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Žižek's Notion of Ideology Critique in Context

Editorial Introduction

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Today, 13th December 2009, the *Observer* reports that

Ireland has moved steadily through the five stages of grief since the collapse of its "tiger" economy in 2008. Denial and anger marked the early months, but on Wednesday it reached the final stage -- acceptance -- when Brian Lenihan, the minister for finance, introduced a budget so harsh that it was described as "masochistic" by the *Financial Times* [...].

We are assured that 'Lenihan had no choice', and learn how

Wednesday's savagery, and its calm acceptance by so many, has bought Ireland some breathing space. If acceptance does not revert to denial and anger, Ireland has a chance of making further changes that will be essential to bring about a full repair. But if the unions succeed in frustrating the cuts by destroying the government, the International Monetary Fund will be forced to pick up Lenihan's axe, and it will wield it with even more violence.

The accompanying piece on Britain delivers the same message:

The fallout from last week's pre-budget report has made the dividing lines in British politics clear – how deep, where, and how fast should cuts be made to reduce Britain's deficit.¹

Nothing confirms the relevance of Žižek's critique of ideology more than the ferocious speed with which the deepest crisis in the history of capitalism has been naturalized and normalized within the short space of less than a year.

Capitalism is not only a mode of production. It is also a religion, as Benjamin remarked. Far from being merely *conditioned* by a religious mentality in the sense of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, capitalism was for Benjamin a through and through religious phenomenon. His fragment 'Capitalism as Religion' distinguishes four essential features. Capitalism is, first, a purely cultic religion, without theology or theoretical justification. The order of things flows from the performative power of the cult which manifests itself in practice as utilitarianism with religious overtones. Second, as a cultic religion capitalism is permanent in the terrifying sense that each day is a holy day demanding unrelenting devotion, without exception. Third, rather than atonement, the capitalist cult gives rise to *Schuld* (debt-guilt-blame) and, ultimately, destruction as the only path to salvation. God, no longer transcendent (yet anything but dead), is incorporated into the earthly fate of *Schuld* and despair from which there is no escape other than by way of endurance, intensification and fulfilment. Such is the historical monstrosity of this religion that it no longer offers the *reform* of being as a road to redemption, but its obliteration. Yet Benjamin did not stop at this point. The religious matrix of capitalism was to have yet another important feature: its God had to be concealed until the end was nigh.²

The current issue of the *IJZS* is the first in a series of annual guest-issues edited by the Cardiff [Centre for Ideology Critique and Žižek Studies](#). The Centre was established in December 2007 to facilitate collaborative research into the question of ideology formation and the works of Žižek, Lacan and Marx. Inspired by Žižek's pioneering work, it explores the formation of ideologies against the background of the changes in the libidinal as well as the political economy of late capitalist society. Our approach to the analysis and critique of ideology draws on the Freudo-Marxian insight that in order to change the matrix of global capitalism it is essential to understand both the political economy and the deep libidinal attraction of the forms of exploitation and domination that have made us who we are.

While in 2007-8 our research focused on the theoretical foundations of Žižek's work and its relationship to Foucault's, since 2009 it centres on two themes: I. psychoanalysis and ideology critique, and II. political economy and ideology critique.

I. Žižek's critical approach to ideology stems from the Lacanian insight that all social orders are stained by a self-generated libidinal excess which makes them inconsistent and

subject to change. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, enjoyment (*jouissance*) has a substantial status: it is the surplus produced by the signifier (language) the moment it comes into play, and henceforth it drives and simultaneously disturbs all human activity. Our basic problem as speaking beings is how to manage the libidinal surplus we produce the moment we enter the social link. From this perspective, the historical and epistemological novelty of capitalism is that it elevates enjoyment, its intrinsic structural limit, 'into the very principle of social life, the speculative movement of money begetting more money' (Žižek). Capitalist ideology functions by surreptitiously converting *jouissance* into value – into something which is valorised and exchanged. Through this conversion, the system's limit is transformed into its main strength, literally its productive engine.

We believe that it is vitally important to retain the Lacanian focus on the historical shift in the function of *jouissance* caused by the advent of capitalism. Particularly with global capitalism, enjoyment has become a powerful ideological category because it feigns a non-ideological function, thus preventing the constitution of alternative political projects. In this respect, Žižek has inaugurated a fertile field of study within which we intend to elaborate not only a psychoanalytic critique of capitalism, but also, more urgently, a theory and practice of its reconfiguration into a different order.

II. With the ideological battle over how to interpret the current recession in full swing, there is a renewed interest in Marxian theories of capital, commodity fetishism and crisis. What they are expected to deliver is not so much a set of solutions as the capacity to redefine the problem. In Marx's critique of political economy, capitalism is seen as a form of social reproduction that weaves three implacable and destructive conflicts into the social fabric.

1. It subordinates the production of use value (goods and services) to the production of surplus-value (profits). In doing so, it renders the right to exist precarious for anyone and anything unable to be employed or utilised on profitable terms. This is the single most important impediment to tackling climate change today and also the root cause of the current economic crisis.
2. The capitalist mode of social reproduction sets in motion a class conflict over the performance and appropriation of surplus labour. The conflict originates in the dual nature of wage labour as both source of profit and cost factor. It not only constrains purchase power in an economic system that thrives on mass consumption, leading periodically to the eruption of crises; it also undermines the historical capacity of capital to generate exchange-value (the specifically capitalist form of wealth) as well as surplus-value (the very purpose and driving force of the capitalist mode of production). What we experience today is not primarily the result of a "credit crunch" but a momentous profit crunch.
3. The capitalist mode of production locks our social and economic development in a universal race for surplus-value and abstract growth in the face of relatively decreasing

profit margins (global market competition). Its blind dynamics not only accelerates what it wishes to combat (the relative fall in the rate of profit), it produces “finance bubbles”, social devastation and military conflict in its wake.

Woven into the social fabric like Ariadne threads, the three interrelated conflicts lead us to the heart of today’s economic meltdown and the deep systemic roots of the unfolding ecological catastrophe. Why does the rerun of Keynesian regulations not resolve the economic crisis? Can a Green New Deal succeed while the systemic gap between work to be had and work to be done is historically widening before our very eyes? What alternatives do Marxian approaches offer in the face of the monumental failure of Marxism in the 20th century? We intend to explore these and other questions with a view to developing desirable and sustainable solutions to the all-annihilating crisis of capital engulfing us today.

Lacanian and Marxian frameworks will provide the staples for our guest-issues over the next couple of years. The articles collected in the current issue explore the conceptual validity, empirical usefulness and political implications of Žižek’s notion of ideology critique in a variety of different contexts.

In ‘Thought is Grievance: on Žižek’s Parallax’, Rex Butler develops a parallel analysis of Žižek’s notions of “symptom” in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and “parallax” in his later *The Parallax View* (2006). From there, he examines Žižek’s pivotal concept of “subtraction” in light of the notion of grievance: how is grievance to be conceived in relation to thought, and specifically in relation to both Lacan’s analysis of Descartes’ Cogito and Žižek’s treatment of cognitivism? Indeed, what is the politics of thinking itself? To qualify these issues Butler looks at Žižek’s reading of disaster films such as *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact*. Can these films help us to identify the dynamics of thought in connection with the necessity of an act in times of overwhelming emergency?

Jodi Dean’s ‘The Real Internet’ draws out the implications of Žižek’s work on cyberspace to examine how they might be employed to debunk the ideology of communicative capitalism. Theorizing virtuality in close connection with the decline of symbolic efficiency, Dean extends her analysis into the field of practices known as Web 2.0. She argues that Žižek’s conceptualization of the inhuman core of the drives at the heart of the human opens up an understanding of the internet as Real, in turn prompting a critique of leading theorists such as Kittler and Hansen.

In his paper, entitled ‘Struggling with Žižek’s Ideology’, Jan Jagodzinski re-examines Žižek’s stance on ideology. He does so by tackling the key issue of the Žižekian “act”, and then by questioning Žižek’s reading of Deleuze in *Organs Without Bodies*, arguing that the encounter between the two thinkers is in fact a missed encounter. Similarly to Lacan’s and Badiou’s, Jagodzinski maintains, Žižek’s philosophical understanding of negativity can only bump up squarely against Deleuze and Guattari’s affirmative stance. The deadlock thereby

produced offers political consequences which can only materialize in two radically divergent paths. Furthermore, these paths are kept apart by two contrasting views of infinity as they are developed in the Kantian antinomy of the mathematical and dynamic sublime.

Todd McGowan's contribution, 'The Necessity of Belief, Or, The Trouble with Atheism', presents an understanding of religious belief as the result of the encounter with absence in the structure of signification. McGowan claims that the most fruitful way to counteract the power of religious belief is not overt struggle against it, but rather the insistence on the absolute necessity of the faith that follows from the destabilizing encounter with absence. Žižek's theorization of Christianity as a political practice is therefore deeply informed by the awareness of the necessity of faith. Paradoxically, atheism itself cannot ignore the enduring power of religion, which emerges not from the contingent psychology of belief but from the realization of the ontological significance of negativity. McGowan's conclusion is that, rather than trying to topple Christian faith, Žižek wants to sustain its form while transforming its content.

In their essay 'A Subject that Matters: Žižek's Ideology Critique Today', Fabio Vighi and Heiko Feldner take a closer look at Žižek's understanding of subjectivity in relation to the process of subjectivation that binds us to the other's desire (Lacan's "big Other"). They explore the impact of Hegel and Lacan on Žižek's formulation of the subject, consider the political strategies that might emerge from such formulation, and discuss how Žižek's recent take on subtraction ("Bartleby politics") activates the transformative capacity of the subject while in turn intersecting with the transformative potential of the social. To substantiate the relevance and topicality of Žižek's approach, they propose a reading of the current economic crisis through the category of subtraction.

In his '*Habermas avec Žižek*', Ricardo Camargo critiques Habermas's theory of communicative action through the theory of ideology formulated by Žižek. Drawing on Žižek's early notion of the Real as that which is primordially repressed, Camargo claims that Habermas's communicative rationality embodies a particular kind a delusion constituted through the combination of cynical rationality and a fantasy construction process, both working as ideological devices.

With his 'Shakespeare's Politics of Invisibility: Power and Ideology in *The Tempest*' Etienne Poulard applies Žižek's ideology critique to a classic literary text. If for Žižek the main function of ideology is to offer us social reality as escapism, then Shakespeare's *The Tempest* offers a near perfect incarnation of this argument, for Prospero's fantasy of absolute power is consistently deferred to a perpetual tomorrow. Drawing on Michel Foucault's conflation of visibility and power, the essay shows how power itself is sustained by an ideological narrative which has to remain hidden from the absolute ruler: indeed, ideology must remain invisible to keep the vacuity of the Real at bay.

Daniel Hourigan's 'Techne and Impossibility: Re-reading Žižek's Ideology-Critique as Geisteskritik' examines Žižek's ideology critique with the combined aim of conceptually distinguishing the deployment of techne as the other side of impossibility, and formulating an ethics concerning *techne*. Hourigan shows how Žižek's analyses of the "ideological filler" and its inherent impossibility open onto *techne* as the other side of impossibility. Consequently, Žižek's branch of ideology critique encourages the crafting (*techne*) of the identity of the human subject and simultaneously forestalls the full realization of this identity from the subject.

The issue ends with Fabio Vighi's review of Adrian Johnston's new book *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: the Cadence of Change*, followed by Johnston's response. Both contributions are centred on the key Žižekian topic of the transformative potential of theory.

Cardiff, 13th December 2009

¹ *The Observer*, 13th December 2009, pp. 24-25.

² Walter Benjamin (1921), 'Kapitalismus als Religion', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols, Frankfurt on Main, Suhrkamp, 1991, vol. 6, pp. 100 – 102.