

THE 'NIGHT OF THE WORLD': POWER, SUBJECTION, AND CRISIS

Introduction

In what follows, my primary objective is to argue for, and articulate, the contours of a psychoanalytic critique of ideology; then I want to add a few things about how this relates to the public support of Authority during times of economic crisis and the recent CUPE 3903 strike at York University – something of which I hope will add to a Marxian critique of ideology. The psychoanalytic critique of ideology that I defend is one that is informed by the work of the contemporary philosopher and psychoanalyst, Slavoj Žižek, whose re-interpretation of the work of the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, is enhanced by his understanding of German Idealist philosophy, from Kant, through Schelling, to Hegel. It is with Hegel that the title of my presentation, the 'Night of the World', is associated (see Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*).

For Hegel (as read by Žižek), 'night' indicates something about the pre-Symbolic, or the pre-Ontological world of blind drives; or, the world prior to its linguistic/symbolic dismemberment. What I posit as crisis, or disruption – or, in the psychoanalytic sense, trauma – is an encounter with the negativity (or the 'nothingness', in philosophical terms) of this 'night of the world'. As I hope to make clear, it is through disruptions, or traumas, that we can come to understand something about the truth of the existing state of things by analyzing it from the perspective of negativity – this, after all, is what dialectics is about.

Psychoanalysis and Marxism: Ideology, from Symptom to Fetish

Both psychoanalysis and Marxism are sciences (if I can call them that) that focus on elements of ‘disruption’. Marxism addresses economic disruptions, or crises, while psychoanalysis addresses disruptions as traumas. For both, disruptions indicate something regarding the truth about the systems they analyse. Ideology, then, provides an account for disruptions in a way that minimizes their traumatic effects for the reigning order. Ideology, in other words, is an attempt at rationalizing some irrational traumatic kernel.

A traditional Marxian critique of ideology is ‘symptomal’: it allows one to perceive the false Truth of the reigning order by locating its symptom. For Marxism, the symptom of capitalism – or more generally, of ‘class struggle’ – is the existence of the proletariat. The symptomal mode of ideology critique relies on a notion of ‘false consciousness’; however, today, we supposedly live in a ‘post-ideological’ era, where Authority no longer has to rely on false representations of ‘reality’ and a naïve consciousness. The enigma of the contemporary reigning order is that its symptom is in plain view for all to see, yet it still persists in its rule. In this situation, it is not possible to conceive ideology as a false-consciousness. Who, today, is unaware of the flaws of capitalism? Even hard-core neoliberal pundits, such as Alan Greenspan, have had to admit to their ‘mistakes’ (Andrews).

A psychoanalytic critique of ideology, in contrast to the symptomal mode of ideology critique, is fetishistic. Rather than conceiving ideology as a false representation of reality, a psychoanalytic critique of ideology asks: how is reality (always-)already constructed as ideological? The difference between the Marxian conception of fetish (as

in ‘commodity fetishism’) and a psychoanalytic conception of fetish is that, with the former the fetish conceals a true reality, whereas the latter hides the Void, or the gap, around which Symbolic reality is, itself, structured. In Marxism, a fetish hides the true reality, whereas, in psychoanalysis, a fetish is constitutive of reality (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 49). What happens, then, when the fetish is removed, or disappears?

***Cogito* and Desire in Psychoanalysis: A Psychoanalytic Thesis on Ideology**

One of Žižek’s philosophical aims is to bring back into critical theory the relevance of the Cartesian subject of the *cogito* as it was taken up in German Idealism. His point, of course, is not to return to the Cartesian *cogito*, as a completely self-aware, centred subject of certainty; rather, Žižek wants to return to the element of doubt in Descartes. It is the doubting of one’s existence, or being, that brings a traumatic disruption into the mind of the subject. Trauma is an encounter with the impossibility of non-being (or absolute negativity) – with that which creates a rupture in to the certainty of the Self.

In both psychoanalysis and German Idealism, and in Marxism to a certain extent, the subject represents a Void, or gap, in the Symbolic order. The Freudian method interprets spots or stains, or disruptions, which mark the uncertainty of the subject’s own self-reflexive sense of existence. Desire develops as an evasion of a traumatic encounter, one which brings the subject into contact with her own non-existence. Desire emerges as a projection of *possibility* in order to evade a traumatic *impossibility* – that of non-being. The noumenal object of desire is thus the very substance of the subject’s own sense of complete Self-unity (in the ontological sense).

The psychoanalytic thesis consists in the suggestion that, in order to evade the impossibility of complete Self-unity, or enjoyment/*jouissance*, the subject submits herself to prohibition. If *jouissance* is prohibited, then its attainment is conceivably possible, and our access to it is limited, not by its impossibility, but by its prohibition. Prohibition saves the possibility of *jouissance*, and at the same time, initiates the subject into the Symbolic order. In the Symbolic order, the subject assumes a symbolic mandate (an identity) through which she can present herself to the Symbolic Other. Here, we are not dealing with the false consciousness of the subject herself, but with the (perceived) false consciousness of the (big) Other, of the Symbolic order.

This is how a psychoanalytic critique of ideology can be understood: rather than an internalization of external, contingent false representations of ‘reality’, ideology has to do with the externalization of the result of an inner necessity. Ideology has to do with the subject’s ‘passionate attachment’ to the (external) Authority of the Symbolic order, which allows her to evade the traumatic impossibility of *jouissance*, and to constitute herself as an actually existing being from the perspective of the Symbolic Other. Because of the subject’s ‘passionate attachment’ to the Symbolic order any rupture in the functioning of Authority is felt by the subject as something traumatic: a rupture in the Symbolic order equals a rupture in the subject’s own self-reflexive sense of existence.

Contrary to the standard Althusserian definition, ideological interpellation does not involve the *internalization* of some external, contingent discourse (in the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), or the Foucauldian ‘disciplines’); it involves the subject’s *externalization* of her own inner necessity of being, which she endeavours to have recognized by the Authority of the Symbolic Other through her actual participation in

particular ISAs. It involves an evasion of the gap/Void constitutive of subjectivity (see Dolar 78; Žižek, “Spectre” 4; Žižek, *Tarrying* 73-74; and, Žižek, *Sublime Object* 43). It is not that the subject recognizes herself in the ideological hail/call *tout suite* – there is no spontaneous attachment to ideology; the subject, rather, attaches herself to her own being recognized by the Other: the relief of assuming a Symbolic mandate – of knowing that, “I am (this).”

Power and Subjection: Where Butler Comes Close to Psychoanalysis

Butler holds to a similar thesis, generated from the Foucauldian perspective on Power and subjection. The paradox of subjection, according to her, has to do, on the one hand, with being dominated “by a power external to oneself,” and on the other hand, finding out that, “what ‘one’ is, one’s very formation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon that very power” (Butler 1-2). In this way, Power “is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbour and preserve in the beings that we are” (Ibid 2). However, her argument diverges from the psychoanalytic one that I am advocating when she claims that, “power imposes itself on us, and weakened by its force, we come to *internalize* or accept its terms” (Ibid, emphasis added). She adds, and here I agree with her to a certain extent, that in addition to this account we must understand that, “‘we’ who accept such terms are fundamentally dependent on those terms for ‘our’ existence” (Ibid). Subjection, according to Butler, “signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (Ibid). Butler claims that the agency of the subject is ‘passionately attached’ to her own subjection. In Foucauldian terms, ‘where there is

power there is resistance’, and, following through with this thesis, the formation of the subject’s agency is realized in its resistance to (or, inherent transgression of) power.

Two Points of Differentiation: On Identity-Agency and Violence

Two points differentiate the Marxian-psychoanalytic approach I am advocating from the Foucauldian approach developed by Butler. First, the psychoanalytic subject represents, the Void or the gap in the Symbolic order. *Individuals* are not interpellated into *subjects*, as Althusser claims. Rather, *subjects* (the subject of the unconscious) are interpellated as *individuals* in the Symbolic order. To be interpellated as an individual means filling-in the Void or gap of the Symbolic order. Here it is important to distinguish between subjectivity and *identity*. Identity is what one acquires in the process of interpellation. Identity, produced through power, is an effect of ideology. In opposition to Butler (and Foucault), I claim that it is possible for the subject to have agency beyond the Symbolic order, and this is, precisely, the outcome of the psychoanalytic cure.

The psychoanalytic cure is correlative with what Lukács referred to as the ‘consciousness of the proletariat’, or what Fredric Jameson refers to as ‘cognitive mapping’. The agency of the subject, from the psychoanalytic perspective, is *not* (totally) dependent upon her subjection to Power, and in the process of developing a proletarian ‘class consciousness’, or in the process of going through the psychoanalytic cure, identity is precisely that which the subject sacrifices as a condition of (emancipated) agency. In order to escape ideology one must *risk* identity.

This first point, allows us, finally, to understand something about the public support of Authority in response to the current economic crisis, as well as the State response to the labour ‘disruption’ last year at York University. The second point I want to make is this: Power is not only dependent upon the subject’s submission to Authority as a guarantee of her own existence. To simply suggest that Power is (only) the result of one’s (ideological) submission to Authority is, I think, somewhat tasteless and vulgar, and ultimately ignores ongoing forms of State *violence*, not to mention other forms of obscene, supplemental violence, such as sexism, racism, and homophobia. There is, of course, a violence that persists at the core of Power and Authority, and this is how I want us to interpret the Marxian conception of the ‘class struggle’.

Class Struggle, Today

Here, I do not think that Butler would disagree that Authority (or, to use Butler’s Foucauldian terms, ‘Power’) manipulates and exploits the external necessity of the Symbolic order for which the subject’s own self-reflexive sense of being is posited. However, I think that it is time to bring a Marxian theory of the State back into discussions of Power (as opposed to ‘biopolitics’). In complement to ideological apparatuses or ‘disciplines’, or juridical institutions, it is necessary to interrogate the repressive apparatuses of the State; not just the militaristic elements of State authority, but also the violent elements of economic exploitation, which the state makes possible through (post-)political acts of administration. The state is first and foremost an institution for sanctioning the domination of the capitalist class.

The state is, in fact, a class state. The role of the state, from the Marxian perspective, is to ensure the rule of a particular class. And this is how we can understand

the role of the state in the current economic crisis, as well as its role in forcing striking CUPE members back to work at York University.

An expression that I keep hearing from Marxian economists in the midst of the economic crisis, one that I think provides an accurate account of the class state in capitalist society is the following: during ‘normal’ periods of fully functioning capitalism we have the privatization of profits, while in periods of crisis there is a socialization of risks, losses and debts. When there is abundance, it is usurped by the ruling class, and when there are losses, they are spread to the rest of society, so that the ruling class can maintain (if not its absolute dominance, *per se*, then at least) its relative comfort as a social body. So it would seem, as Žižek has recently pointed out, that socialism is alright as long as it is used to save capitalism, or the capitalist class (Žižek, “Don’t Just Do Something”). And, contrary to neoliberal ideology, the role of the state, in this case – as we saw in the U.S. with its ‘bailout’ packages – was, in fact, to involve itself in the market economy.

Something similar occurred in the case of the CUPE strike at York. In its official ideology, the liberal-democratic doctrine advocates for the rights to free assembly and protest, even the right to withdraw one’s labour. Here we should consider the difference between the ruling ideology and *the ideas which seem to rule*. This is evident in the case of the CUPE strike: the forcing of workers back to the job through violent (i.e. legalistic) recourse clearly contradicts the reigning liberal-democratic ideology, while simultaneously re-enforcing its own dogmatism (i.e., the ‘rule of law’). It is important to understand, here, that the legal framework of the state is one that is necessary for maintaining the rule of a particular class. Legalistic violence is *still* violence. It is a form

of objective, ‘systemic’, invisible violence, as opposed to visible ‘subjective’ violence. Žižek notes the difference between the two in his recent book, *Violence*. Subjective violence is of the kind where there is an identifiable assailant, such as in theft, or ‘terror’. Objective violence, in contrast, is the kind of violence that maintains the ‘normal’ everyday functioning of the ruling order. Crises, in fact, give us an indication of the kind of ‘founding violence’ that is necessary and maintained to secure the functioning of the everyday order. I am even tempted to suggest a reversal of the expression ‘class struggle’ here. What we are witnessing with State reactions to economic crisis and labour disruption is, not necessarily the struggle of the proletariat, but the struggle (particularly in times of crisis) of the ruling class to forcibly maintain its rule over the proletariat.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if we want to understand something about the ‘truth’ regarding the ‘normal’ functioning of a system, we need to observe how it functions during a crisis, or in the way it deals with traumatic encounters. This is where Marxism and psychoanalysis cross paths. A psychoanalytic critique of ideology involves understanding the relationship between the subject and her agency within a Symbolic order – a relationship that is to be regarded as symbiotic: the subject, in fact, wagers her own existence – that is, her own identity – on the existence of the Symbolic Other (in developing a class consciousness, identity is precisely what one must sacrifice). This is how we can understand public reactions to economic crisis and labour disruption, particularly, or (I should say) especially those reactions which are supportive of the reigning order and Authority. My claim is that support for the reigning order is felt as support for one’s own existence, or identity – one ‘passionately attaches’ one’s very being to the existence of

the Symbolic. However, at the limits of the Symbolic, we find the violence of the State authority: where it is not possible to (fully) exploit the ‘passionate attachment’ of subjects to Authority, the State intervenes to maintain the wealth and rule of the dominant class. And finally, it is at this limit of the Symbolic, the limit where the violence of state Authority has to intervene to maintain the ruling order, the limit of negativity represented by the Hegelian notion of ‘night’, that I think it is necessary to again think of Power in the terms of the class struggle.

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