

Ideology! The Fetishes and Disavowals of the Woke and the Conspiratorial

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Abstract: “Woke” and cancel culture have become mainstream methods for ideological leftists to express their sense of hopelessness and frustration. And while many agree that improving social harmony is an admirable goal, policing the use of pronouns while carefully maintaining the status quo of capitalism’s production, destruction and inequality does little to address the underlying structural problems that create the conditions for social disharmony. It is on this point that Žižek finds agreement with commentators on the ideological right. But at both ends of the ideological spectrum we find little to hope for. This paper is about what happens when important discussions are hijacked by extremists on both ends of the political spectrum. Surely, there must be more than politically correct totalitarianism and the irrational outbursts of conspiratorial fanatics. As Žižek has long argued, we should, perhaps, hold out for the worst option in the hope that real change might still be possible. I make this case with reference to popular events and culture, and a wide array of Žižek’s scholarly and popular works.

Introduction: The worst option

Elizabeth Bennett: And *your* defect is to hate everybody.

Mr Darcy: And yours ... is wilfully to misunderstand them (Emphasis in original. Austen, [1813] 2012: 69).

In Jane Austin's novel *Pride and Prejudice* the heroine, Elizabeth Bennett, becomes increasingly angered by the proud and arrogant Mr Darcy as he explains to her his views on the value of people and society. Darcy felt most people were below him, not worth his time or effort, and were easily seduced by illogical human vices. Breeding and birth, for Darcy, were better predictors of human value than any social experience could offer. Elizabeth thinks Darcy is a fool – so quick to disapprove, unwilling to see the humanity in us all, and too guarded and pompous to ever make real human connections. Breeding and birth may be important, but not as important as manners and behaviour in public gatherings.

It is through this lens that one should read the groundswell of comment offered online by “left” wing and “right” wing commentators and social media users in recent years. Where Žižek (in Aitkenhead, 2012) freely admits to misanthropic tendencies, he still conveys a message with more hope than most of the “woke” left or conspiratorial right can offer.

Žižek (2015; 2021a), like many others, has argued strongly against ‘woke’ and ‘cancel’ culture. The new ‘formula’ for totalitarianism, in Žižek’s (2015) view, is not ‘I don’t care what you think, just do it’, but rather ‘I know better than you what you really want’. ‘Woke’ and ‘cancel’ culture becomes a ‘pseudo-activity’, even when social change is the ostensible goal. By focussing on the trivial symptoms of social ills the practitioners of woke culture ensure that ‘nothing really changes’ (Žižek, 2021a). In his preface to the 3rd edition of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek (2008 [1989]: vii) provides for this formula through his description of ‘Ptolemization’. In the face of the Copernican revolution in scientific thought, followers of Ptolemy’s ‘earth-centred astronomy’ spun his accounts to try and maintain the status quo and protect *common* knowledge from the advancement of thought. Our task becomes to

identify the difference. When a revolution in thought arrives ‘is this a truly Copernican revolution, or merely a Ptolemization of the old paradigm?’ (Žižek, 2008 [1989]: vii). Are we ready to embrace real, ugly and dangerous change, or do we cling to the old concepts, tweaking them to be relevant for present-day purposes? As Žižek (2008 [1989]: viii) has long told us, following Lacan, ‘the correct thing to do is choose the worst option’.

This paper is about what happens when important discussions are hijacked by extremists on both ends of the political spectrum. In drawing attention to this I intend to use an assortment of Žižek’s many short pieces of writing and cultural contributions in addition to his more substantial works. I hope I will also be permitted some liberties to borrow some of Žižek’s strategies. It would not be considered ordinary practice to use a scholar’s popular media articles and resources (such as *RT* and *YouTube*), use prose that might be considered “Žižekian”, as well as use popular culture to reinforce arguments. But these strategies seem consistent with the approach of a Žižek scholar and appropriate given the public nature of “left” and “right” screaming matches across various cultural and social mediums.

This paper has been structured in the following way: first, I explore the importance of *visibility* for understanding ideology and its impact in the social world. Where ideology reigns, and where it is most acutely visible, it is often accompanied by flawed attempts to confront “reality”. When this fails, the disavowals that are spun out in reality’s presence will have to suffice. To the fetishist, a concocted reality is vital for dealing with the hopelessness of our times. Second, I explore the case of Serbian tennis player, Novak Djokovic, and his deportation from Australia in the lead up to the *Australian Open* as a demonstration of fetishistic disavowal in action. People clung desperately to ideology during this period, and we witnessed the ugly re-emergence of Serbian nationalism. In the third section I attempt to redeem wokeness through a discussion of the online horror story of *The Slenderman*. I argue that where the totalitarian right calls for the elimination of their enemies, at least woke leftists, with all their faults, probably have their *hearts in the right place*. Is it reasonable, therefore, to judge the left less? I conclude by noting the self-destructive tendencies of both extremes of the political spectrum.

The Visibility of Ideology

As readers of Žižek, how should we view the proliferation of right wing populism? One starting point might be to consider the arguments of one of its most prominent intellectuals, Jordan Peterson. On the one hand, Peterson is a Harvard educated (former) professor of psychology. His work in clinical psychology seems well respected in his scientific community – he has worked in clinical teams, sometimes as the first author in published studies, and they are often well cited (although half of the citations have occurred since his online popularity) (see Google Scholar, 2021). He has also, bizarrely, claimed that he eats only ‘beef, water and salt’ (and, if one wanted, bourdon and vodka) and nothing else (Hamblin, 2018). If he doesn’t stick to this diet he claims the consequences are ‘absolutely catastrophic’. After ingesting apple cider Peterson claims to have been ill ‘for a month ... It produced an overwhelming sense of impending doom ... I didn’t sleep that month for 25 days. I didn’t sleep at all for 25 days’ (Peterson in Hamblin, 2018). For a professor that preaches the virtues of science, and who once bristled when Žižek noted the pseudo-scientific nature of some of Peterson’s thought, there is not much scientific reality in these claims (RT, 2018). We could also draw attention to the dilemmas inherent in other claims Peterson’s has made – that a theorist can be simultaneously both Marxist and postmodernist; that Foucault was simultaneously a Marxist and postmodernist when according to most scholars he was neither; and that the serpent in the Garden of Eden is a metaphor for Satan when for the Sumerians who wrote Genesis there was no unifying concept of Satan nor were serpents representatives of evil (Sylvester, 2019). Peterson also once tried to engage Žižek on Twitter, seemingly not understanding that it was a Žižek quote-bot (RT, 2018).

And, of course, Peterson ‘debated’ Žižek in a public forum and that debate is available in its entirety online. Peterson, by his own admission, was woefully unprepared and chose to debate on subjects in which Žižek has widely acknowledged expertise (which is, perhaps, an understatement). It is not my intention to pick apart the arguments of Peterson, or analyse whether he is “right” or “wrong”. Instead I hope to locate Peterson as a symptom amongst the proliferation of right-, and left-, wing ideologies within broader trends in popular culture such as film and television, the analysis offered by political commentators, strange news stories and the social media users that rage about them.

In his preface to the third edition of *The Plague of Fantasies* (2008: xi-xiv), Žižek writes, at length, about John Carpenter's film *They Live* (1988). This film, counted for Žižek amongst the 'neglected masterpieces of the Hollywood left', tells the story of John Nada (John "Nothing") and his discovery of glasses that allows him to see the world as it really is, with ideology laid bare (Žižek, 2008: xi):

When he ... puts on a pair for the first time, he notices that a publicity billboard now simply displays the word 'OBEY', while another urges the viewer to 'MARRY AND REPRODUCE'. He also sees that paper money now bears the words 'THIS IS YOUR GOD'.

A crucial scene depicts a fight between Nada and his friend, Frank Armitage. Frank's refusal to put the glasses on, sensing perhaps their power to unravel the 'relative peace' of his day-to-day life, results in a long, drawn out fight lasting some 10 minutes (Žižek, 2008: xiv). The fight ends with Armitage wearing the glasses, despite his desperate resistance, and seeing the world as it is, without an ideological veil.

A far clumsier attempt at exposing ideology is offered in the Adam McKay film *Don't Look Up* (2021). It tells the story of two scientists, Dr Randall Mindy (played by Leonardo Di Caprio) and his PhD candidate, Kate Dibiasky (played by Jennifer Lawrence), who have discovered a comet that is on a collision course with Earth. Their efforts to inform the world of this impending catastrophe are met with disbelief, ideological naysaying, and a President who can only act if political necessity dictates that she act. The world becomes divided into three ideological groups – those that want the comet destroyed; those that want the comet to be broken into segments which are then permitted to hit the Earth in order to recover the trillions of dollars worth of precious minerals contained within it; and those who believe the comet is a hoax invented by elites to keep people afraid. The President, Janie Orlean (played by Meryl Streep), rides a wave of popularity with her slogan 'Don't Look Up!' as a way of dealing with the approaching comet. Her rallies are complete with aggressive supporters waving banners, draped in red, white and blue clothing and flags, and all wearing red hats with the 'Don't Look Up' slogan. The implication that these were the equivalent of low-SES, working class Trump supporters was clear.

For Žižek (2008, xii) movie scenes like these direct the viewer to an ideology that is already visible to us but that we are not necessarily aware of. It even,

perhaps, represents the 'dictatorship *in* democracy' (emphasis in original). In this way, it is possible that Adam McKay's film shares more than it intends despite suggestions from McKay that if you 'don't like his film, it's because you don't get it' (ABC News, 2021).

One can imagine the sort of response Jordan Peterson might make to *Don't Look Up* (2021). He would probably emphasise the "wokeness" of the film and how wokeness is linked to totalitarianism. He would probably discuss Hollywood's role in manufacturing consent and limiting choice, and point out that comparing people who vote for Trump to folks who ignore plain reality is a pretty snarky ideological move. He would probably have a point. I think it is likely that right wing ideologues 'get it' just fine. There is a dangerous conceit in McKay's claim that many don't 'get it' – it is a claim flooded with the kind of (often incorrect) ideological assumptions that Trump supporters hate, relating to 'the failure of half the country [the US] to know what's good for them' (Rensin, 2016; Smarsh, 2016). This is despite Trump supporters, statistically, being no more poor or uneducated than people who do not vote for Trump (Smarsh, 2016).

Žižek (2021a), among his responses to the 'wokeness' and 'cancel culture' movement, argues that by objecting to the surface or superficial occurrences of what they perceive as racism or discrimination, leftist ideologues ignore other forces that have far more damaging consequences. In the words of philosopher Ben Burgis (2021: 1), the advocates of cancel culture work towards 'canceling (sic) comedians while the world burns'. As climate change continues to cause disproportional damage in underprivileged nations, as Joe Biden issues threats to Russia prior to their war with the Ukraine (Žižek, 2021b), as gross injustice, violence and inequality remain the norm in advanced capitalism, woke leftists focus on the injustices of pronouns, micro aggressions and offensive jokes (Žižek, 2021a). But 'you don't really change things', Žižek (2021a) claims, if you 'only try to strike a superficial ... balance without attacking the underlying causes of the imbalance', echoing arguments he made long ago in *Violence* (2009).

As Žižek (2008 [1989]: vii-viii, xxiii-xxiv; 2012¹) has often warned, any thought that positions itself as without ideology is usually the most mired within ideological modes. McKay's film could be viewed as falling into such a trap. These ideological

modes are made visible in different ways at different times. Through repressive desublimation, for example, what is (or should be) repressed is laid bare, revealed for all. Through this process, however, new forms repression are ushered in. Sublimation is effectively *reversed* and we experience a cultural compulsion to confess and show the world who we *really* are (as if such a thing were possible) (Žižek, 2005 [1994]: 7-13). Yet, it is precisely these confessions that are experienced as invasive interventions into the lives of others. In 2022 this often takes form in various screen cultures (Hollywood culture industries, online arguments participated in via smartphones, television or ideologically specific media such as far-left or far-right YouTube channels). We should, perhaps, understand this;

in the context of the late-capitalist Narcissistic mode of subjectivity within which the 'other' as such – the real, desiring other – is experienced as a traumatic disturbance, as something that violently interrupts the closed equilibrium of my Ego. Whatever the other does – if s/he fondles me, if s/he smokes, if s/he utters a reproach, if s/he looks at me lustfully, even if s/he *doesn't* laugh at my joke heartily enough – it is (potentially, at least) a violent encroachment upon my space (Žižek, 2005 [1994]: 7-8).

Is this not exactly the nature of online rage today? Might it also not be the basis for leftist woke culture and violent right wing radicals expressing an overflow of frustrations that leads to each extremes of the political divide retreating into their own 'space'? *I can no longer tolerate your view, so I will deal with it by being completely unreasonable. I know what I am saying and doing isn't right or true, but I am acting out!*

This is perhaps the essence of the hopeless impotence of the 'woke attitude' (Žižek, 2021a). The focus of proponents of woke culture on speech acts and superficial injustices betrays their hopelessness in confronting the widespread disadvantages and violence that is the normal operation of capitalism (Žižek, 2009: 1). This, in Žižek's (2008 [1991]: 245) terms, is the basis of disavowal. The formula becomes 'I know, but nevertheless ...' in relation to three modes of disavowal – normal, manipulative, and fetishistic. Žižek's discussions of these concepts in *For They Know Not What They Do* centred on Hitler and Nazism, but in a world where

the accusation of “fascism” is thrown around liberally it seems highly appropriate to analyse the vitriolic political debates of the 2020s through this lens.

Normal disavowal refers to situations where the reality is hidden and revealed later, only for the revelation to result in the symbolic persistence of the original falsehood. Hopi Indians practice this type of disavowal with ‘Katchin’ masks that are used to discipline and instruct Hopi children (Žižek, 2008 [1991]: 245). Adults wear the masks scaring the children at different times until a certain age where it is revealed that members of the tribe, not spirits, are wearing the masks. At this point, the children stop believing in corporeal monsters but instead believe in the spiritual symbolism of the practice, all the while understanding that there was, perhaps, no truth to the stories as they were told to them. *I know that the masks are not evil spirits, but nevertheless will accept the religion of the tribe as it is a marker of my belonging.*

Manipulative disavowal is explained in the relation to a story about Casanova and his attempts to lure a simple country girl into bed (Žižek, 2008 [1991]: 247-248). He pretends he is a wizard and performs magic acts he knows to be fake. When severe storms begin during the ritual, a fear grips Casanova. The distinction between himself as the manipulator and the girl he is attempting to manipulate collapses as his superstitions that he is causing the storms get the better of him. He immediately ceases the ritual, and immediately feels better. *I know that my magic is bullshit, but I nevertheless believe, on some level, that it is possible that it is true.*

Fetishistic disavowal involves knowing very well that something is not so, but acting as if it is so, and through our special awareness and pretending we can manifest a kind of social reality out of falsehoods and demand that others accept it (Žižek, 2008 [1991]: 248-249). In this way, fetishizing ‘abolishes the problem of belief, magic or not’ – the distinction between belief, falsehood and reality no longer matters (Mannoni in Žižek, 2008 [1991]: 249). Through the fetishist disavowal, totalitarianism can emerge:

the point is no longer that the other (“ordinary people”) would be deceived manipulatively but that we are ourselves those who – although “we know very well” that we are people like others – at the same time consider ourselves to

be “people of a special mould, made of special stuff” (Žižek, 2008 [1991]: 251-252).

Je suis Djokovic?

On 8 January 2022, the hashtag “Australia has fallen” was trending on Twitter. Throughout 2021, right wing conspiracists had claimed that as a result of strict Covid-19 lockdown laws and protocols, Australia had slipped into totalitarianism, including false declarations that Australians were living under ‘martial law’ (Carlson in Armitage, 2021). These conspiracies also led to protests outside the Australian consulate in New York. Among the amusing ironies of these beliefs is the careful efforts of right wing commentators to not mention that Australia is currently governed by a centre-right government with a Christian conservative Prime Minister (who is a devout member of *Hillsong*) (Martin, 2020). Even some serious outlets like *The Atlantic* openly questioned whether Australia’s Covid-19 strategies had gone too far down a tyrannical path with Friedersdorf (2021) bizarrely comparing Australia’s conservative government to a Communist regime². These arguments returned on January 8 when the world’s number one tennis player, Serbian Novak Djokovic, was denied entry into Australia to play in the *Australian Open* because he was unvaccinated.

‘I hope Australians realize that their country has been turning into North Korea for the past 2 years’, opines Twitter user “Milly” (2022). ‘A beautiful, formerly democratic country has turned into a dystopian police State’, laments Twitter user “Nick the Greek” (2022). Australia is described via this hashtag as a Nazi state, Communist, unfree, and dangerous. The hashtag’s use is widespread and popular amongst far-right accounts in the US and UK. It operates in much the same way as a fetishistic disavowal. *We know that Australia is still a capitalist democracy but we will act as if we do not know since we have the special insight that the Australian government’s behaviour is, in reality, totalitarian.* The fact that despite these supposed totalitarian tendencies (making people wear facemasks, be vaccinated, and take basic precautions to prevent the spread of Covid-19) Australia remains liberal, capitalist, and democratic, with welfare and free healthcare, undermines the far-right’s supposedly pro-freedom ideology. The secret truth of the Twitter attacks

may be that despite their strict Covid-19 policies Australia remains one of the most liberal countries in the world and this hurts the cause of those who claim that freedom is not possible with vaccine and mask mandates.

Žižek (2008 [1991]: 252-253) argues that totalitarianism seeks to confess its nature and structure, often in indirect ways. This occurs not simply as a product of the 'old, regular tactic' of totalitarian regimes creating their own opposition to themselves in order to justify 'incessant purges' and the like, but also as a 'compulsion' to 'produce a text that expresses its own Truth'. That is, totalitarian ideology seeks to define and narrate its own horrors and oppressions in the form of its imagined opposition in order to justify its vicious nature. It is here that the Twitter attacks take on several ironic twists – the right wing Twitter accounts want to blame the unjust ideology of a leftist leader abusing their power when it was the conservative federal government that was responsible for the visa cancellation ("Sack Dan Andrews", 2022); right wing accounts lament the dire conditions in the immigration detention hotel where Djokovic was kept despite having argued for many years that the detention of refugees was a necessary step in protecting a nation's borders (Sky News, 2022); and the right have long argued for every country's right to self-determination but now argue that Australia's border laws are outdated and draconian for denying a visa to an unvaccinated traveller (Craig Kelly MP³, 2022). Could it be that the secret message here is that right wing ideologues also think, along with most leftist liberals, that conservative governments should be replaced, immigrants should not be held in detention, and that national borders should be thought of as doors rather than walls? It should also not be seen as a coincidence that Serbian totalitarian nationalism has again emerged in response to Novak Djokovic's visa cancellation (Andrade, 2022; Zirin, 2022).

In an old Serbian joke⁴, former Yugoslav and Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic visits the White House during Bill Clinton's term. He is searching for a toilet, all the while marvelling at the glamor and prestige of the US's seat of government. He finds a golden, shining urinal in one of the rooms and he is amazed. He relieves himself and thinks 'yes, this is leadership! Pissing into a shining, golden urinal!' He returns to Serbia and installs one of his own. When the Clinton's visit Yugoslavia they visit with Milosevic who proudly shows the Clintons his own shining,

golden urinal Hilary leans close to Bill and whispers, 'At least we know who pissed in your saxophone'.

I was reminded of this joke as I read some of the commentary from prominent Serbians following Djokovic's deportation. Djokovic's father likened the decision to an 'assassination'. Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, described it as 'torture' (Rimmer, 2022). Serbia's Primer Minister, Ana Brnabić, believes that 'It's been incredible to witness brutal lies ... in Australia by the representatives of the state' (Brnabić in Rimmer, 2022). Former President of the UN General Assembly, Vuk Jeremić, told his Twitter followers that 'Muhammad Ali was vilified too, after refusing to go to Vietnam. The rest was history' (Jeremić, 2022).

The rest was history. Some Bosnians and Kosovans might be forgiven for thinking the same thing in the wake of these comments from prominent Serbians. Indeed, assassination, torture, vilification, as well as murder and rape were the weapons of choice of Serbian troops during the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Again we witness here a fetishistic disavowal at work – *we know very well that Djokovic was not tortured or vilified, but we will say he was anyway, while simultaneously denying we acted out these very crimes in the 1990s. The secret truth is that the world knows we have special insight into vilification, torture and assassination since everyone knows our denials are empty!* The net effect of a fetishistic disavowal is engaging in certain speech acts that may alleviate our anxieties (we are not like this, the world is not like that) whilst also secretly accepting that the world is as traumatic as we suspect. We know but we do not need to commit to fully being impacted by that knowing:

Would the watcher be able to continue going on as usual? Yes, but only if he or she were able to somehow forget – in an act which suspended symbolic efficiency – what had been witnessed ... 'I know, but I don't want to know, so I don't know'. I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don't know (Žižek, 2009: 45-46).

Indeed, Vuk Jeremić once petitioned the international court of justice to declare the Kosovan declaration of independence illegal (T.J., 2012). One can well imagine the logic; if the Kosovans acted illegally, maybe we were justified in our horrifically

violent response. At other times he has glossed over Serbian atrocities in Bosnia and Kosovo, whilst bemoaning the disadvantage experienced by ethnic Serbs (Lynch, 2013). The protestations of prominent Serbians against Djokovic's 'torture' are undoubtedly difficult to stomach for many Bosnians, Croatians and Kosovans. Could they really believe what they are saying? If they do believe what they are saying, at least then we would know who pissed in our saxophone! They could simply be too ignorant to know the difference.

Redeeming "Wokeness"

In their debate, Žižek and Peterson broadly agreed that woke ideology and cancel culture were dangerous developments for anyone who valued free debate and scholarship (Žižek & Peterson, 2019). Indeed, Peterson's lack of preparation, by his own admission, left him with little to contradict Žižek. He even commented that Žižek 'was not really much of a Marxist at all' (Peterson, 2019).

The woke, I argue, are fetishists at heart. In narrating the traumatic experiences of our lives people rely on their various fetishes and fantasies. As it is widely established in Freudian circles (and, despite protestations to the contrary, still in many forms of contemporary psychological practice such as through *unconscious bias*) we repress those aspects of our experience that are too confronting to experience directly and they bounce back in a variety of forms – dreams, slips of the tongue, the clothes we wear, the way we carry ourselves, and, I claim, in our efforts to represent our lives on social media. In ordinary circumstances, the fetishes and fantasies we set up for ourselves (quite unconsciously) are threatened by the 'symptoms' – that is, the 'cracks in the fabric of the ideological lie' (Žižek, 2006: 253).

The fetish is effectively a kind of symptom *à l'envers* [in reverse, back-to-front]. That is to say, a symptom is the exception which disturbs the surface of false appearance, the point at which the repressed truth erupts, while a fetish is the embodiment of the lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth (Žižek, 2006: 253).

But the existence of the fetish also embodies a kind of acceptance of reality. A fetish is only possible to the extent that something we know to be unbearable requires

mitigation (Žižek, 2005 [1994]: 75; 2006: 253). Indeed, fetishists are ‘not dreamers lost in their private worlds, they are thorough ‘realists’, able to accept the way things are – because they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to defuse the full impact of reality’ (Žižek, 2006: 253-254).

I want to problematize Žižek’s account here with reference to outbursts of ideological violence in America and the folklore studies concept of ‘ostension’ (Peck, 2015: 14; Tolbert, 2015). A strongly held belief amongst the far-right recently has been *ideas cannot hurt you and being offended does not contribute to debate*. So when a popular, underground author carried out the violent fantasy he had written about in his novels – right down to murdering the very people he had named murdered characters after – his right wing supporters desperately worked to distance themselves from his ideas (Bradbury, 2021). Even *Amazon*, who had stocked his self-published novels, purged his “ideas” and “debates” from their catalogue (Burley & Ross, 2022). The shooter, Lyndon McLeod, wrote a series of novels under the saga-title *Sanction* and had promoted his books on the right wing, online, talkback show circuit (Bolies & Bredderman, 2021). At least one Republican politician has retweeted McLeod’s “ideas” and “debates” (Carroll, 2022). For Žižek (2005 [1994]: 75):

The doxa about violence in the postmodern ‘society of spectacle’ goes like this: today, our perceptions of reality is mediated by aestheticized media manipulations to such an extent that it is no longer possible for us to distinguish reality from the media image – reality itself is experienced as an aesthetic spectacle. Outbursts of ‘irrational’ violence are to be apprehended against this background: as desperate attempts to draw a distinction between fiction and reality by way of a *passage à l’acte* – that is, to dispel the cobwebs of the aestheticized pseudo-reality and to arrive at the hard, true reality.

It is precisely the distinction between fiction and reality that is challenged with ostension. In folklore studies, ‘ostension’ is defined as ‘enacting an aspect of a legend cycle in real-life’ (Peck, 2015: 15). To put it in Žižekian terms, when our world is too traumatic, perhaps too filled in with reality, we work to influence that reality with our behaviour and speech acts and, in so acting, we seek to alter that reality, changing it, so it becomes symbolically and psychologically more palatable.

Ostension is said to be exemplified in two pre-teen girls in Wisconsin who attempted to murder their classmate to pay homage to the fictional online creature, *The Slenderman*.



Source: Velocci (2018)

On 31 May 2014 in Waukesha, Wisconsin a cyclist discovered a 12 year-old girl lying on the sidewalk having been stabbed nineteen times. Two 12 year-old girls confessed to the crime – the victim’s close friends, Anissa Weier and Morgan Geysler. They were discovered walking along a Wisconsin road ostensibly making their way on a nine hour trek to where they believed The Slenderman’s mansion was located in remote Wisconsin forest (Tolbert, 2015: 41). Their attempted murder was designed to gain favour with the monster after becoming afraid whilst reading Slenderman horror stories online. Among the claims of The Slenderman community was that if you are dreaming of him he is stalking you, and one of the girls had claimed to be having vivid dreams of being in his presence. In the words of one of the perpetrators, ‘Many people do not believe that Slender Man is real ... [We] wanted to prove the skeptics wrong’ (Dewey, 2016). The logic here, of course, is flawless. *These fictional stories that we are obsessed with become real if we act on*

them! How could anyone say The Slenderman does not exist if we have already murdered in his name?

It is at this point that the fetishist encounters problems. Rather than the fetish defusing 'the full impact of reality' (Žižek, 2006: 253-254), in the digital age the fetish generates its own reality, often among those who witness the fetish playing itself out but who do not necessarily partake in the original fetish (that is, for the witness of the fetish, nothing is defused). As was the case with the *Blair Witch Project*, the *War of the Worlds* broadcasts, and the Pizzagate conspiracy, the fetish is lost in the idiotic acting out of its downstream implications (Tolbert, 2015: 38). At some point we are not defending ourselves against a traumatic reality but, instead, creating new traumatic realities.

It is here that I argue that wokeness can be redeemed. Despite their shortcomings and totalitarian undercurrent, there is a traumatic kernel of truth in the exasperated certainty with which adherents to cancel culture operate. I want to draw attention to an old Bosnian story shared as an epilogue by Žižek in his *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (2005 [1994]). The story is called 'The Terrapin':

the mother of an eight-year-old boy brings home a live terrapin that she plans to cook for dinner. If the terrapin's meat is to taste good, he has to be boiled alive, and this is what leads to the catastrophe: in the presence of her son, the mother throws the terrapin into boiling water and covers the pot with a lid; the desperate terrapin takes hold of the pot's brim with its forelegs, raises the lid with his head, and peers out; for a brief moment, before the mother pushes the terrapin back into the boiling water with a cooking spoon, the son catches sight of the desperate gaze of the dying animal; the traumatic impact of this gaze causes him to stab his mother to death with a kitchen knife (Žižek, 2005 [1994]: 210).

Here the trauma takes shape as the 'gaze of the helpless other ... who does not know why something so horrifying and senseless is happening to him ... the gaze of a perplexed victim' (Žižek, 2005 [1994]: 210-211). The impotence, the hopelessness, that one feels in such circumstances might lead to a ridiculous acting out – the *passage à l'acte*, as Žižek has described in detail (Žižek, 2006: 275). It is my claim that this process is playing out amongst the woke left today. Frustration with an

injustice that one is powerless to stop, takes form in causes where one can have an impact – petitioning sponsors to abandon a commentator, seeking to have someone’s comments removed from social media, or their accounts suspended altogether, and angrily correcting someone who uses the “wrong” pronouns. The story of the Terrapin is a powerful metaphor for an idiotic response to an injustice that makes the witness feel hopeless.

In order to redeem the ‘emancipatory core’ of leftist ideals, a series of taboos must be left behind (Žižek, 2017: 17). The left must resist the trap of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*; there is no reason to listen to the monster when it speaks. Yet this is the liberal point of view at its ‘most radical’ – ‘everyone’s point of view should be heard’:

Mary Shelley moves inside his mind and asks what it is like to be labelled, defined, oppressed, excommunicated, even physically distorted, by society. The ultimate criminal is thereby allowed to present himself as the ultimate victim. The monstrous murderer reveals himself to be a deeply hurt and desperate individual, yearning for company and love (Žižek, 2017: 17).

The Bosnian story of the terrapin should be read alongside the 1990s Balkan war and the plight of the residents of Sarajevo attempting to continue on with life as normal. ‘The tragedy of Sarajevo’, Žižek (2005 [1994]: 2) believed, was ‘epitomized’ by these attempts to live a life worth living whilst war continued around them. The Western media’s desire during the Balkan war was for images of violence with journalists competing ‘with each other on who will find a more repulsive scene’ (Žižek, 2005 [1994]: 2). There was less appetite for depictions of life continuing as such images would threaten the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The terrapin represents hopelessness and the fury it engenders. The problem, perhaps, is that we are all passive witnesses unless we lash out. The moral is that explosive violence sometimes seems to be our only hope. Western media had little appetite to present people in Sarajevo in 1993 as otherwise living normal and everyday lives because then they would be *just like us*. For Žižek (2005 [1994]: 2), ‘The unbearable is not the difference’ between us and them, ‘The unbearable is the fact that in a sense *there is no difference*’ (emphasis in original). There were no ‘exotic’ victims in the Balkan wars, ‘just normal citizens like us’. The safe distance of witnessing is eradicated in

these conditions. If the victims remain exotic and distant, there is no space for our hopeless rage.

Whilst woke acting out in place of violent acting out is an expression of hopelessness amongst the Left, one can at least see that they care (and in the process are less prone than the right to violently act out)⁵. Their danger is much like the one identified in Hilary Clinton – caring without change is worse than uncaring with change (Žižek, 2019). Humanity without meaningful change? Or inhumanity with real change? At the time of writing Russian troops have begun their invasion of the Ukraine. Once again Twitter has filled with strange debates about this or that conspiracy. My fear is that we live in a world incapable of distinguishing between fetish and reality. One wonders why people were so eager to abandon Freud given this predicament.

Conclusion: ‘Woke Science’?

Among the more humorous turns of phrase that are circulating in the early years of the 2020s is ‘woke science’. It is something pursued by even semi-serious publications like *The Wall Street Journal* (Mac Donald, 2020). And let us put aside, for a moment, the 35+ years of established scholarship from some of the brightest living thinkers in Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway and Helen Verran, the entire field of science and technology studies, the work of Marie Curie, all of whom have shown the limits of science when it is only performed by one type of scientist (European men) and in one type of environment (the laboratory) (Haraway, 1997).

As Žižek (2021d) argues ‘We need good mathematicians to do serious science’. The problem, of course, is that those future brilliant mathematicians may never get access to mathematics education if they are born too poor or in the wrong neighbourhood, or in a war zone, or born a woman in some places (think fanatically Islamic or, in some cases, fanatically Christian nations). It is disingenuous to suggest that poverty in the US is not a limiting factor in becoming a scientist when one considers the scramble of families that desperately attempt to move to the Palo Alto area of California so their children qualify to attend the best science schools in the heart of Silicon Valley (see Rosin, 2015). Real estate prices often rise and fall in relation to such social realities⁶.

When rightists claim that science is ‘woke’ there may be another powerful disavowal at work – critics of ‘woke science’ argue that we must intervene in science to prevent it from being ‘woke’ whilst simultaneously decrying supposedly ‘woke’ interventions into science. These types of contradictions are inherent in thought at the extreme ends of the political spectrum. It is possible, of course, that I have given too much credit to those who claim to see wokeness invading science. One is, after all, practicing a kind of public image when one becomes a political spokesperson in mainstream or social media. It is an identity that needs to be carefully managed and maintained. As revealed in Alex Jones’ child custody case, he is a ‘performance artist’ and is merely playing a character on the internet. It was added that judging Alex Jones for the right wing ideology he spouts on his show would be like ‘judging Jack Nicholson by his depiction of the Joker’ (Siemaszko, 2017).

In August 2021, UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, declared that environmental destruction was now at a ‘Code Red’. The ‘alarm bells are deafening ... the evidence is irrefutable’. Greenhouse gas emissions combined with deforestation was literally ‘choking’ the planet and billions are at ‘immediate risk’ (Guterres, 2021). The world faces real problems – gender pronouns and vaccination mandates depriving us of “freedom” are not among them. Claiming either of these things as some kind of catastrophe reeks of the privilege that both leftists and rightists claims to fight against. Can we hope for a happy ending like the ones at the end of (most) Jane Austen novels? Might the verbal attacks reigned down on one another result in some kind of cathartic love, as it did for Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet? Time will tell. At least yelling at each other online does seem to be the worst option.

Notes

1. Ideology is ‘our spontaneous relationship to our social world’, not something imposed upon us (Žižek, 2012).
2. As an Australian who lived close to Covid epicentres in the Melbourne region, the rules were strict but seldom enforced. I went shopping whenever I wanted, went wherever I wanted, and chose, as much as possible, to follow the rules as laid out.

No police officer spoke to me, or stopped me, at any point in time. Red ink was also plentiful! (Žižek, 2014: 95).

3. Craig Kelly is a well-known far-right politician in Australia, and prone to conspiratorial gaffes.

4. I attended a Catholic high school in the 1990s during the Balkan war and the Croatian students had many such jokes.

5. Anticipating criticism of this claim I point the reader to the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland which has plainly documented that in the US right wing ideological violence far outstrips the ideological violence of the left or Islamic extremism since 9/11 (see Parkin et al., 2016 and other numerous reports from the 'START', the 'Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism', website at start.umd.edu).

6. It is also perhaps noteworthy that Palo Alto high schools were home to a suicide cluster and an 'echo' cluster, which is 2 suicide clusters in the same location within a short timeframe (Rosin, 2015).

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