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Hauntology or the Return of the Real Man: Edging the Žižek-Laclau controversy on populism

Jan De Vos – Ghent University, Belgium.

Introduction: I want to become human

“I want to become human”, said Hans Van Themsche when he heard the jury sentencing him to life. Hans Van Themsche, eighteen years old, bought a hunting rifle, dressed up in the style of *The Matrix*, and walked through the centre of Antwerp intending to kill some *coloured trash*; he shot three people – only one of whom survived – before being shot in the stomach by a policeman. He said “I want to become human, I need professional help”. Should we tell him that after all, we the professionals do not know precisely what the human is ourselves? Consider for example the fierce battle during his trial between the independent psychiatric experts who diagnosed him autistic and declared him to be of unsound mind, and psy-professionals who in the media claimed to speak for everyone who was shocked and offended by the alleged relationship between autism and inhuman atrocities. This battle of the experts was already the second one in this trial: the first was a debate over whether or not racism was a motive for Hans Van Themsche’s deeds – his family was involved in the Flemish populist xenophobic party *Vlaams Belang*? Academia disagreed: a case of racism or autism? Sociology or (neuro)psychology? But is it not clear that both stances undermine any concept of responsibility, let alone subjectivity? This case seems to lay bare that we no longer understand what responsibility is and more generally, what the human is, in spite of all the available sociological or neuropsychological explanations.

Mainstream science however has no difficulty in bypassing this deadlock in understanding.

A renowned Flemish professor for example, in his new book for parents, unhesitatingly links sociology to neurology. Commenting on the Van Themsche trial he contends that it is normal for adolescents to engage in black-and-white thinking, considering “how the brains of a teenager function”. A music-choice, becoming a vegetarian fanatic, racist talk ... all this is connected with the fact that “teenager brains [are] not yet fully developed” (Adriaenssens 2007). Equally clear and simple is how he assesses the contemporary educational difficulties: 'There is a lot of knowledge in the world, but with the public this often is limited to the basic ABC. And then those parents coming to the one-hour consult, have to grasp everything we've learned in a long academic training' (Adriaenssens 2006). So what is a human? What is a teenager? What is education? The answer a certain branch of academia provides to deal with the problems these questions pose should not be misunderstood: it is *Knowledge*. So if Hans Van Themsche wants to become human, the proper answer is to *instruct* him in psychology and sociology and the like. With his “I want professional help” Van Themsche showed that the extreme-right discourse failed in providing him with an answer to his quest for Being, the question however is whether he is right to place his ontological hope on professional and academic help. Remember Lacan's statement that *le discours de la science ne laisse aucune place à l'homme* (the discourse of science leaves no place whatsoever for man). The paradox is that if we are to provide Hans Van Themsche with the academic knowledge of the Humanities and social sciences, then maybe also Lacan's assertion should figure in our lessons.

In this paper I aim to situate today's academization – academic knowledge having become central in mediating the presence of the human being with himself, the others and the world – as a question of ideology. I will demonstrate this by opposing the theories of ideology critique of, on the one hand Ernesto Laclau and, on the other, Slavoj Žižek. I will first depart from Laclau's attempt to ground a critique of ideology in the idea of the *absent fullness of society* as he engages with the social theorist Michael Walzer. As we will see, Laclau however remains stuck in the Academic matrix and fails to understand Academia's urge to go *beyond Academia* (in order to return of course). This will then be set against the contemporary claim of having entered an era *beyond politics*. In times of globalization, it will be argued, academization can be understood within Žižek's notion of pseudo-concreteness. This will lead us straight into the heart of the controversy between Laclau and Žižek on populism: as their dispute on populism will ultimately boil down to a dispute on what *real man* is. Laclau's theory, missing the dimension of the uncanny and the truth shall thus be contrasted with Žižek's recourse to the idea of hauntology as the basis for Žižek's reasserting of what we could call *the rock of class struggle*. Class struggle furthermore will turn out to be also the issue at stake in that other debate of Žižek with Yannis Stavrakakis. In the concluding part the viability of Žižekian hauntology is questioned given the impossible politization of psychoanalysis and its *skandalons*.

Beyond Academia

In *The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology* (1997), Laclau explores the very possibility of ideology critique engaging with some theses put forward by Žižek. At a given point Laclau comments upon a passage in which the social theorist Michael Walzer questions his reactions to television images showing people marching in the streets of Prague in the year of 1989. The protesters were carrying signs saying “Truth” and “Justice”. Walzer recalls that he immediately recognized what the signs meant and instantly endorsed the values being defended. He asks:

How could I penetrate so quickly and join so unreservedly in the language game or the power play of a distant demonstration? The marchers shared a culture with which I was largely unfamiliar; they were responding to an experience I had never had. And yet, I could have walked comfortably in their midst. I could carry the same signs (Walzer 1994: 1)

The issue for us is how to understand Walzers’ bewilderment. Is Walzer suddenly aware of his own simple feelings and his sense of belonging to the common people: *I am human after all*? It is a joyful celebrated claim of universality, in the light of the fall of Communism, Walzer seems to revel in his being connected to the real world of real man: it assures him that if circumstances were different, he too would walk on the streets as a true citizen. Nevertheless, this is only one side of the picture: almost immediately Walzer interrupts his reveries and defies the *post-modern* thinkers he mistrusts: “Is there any recent account, any post-modernist account, of political language that can explain this understanding and acknowledgement?” (Walzer 1994: 1). From the real world back to Academia. The academic movement resembles that of a creature, probing the outer-world with its tentacles only to quickly withdraw them and contemplatively devour the sampled reality. Challenging post-modern relativism Walzer returns to the academic debate and thus himself in a way *deconstructs* his alleged authentic feelings and being connected to the real world. His nostalgia as such confirms that (post)modernity is thoroughly marked by an always returning reflexive distance. Are not both movements, the push to reality and the return to the academic pondering on it, the primal axes of (post)modern reflexivity? Modernity made us all academic subjects who regard ourselves through the academic gaze; academia became post-modern man’s habitat. As science never satisfies the modern subject in his quest for a positive ontological ground, modern man must leave academia to rehumanize himself through eruptive excursions to a supposedly real *outer world*. The modern academic subject always falls between two positions and finds itself neither in academia nor real life: *le discours de la science ne laisse aucune place à l’homme* .

What we are stating here concerning academic subjectivity echoes the approach Laclau takes to ideology critique in his aforementioned essay. There he tries to account for Žižek’s idea

that ideology critique inevitably departs from a presupposed zero-level, or extra-ideological, reality. For Žižek claiming such a neutral position is “the ideological misconception *par excellence*” (Laclau 1997: 298). This *there is no beyond ideology* of ideology critique seems to return in the *there is no beyond academia* which we saw emerging in Walzer’s account. For the late-modern academic subject there is nothing positive beyond the academic way of seeing and experiencing things. At the same time, the presupposition of an extra-sociological, extra-psychological, in short, extra-academic reality, is the very condition for a subjective position in the *academified* post-modern habitat. Walzer depends upon the idea that if things were otherwise, he would leave the campus and walk the streets as a commoner underneath the flag of one or two big words. But in the same way as Laclau and Žižek argue that the “operation of the supposedly ‘extra-ideological’ reality depends on a mechanism belonging to the ideological realm” (Laclau 1997: 298), the movement beyond academia is itself structured as academization. Walzer, trying to ground his connection to *real humanity*, cannot but engage himself in the *post-modernist* debate. There is no positive place beyond Academia.

There is a second similarity between the paradox of ideology critique and that of post-modern academic subjectivity. Laclau elaborates Žižek’s idea that the signifier *ideology* is too strong: where everything is understood in terms of ideology, ideology critique loses all meaning. Žižek argues:

Therein resides one of the main reasons for progressive abandonment of the notion of ideology: this notion somehow grows 'too strong', it begins to embrace everything, inclusive of the very neutral, extra-ideological ground supposed to provide the standard by means of which one can measure ideological distortion. That is to say, is not the ultimate result of discourse analysis that the order of discourse as such is inherently 'ideological'? (Žižek 1994: 16)

For Laclau this is the death of the theory of ideology: the inflation of the concept of ideology makes it lose all analytical precision (Laclau 1997: 297). Is this not exactly the paradox of contemporary psychology, which plays a central role in today’s academization? For, explaining everything psychologically, the psy-signifiers become too strong and *the psyche* as such disappears. Maybe this is how we can understand that in psychology psychological explanations made way for biological and neurological paradigms: pan-psychologization leads to de-psychologization (De Vos 2008). But, and this is the peculiarity of the death of psychology, it does not make psychology disappear. In the contrary, the omnipresence of psychologists nowadays – from pre-natal counselling to palliative care, spreading the psy-signifiers through a multitude of discourses – testifies that contemporary mainstream psychology exactly feeds on the allergy for the dimension of the psyche. Maybe post-modern psychologization thus realizes what Adorno and Horkheimer already saw emerging in the rise of fascism in the 1930s; namely a de-psychologized subject as effect of *administrated* modern life. For Adorno and Horkheimer the modern subject came under

the sway of the logic of techno-rationality instead of the Oedipal father figure who was responsible for the psychological profile of pre-modern man (Adorno & Horkheimer). Today de-psychologization is exactly connected to the heightened presence of the psycho-social sciences in so-called post-modern everyday life. But in a peculiar way, psychology as such was already figuring in Adorno's analysis of fascist propaganda:

Just as little as people believe in the depth of their hearts that the Jews are the devil, do they completely believe in their leader. They do not really identify themselves with him but act this identification, perform their own enthusiasm, and thus participate in their leader's performance [...] It is probably the suspicion of this fictitiousness of their own 'group psychology' which makes fascist crowds so merciless and unapproachable. If they would stop to reason for a second, the whole performance would go to pieces, and they would be left to panic (Adorno 1991: 132).

Is this "fictitiousness of their own 'group psychology'" not already the paradox of academization? Modern man knows that it is not real, that it is nothing but theory and psychology, and this propels him into a passionate and sometimes merciless enactment of the rejoining of the real. Our everyday academic outlook on life is actually founded on this *beyond academia*. Walzer's account reveals that there the image of the People arises: his fascination with the television images of people marching in the streets therefore lays bare a fantasy of the people at last united by a righteous cause, being the enactment of the escape from the constraints of (post)modern *academified* life. Does this then not risk to come close to the proto-fascist fascination with natural man and natural life, man and life as they really are? Beyond Academia seems to lead to a beyond politics.

Beyond Politics

To explore the relation of Academia with politics we can depart from the events of May 1968: an instance of the attempt to join the two. It is well known that Lacan was very sceptical to the May 1968 events in Paris. Remember his famous statement: 'The revolutionary aspiration has only a single possible outcome – of ending up as the master's discourse What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one' (Lacan 2006: 207). In addition, Žižek contends that it is no coincidence that the May 68 revolt was located at the universities; it merely signalled a shift to new forms of domination in which the scientific discourse legitimizes the relations of domination (Žižek 2004: 505). The politicization of academia in the sixties lead to an actual de-politization and the further academization of society. Today this is visible in post-politics' embrace of the *learning discourse*. For is not the political answer to a multitude of problems *everybody student again*? Do you want to become parent? Take a parenting course. Problems with drugs? Enrol in a

rehabilitation course. Sex problems? Consider a master-class. Unemployed or worried about keeping your job? Engage in *Life-long learning*: the ultimate answer to our economy's failure to create jobs. The idea that for example Europe should evolve into a *Learning Society* has implications far beyond the ostensible practical economic objective of trying to stay competitive, it is clearly ideologically grounded. As the EU website states in typical euro-language: 'Lifelong Learning is a core element [...] central not only to competitiveness and employability but also social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development' (cited in: Contu *et al.* 2003: 942)

It has been criticized that the Lifelong Learning's claim to be an emancipatory project cannot but result in the opposite. As for example Alessia Contu contends, the learning discourse tends to maintain relations of power and subordination: the positions are defined according to seemingly neutral technical skills and this exactly proscribes the roles that are taken by and ascribed to the citizens/workers (Contu *et al.* 2003: 943) (1). Do the manifold analyses of social and psy-scientists filling our everyday life world not have the same function? Take for example psy-scientists analysing the fact that the Hans Van Themsche-case lead to a so-called White March (2): the experts all pointed to the collective trauma and the necessity of rituals for collective mourning. But it is important to see that also the arguments of the organizers *and* the participants put forward in numerous interviews invariably were informed by the same psychological and therapeutical discourse. In the White March the view of the expert is always already incorporated, the analysis is always already included. Or: the ritual is the collective performance of the analysis. Is it furthermore not significant that a relative of one of Van Themsche's victim proclaimed: "This is not a political march, but a march to show our grievance"? As Vanessa Pupavac, commenting on the collective mourning on the occasion of Princess Diana's death, argued, therapeutic forms are becoming the predominant cultural rites (Pupavac 2004). Academia's neutral knowledge thus proscribes everyone's role in a de-politicised scene. This is a clear instance of Žižek's claim that it is not that we have the wrong idea of how things really are, but, that we have the wrong idea of how in reality things are mystified (Žižek 2005). Mainstream social science analysis may well be the stuff of which today's mystifying veils are made.

The central role late-modern man is called upon to assume is thus exactly to be his own (naïve) anthropologist or psychologist: *look how I behave according to group dynamics, or, look how my behaviour is determined by my genes and our past as hunters-collectors*. But critiquing Academia one could object that the layman is informed foremost by mainstream and popularized theoretizations. Are we then led to the conclusion that unfortunately it are the bad and simple theories which find their way to the public? One could claim that this is exactly the problem of Žižek's skinhead: parroting the expert's psycho-sociological platitudes on his own situation in front of the camera, he returns to the mob not in the least hindered by his academically correct self-assertions (Žižek 1997b). Would it make a difference to instruct the skinhead with the more sophisticated theories, theories that would depart for example from the structural reflexivity of

theory itself? Perhaps we should spread the news that absolute Truth no longer exists leaving only various narratives of what is ultimately beyond our understanding. Laclau is rightfully suspicious of such arguments as he warns that if we hold that there are only incommensurable discourses, then “we merely transfer the notion of a full positivity from an extra-discursive ground to the plurality of the discursive field” (Laclau 1997: 299). This is recognizable within the social sciences. Consider the importation of *evidence based methods* into psycho-social praxis and research: one no longer bothers why or how a therapy or method works; as long as the ciphers show its efficacy. Not only has this neo-empiricism preserved a rather simple form of pure quantitative thinking in the social sciences, but it has also kept alive the meta-perspective which was for so long the departing point. Moreover the idea of the plurality within the discursive field easily fosters absolutist thinking. For example, the claim that *well-being* differs in other cultures and times, is based upon elevating *the idea of well-being* itself to an absolute cross-cultural and cross-historical standard. In this way a particular Olympian view is maintained; while man has no direct access to what makes him tick, science is proclaimed the *via regia* to knowledge *and* salvation. Knowledge is considered the means of emancipation from those biological, psychological and social forces which determine man. This brings us back to the Althusserian approach criticised by Rancière: Althusser’s elitism strongly separates scientific cognition from ideological (mis)recognition in which the masses are immersed: this allows theoreticians to speak for the masses, and to know the truth about them (Žižek 1998): the truth supposed to be beyond politics.

Academization and pseudo-concreteness

So if we depart from an approach of ideology critique to academization we should not fall in the trap of the simple plea for de-theoretization and de-academization of life (3). For academization comes very near to Žižek’s conception of pseudo-concreteness. Žižek explains that notion pointing to computer operating systems. To counter the growing complexity and opaqueness of computers, Apple was the first to try to recreate an artificial concreteness with a *graphic interface*: the pseudo-concreteness of icons enables us to relate to the complex environment of the computer (Žižek 2006a). If the function of psychologization within the broader phenomenon of academization is to give an artificial concreteness to our complex post-modern world – then the PC-metaphor can show us how to understand this. Pseudo-concreteness is not about, for example, the blank male concretizing his socio-economical uncertain situation in the fear for the migrant – pretty much as primitive man sees heavenly creatures at work in thunder and lightning. These simplifications overlook the fact that pseudo-concreteness always is a secondary process. The graphic interface Apple invented is a secondary virtualization allowing us relate to the primary one, namely the growing opaqueness of the PC: evolving from a mere electronic device to a medium of virtual reality. In the same way, it is in light of a *primary virtualization* of our habitat in post-modernity – as

an essential feature of globalization – that man loses his grip and seeks pseudo-concreteness.

According to Žižek, the key issue of late-capitalism is that the ultimate power and control is no longer in the hands of the firm or individual who owns the means of production; it has become a virtual level in which companies are the shareholders of other companies, and borrow money from the bank and in reality own nothing (Žižek 2002). These paradoxes of virtualised capitalism together with the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse backing it up, constitute contemporary alienation and lead to attempts to cope with it. The second virtualization is always an attempt to domesticate the first. The virtuality of Second Life should not be understood as though *first life* were the real and authentic one. Likewise, the dissemination of theories on the functioning of the brain, social skills, group dynamics etc., seems to bring us back a meaningful, manageable life-world: denying the late-modern alienation of globalisation it thrives on the illusion that Real Life just lurks behind the veils of post-modern complexity. And here the line between certain tendencies within mainstream psy-praxis and the populist conservative discourses becomes thin. Think for example how psycho-social action programmes often come in terms of *repairing the social fabric*, or, *the creation of spaces for dialogue and encounter...* The illusion that a return to the real, down-to-earth, unspoiled, *pastoral* kind of *first life* is possible, comes uncannily close to the organicist-corporatist metaphors promising us a return to the alleged authentic way of life we seem to have lost through globalization. The return of politics risks to come in a proto-fascist way. It is only in this mode that we can understand Walzer's fascination with the people marching in the streets united in a righteous cause. His defiance to post-modernist theorists to deliver the explanatory account of political language for his feeling united with the (distant) People has a clear provocative and almost triumphant undertone. And it is there I think Laclau misses a capital point in taking up uncritically Walzer's challenge to deliver the politico-theoretical account of academic man's unreserved and almost *oceanic* feelings of connectedness with the Prague protester. Taking Walzer's defiance at its face value, Laclau's conception of ideology critique, I claim, already carries the germs of the problematic aspects of his theory on populism, which Žižek consequently commented upon.

Laclau's *society does not exist*: stuck in academia?

At the first glance Laclau and Žižek seem to be holding the same position regarding the possibility and the conditions of the critique of ideology. In his answer to Walzer, Laclau puts forward his theorem of *society does not exist* which is very similar to Žižek's ideas. That theorem is the base of how Laclau posits the *resurrection* of ideology critique (answering Žižek's two assertions of *there is no beyond ideology* and the signifier ideology having become too strong). Laclau departs from the deadlock of the conception of ideology as related to notions such as false or distorted consciousness leading to the metalinguistic operation of unmasking. His solution is to put all weight

on the distorting mechanisms themselves: for Laclau the distortion actually serves the representation of an “object which is simultaneously necessary and impossible” (Laclau 1997: 320). That object is society: the distortion of the ideological operation is thus actually giving form to the illusion of the closure of society, an illusion indispensable to the constitution of the social link: 'It is the study of the mechanisms which make this illusion possible that constitutes the specific field of a contemporary theory of ideology' (Laclau 1997: 320). The conception of an *absent fullness of society* is Laclau's central argument to dissociate himself from a traditional form of Marxism which considered class struggle as a solvable alienation. Laclau rejects the idea of a society free of antagonisms. The (necessary) illusion of experiencing society as a meaningful whole works for Laclau via two *distortions*. The first distortion concerns how an impossible object (society) gets represented by a chain of particular contents: for example, society represented by the signifiers *justice, freedom, and democracy*. At the same time an *equivalential relation* weakens the differential character of each link of the chain, this is the second distortion (Laclau 1997). We can understand that none of the signifiers comes in the place of society as such, it is in the interplay between them that the illusion of a full positive society takes form, and in this interplay, the different signifiers lose their particularities, they become *empty*. This is for Laclau the dynamics in which Walzer is caught.

Laclau illustrates this further with mysticism: in the equivalential reiteration in prayers and litanies, the particular words do not matter: “The enumeration does not enrich our conceptual knowledge of the attributes of God” (Laclau 1997: 313). But does not Laclau here miss the subjective position of Walzer? Focussing on the play of signifiers encircling the absent fullness of society, Laclau does not engage with the subjective dynamics underpinning it. Walzer is the academically informed subject who is experiencing a dramatic and compulsive pull from what he believes to be an extra-academic authentic reality. Laclau however, together with Walzer, takes the figure of the Prague protester at its face value and misses how it functions for Walzer as an embodiment of *full, positive man*. Is moreover the figure of the mystic not to be understood along the same lines? Both the Prague protester as the mystic seem thus stand-ins for Authentic Man. As a kind of pre-enlightenment creatures they are probed enviously by Academic Man. Our momentary identification with them is narcissistic: like Freud's cat, the figures of the mystic and the Prague hero appear to us to be satisfied in simply being themselves. Laclau's need to experience society as a meaningful whole, thus is finally linked to the equally necessary illusion that *man exists*, which is maybe *the* founding myth of Academia. This is precisely what Laclau does not question as he fails to make the step from the absent fullness of society to the absent fullness of the subject, and more importantly, it is here that he misses the role of Academia.

Laclau's theory thus risks to remain trapped within the paradoxes of Academia exactly where he fails to account for the subjective position of modern man. The redoubling of man in a figure who seems to live in his place, or seems to be able to live fully, is maybe an echo of the uncanny

double which Freud depicted in *The Uncanny* (Freud [1919]1955). Mladen Dolar contends that the Freudian uncanny has to be understood in terms of the advent of modernity: the objectivisations of man by modern sciences reduced him to a horrifying zero-level of subjectivity (Dolar 1991: 17). In Žižek's terms: the subject is not the result of the objectivisations of science as Foucault would have it, in contrast, the subject is the "indivisible remainder" of that operation (Žižek 2004: 506). Thus the questions paradigmatic to modernity are: *if I know how academic disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, or sociology describe me, can I still feel and act freely, are my enjoyments and griefs still real?* And this zero-level of subjectivity pushes the *homo academicus* in a passionate quest for identification with the figures of Real Man like the mystic or the Prague Protester, always with the possible backlash of the advent of the uncanny, where the gaze of the double de-subjectivises us. This is central in Freudian theory: knowledge does not make man a subject. Žižek reformulates this as the never to be subjectivized knowledge of the drive: "it is uncanny, horrifying even, since it somehow "depossesses" the subject, reducing her or him to a puppet-like level "beyond dignity and freedom" (Žižek 1997a). This uncanny dimension is radically absent from Laclau's theory. And maybe also Ian Parker's critique against discourse analysis holds true for Laclau: the juggling with signifiers by discourse analysis betrays a bureaucratic orientation to language, holding no place for the domain of the truth (Parker 2007).

It is exactly here, where the uncanny and the truth are missing in Laclau's discourse theory and where he thus remains within the academic matrix, that we should situate the main disagreement between Žižek and Laclau over class struggle. Laclau substitutes class struggle with *the fight for hegemony*; the fight over which signifier, or chain of signifiers, will be the ultimate stand-in for the absence of the fullness of society. Žižek agrees with Laclau that in the core of the social there is a kernel which simultaneously ruptures and produces society as something which can never be fully totalized (Žižek 1989). However, in contrast to Laclau, Žižek defines this antagonism in terms of *class struggle*: "[class struggle] structures in advance *the very terrain* on which the multitude of particular contents fight for hegemony" (Žižek 2000: 320). We can understand Žižek's holding on to the concept of class struggle as an attempt to give the zero-level of subjectivity (the dimension of the truth and also the uncanny, but we will come to the latter in the next part) a place within ideology critique. For Žižek Laclau's denial of class struggle makes that his fight for hegemony is doomed to take place within the existing coordinates of the political space. In other words, the fight for hegemony boils down to *identity politics*, where the goal is to assert one's particular identity and proper place within the *given* social structure (Žižek 1998). According to Žižek, these post-modern identity-politics of particular life-styles (ethnic, sexual, etc.) represent the displacement and neutralization of class struggle. Žižek for example writes of the standard approach to right-wing populism: '... the mere insistence on multiculturalist openness is the most perfidious form of anti-workers class struggle' (Žižek 2006a: 552). Overseeing the domain of identity politics, does it not rapidly become clear that identity politics are basically academically-

driven? The discourse on tolerance for example seems to be an academic industry in which research and resource centres offer training, organize media-campaigns, distribute booklets and educational material to prevent discrimination and promote racial, cultural and gender diversity etc. Even pre-school children have *anti-bias* curricula to raise equality issues and counter stereotypical and discriminatory thinking (see <http://www.persona-doll-training.org>). If the school used to be perceived as the place for the emancipation of the working class, now it is the locus of academic identity politics, which if we follow Žižek, entails the denial of class struggle (4).

The Hauntology of Real Man

Once the working class represented the dipsomaniacal, trouble-seeking, godless socialists, who disturbed the comfort of the bourgeois. Perhaps the dismissal of class struggle has created new troubling figures of which Žižek's skinhead is a paradigmatic example. In this way, the *acte gratuite* or *random violence* has returned: freeway shootings, wilding, youngsters beating someone up for no reason at all. This pointless violence is so disturbing because it escapes explanation and leaves academia impotent. Also Hans Van Themsche's deeds for example seem to transcend both the medico-psychologizing explanation of autism and the standard academic (de-politicized and psychologizing) theoretizations of racism. If in psychoanalytical terms this could be called the return of the repressed, what is then exactly returning? To understand this, let us engage with the polemics between Laclau and Žižek on the topic of populism, a controversy played out in a series of articles published in the *Critical Inquiry*.

The polemics were prompted by Laclau's book *On Populist Reason* (in which various allegations were made against Žižek). In this book Laclau's dismissal of class struggle results in putting forward populism not as a particular kind of politics, but as the political as such. This is a specific elaboration of Laclau's theory on the *fight for hegemony*: the struggle over which contingent content will figure as the stand-in for the fullness of society. For Laclau it is not pre-determined which particular struggle will be elevated to the *universal equivalent* of all struggles. Laclau thus denounces the working class as the predestined revolutionary agent, since this would reduce the ideological-political process to an epiphenomenon of an underlying objective, thus a *full* reality. Rather he advances the concept of *the people*, emerging as an agent unified through the act of nomination inherent to the fight for hegemony (Laclau 2005). Within this logic, Laclau has to demonstrate that *the people* is not merely the contingent opposite of *power*, but that in the process of nomination *the people* is created as something new. Laclau thus contends: 'the opposition A-B will never fully become A - not A. The 'B-ness' of the B will be ultimately non-dialectizable. The 'people' will always be something more than the pure opposite of power. There is a Real of the 'people' which resists symbolic integration' (Laclau 2005: 152).

Žižek responds that Laclau misses the essentials of Hegelian dialectics. This is how Žižek summarizes Laclau's stance: first Laclau rejects dialectics by reducing the dialectical relation A and not-A to a logical opposition. In this way Laclau of course can claim that it is not a genuine antagonism: since not-A is merely the opposite of A, they are both situated within the same unified symbolic space. Next Laclau introduces a B (the people) which is not reducible to A, a B which does not belong to the same representational space. For Žižek however, the problem is exactly how to account for that B, and here Žižek criticizes Laclau for oscillating between the formal notion of the Real as antagonism, and an *empirical notion of the Real* (Žižek 2006a: 566). For Žižek, Laclau's idea of the people exceeding the pure opposite of power, leads to the assertion of empirical and symbolic determinations. In reply to Žižek, Laclau speaks of a *contingent empiricity*, refuting the criticism that he understands the Real to be empirical. Laclau argues that his concept of *heterogeneity* can account for the Real of antagonism where Hegelian dialectics fail to do so: antagonism requires the interruption of a saturated space by something *radical outside*. So for Laclau "heterogeneity is another name for the Real; the B-ness of B means that B is not simply an empirical object, but one which has been invested with the function of representing a fullness overflowing its ontic particularity (Laclau, 2006: 669).

Let us try to retrace Laclau's struggle with the Real and his recourse to the concept of *heterogeneity* at other places in his theoretical edifice. To begin with, when Laclau tries to conceptualize the stability of *social articulations* he also resorts to the idea *constitutive heterogeneity*. For Laclau the structure of social identities is contingent and not determined by the relations of production (Laclau 2006: 669). But as this would make them shift invariably and rapidly, Laclau has to try to understand their relative fixity. This fixity as Laclau argues, is to understand as "the result of a construction operating on a plurality of heterogeneous elements [...] [h]omogeneity is always achieved, never given" (Laclau 2006: 672). This somewhat opaque hint is all he provides on this topic, yet, he does assert the existence of a third dimension: 'A third dimension to be taken into account is that, if heterogeneity is constitutive, the succession of hegemonic articulations will be structured as a narrative which is also constitutive and is not the factual reverse of a logically determinable process' (Laclau 2006: 672). Does Laclau not here, by ending up with narratives, only opens up the space of the *juggling with signifiers* of discourse analysis? We seem to be back again on academic ground, condemned to meta-empirical scrutinizing of narratives.

Our second instance is on the same problem of stability returning in Laclau's *equivalential logics*. According to these an *impossible thing* (e.g. society) is being represented through a set of signifiers in a *equivalential chain* (e.g. justice, freedom...). The proliferation of the chain leads to the destruction of meaning, or the evacuation of particular elements. The problem for Laclau is then why those particular signifiers do not melt into each other, why the chain does not collapse. Laclau thus must show that equivalence does not mean identity and that each of the transformations retain something of their own identity (Laclau 1997). His solution is to propose that

the equivalential chain does not collapse due to the *remainders of the particularity of each element*:

What we have to add now is what happens from the other angle: the effects, on the structuration of the chain, of what remains of those particularities. These remainders are absolutely essential for any equivalence for if they were to vanish, the chain would collapse into simple identity. [...] There is a resistance of meaning which operates in the opposite direction (Laclau 1997: 320).

This seems to be a very Freudian idea. For does not Laclau's idea of the remainders of particularity echo Freud's assertion of the inertia of libido, specifically its disinclination to relinquish an old position in favour of a new one? (Freud [1930a]1955) *Desire* is not endlessly mobilizable; once an object gets caught in the spell of the phantasm, a certain quantum of libido remains stuck to it. Thus Laclau's theory of the resistance of meaning could account for the weight of contingent history. When a protest movement for example adopts the "end of arbitrary arrests" as one of the names of *justice*, Laclau explains, then the "prevalence of the will of the people over all legal restrictions" could not enter into the same system of equivalences without difficulty (Laclau 1997). In this light, the term *Old Europe* would receive a new meaning; caught up in equivalential logics, Europe has to carry the weight of what remains of the particular elements of its historic chain. The weight of history does not provide us Europeans with moral superiority, rather, it condemns us for example to a lethargic sticking to our Welfare State illusions. Do we not find here a major impediment to the Žižekian endeavour? His plea for *a leftist appropriation of the European legacy* (Žižek 1998) would then be misplaced since this legacy is exactly the problem. It would lead to the idea that Žižek, clinging to the idea of class struggle, is neglecting the reality of a history-tired Europe, a Europe which in these globalised times should get rid of its weighty legacy, the old relics of the welfare state, old European world-power and class-struggle.

But should we agree with Laclau's reversal of the classic Lacanian articulation of the resistance of meaning? The bar between signifier and the signified ensures that the signifier never reaches full meaning or significance: it resists full signification. This is the basis for the Lacanian idea that the signifier installs the lack of being in the object relation. Thus the signified is always under the sway of the imaginary dimension, caught up in the play of the signifiers and the lack of being. Laclau however claims that the resistance of meaning also works the other way around: for him *the signified* beholds an element of resistance through which the chain of signifiers does not collapse. Is not thus the conclusion that Laclau claims positive and symbolic effects at the level of the signified? Here the Žižek-Laclau controversy becomes fully-blown. While Laclau criticizes Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* as a positive ontic science (the idea of *class struggle* reducing the political to an epiphenomenon embedded in substantial reality), with his "resistance of meaning", Laclau seems to fall into the same problem: Laclau appears to be haunted by an

empirical notion of the Real. It is there that, by contrast, Žižek argues that Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* demonstrates that the economy is itself political. For Žižek the political class struggle permeates the entire analysis from the very beginning *political* economy is not about objective socio-economic data, but about "data which always signal the outcome of a political struggle" (Žižek 2006a: 566). Can we not say that it is this engaged stance of Žižek which makes that in a sense the Real is not empty? This partisan choice thus seems the key to understand Žižek's idea of *hauntology*: "ontology is always supplemented by "hauntology," science on ghosts - what Marx calls the "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" of the universe of commodities" (Žižek 2006a: 565). According to Žižek, it is exactly this *spectral dimension* of Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* which Laclau misses in his attempt to keep the domain of the Real clear. In his refusal of class struggle, he denies this spectre of the mad, solipsistic dance of Capital. When for Laclau the *people* is but the result of nomination, Laclau bypasses the real people and natural objects, as Žižek writes, "on whose productive capacities and resources the capital's circulation is based and on which it feeds itself like a gigantic parasite" (Žižek 2006a: 566). It is the partisan choice which makes the ghosts and thus the Real of class-struggle visible. Before going a little deeper into Žižek's hauntology, we will turn first to another quite similar debate as the one with Laclau, namely the one with Yannis Stavrakakis.

The rock of class-struggle

It is not surprising that the same issues of the discussions of Žižek with Laclau return in the, at times equally heated, debate with Stavrakakis, the latter having been the student of Laclau. For also with Stavrakakis one of the central issues is to understand discursive stability and fixity, a question which he formulates in Sara Ahmed's terms as "what sticks" (Stavrakakis, 2007: 165). He situates the question within the advent of modernity: the Enlightenment signalled the replacement of "primordial attachments" by "ideological attachments", the latter changeable while being constructed (Stavrakakis 2007: 163). Stavrakakis departs from the shortcomings of the linguistic or cognitivist approach to understand what fuels identification and discursive fixity. Drawing upon Goodwin's *Passionate Politics* (2001), he argues that the linguistic turn has made way to a turn to emotions, which is the right track for Stavrakakis. However, to avoid both the instrumentalised, constructionist use of emotion and an outmoded affective essentialism, he pleads for the turn to the Lacanian *jouissance* (Stavrakakis 2007: 167). Together with Jason Glynos he contends: 'A Lacanian approach to subjectivity and fantasy (...) accepts the central role that affect or *jouissance* plays in accounting for the "grip" of identity or the "vector" of identifications' (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008: 266).

Stavrakakis had already brought up the concept of *jouissance* in a critique on Laclau's formalistic approach to populism, arguing that Laclau misses the "affective, passionate nature" of

populism (Stavrakakis 2007: 264). But Stavrakakis also recognizes the risk of the turn to *jouissance*: arguing that *jouissance* is missing from Laclau's corpus, Stavrakakis acknowledges that thinking about the real qua *jouissance* inevitably flirts with a certain essentialism (Stavrakakis 2007: 76). However, if as we have argued Laclau's theory is not able to circumvent this risk of essentialism, the question is then whether Stavrakakis can escape it. For, Stavrakakis is clearly betting on using *jouissance* as a positive concept, useful in academic research of a broad range of phenomena in the socio-political sphere: nationalism, consumerism, democracy... (Stavrakakis 2007). Together with Glynos, he asserts that central in understanding the significance of emotions in the organization of social practices is to try "to map them in relation to the underlying fantasies that organize a subject's affective enjoyment" (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008: 267). Is it thus possible to go from Theoria to Academia? Can a Lacanian concept become a tool within an academic research practice? Take for example Stavrakakis' attempt to answer Wilhelm Reich's well-known defiance to understand why the majority of those who are hungry do not steal and why the majority of those who are exploited do not strike. Glynos & Stavrakakis argue that from a Lacanian perspective, obedience to authority has to be understood not only at the level of knowledge and conscious consent, but also at the level of fantasy: it is fantasy that binds subjects to the conditions of symbolic subordination:

Thus, if psychoanalytic intervention (and, by extension, political intervention, and critical theory) is to have any effect in these cases, it must aim between the lines, so to speak, at the field of fantasmatically structured *jouissance*, and the way it constitutes our desires and sustains various social and political practices (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008: 268) (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008: 268).

There are however several problems with this account. To begin with, as Žižek puts it, psychoanalysis is called upon to explain what libidinal mechanisms the enemy is using: what Reich tried to do for Fascism, Stavrakakis attempts for consumerism and nationalism (Žižek 2008). But to this we have to add the question - if Stavrakakis' assessment of the enemy is right: can we call the mainstream right-wing liberal discourse unambiguously emotional or affective? For a quick look on consumerism reveals a clear appeal of the advertisers on scientific knowledge: the *command to enjoy* is grounded within science. Although today in advertising, the serious, non-ironic use of *the man in the white coat* has almost disappeared (notwithstanding the obvious exceptions of toothpaste or washing powder ads...), the framework of science is easily found in the discursive structure, revealing how the consumer himself is addressed as a *proto-scientist* having adopted the scientific gaze to look upon him or herself. For example, *Flora spread* has on its official website next to the home button, three other buttons *know your heart*, *heart healthy living*, *cholesterol advice*: food consuming is for the everyday consumer a scientific informed business. But maybe far more than the medical, the *psychological* discourse is appealed in advertisement. Like Daunton &

Hilton write: "it is now something of a duty to explore personal identity through consumption" (Daunton and Hilton 2001: 31). L'Oreal's "*Because You're Worth It*", for example directly refers to the self-esteem and self-worth discourse in psychology. Nike's *Be Real, Be You, Be True*, - and, design your own custom shoe – is at the other hand appealing to the authenticity injunction, the (paradoxical) psy-command par excellence. It is crucial to understand that we are not dealing with clever advertisers who use psychology to address our subconscious emotions or hidden drives, no, they directly appeal to the consumers' familiarity with the widespread imagery of psychology, to his own proto-scientific position. Stavrakakis' analysis seems to overlook the role of Academia in the discourses which demand obedience. However, in his approach to Stanley Milgram's experiment *Obedience to Authority* Stavrakakis does show how in the experiment obedience is obtained via the fantasmatic frame of science itself (the test subjects comply to the experimenters demands because these are invested with the authority of science), but he does not work this through (De Vos 2009). It is clear that the late-modern discourses of obedience pass over knowledge and Academia: they are as such not passionate or emotive discourses, as fantasmatic frames they so to say *script* our emotions. Michael Walzer's attempt to join the authentic extra-academical space to reach full subjectivity is only the other side of this. But then again, this transgressive and passionate movement will always be prone to re-academization. Even more: these passionate and as said higher, sometimes merciless, attempts to escape Academia are maybe exactly what fuels Academia as such. And here of course we come close to the dynamics of late-modern capitalism, being able to incorporate and to fuel on everything which tries to supersede it.

As such it is clear, the attempt of Glynos & Stavrakakis both to use *jouissance* as an academic-research tool and to make it the grounding principle of a more appealing leftist discourse (as a kind of academic informed psychoanalytical engineering) threatens to be but a pastiche of real existing Academia. Žižek remarks quite bluntly that the solution Stavrakakis proposes resembles the joke quoted by Lacan about a doctor asked by a friend for free advice: "reticent to render his service without payment, the doctor examines the friend and then calmly states: 'You need a medical advice!'" (Žižek 2008). For Žižek the problem is that Stavrakakis' approach is an ersatz for a proper political analysis: the lack of passion in the leftist praxis and theory should be explained in its own terms, i.e., in the terms of political analysis itself (Žižek 2008). But if Stavrakakis seems stuck in the late modern hegemonic space of Academia and capitalism, does the Žižekian approach offer a way out? Does his return to class struggle via hauntology open up a new space for resistance? According to Ian Parker it does not. Parker contends that the Žižekian class struggle points to an antagonism that cuts across any attempt to make the social into a wholesome system. This fundamental impossibility will frustrate those who want to improve capitalism as it will also block those who want to overthrow it. Parker further argues that for Žižek the obstacle or antagonism is the very condition of possibility for capitalism to exist; to remove this impediment would be to lose the very productivity that is generated by it: 'Despite some ultraleftist

rhetoric that is occasionally wheeled out to annoy the likes of Laclau, Žižek does not think beyond the horizon of capitalism' (Parker 2007).

Conclusions

What are we then to do with Žižek's paradoxical sticking to the concept of, or *the real* of class-struggle? Where does Žižek exactly leaves us in his critique that Laclau misses how capitalism feeds itself like a gigantic parasite on "real people and natural objects"? For does not these *real people and natural objects* constitute the point where Žižek's hauntology cannot but return to the figure of the *real man*? Let us recapitulate: academia's pursuit of *real man* – even when the Kantian correction acknowledges that *the thing* as such is unknowable – is always doubled in the emergence of the spectral images of the Prague hero (Laclau took a ghost at its face value) the mystic or the racist youngster engaging in useless violence. So maybe Lacan's response to the '68 anti-structuralist Parisian graffiti *Structures do not walk on the street*, stating that the events of May 1968 *did* show that structures walk on the streets, is misunderstood. While it is generally believed to mean that people on the streets are not free and that their acts are determined by superseding structures, maybe we should interpret it to the letter: the *structures* of academia eventually tend to escape the campus like golems or Frankensteins. The universitarian concepts of man seem to haunt us like academic body snatchers, threatening to replace us cell for cell, atom for atom, till we are free from love, desire, ambition or faith, till we all resemble the image of psychological normality. So where academic discourse denies that reality is haunted, this cannot but result in the proliferation of more ghosts. In this way it seems that the intermittent probing of real *reality* is the haunting itself. And there academization meets capitalism: when mainstream, *really existing*, academia pretends to possess knowledge of real man, the liberal economy presents itself as serving the real needs of real people. The university discourse of Academia is contingent with the systemic violence of capitalism; both operate in *blessed indifference* to the concrete people which they subject.

Concrete people, here we are again. Is it really impossible to define man beyond the academic paradox? Žižek's answer is, I think, yes. Because, should we not see *real or concrete people* in the Žižekian endeavour as a *construction* in the proper Freudian sense? Real people and real man should be seen as purely logical explanatory presuppositions, like the second stage (I am being beaten by my father) of the child's fantasy "A child is being beaten" which for Freud is so radically unconscious that it can not even be remembered. The construction of *real people* would mean that we can understand *the people* - exactly as *class struggle* - not as objective data, but as the result of a sectarian and politicized choice:

One of the tell-tale signs of university discourse is that the opponent is accused of being "dogmatic" and "sectarian." University discourse cannot tolerate an engaged subjective stance. Should not our first gesture be, as Lacanians, to heroically assume this designation of being "sectarian" and engage in a "sectarian" polemic? (Žižek 2006b: 108).

It has been said before that this Žižekian stance however cannot but fail. The paradox of psychoanalysis is the impossibility of transforming its findings into a positive political project. Since the Freudian constructions are *skandalons* – sexuality, the unconscious, the death drive... – this prevents positive operations. How could one build a society on the perverse polymorph sexuality, for example? But it would be a big mistake to believe that today's hegemonic political discourses endorsing liberalism and globalised capitalism are departing from a positive project completely different from Freud's *skandalons* – the image of within a humanistic psychology for example which in contrast would be believed to permit a positive political translation. Let us not forget that psychoanalysis was the first profound theory of modernity and modern man. All subsequent theories of man depart from the Freudian *skandalons*. In a way, the humanistic ideal is, as a reversal and denial, one of the places of the truth of the Freudian stance. Thus eventually the discourses of capitalism do feed on the real of the *skandalons* of modern antagonism as they were articulated by Freud, albeit it a distorted way. Via this twisted Freudian heritage, the psy-sciences became today's main providers of the "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" of the universe of commodities. The challenge for both psychoanalysis and contemporary Left is to re-appropriate this legacy, exactly through untying the false knot of psychoanalysis with politics, maybe this will be the only way to escape the deadlock of contemporary conceptualisations of class struggle.

Notes

(1) Contu remarked that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to be against learning; it is not easy to oppose the values of individual emancipation or social progressivism promoted by the learning discourse (Contu et al., 2003). The same holds for psychologization, which is an important axis of academization: how can one oppose a discourse which promises empowerment or self realisation?

(2) Belgium had its first White March after the paedophilia case of the infamous Dutroux.

(3) Academization is always doubled by the elevation of something *beyond* the advice, *beyond* psychology or sociology. Teaching theories of life always presupposes a mythical *real life* behind the theories. To theorize is to open up the artificial imaginary space of Life with a capital L. For example, sex education presupposes that behind the hormones and pheromones there is always something like *authentic love*. And it is exactly this myth of authenticity which also drives the plea

for de-theoretization.

(4) Of course one could argue that today's academic research on multiculturalism and gender is far more subtle; there are many theories on *diversity*, but unfortunately those which prevail in the public sphere reinforce class inequality. I am tempted to stress that in everyday praxis we have to deal not with the more refined theories, but with 'real existing academia'.

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