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Conservatism, Liberalism, and Identity

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Abstract

Throughout recent discussions of race, gender, and identity, both sides of the political spectrum avoid addressing the central concept of what “otherness” is. Using the psychoanalytic and philosophical insights of Slavoj Zizek combined with philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard and Albert Camus, this paper will argue for the rejection of left liberalism, political correctness, and conservative cultural theory due to their inability to allow the subject more freedoms in relation to the other. The paper calls for the adoption of Zizek’s elimination of the big Other in which one enters into communication with the other as a subject of ideological equals. This will be the only way in which one can ever speak, congregate, or interact in a wholly free and unrestrictive manner while also creating genuine political change.

The current problem of our “postmodern condition” is the total absence of otherness. In previous times, the other stood as a reference point for our identity. Lacanian theory argued that our central identity, unknown even to us, is formulated through the mimicking of ideas, objects, and people around us. Yet, in postmodern times, when we no longer are allowed to gaze upon others, how do we create our identity? This is the central question of western liberal countries which currently face economic troubles, class struggle, and issues of cultural and social import. Philosopher Jean Baudrillard poses this question in another fashion and answers it to an extent. Namely what happens to “a slave without a master? He ends up exploiting himself” (Baudrillard, 2008: 113). The result of this is that “we have become masters...of this world, but the object of that mastery, the finality of that mastery, [has] disappeared” (Baudrillard, 2008: 113-114). Thus the very process by which we can create our identities in postmodern times, by radically defining ourselves as anything we want, has become the very ideology which keeps us from noticing the exploitative nature of capitalism. In an era in which we are all masters, choosing which commodities we prefer over others, choosing our own career paths, and radically reinventing our identities, we have destroyed the process in which we are free and able to choose what we want. Today, western liberal countries face the same problem and are unable to answer this central question: What will be the future of otherness?

Postmodernity as Conservatism

A conservative society is one in which the other is a reference point, a mere stand-in, in which one can structure the symbolic order of the whole of society. In conservatism, everything is already assumed in the notion of the society which is present. In his essay “On Being Conservative” by Michael Oakeshott, he writes “to be Conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss” (Kirk, 569). In conservative societies, a rigid social order is established in order to assure the existence of an identity for everyone at all times. In every conservative encounter, one is consistently assured of one’s

identity because it is always-already signified by the order of things in the world. If one is to be conservative, identity (status and position included) forms the basis of social relations by which one can know one's position externally and internally. Conservatism then strikes fairly close to the postmodern ability for one to radically identify with oneself and act as an agent in the world not only as yourself, but as your identity.

In conservatism, everyone's identity is connected to this symbolic order of sameness. Every infraction is an aggression against one's being and ability to establish oneself within the organic order of things. This is why "...change is a threat to identity, and every change is an emblem of extinction. But a man's identity (or that of a community) is nothing more than an unbroken rehearsal of contingencies, each the mercy of circumstance and each significant in proportion to its familiarity" (Kirk, 570). Notice the instant connection between the change of one's identity and the act as an affront to the community as a whole. Conservatism presupposes that everyone is in their proper place. In this way, the identity of the other is merely a stand-in without any actual substance. The other in conservatism merely acts as an external object in which the subject can believe that someone, somewhere is making everything happen for the subject. Conservatism creates an order of people in a way that is assumed everyone earns what they deserve and can act productively. No one is in conflict because everyone, in a purely meritocratic way, can achieve what anyone else has achieved. No one is an opposite; everyone only reflects, or mirrors, the organic equality that permeates the system.

Of course, this binding order that keeps the other at bay is fake and arbitrary. The purpose of this order is that no one is different insofar that anyone could use their position in society as a point of rebellion against those in power. The obsession of various groups in postmodern times to utilize their subjective identities as a method of a possible emancipatory politics, not only on theoretical grounds, but on practical grounds is reactionary because it is rooted in the conservative premise of identity as something important and unchanging in the social and cultural sphere. When one uses identity as a method of political disruption, one does not only assume the role as a gay person, or a transgender person, etc., one assumes the role of being a victim which is also written into the symbolic order. In this way identity plays into the conservative premise that everyone is in their proper place and will become malleable to the rigid order of things.

Take the example of someone who wishes to rebel against the state in order to achieve some greater measure of autonomy and freedom. In Albert Camus' *The Rebel*, the one who acts on his wish for new rights or economic security is someone who says "no." Camus elaborates: "he means, for example, that 'this has been going on too far,' or, again, 'there is a limit beyond which you shall not go.'" In other words, his no affirms the existence of a "borderline" (Camus, 13). This forms the greater identity of the proletarian masses as a group of people wishing to achieve recognition of their plight and circumstances. Camus is able to identify the greatest example of the so called proletarian *cogito* "I rebel – therefore we exist" (Camus, 22). Yet, Camus already expects the eventual death of such a movement due to the dialectical movements of the State, authority, or those in power understanding the creation of this new identity, as these already existing structures wish to capitalize on the eventual failure of such a *cogito* coming to fruition. "To the 'I rebel, therefore we exist,' he adds, with prodigious plans in mind which even include the death of rebellion: "And we are alone" (Camus, 101). Camus writes that through the course of every rebellion the failure to actually focus on the worries of those in the rebellion serves only to reinforce the power of the state or an existing regressive ideology. Here one can see that it is merely due to pervasiveness of conservative ideology that one is forced to cling to identity as a sort of ticket into the realm of political matters.¹ At all times, one is unable to understand the true circumstances of one's own act of rebellion against the state. Every act, even rebellion, in a certain order is only further linked within the symbolic order if it does not actually have the means to overthrow the established order. This is why identity based movements will never make drastic political changes because identity is already a mechanism which sustains the existing order. Instead of totally rejecting identity and trying to achieve a radical order of otherness, we find instead that those on the radical left have been left to wallow in their identity.

Here the ability for otherness to constitute a sort of death drive in conservatism becomes apparent, and constitutes ideology in the purest sense. One is not only left in one's identity, but as someone who, within the symbolic order, is made to be oppressed. What is being made in conservative/postmodern otherness is the creation of a "victim society" which is "the easiest, most trivial form of otherness" (Baudrillard, 137). The other in our current times is made out to be a sort of sublime *object petit a* in which no amount of inquiry will yield any knowledge about its being, but rather one is supposed to fetishize the practices, customs, rituals, and ways in

which the other operates. The goal of identity politics as an emancipatory discourse always barreling towards a time where minority groups will be enfranchised fails. In *Living in the End Times*, Slavoj Žižek offers the example of what postmodern identity theory actually accomplishes when one is told to fully identify with one's status. In his example, he brings up the great differences between two Indian nationalists; those of B.R. Ambedkar and Gandhi in relation to the Hindu Caste system. In contrast to Ambedkar's more emancipatory idea that in order to release the Untouchables from their servitude, the entire caste system must be abolished and totally forgotten. Gandhi's attitude allowed "...them to 'fall in love with themselves' in their humiliating identity, to accept their degrading work as a noble and necessary social task, to see even the degrading nature of their work as a sign of their sacrifice, of their readiness to do a dirty job for the sake of society. Even his more 'radical' injunction that everyone, Brahmins included, should clean up his or her own shit, obfuscates the true issue, which, rather than having to do with our individual attitude, is of a global social nature.... The task is not to change our inner selves, but to abolish Untouchability as such, that is not merely an element of the system but the system itself which generates it" (Žižek, 2011: 22). What is done instead of actually interacting with the other as an equal in class struggle is forcing such groups to identify with their own victimhood. Instead of overcoming and actually striving for genuine political change in the form of a possible revolution, identity theorists tell us that by building up grand identities, we subvert some higher political power or authority. Merely creating an identity (Queer, Trans, etc.) and claiming it as subversive does nothing. What needs to be done is actual hard, radical, revolutionary work.

Claimed here is that in wanting to create new "subversive" identities in postmodern times, one only creates another symbolic social structure and order in which more regulations and rules govern one's life. The goal of a truly radical movement or idea is for the emancipation of all people and elimination of the existing symbolic order. In contrast, this new identity based movement only restructures the social order with more rules and regulations in which one only becomes ever more rigid in terms of interpersonal relations. Assuming an identity in this way creates another mask which alienates the subject from itself by identifying with an abstraction external to the subject. One is no longer creating one's identity and can no longer interact with others in a free sense, but rather creates another order in which one can rule how people talk.

This ideology aims to create a “part-of-no-part organic order” in which superficially creates a social order respecting of differences but, in reality, merely masks the antagonisms underneath.

This creates an order which is further segregating society into groups of order and sameness. Truly this is a culture of autistic values. One should find it very hard to act without offending or “appropriating” some concept from some other group one is not a part of. Identity politics, in this way, is a conservative big Other; a superego figure completely regulating the actions of every subject, judging one guilty for not acting in a predetermined ethical manner of sameness within one’s identity.

Conservatism as death drive

It should be the goal of the radical left today to overcome the idea that identity constitutes a form of participation in the political sphere. It keeps the people that it intends to help from the actual process of changing the political realm by asking them to not take part in a universal class struggle. If the left continues down this road, it will perpetuate what Baudrillard calls the “...consumers of the ever delightful spectacle of poverty and catastrophe, and of the moving spectacle of our own effects to alleviate it, which, in fact, merely function to secure the conditions of reproduction of the catastrophe market” (Baudrillard, 1994: 67). This connection of identity towards being a (negative) space of enjoyment and experimentation is a commonly held view today. Much like in *The Titanic*, we imagine what happens underneath the ship, where the poorer classes live, as being a place of endless orgies of pleasure and where people *truly* live. On the one hand, as Slavoj Žižek has elaborated on, we are fully within ideology when we think we are eliminating this “catastrophe market.” Žižek offers his classic example of Starbucks Coffee as ideology when one is told that one’s purchase goes to feed impoverished children in foreign countries, helps one’s community, and helps those in third world countries find jobs which will then help the Earth. One eschews any ethical questions about consumption in lieu for interpassivity and enjoyment (Žižek, 2009: 53-54). Yet, on the other hand, is one not within the parameters of a conservative political economy again? Here one finds that if any movement, even negative, within the capitalistic system only serves to reinforce the capitalistic system, then no longer is one dealing with some form of a liberal economy, but instead a conservative economy. This is why “conservative economics,” no longer exists (if it ever did). It is because we are always-already within the paradigm of the

conservative political economy. This is what Hegel writes in *Phenomenology of the Spirit* as being "...comparable to a silent expansion or to the diffusion, say, of a perfume in the unresisting atmosphere. It is a penetrating infection which does not make itself noticeable beforehand as something opposed to the indifferent element into which it insinuates itself, and there cannot be warded off. Only when the infection has become widespread is that consciousness, which unheedingly yielded to its influence, [becomes] aware of it" (Hegel, 331). It is the very act of awareness which comes after the act is accomplished. Without our knowing, through identifying with negative acts in a capitalist society, one has further perpetuated a capitalist society.

Here one should risk connecting the death drive to conservative societies in order to understand why this failure keeps occurring. In conservative societies, two sorts of death drive exist. The first example is present in the "pure" and Victorian sort of class system in which one, by assuming an identity which is complicit within the symbolic order, one becomes a being-towards-death. With no room for growth or change, one merely becomes a being without serious contemplation of one's situation or why one is in the position one is currently in. One waits to decay within the static order. The other form of death drive is accomplished through the alluring act of rebellion aforementioned. Camus mentions that the state and rebellion are intertwined, dialectically working off each other. When this properly functions in a conservative society, suffering is made into a sort of virtue with fantastic fruits to bear. In this way conservatism utilizes the other as a negative space for creation: art, culture, fashion, ideas, and for those in power to take part in their enjoyment. Conservatism creates an ideology in which the debauchery, the spectacle, and the function of society in general operates as if it were for the other. The underbelly of society is allowed its oppressed status in order for the outcasts, the degenerates, and the *lumpen* to become heroes for those in the mainstream.

Thus it is those in the upper classes which, like vampires, suck the life from those who have been made to create transgressive culture. The allure of the conservative death drive ideology is that this underbelly status becomes instantly romanticized. In much similar ways, one is told in identity politics that one's experiences and being, is a central phenomenological tool by which one can discern certain political phenomena and can radically create spaces of enjoyment. Both postmodern identity and conservatism are shown to be the same insofar as they make a virtue out of suffering and a privileged position for those in oppressed classes.

This is why conservatism is able to operate and further degrade the working classes. If functionalist or conservative arguments were in any way correct, the very operation of all classes in their “organic” states working together would seamlessly create a near utopian society. In reality, one finds that these lower classes have to be distracted from the actual state of things by taking a perverse pleasure in their own oppression. This is the function of death drive in conservatism. The elevation of suffering, poverty, and consumption towards being a virtue because of the possible cultural capital it offers.

Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* is the signature example of a case in which the other, the alienated subject, serves as an object for enjoyment. While sticking to the original interpretation of Gregor Samsa being treated as a figure of contempt and hatred, one also has to remember the underlying positives which we are reminded of by Kafka. Gregor is abused, beaten, and segregated from the rest of his family, yet continually tries to reappear and remind his family that he is still alive. This is the prime example of conservative death drive in which no matter how much the other is repressed, the other continually returns to disrupt the natural order of things. One should find the tale of alienation compounded with another message: the vampirism inherent within conservatism and an alienated social order. Note how at the end of the story Kafka writes about the Samsa family “while they were thus conversing, it struck the two Samsa parents almost at the same moment, as they observed their daughter’s increasing liveliness, that despite all the labours which had turned her cheeks pale she had recently blossomed into a pretty and shapely girl. Growing quieter now and coming almost unconsciously to agreement by an exchange of glances, they reflected that the time was also ripe to find her a good husband. And it was like a confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions when at the end of the journey their daughter was the first to rise to her feet and stretch her young body” (Kafka, 110). The ending shows how the survivors of alienation (those who benefit from the existing social order) are those who reap the benefits of the class divisions. The act of alienation was initially a negative space in which the family was left without a source of income, but instead the family was able to better itself by learning to go out into the work force, learning how to save money, and creating a life in which everything was in its place again. Gregor’s identity served as a source of pleasure for those who were not alienated, and in today’s postmodern societies, one finds that those not alienated take delight in alienation. The death of Gergor can be read as a sort of release from the death drive which

came over him. There was no 'out' in his identity, no escape from being alienated. His suffering, in the long run, only helped better the lives of those who were most afraid of him. The Samsas had only kept the other around in order to keep up appearances and make themselves better people. Such is the ideology of identity today in which one clings to their status and position in society instead of trying to totally abolish identity and class divisions. Conservatism forms this death drive as one is left to take an immense pleasure in one's own destruction and humiliation. If we feel any sort of sympathy for Gregor, it is because he did not notice that the way to achieve a better existence was not by trying to reintegrate himself into his family's life, but rather by cutting ties with his family because of their horrid treatment, and thus ending his alienation.

One should be reminded of the patriarchal attitudes towards sex and the other (in this case women) written about by Bertrand Russell. In his book *Marriage and Morals*, his examination of Victorian ethics leads him to the paradox of first sexual encounters. Written in 1929, Russell remarks "men have from time immemorial been allowed in practice, if not in theory, to indulge in illicit sexual relations. It has not been expected of a man that he should be a virgin entering marriage...The possibility of this system has depended upon prostitution"² (Russell, 86). In keeping up appearances, a man can be sexually knowledgeable and experienced, whereas the woman must be chaste and pure when being married off. Conservative ethics always betrays itself. A sort of outcast with a troubled and interesting background, in this case a prostitute, is designated as the refuse of society in which the privileged man can overcome the strict social morays. Compounded by the risky nature of the prostitute's profession, the act in itself becomes a sort of structured death drive, in which debauchery, public shame, and legal troubles are risked, while the Victorian way of life is allowed to be propped up. This is why Zizek finds that "...death drive is not a push towards total disappearance or self-annihilation, but an 'undead' persistence attached to a contingent particularity" (Zizek, 2013: 490). It is the very excess of unneeded people in conservatism that we find those bound to the lower strata of society forced to assume new identities merely trying and stay alive. This is how through accepting the "postmodern condition" and the allure of radically reinventing oneself, one only finds further alienation and subjugation, not more freedom.

There is another sort of death drive is born within the other in left liberalism today. The other constantly exists because it remains as this object of pure alterity in which any reference point

to the object transforms it into something else. In this way the other acts as a Levinasian ethical object in which one is constantly in debt to. In the left liberal viewpoint one always wishes to see the other act naturally but this eludes him and thus becomes an object of fetish and intrigue. Therefore we should note two things. First, that we find that the ability to resurrect the other has to be done right, not in some patronizing politically correct way in which one never actually has to deal with the implications of those who are not like us. Second, that we should be able to appropriate the William Bagehot quote that: "To a great extent, every Liberal is now a Conservative" (Kirk, 242). One can imagine the striking similarities between a culturally and socially conservative society and a left liberal society. In the conservative society the proximity of the other is never embraced and appearances form the basis of encounters. In the same way the left liberal society fully fetishizes the other by wishing to fully respect their practices and rituals without ever having to interact with any form of otherness, lest it destroy it in the process. In both societies one imagines the other exists purely for the enjoyment and satisfaction for the prevailing "reasoned" people (i.e. those in power and those who are intellectually aware enough to understand what is happening). Never are actual serious ethical issues about culture, race, social classes, or economic matters brought to the front. In these societies, the dimension of the other is enough to distract us from the Real of class struggle. In turn, all our problems and dreams are actualized in some other being that we never have to come into contact with and, in turn, solve all our qualms.

Zizek's Answer

As Zizek points out, one can look at the speeches of Martin Luther King and rarely, if ever, come across the notion or injunction that we ought to be "tolerant". Tolerance is a proto-conservative notion that we ought to not understand the neighbor or the other, but rather merely tolerate their existence. This is merely a proto-conservative class structure in which even though one may find immigrants, homosexuals, or ethnic minorities sub-human, they are at least allowed into the margins of society and tolerated. For example, could one ever actually imagine King, Asa Philip Randolph, or Baynard Rustin giving a speech about tolerance in the 1950s saying: "Okay, we know that the white people hate us and its okay that we are treated as second class citizens, but, all we ask for is some tolerance from white people" (Zizek, 2014:

Web). The very idea that this demand, of tolerance, could be revolutionary is wrong, and instead should be forgotten.

There is a further disconnect between actually radical politics and identity politics today concerning cultural capital. Today the goal of identity politics is to be integrated into the realm of capitalist culture instead of being a dissident group with anti-capitalist potential. So called radical groups claim their “revolutionary” goals are to have more television shows, music, and culture that represent them. Far from this being inherently wrong, the point is that these “radical groups” are no longer demanding the impossible. These groups are no longer demanding the end to capitalism, the actual perpetrator of racism and oppression. They are demanding to be commodified in the cultural realm like everyone else. This is the conservative underside of identity politics which only solidifies capitalism’s strength to create capital. The demand to be integrated into the capitalist system will only create more opportunities for capital to be created and another ideological lens which new groups can view economic problems through.

The main point Zizek argues in his recent essay “The Sexual is Political” is exactly along these lines. Any new form of identity is merely not radical enough to subvert capitalism because the very necessity of a malleable yet strongly clung to identity is found in late capitalism. He writes: “As is often the case, big business stands proudly united with politically correct theory” (Zizek, 2016: Web). Any movement or idea which can be so easily co-opted by the largest exploiters of the working class and producers of capital (such as Walmart, Citibank, TD Ameritrade, which are all regularly seen at gay pride parades) cannot be worthy of creating a revolutionary movement. The point is to continually fight for the inclusion of LGBT people, but to be wary of adopting identity as the access point to a truly radical movement. The ontology of capitalism makes it so that the identities created within it, only serve as ideologies which further perpetuate the existence of capitalism itself. One can be a radical fighting against capitalism, or someone who adopts identity politics as a mode of critique. But it should be noted that since one choice is inexorably attached to capitalism, one cannot have both.³

The truly revolutionary spirit begins with the 11th thesis of Marx by being able to identify the world around us. One first must interpret the social, ideological, and cultural world, before having the opportunity to change it and completely restructure the being of our world. The explanation for why it seems some form of left liberalism appears the most radical is mainly at

fault of the political left. The left has not done a good enough job at actually detailing the current troubles which face the world and articulating genuine solutions to solve them. It is the left, Zizek notes, which sets the ontological coordinates of the political spectrum (Zizek, 2008: 139). The solution to these cultural and social problems is through elimination of the idea of the big Other which is found in communism. The left has to make it a point that this is their radical goal for our cultural sphere. Only through a return to a class based politics which fights for universal freedom and global solidarity can current problems, including otherness, be solved. Zizek warns “if we don’t engage in it, then we are really lost. And we will deserve to be lost” (Zizek, 2016: 110).

Notes

1. It is important to note Camus’ impeccable ability to analyze the process of movements both at the time of his writing and its applicability to future “revolutionary” movements. Camus notes, on page 194, that “paradoxically, progress can be used to justify conservatism.” Progress, such as postmodern identity politics, can act against the symbolic order and well as continue the reproduction of ideologies such movements work against.
2. For more on this subject one should read Chapters Seven and Eleven of Russell’s book.
3. In connection with the acceptance of these identities into the capitalistic symbolic order, they lose all sense of subversive qualities. These identities no longer hold any ability to shock or sway political conversations; they now act as signifiers which show capitalism’s ability to be a progressive, tolerant force in the world.

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