporary society becomes “paralogical.” Metapopulism forms its discourse as a reverberation of the paralogical society which explains its inconsistency. (Elaboration in the part “Capitalism and Paralogy”)
- Metapopulism creates a unification that would be a substitute for liberal universalism. This unification works on two principles: allegory and the Real. Allegorical signifier (“Trump,” “patriotism” etc.) evokes the promise of a unification that would draw upon an underlying idea; the (imaginary) Real promises to enhance the experience of the global Capital's failures by attributing a social meaning to it (sublimation). These principles work on the condition that their promises are permanently thwarted and deferred. Metapopulist unification is spectral. (Elaboration in the part “Metapopulism and Spectral Unification”)
- The liberal universalism of citizenship has been disintegrated as an effect of the intensified fragmentary tendency of neoliberal capitalism. This is why liberal universalism along with its egalitarian elements probably cannot be revived as a unifying discourse and replace metapopulist spectral unification. However, another type of unification may be feasible. It is a unifying discourse and practise that is grounded in a specific position of the “precariat” as the hegemonical class as formed by neoliberal capitalism (the Lukácsian concept). Here, a principle is the Real that acts as the signifier (“Global Capital”) and the signified (experience of the global Capital's failures), but in contrast to allegorical separation in metapopulism, there appears a vivid inter-relation (sublimation). While metapopulism constantly fails its promise of sublimation, Lukácsian type of unification embodies the praxis of sublimation. (Elaboration in the part “The Precariat and Sublimated Unification”)

## Capitalism and Paralogy

Many authors notice that contemporary society is being disintegrated into fragmentary communities that tend to live in their own worlds without seeking a common communicative code. Torben Lütjen, a German political scientist who has been studying liberal and conservative enclaves in Wisconsin, states: “America

has split into closed and radically separated enclaves that follow their own constructions of reality” (As people “sort” themselves, consequences for democracy).

This social fragmentation, however, is not an abrupt emergence of a new phenomenon when considering that ideological and cultural fragmentation has been conceived as a principal feature of capitalism. Marx associated the social fragmentation with the exchange value that sets in motion the circulation of capital restlessly and perpetually seeking new ways to garner profits (Harvey 107). With neoliberal capitalism, the factional forces and fragmenting effects intensified and according to Lash and Urry, capitalism became disorganised as advancing cultural fragmentation coupled with the undermining of traditional class or national identities (Harvey 176).

Toffler (*Future Shock*), Tenbruck (*Die kulturellen Grundlagen der Gesellschaft*), Harvey (*The Condition of Postmodernity*), Jameson (*Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*) etc. pointed out that this fragmentation and particularisation resulted in emerging communities that live in different worlds “between which an uncommunicative ‘otherness’ prevails in a space of coexistence” (Harvey 113). The fragmented communities are prone to idiosyncrasies without bothering to relate themselves to other doctrines. They are imbued by “powerful particularistic spirit” and tend to dismiss universalism of freedom and rationality of the Enlightenment period (Tenbruck 118).

What is crucial here is the fact that liberal and social-democratic universalism of citizenship and human rights has been plunged into this vortex of fragmentation and particularisation that neoliberal capitalism bears. As Gaspár M. Tamás put it, “universal citizenship—that is, virtual equality of political condition, a virtually equal say for all in the common affairs of any given community—together with a social condition and a model of rationality that could make it possible is now rejected even under democratic circumstances ... Everywhere, then, from Lithuania to California, immigrant and even autochthonous minorities have become the enemy and are expected to put up with the diminution and suspension of their civic and human rights” (On Post-fascism: The Degradation of Universal Citizenship). The recent evolution of capitalism intensified its fragmentary effects, which disrupted a communicative code among communities and eventually subverted liberal universalism.

Likewise, we can newly situate Lyotard’s concept of paralogy which was meant to subvert political, technical, and technological dominance that imposed unity and hegemony on a particularity (Zima 66). According to Lyotard, meta-language and its universal rules are “terrorist” since they eliminate the heterogeneous nature of language games by enforcing adaptation to and identification with the system (Lyotard 63-64). However, this subversion of “terrorist” universal rules may eventually coincide with a subversive legitimization of anti-establishment billionaires warming up the conservative dismissal of the liberal universalism of citizenship. As Rorty aptly expressed himself, Lyotard, unfortunately, retained a silly ultra-leftist idea that “escaping from such homogeneous institutions is automatically a good thing, because it ensures that one will not be ‘used’ by the evil forces which have ‘co-opted’ these institutions” (Rorty 42). As regards the contemporary condition, “paralogy” proves to reproduce the ideological structure of the post-liberal society.

Lyotard expressed the idea of “the heteromorphous nature of language games” as well as the dictum that “any consensus on the rules defining a game and the ‘moves’ playable within it *must* be local” (66). There is only a multiplicity of finite “meta-arguments” limited in space and time. Universal meta-language is replaced by a plurality of formal and axiomatic systems. A meta-language that would regulate the relations among “language games” becomes impossible upon recognition of their “heteromorphous nature.” Temporary contracts are negotiated among heterogeneous “meta-arguments” localised in particular speech communities. These temporary contracts are not bound to universal rules, and they are characterised as paralogy, which means that a general concept which would capture the complexity of inter-relations as a consistent whole cannot be found. Paralogy expresses the inconsistency and incommensurability of relationships among heterogeneous communities, which is a result of *temporary* contracts being the only type of inter-relations that Lyotard allows for in his system of analysis.

In the post-liberal society, we can reinterpret Lyotardian paralogy as follows. Universal meta-language as a unifying principle of citizenship is replaced by “language games” (values, ideas, messages) which are linked with heterogeneous communities. As Harvey, Tenbruck, Jameson etc. show, they live in different

worlds with interrupted inter-relations and create local modus of communication only.

So, our society can be seen to become paralogical for these two reasons:

- the proliferation of the heterogeneous communities and local “language games.”
- the disintegration of the liberal universalism of citizenship as a unifying meta-language

Then, the paralogical structure of society echoes in a political strategy of metapopulism. The metapopulist leader creates signification that preserves paralogical relations among communities. As Christian Parenti points out, Trump’s discourse works with heterogeneity: “his meanings, because of the form of their delivery, were open to multiple understandings and re-assembly by the listener ... In Trump’s discourse, A does not necessarily connect to B. If you don’t like A, just focus on B. The structure of Trump’s discourse will never demand that all the pieces be connected. He has even described his own statements as mere ‘opening bids’ in a negotiation” (Parenti, *Listening to Trump*). Trump’s emphasis on anti-immigration policy and rhetoric is combined with some left-leaning economic positions; for example, protecting social security, and supporting infrastructure spending and trade protection. There is no unifying meta-language such as a conservative doctrine that would create a more consistent composition of statements. Paralogical relations are a vein of metapopulist signification as I showed in details elsewhere (Hauser, *Metapopulism in-between Democracy and Populism*).

The paralogical discourse of metapopulism, however, is too unstable and volatile to have the power to unfold unifying principles that would substitute liberal universalism. As Harvey stressed, ongoing social fragmentation is coupled with the need for coordinating systems to bring order to all this chaos and set the path of capitalist evolution on a more stable terrain. According to Marx, the power of these coordinating and unifying systems is itself transitory and illusory in the end (Harvey 107).

## Metapopulism and Spectral Unification: Allegory and the Real

In the first part, I proposed to conceive our society to become an inconsistent composition of heterogeneous communities with paralogical relationships as a consequence of the fragmenting effects of neoliberal capitalism. Along with other authors such as Tamás, I claimed that liberal universalism had been disintegrated as a discursive unifying principle. My point is that metapopulism:

- retains paralogical relationships among communities
- creates the spectral unification via allegory and the Real as a substitute of liberal universalism

When considering paralogical relationships, we need to unearth concepts that enable us to introduce a non-universalist type of unification that would preserve the heterogeneous character of communities (paralogy). I find two concepts to be helpful here: allegory and the Real.

Allegory is the term that Jameson revives when pointing out that it works as the postmodern representation which indicates a yawning chasm between the generality of the signifier and the particularity of the signified (Jameson 136). The allegorical signifier is posed to keep incommensurable distances and breaks among singular social worlds, or spaces that cannot be linked by the universal signifier. In other words, allegory is the concept that matches with paralogy. As Hegel put it, the allegorical signifier must be so hollow that all specific individuality vanishes from it. Allegory does not have the power to unify the multiplicity of “attributes.” It becomes a purely abstract form that is frosty and cold. Allegory consists in the separation of universal and particular (Hegel 399).

As I showed in detail elsewhere (*Metapopulism in-between democracy and populism*), the metapopulist leader acts as the signifier that corresponds to allegory because he or she keeps a separation (alienation) between the signifier (“Trump,” “Putin”) and each particular signification of heterogeneous communities even if the metapopulist leader can still express a momentary investment in some fragment of a signification. This is why I argued that hegemonization of a particular demand as Laclau understood it in his concept of populism is hindered. A particular demand does not appear to be a place-holder for universal meaning. This alienation manifests itself in Putin and Trump becoming politicians who are sold as brands, and the result

is sound-bite and image-based politics. This is a commodified politics of buying and selling fleeting images and buzzwords, and preferring the signifier over the signified (Standing 147). The common signifier remains without a consistent linkage to singular demands (significations) of communities. This allegorical character of metapopulism prevents the common signifier (“Trump,” “Putin”) from introducing unification that would create mediation among particular communities. The relations among communities keep being paralogical even though the communities accept that they have a common representative signifier (“Trump,” “Putin”). Allegory in the sense of the common signifier which remains separated from the signified precisely is the type of the unification principle that retains paralogical relationships among communities.

As Jameson puts it, there can be no question of linking incommensurable worlds, or spaces in which particular communities live, or fusing them into some organic synthesis; at best, the peculiar shape dramatizes the impossible task of such representation all the while indicating its impossibility. Here Jameson considers some curious second-degree level representing it all at once anyhow (125). I understand the allegorical signifier to be this particular type of representation that I link to paralogical relationships among the communities. The allegorical signifier acts as a unification principle without creating an idea that would be an underlying element of unification. The central place of metapopulist discourse must *continually* remain alienated. What we see are ideas, values and messages that fly through the central place of the discourse. For instance, Putin still struggles to find a unifying idea for Russia, but he seems to fail constantly (Filipov, Putin can’t seem to find a “national idea” for Russians, so he’s proposing a law to do it). After toying with “competitiveness” and “saving people,” now Putin declares that “We don’t have and there can’t be any other unifying idea, apart from patriotism.” This failure is caused by the fact that an idea (for instance “patriotism”) can fulfil the role of the common signifier on condition that it acts as allegory because of paralogical relationships among communities. As we saw, this social paralogy is a result of fragmentary effects of neoliberal capitalism. So, we can conclude that an underlying unification of society in the shape of a (neo)fascist organic unity is impossible when considering neoliberal capitalism as intensively dissolving each social bond.

I call the allegorical signifier a spectral unification because it induces the semblance of unification of society that would consist in an underlying idea (“patriotism,” “great America”) but this semblance proves to be an apparition that fades away as soon as we call for its embodiment. A unifying idea works provided that is not in its full meaning and keeps being an allegory that is separated from its signified. The moment we begin to change this allegorical signifier into an underlying idea of unification this signifier fails to fulfil its unifying role. For instance, “patriotism” being pinned down as this or that meaning (“Holy Russia” or “competitiveness”) would repulse heterogeneous communities with a different concept of “patriotism.” Being policy that echoes paralogical society, metapopulism has no other option than to refresh the promise of a meaningful unification that it permanently fails.

Allegory is a principle of unification that maintains paralogical relationships among communities and therefore is still too fragile and volatile to explain the metapopulist unification entirely. I propose to pay attention to the Real that appears as another principle of this spectral unification.

Generally, the Real is the Lacanian/Žižekian concept that introduces inconsistency and gaps as an inner obstacle of all order, which causes the process of symbolization to be inherently thwarted. The Real is the imminent failure to produce a consistent and well-balanced symbolical order. Here I consider a peculiar representation of common and simultaneously non-shared traumatic experience of the system’s failures, the one that is not integrated into the established symbolical order. I understand this peculiar representation to be the signifier in the shape of the Real (“the Real signifier”). This signifier can be perceived as the voice of the Real, in as far as it relates to common traumatic experience which cannot be expressed in an established symbolical order. The concept of the Real signifier corresponds to an aspect of Žižek’s understanding of the Real. The Lacanian Real may seem to resist symbolization absolutely. Žižek, however, recognises an aspect of the Real that enables us to see the Real in signification. Žižek conceives of global Capital as “the Real which lurks in the background” of our political space and as “the Real of our age” (*The Ticklish Subject* 222; 276). The Real in signification is not only the failure to grasp the Real through language and speech acts as Žižek often writes (*For They Know Not What They Do* xiv). According to Žižek, Buchanan and other rightist populists addressed the signifier with a “bad reputation” in order to open the space of the Real within

normalised language. Slavoj Žižek also describes left liberals experiencing a strange kind of relief when politicians such as Patrick Buchanan in the U.S. and Jean-Marie Le Pen in France in the 1990s openly broke the liberal consensus stalemate and questioned the unrestrained rule of the market (*The Ticklish Subject* 355; 381). Donald Trump's statements on the corrupt elite, a rigged system, and unbridled global capitalism can be classed in much the same way. Žižek and Laclau look at how statements such as these impinge not only on far-right conservative groups but also attract a much wider part of the population. As Laclau tells us, the name that is "the signifier of what is heterogeneous and excessive in a particular society, will have an irresistible attraction over any demand which is lived as unfulfilled and, as such, as excessive and heterogeneous vis-à-vis the existing symbolic framework" (108).

My point is that the Real signifier works as a principle of a spectral unification regarding its "irresistible attraction" as Laclau refers to. In my concept of a spectral unification, the Real signifier creates linkage among heterogeneous segments of metapopulist discourse. This linkage is not given by a meta-discourse in Lyotard's sense, since it does not act as the language that unifies or totalizes particular discourses by removing their paralogy. This linkage is an effect of the Real signifier which is necessary to discuss because the Real signifier, thereby, becomes a peculiar cement of paralogical relations that condenses in the allegorical signifier.

First, I would analyse the logic of the Real in signification. How does the Real work in a signifying operation? We can consider Žižek's example of global Capital as "the Real which lurks in the background." I am going to unfold two possible interpretations:

- (1) Global Capital is the Real with a determinate meaning. Global Capital (over)determines our society without we are in a position of checking this process. This Real signifier matches up to the Marxist account of Capital. In this interpretation, global Capital is the signifier that contains an excessive dimension which cannot be reduced to the meaning that liberal political discourse attributes to it. However, this excessive dimension cannot be understood to elude a discursive grasp when accepting that the Marxist political economy caught complex relations between Capital and society. In Marxism, Capital is the symbolised Real which received a complex and yet determinate meaning. This interpretation overlooks what is crucial here: reclaiming the signifier "Capital," the right-wing populists attract miscellaneous communities while as a rule, its Marxist voicing has not echoed through contemporary society. Here I put aside the history of Marxism being gradually marginalised in political discourse since 1970.
- (2) Global Capital is the Real with a dispersed and elusive meaning. Global Capital is the signifier that attracts on condition that its meaning, which is the signified, keeps working as the Real that is dispersed and elusive. As soon as global Capital becomes the signifier that symbolises Capital in the sense of Marxist political economy, its mysterious odour, which impinges on diverse groups, begins to evaporate. In metapopulism, "Capital" is inscribed in signification but in the shape of the signifier that resembles Žižek's "imaginary Real," which is the mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable "something" on account of which the sublime dimension shines through an ordinary object (*For They Know Not What They Do* xii). It works only as far as it leaves its meaning (the signified) undetermined and multifaceted. If we defined Capital as a determinate social relation in the Marxist sense, i.e. the class relation, we would devoid it of its capacity to be an element of paralogical signification because the signifier "Capital" would turn into Master-Signifier that sutures the semantic field into a consistent one. In the Lyotardian view, the signifier "Capital" would become a meta-discourse that unifies particular language games by establishing their common denominator and by erasing their heterogeneity. In my concept of metapopulism, a determinate meaning of the signifier "Capital" would disturb an allegorical way of signification that enables the metapopulist leader to hold sway over heterogeneous communities.

"Global Capital" displays all three interconnected facets of the Real which Slavoj Žižek introduced that is the imaginary Real, the symbolic Real, and the real Real (*For They Know Not What They Do* xii). In the context of allegorical signification and social paralogy, "global Capital" appears to be the imaginary Real as the image of elusive "something" that evokes an appearance of meaning. Eventually, this image gains the character of a nominalistic sign with dispersed and fluid semantics which is impossible to determine. In this aspect, the signifier "global Capital" turns out to be the symbolic Real that is a senseless formula

which can no longer be translated back into—or related to—the everyday experience of our life-world. And the third facet of this signifier is the real Real as being the horrifying Thing that suddenly encroaches on our life-world and eludes a discursive grasp. The analysis of the Real in signification implies that the Real signifier can be viewed in these three dimensions which have in common that do not produce a determinate meaning of the experience of the system's failures and remains the signifier which is detached from the signified: it keeps being in allegorical modus of signification.

Similarly, we can conceive Donald Trump's statements on the corrupt elite and unbridled global capitalism as the Real signifiers in the signifying chain made of all statements and gestures that are connected with the name "Trump" and the slogan "make America great again.". "Trump" and the slogan "make America great again" are allegorical signifiers that create a principle of a spectral unification. The other principle of a spectral unification, which is the Real signifier, energises and cements the allegorical signifier. As we learnt from Žižek and Laclau, the Real signifier unblocks the accumulated experience of the system's failures and becomes a paradoxical representation of unvoiced life-world experience. In this representation, the chasm between the signifier (in the shape of the Real) and the signified (experience of the system's failures) keeps being in the manner of allegorical representation.

How is it possible to have the signifier which detaches itself from the signified in an allegorical way and simultaneously touches experience and becomes its representation in some sense? My explanation is that with metapopulism the Real signifier is devoid of a determinate meaning, which would incorporate the living experience in its complexity. The Real signifier impinges on unvoiced experience, which is not explicable as activating a full semantic content of the experience. This linkage between the Real signifier and the signified does not consist in their corresponding content. What is left here is their corresponding form that is the Real. As for this linkage, the signifier "global Capital" in Trump's speeches acts precisely as the imaginary Real which expresses unfathomable "something" that touches traumatic experience. This connection between the imaginary Real and experience of the system's failures can be explained in a way that an unfathomable "something" induces the sublime dimension that Žižek links to the imaginary Real. The sublime dimension shines through the experience which has a desublimated character. I draw on Žižek's analyses of the contemporary society who highlights the loss of symbolic efficiency and its psychotic nature (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 322-34). Žižek's concept of psychotic society offers the Lacanian view of the fragmenting effects of neoliberal capitalism that result in paralogical social relationships without a unifying discourse. In the psychotic society, the traumatic experience is desublimated in the sense that it resists being permeated by symbolic signifiers (words and symbolic expressions). From my point of view, the desublimated experience shows that there is a chasm between the signifier and the signified, which creates allegorical signification. The desublimated experience is touched by the reappearance of the sublime dimension on account of the imaginary Real. The experience can be seen to be psychotic regarding its detachment from the symbolical order. The imaginary Real, e.g. the signifier "Global Capital," induces the semblance of resublimation of the experience that is caused by the fact that the signifier "global Capital" is precisely the Real. It acts as an element that comes from another world in which our experience and perception were enhanced by sublimation. The signifier "global Capital" bears imaginary sublimation which is an image of our experience as being endowed with a common meaning that is attributed to the symbolical order. The signifier "global Capital" impinges on the experience of the system's failures in the way of irradiating it with the light of sublimation. This means that imaginary sublimation is nothing more than the promise of enhancing experience which, however, remains unfulfilled. The promised enhancing of the traumatic experience explains how the signifier "global Capital" as the imaginary Real unblocks the accumulated experience of the system's failures even though it keeps being detached from the signified. This signifier activates the experience without giving a determinate meaning to it.

This promise of sublimation explains the mysterious ability of the Real signifier to attract people from heterogeneous communities. The Real signifier works as a unifying principle with the promise of sublimation that will never present itself in the form of an enhancing embodiment of a determinate social experience. The imaginary Real keeps evoking the semblance of sublimation that never comes in its full meaning. For this reason, metapopulist sublimation can be seen as a spectral formation.

So, while allegory induces the promise of a unification that would consist in an underlying idea, the imaginary Real gives the promise to enhance a concrete experience by permeating it with a determinate social meaning (sublimation). Both of these promises work only on the condition that they are permanently failed and deferred. This peculiar phenomenon I call metapopulist spectrality. Metapopulism creates a substitute of liberal universalism when forging the principles that evoke the promises whose fulfilment is postponed eternally. Metapopulism needs to be spectral to work smoothly.

## The Precariat and Sublimated Unification

What we look for is a possibility to think of another type of unification that would challenge a spectral unification that belongs to metapopulism. I tend to doubt that a revival of the liberal universalism of citizenship could resist the upswing of metapopulism because neoliberal capitalism resulted in creating the paralogical and psychotic world with heterogeneous communities. As a consequence, liberal universalism may be understood to be the message of a particular community such as the one of the “privileged” when considering recent liberal discourse (see the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton) that did not succeed in representing the experience of the system’s failures. In the paralogical society, liberal universalism acts as if it were liberal particularism.

If liberal universalism fails to keep its unifying universal form in the paralogical society with metapopulism, we cannot avoid asking the question whether another type of universalism is possible that would call forth a discursive and practical unification challenging metapopulism as a post-liberal policy that dissolves the universalism of citizenship along with its egalitarian elements.

In the previous part, I explored the imaginary Real as a principal of the spectral unification in metapopulism that is detached from the experience of the system’s failures and simultaneously activates this experience via inducing the appearance of sublimation. It results in creating a remarkable ideological discourse which incorporates the signifiers such as “global Capital” in the shape of the Real. Metapopulist ideology gives the promise of sublimated experience, which, however, gets stuck in allegorical signification and paralogical relations. Is it possible to conceive of unification that would provide us with a representation of the experience of the system’s failures which removes chasm between the signifier and the signified? What is at stake here is unification that would bear a new type of sublimation, which is nothing less than the fulfilment of an infinite promise that metapopulism generates.

In the proposed concept of unification, I draw on Lukács’s concept of the proletariat as the particular class that represents the social whole.

Lukács’s thought seems to be obsolete as conjuring the proletariat who is supposed to have disappeared as a political formation historically. In last decades, however, there appears a class that occupies an analogical position in the contemporary social whole as the Lukácsian proletariat. This is the precariat that is the product of the social whole which is formed by disorganised neoliberal capitalism. The precariat has not socially been integrated and simultaneously has been a productive force of contemporary capitalism, which reminds of the proletariat.

The precariat is the class that emerged from neoliberal capitalism with its flexible and disorganised form of accumulation which became dominant. There are other social classes such as the old “working class” or the “salaried” (well-paid employees), but the precariat is the hegemonic figure that gradually changes other classes to adopt its central qualities. This is because the flexible form of accumulation is dominant and precisely this form of accumulation gave rise to the qualities of the precariat. According to Standing, the precariat consists of an increasing number of those who flit between jobs, are unsure of their occupational title, lack labour-related security and have precarious incomes. They are not ranked among employees and are deprived of voice that would represent their agenda. They are detached from trade unions and mostly denied state benefits since they do not pay the necessary contributions. The precariat is composed of contingent and temporary workers of different descriptions who often appear as self-employed. For the most part, the labour is understood as a means of earning income without meaning anything else. Members of the precariat do not identify with an occupation. The prospect



of failure hinders investments in skills or a psychological commitment which results in the sense of alienation and anomie (Standing 11; 146; 156).

The precariat is the class that is fragmented by the volatile form of labour and life and simultaneously tells of a tendency towards unification and of a possibility of class consciousness—witness current movements and parties that are supposed to be on the verge of becoming the political body which would be the voice of the precariat. However, this tendency is inhibited by the individualisation tendency which may be even stronger than in other classes. The precariat has an inner obstacle to forge a coherent image of its class position and simultaneously contains the possibility of class consciousness. Its evolution is conditioned by the Lukácsian operation of imputation that is an operation that attributes “the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were able to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society” (Lukács 51).

The imputation of class consciousness is not a one-time theoretical operation that would finish up with theoretician’s and politician’s creating an abstract and empty idea of attributing class consciousness to the precariat. As Lukács put it, the awaking of class consciousness is a two-sided process. The first side is a theoretical act of imputation prompting a generalisation of particular thoughts and experience; the second one condenses the living experience of the precariat reflecting its struggles, losses, and wins on a particular location. The theoretical act of imputation stays empty if it is not completed with the living experience; the living experience keeps being the mere records of distinct voices without a lasting political meaning if it is not generalised and recast in a common voice.

In the case of the precariat, the experience side of the evolving of class consciousness is not easy to create when considering dispersed and fragmented character of the precarized work and life (Barassi, *Activism on the Web*). These living conditions result in its voices getting stuck. Therefore, the act of “providing voice,” which consists in an activist’s, journalist’s, or scientist’s entering the living world of the precariat, is necessary to go along with the theoretical imputation of class consciousness. Relying on living experience with the precarized work, these activists, journalists, or scientists might help the precariat to achieve a politically significant voice. See the Czech documentary *The Limits of Work* by Apolena Rychlíková (2017) which focuses on working conditions in hospital laundry rooms, poultry houses and waste-sorting facilities in today’s Czech Republic. This documentary makes visible the experience of the precarized work that is sealed off in a heterogeneous life-world. It shows that the fragmented experience has some shared traits which call for a more general naming of what they have in common. This documentary suggests the possibility of a general signifier that would vividly embody the signified that is the fragmented experience.

This theoretical backdrop enables us to see that the precariat experience the system’s failures in a way that their experience contains possibility to overcome allegorical (mis)representation. Regarding this possibility, I propose to forge a model of a unifying signifier that would trigger the process of sublimation. The proposed model could be a possible way of opposing metapopulist power (Trump, Putin, etc.).

The operation of imputation is crucial here. It may introduce a signifier that relates differently to the signified than the allegorical signifier and the imaginary Real do. We would get the signifier that is the Real in the same sense as the signifier which appears as the imaginary Real. Nominally, this signifier may be identical with the imaginary signifier such as the signifier “global Capital.” But contrary to the imaginary Real, this signifier gains the meaning which is linked to a specific position of the precariat from which the social whole is attainable. This meaning, however, does not need to correspond to the statements and the signifiers that the empirical members of the precariat convey. Guy Standing speaks of the “nostalgic” part of the precariat that is often open to post-fascist rhetoric and turns against immigrants and minorities that are demonised as a threat (146; 156). Decisively, the detachment from these empirical voices of the precariat does not show an elitist attitude.

My point is that the operation of imputation grasps the latent content of the experience and attaches it to the Real signifier. In keeping with Lukács’s concept of imputed consciousness, this latent content is not a prescriptive definition of the meaning of experience. This content can be seen to be the possibility of developing the vivid relation between the signifier and the signified. For instance, the signifier “global Capital” can produce the meaning that latently consists in the fragmented experience of the precariat. This meaning, which is the signified, is not pre-given in the immediate experience of the system’s failure, but it

is the result of imputation which unifies this fragmented experience in a two-sided process.

The first side is a unifying generalisation of particular and fragmented thoughts and experience, the one that attaches them to the signifier “global Capital”; the second one is the reviving and the representing of the experience of the precariat in a specified and non-predictable form. The signified is understood to be a process which develops the latent content of the fragmented thoughts and experience of the precariat. The Real signifier ceases to be the imaginary Real which maintains the chasm between the signifier and the signified. The signifier becomes the one that develops a relation to the signified. The development of the relation is a two-sided process. First, it consists of the theoretical operation of imputation that is a unifying generalisation of fragmented experience. Second, it involves the praxeological operation of reviving and representing the experience of the precariat in a specified and non-predictable manner such as the mentioned documentary *The Limits of Work*.

In this Lukácsian unification, the signifier is re-instated as the bearer of the vivid relation to the signified. There are two possible views: we can pay attention to the formation of the meaning of fragmented experience, which is connected to the praxeological operation. This formation is the production of the signified in respect to the unifying signifier such as global Capital. We can see that the production of the signified is reproduced by the signifier in its unifying function. Or we can address a unifying generalisation, which is linked to the theoretical operation of imputation. This generalisation produces a unifying signifier. In this case, the production of the signifier is reproduced in the formation of the meaning of fragmented experience. My hypothesis is that in this two-sided procedure, a signifier such as global Capital would gain symbolic efficiency. Regarding the allegorical (mis)representation, the chasm between the signifier and the signified is transformed into dialectical interconnection between theoretical operation and praxeological one. We come across the signifier that is the Real as was the case with the metapopulist imaginary Real but instead of a chasm we have a vivid relation. So, the signifier is the Real, which can be conceived as the sublimated Real. In the same way, unification of fragmented thoughts and experience of the precariat is being formed by the signifier in the shape of the sublimated Real that is not the imaginary Real, which works in metapopulism.

As we saw, the signifier in the shape of the Real acts as the point of the negativity in an established discourse. The signified, which is the meaning of the precariat’s experience, is the Real regarding its latent character. This latent meaning is accessible from a particular position of the precariat and eludes an established discourse. From the liberal democratic and metapopulist point of view, the choice for preferring the position of the precariat contravenes a fundamental tenet of “plurality” or “radical plurality” of possible starting perspectives. For this reason, the signifier, which is connected to the precariat’s position, is the Real of liberal democracy and metapopulism.

## Conclusion: Beyond Limits of the Contemporary Power

One of the legacies of Karl Marx is his call to be in the vital centre of our present age. Likewise, we may address the contemporary metamorphosis of power that engenders metapopulism. Generally, the contemporary power seems to disintegrate liberal universalism of citizenship that is deemed to buttress liberal democracy. Because liberal universalism is fading away, we are found in a new political terrain where spectral figures of metapopulism emerge. Simultaneously we have a chance to revive concepts that may have been seen to be obsolete such as the Lukácsian understanding of the proletariat. This is an ambiguity of the contemporary post-liberal situation.

As we saw in the first part, fragmenting effects linked to the exchange value intensified with neoliberal capitalism. Harvey, Jameson, etc. show that neoliberal capitalism resulted in communities living in different worlds among which an uncommunicative ‘otherness’ prevails. The liberal universalism of citizenship as a unifying meta-narrative has been disintegrated as a consequence of these fragmenting effects. The ideological and cultural structure of society corresponds to the Lyotardian paralogy that is a coexistence of heterogeneous “language games” with temporary contracts without being bound to a unifying meta-language. The paralogical society echoes in a political strategy of metapopulism. The metapopulist

leader creates a discourse that preserves paralogical relations among communities. Paralogy is unstable and volatile, and therefore metapopulism generates principles that would bring order to this chaos and substitute a unifying liberal universalism.

The first unifying principle is the allegorical signifier. I depicted allegory in Jameson's sense as the signifier such as "Trump," "Putin" or "patriotism" that is separated from values and ideas as shared by a community. An allegorical signifier respects paralogical social relationships that are constantly reproduced by neoliberal capitalism. Simultaneously the allegorical signifier becomes a common representative one for heterogeneous communities. It promises a unification of society that would consist in an underlying idea ("patriotism," "great America") but this idea acts provided that keeps being meaningless.

Metapopulism can attract a heterogeneous community by signifiers such as "global corrupt elite" and "global Capitalism" that capture gaps in "correct" liberal discourse. These signifiers correspond to the Žižekian term "the Real" as introducing gaps and inconsistencies into a symbolical order. The Real signifier promises to attribute a social meaning to the experience of the system's failures (the promise of sublimation). However, the promise of sublimation remains unfulfilled because of a chasm between the signifier and the signified that is an allegorical manner of signification which cannot be removed in metapopulism. From this analysis, it follows that metapopulism generates the promise of sublimation which attracts people from heterogeneous groups but this promise is failed constantly. Allegory and the Real are principles of spectral unification. In the third part, I searched for another type of a discursive and practical unification challenging metapopulism that dissolves universalism of citizenship along with its egalitarian elements. For this purpose, I put forward the Lukácsian concept of unification because the precariat is the class that is the result of the recent evolution of capitalism, which corresponds to Lukács's definition of the proletariat.

Along these lines, I proposed to develop a new praxis of sublimation. Here, the chasm between the signifier and the signified would transform into dialectical interconnection. The Lukácsian imputation of class consciousness creates the signifier that is the Real as was the case with the metapopulist imaginary Real, but instead of the chasm, there appears a vivid relation to the signified which are the experience of the system's failures. The signifier such as "global Capital" is the Real which unifies fragmented thoughts and experience of the precariat. This is the Real with a determinate meaning which I analysed in part "Metapopulism and Spectral Unification" as the first possible interpretation of the Real signifier such as global Capital. I argued that the Real signifier with a determinate meaning that was Capital in the Marxist sense cannot attract people from heterogeneous communities. This failure of the Marxist signifier concerned the paralogical and psychotic society, which was a hotbed of metapopulism. I supposed that the theoretical and praxeological operation of imputation could transform paralogies and social psychosis into the experience of true representation that would be provided by the sublimated Real signifier. A determinate meaning of the signifier "global Capital" would be perceived as the Real that the metapopulist leader always-already forecloses. A determinate meaning of the signifier is the Real of metapopulism that could propel the process of unification which consists in sublimation.

The political praxis of sublimation may create the conditions under which an alternative to metapopulist capitalism would be imaginable.

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