

There *is* no metalanguage; or, Truth has the structure of a fiction: The Žižekian system, between post-ideology and post-truth

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Abstract

This article examines Slavoj Žižek's overall approach to the critique of ideology. His Hegelian-Lacanian approach to ideology criticism is addressed by looking at the historical shift from the problem of post-ideology to that of post-Truth. In the process, this article explains simply Žižek's brand of ideology criticism.

Keywords: dialectic; Hegel; Lacan; metalanguage; post-ideology; post-Truth; psychoanalysis; Žižek

Resum. *No hi ha metallenguatge; o la veritat té l'estructura d'una ficció: el sistema žižekià, entre la postideologia i la postveritat*

Aquest article examina l'enfocament general de Slavoj Žižek per a la crítica de la ideologia. El seu enfocament hegel·lià-lacanià de la crítica de la ideologia s'aborda examinant el canvi històric del problema de la postideologia al de la postveritat. En el procés, aquest article explica simplement el tipus de crítica ideològica de Žižek.

Paraules clau: dialèctic; Hegel; Lacan; metallenguatge; postideologia; postveritat; psicoanàlisi; Žižek

Summary

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1. The End of Ideology

Since the publication of his first book in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989)—and even before, in *Le plus sublime des hystériques* (1988)—Slavoj Žižek has become known primarily for reinterpreting the work of German Idealist philosophers, including Kant, Schelling and Fichte but primarily Hegel, through the prism of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Žižek has added to our rethinking of the categories and concepts developed by Lacan by giving his work a new reading based on Žižek's interpretation of Hegelian dialectics. The product has been Žižek's own original theory of ideology that has, over the course of more than three decades, transformed into his re-appropriation of Dialectical Materialism (most fully developed in his book *Less Than Nothing* (2012); see also Hamza and Ruda (2016)). Contrary to post-Structuralist, deconstructionist and even some Marxian arguments regarding the so-called end of ideology, the crux of the argument in Žižek's theory of ideology has been that, beyond positive assertions of existing free from the confines of ideology, there persists an underlying dimension to ideological attachments. While Althusser is certainly a precursor in this endeavour, Žižek's work has aimed to supplement his theories of ideology and subjectivity through a deeper explanation of the underside of ideological interpellation neglected by Althusser—Althusser, as Žižek has put it, never fully explained the whole operation of ideological interpellation (Žižek, 1989: 43); but in doing so, and through his recovery of Hegel, Žižek proposes, too, a dialectical method of ideological *criticism* that coincides with the psychoanalytic process of the cure. There is, in Žižek's writing, an identification with the ends of psychoanalysis and the Absolute idea. Žižek's approach to ideology has thus been significant insofar as we need to still ask the question: What remains ideological in a supposedly post-ideological era?

However, there is a very odd twist of fate in recent times that would seem to overturn the prior defence of the post-ideological, insofar as, today, the problem of ideology seems to have come back to bite us. That is to say that today we find ourselves no longer talking about the end of ideology. Today the problem is not that ideology is nowhere; on the contrary, in our so-called “post-Truth” historical era, it very much seems that ideology is now *everywhere*.

The difficulty today, as demonstrated by the oversaturation of information in our society of the *digital* spectacle, is that no one any longer finds themselves capable of articulating objective truth. Truth (not to mention *universality*) has become a dirty word. It seems too often that subject positioning takes precedence over a shared common truth—more and more, situated knowledge(s) is(are) given primacy over shared truth. We fall back onto the problem: What makes one person's truth any more valid than another's? The crisis of truth and the return of ideology can nevertheless be read against the background of the postmodern incredulity towards metanarrative and the post-Structuralist claim regarding the nonexistence of metalanguage, in the sense that it would seem that no one believes any longer in the operation of what Lacan

referred to as the big Other—and I want to emphasize here that this apparent disbelief in the functioning of the big Other is *only* apparent. Its actual functioning is precisely what we have to recognize and acknowledge as the still fully functioning dimensions of ideology today. But what appears to have disintegrated, partially as a result of the oversaturation of our society with digital media, is an absence of a shared, common belief in the big Other.

Žižek's approach to the problem of metalanguage is different from the post-Structuralist operation to the extent that, for the latter, our goal must and has been one of critiquing every affirmative representation of reality or Truth as either false or overly subjective. For Žižek, though, we must come to think and theorize the way that Truth, in fact, has the structure of a fiction. To see this, we can turn to the very material functioning of the market. As Žižek described in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, we can see precisely how:

markets are effectively based on beliefs (even beliefs about other people's beliefs), so when the media worry about "how the markets will react" to the bail-out, it is a question not only about its real consequences, but about the *belief* of the markets in the plan's efficacy. (Žižek, 2009: 11)

This point is demonstrated quite clearly in the popular HBO series *Succession* (2018-), which deals with the family feuds between members of the wealthy Roy family, which owns a media holding company, Waystar. The series follows the various conflicts between Logan Roy and his four children, each of whom is vying in some way for the top position to succeed Roy as CEO of the company. Every episode deals with the best ways to represent the *narrative* of the family feuds and conflicts with other shareholders and board voting members in order to impact the value of shares and the effective value of the company in the market. What we see quite clearly in their efforts to control the narrative is the way that, although belief in the functioning of the big Other matters little to each individual person, what truly matters is the Other's belief—that is, the belief of the big Other, itself. The series demonstrates the way that narrative plays an operative function, not only in some form of ideological masking; rather, as we see in *Succession*, narrative is a socially symbolic act, as Fredric Jameson (1981) has put it. And in a way, Žižek's own theory of ideology and his approach to the question of metalanguage or metanarrative helps us to consider the way that the signifier falls into the signified; or, that is, that the *form* that the Symbolic order of the narrative can in fact have an effect in the Real.

2. The big Other does not exist

To make sense of the above point, we first need to understand the constitutive dimensions of the Lacanian big Other. According to Lacan, the big Other refers to the virtual agency of the collective others we formulate as our "audience", in a manner of speaking; the social structure towards which we aim our

utterances and our activity. Because we cannot account for all of the various small others (*petits autres*) out there in the world—we cannot go to every individual and ask them if they truly know the meaning of every one of my utterances—we instead refer to the virtual agency of the big Other (*grand Autre*) as the guarantor of our meaning. But in our supposedly post-ideological era, it appears as though no one believes any longer in the virtual agency of the big Other (see Dean, 2010). This, of course, presents a problem, since, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the process of the cure *is* to convince the subject about the non-existence of the big Other. If everyone already knows that the big Other does not exist, then it seems quite difficult to develop a critique of ideology based on this very premise. The problem can be developed further by drawing on one of Žižek's theses from his book *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), in which he refers to a supposed "demise of symbolic efficiency", which coincides, similarly, with the way that Fredric Jameson (1984) has described postmodernism in Lacanian terms, using Lacan's formula for psychosis (and Jameson is, here, somewhat drawing upon the claims of Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983)), as a "breakdown of the signifying chain."

Here, the point is that—even through the Derridean strategy of deconstruction; or, too, the methodology devised by Adorno's negative dialectics (see Dews, 1994)—every assertion towards truth is deconstructed and torn down. Every master-signifier, as Lacan called it—that is, the empty (phallic) signifier, the signifier of symbolic castration—appears to have been desublimated. There is, of course, an overlap here with Herbert Marcuse's (1991) conception of "repressive desublimation." In the modern sense, it appeared that desire was driven by prohibition and the authority of the Father to say "No!". However, in postmodern consumer culture, when we are constantly driven by the super-ego injunction to enjoy and consume, when it appears that all barriers and prohibitions to enjoyment have been lifted, we nevertheless seem unable to find satisfactory enjoyment. The tearing down of every master-signifier thus has the effect of appearing to take down or wipe away any and every prohibitive authority; it also appears to tear down every and any assertion of universal (shared) truth, by demonstrating that it is always already an assertion of a *particular* truth—the truth of the speaker and their own particular position of enunciation (whether classed, gendered, racialized, in particular ways, etc.). But if every assertion of truth is only the particular truth of the speaker, and there are no common, universal truths, then it would seem that the shared space of communication is void, and that there is an inability to arrive at consensus—hence, it does appear that for many of us the big Other does not exist.

But what if—and this, I believe, is the point of Žižek's theory and critique of ideology—the problem is not simply the demise of symbolic efficiency and the apparent non- or dis-belief in the agency of the big Other; what if, on the contrary, we all do still secretly believe—but in a disavowed (unconscious) form—in the operation and functioning of the big Other? We do this, but in what sense? At this point we have to understand precisely the meaning of Žižek's category of the *sublime object* of ideology; and we have to do so by

developing our understanding of the Lacanian *objet petit a* (object small other) as a correlative to the big Other (*grand Autre*). We can do this by coming to understand the Lacanian logic of *choice* as it has been developed in Žižek's work.

3. The forced choice of being

In his books *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (1991) and *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (1993), Žižek draws on the Cartesian legacy in Lacan (which he returns to much more directly in *The Ticklish Subject*). He does this by addressing the way Lacan breaks down the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* into the two moments of the “I think” and the “I am”—that is, the separation of thought and being. In Seminar XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (1981), Lacan claims that the subject is forced to choose thought over being; however, in Seminar XIV on the logic of fantasy (unpublished), Lacan instead asserts that the subject is forced to choose being, and thought is then relegated to the position of the unconscious. Žižek, however, opts not to read the later formulation as substituting and correcting the earlier one; instead, he argues that we must read the two formulations against the Lacanian logics of sexuation.

Drawing on arguments made by Joan Copjec (1994) regarding the Kantian antinomic structure of Lacan's logics of masculine and feminine sexuation, Žižek proposes that the first formulation—the choice of thought over being—is tied to feminine sexuation; the second version, then—the choice of being over thought, with thought relegated to the position of the unconscious—is tied to the masculine. The formula of masculine sexuation in Lacan (1998) can be read as the relation of universality and its exception. In the masculine logic, all subjects are submitted to the function of the phallic signifier; but then there is one subject that remains unsubmitted to the phallic function. On the feminine side, there is no subject that is not submitted to the phallic function; but then, *not-all* subjects are submitted to the phallic function. The way that we can read these formulations, I propose, aligned with Žižek's theory of ideology, is to conceive the masculine logic as the premise for theorizing the subject trapped in ideology, whereas the feminine logic helps us to understand the critique of ideology and the ethics of psychoanalysis and emancipation. As Copjec (2004), for instance, has noted, for Lacan the ethical subject can only be feminine. In the masculine formulation, the subject chooses being, with thought relegated to the position of the unconscious; however, in the feminine formulation, the subject *risks* being in favour of thinking and reasoning. Reasoning, after all, from the Hegelian dialectical perspective, is the *path* to Truth. There can be no access to Truth without a gesture of risk, of choosing sides. We therefore need to understand further the way that the choice of being in the masculine logic is consubstantial with the formation of the sublime object.

Žižek describes this, in various places, as the *forced* choice of being, and we need to understand this choice as it relates to the subject's relationship to the

objet petit a—or the object-cause of desire—and the big Other. The forced choice is, in fact, the way in which we, as small children, all come to identify our sense of self as it relates to the social form of language and discourse, or what Lacan calls the Symbolic order, relying on Saussurean structural linguistics and the structural Anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. We enter into the realm of the Symbolic order, the realm of language and communication, when we come to identify with the gaze of the Other (here the Lacanian big Other) congealed in the form of the gaze of the parent or early care giver, for instance. At this point, we have all the options in the world—a multitude of options—available to us of what we can *be*. Nevertheless, the Symbolic order exerts pressure on us to be what it demands of us. In preceding our own subject formation, the Symbolic order never arrives to us pure, without ideology. It is always already coloured and shaped by the historically contingent terrain of the prevailing social values, beliefs and ideologies, which transform and develop over the course of history and struggle, but which nevertheless still inform the gaze of the Other we try to impress—or which we feel pressured to impress—with the choice that we make of all of the available options for identification. In this way, our choice of identity is intended to satisfy the desire of the Other; and, again, in this way we may realize what is meant in Lacanian theory that the subject's desire is always the desire of the Other. We choose, then, to identify with the signifier conveying meaning upon our identity. As Lacan puts it (1981), the signifier represents the subject for another signifier—that is, the signifier conveying meaning upon us (the empty master-signifier, or the phallic signifier) is the one that we use to represent our own self to the various others present within the Symbolic order. Yet at the same time the signifier is also that for which all of the others (the big Other) represent or define the subject.

There is a two-way relationship here where, on the one hand, the signifier represents the subject for the other signifiers; but also, all of the other signifiers represent the subject. The choice of signifier, therefore, comes to fill in a lack in the Symbolic order, marked by the presence of the subject itself. But then what happens to all of the other choices *not* chosen? We should read all of these various other choices not chosen as developing the construction of the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire—the *sublime object* of ideology. The subject's desire is formulated, in this way, as the perception of all of the other choices not chosen. But what hides for the subject its own responsibility in having freely chosen (although forced—it is a paradoxical choice) the particular identity that it assumes, is the formation of the *fantasy*. Fantasy is what masks for the subject the fact that it made the choice *itself*—that the subject is, itself, responsible for this free choice, if however forced—the choice of being over thought—being, that is, for the gaze of the Ego-ideal of the big Other. The price it pays for the choice of being is a loss or lack that drives its desire. Still, what the fantasy of the lost object of desire—the object whose attainment the subject believes will finally wrest and satisfy its enjoyment (*jouissance*)—veils for the subject is that it actually still garners enjoyment from

the *failure* to capture the lost object. This latter form of enjoyment (or, *jouissance*) is what Lacan refers to as drive (as opposed to desire). While the subject consciously pursues the lost object of desire, which it believes will *satisfy* its desire, it is in fact always receiving a form of surplus-enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*) through drive in the very failure to find and locate the lost object.

Here, it is worth noting, though, that the lost object of desire, the *objet petit a*, is precisely the very thing that Žižek calls the sublime object of ideology. It is through the fantasy relationship to the sublime object of ideology that the lack in the Symbolic order, occupied by the position of the subject, is filled in by the subject's perception of the desire of the big Other, and which tethers it to the surface level of ideological propositions. This formulation is what Žižek adds in to supplement the Althusserian theory of ideological interpellation in and by the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs).

4. The precipitous anticipation of ideological interpellation

Althusser (2001) argues that individuals are interpellated by ideology as subjects, that is, that individuals become subject through the process of their interpellation in the state ideological apparatuses, including the family, the church, the school, the media, etc. But as Žižek notes early on in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*:

[Neither Althusser nor his followers ever] succeeded in thinking out the link between Ideological State Apparatuses and ideological interpellation: how does the Ideological State Apparatus... “internalize” itself; how does it produce the effect of ideological belief in a Cause and the interconnecting effect of subjectivization, of recognition of one's ideological position? (Žižek, 1989: 43)

As he later puts it, in opposition to Althusser, we must come to grasp ideology less as the internalization of some external contingency; ideology, rather, “resides in the externalization of the result of an inner necessity, and the task of the critique of ideology here is precisely to discern the hidden necessity in what appears as mere contingency” (1994: 4). In other words, what we start to recognize here is that ideological interpellation has far less to do with the internalization of the ideology present in the external apparatus, in institutions, in the Symbolic order and so forth. Its effect, in fact, has to do, instead, with the need for the subject to have itself—its own inner ideal ego—recognized by the external Ego-ideal of the big Other. The subject's aim, we shouldn't forget, is to satisfy the desire of the Other. Its desire is the desire of the Other. In this sense, we might be able to grasp the impact of ideological interpellation not as the internalization of an externally contingent ideology; it resides, rather, in the anticipation of the Other's desire and, as Lacan develops in the discourse of the hysterical neurotic, particularly in his graph of the dialectic of desire, the question of the subject, posed to the virtual gaze of the Other—the Ego-ideal—is “*Ché vuoi?*”: What do you want from

me? What am I to you? Am I a man? Am I a woman? What *am* I? In the ideological gesture, the subject attempts to anticipate this desire of the Other and select an identity—the formal function of the empty master-signifier—to choose from all of the possible available multiplicity of choices, before it gets caught with its (figurative) pants down.

Relying on Lacan's essay on logical time, Žižek explains this movement in the following way:

In the shift from $\$$ to S_1 , from the void of the subject epitomized by the radical uncertainty as to what I am, i.e., by the utter undecidability of my status, to the conclusion that I am [this], to the assumption of the symbolic identity—"That's me!" (1993: 75-76)

In other words, what remains under theorized by Althusser "is the gesture of symbolic identification, of recognizing oneself in the symbolic mandate [...], a move aimed at resolving the deadlock of the subject's radical uncertainty as to its status (What am I qua the object for the Other?)." Therefore, as he puts it, the Lacanian approach to interpellation differs from the Althusserian one insofar as it reverses the process. It's not that ideology interpellates individuals into subjects; the reverse is true: ideology interpellates subjects into some symbolic identity, mandated by the desire of the big Other, thereby eluding the abyss of its own desire or form within the framework of the Symbolic order (1993: 73-74). For this reason, as Mladen Dolar (1993) has put it, in the Althusserian approach, subject is a product of ideology, whereas in the Lacanian approach subject emerges where ideology fails.

But if this is the case then we still have to ask: What happens when no one believes any longer in the functioning of the big Other? What happens when we are dealing with the so-called demise of symbolic efficiency, when the operation of the big Other is de-tethered, when the suturing operation of the Symbolic order no longer has effect, either in the form of the post-Structuralist deconstruction of every master-signifier, or in the claim regarding the incredulity towards metanarrative—that is, when every shared, common "truth," is already undermined ahead of time? The first question to ask apropos of this problem is the following: Is this non-belief in the big Other authentic, or is it only apparent? In other words, on what level do we proclaim our non-belief in the big Other?

5. The Perverse Form of Cynical Ideology

Here we have to consider the difference in the function of ideology at the different levels of the practical (unconscious) materiality of its form and the way that we may reflect on it at a conscious level in our avowed awareness. What we find, perhaps, at the level of consciousness is that everyone today is supposedly an enlightened realist—it is worth noting that even conspiracy theorists see themselves in this way, from Holocaust deniers to followers of QAnon

to Flat-Earthers and so on, and even those such as Giorgio Agamben, who believe that the Covid-19 crisis is but a mere mechanism of biopolitical population control. Nevertheless, who might we say, today, remains unaware of the exploitative dimensions of global capitalism, its functioning not only as a global economy but also as a global ecology? Who remains unaware of the problems we face with racism, colonialism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and so on? Who is unaware of the deepening debt crisis brought on by decades of neoliberal market fundamentalism? The problem today is not that these issues remain hidden from full view. The problem is that we approach such crises from apparently realist positions but nevertheless approach them from a cold distance, as if they are eternal problems that we cannot solve. As Fredric Jameson famously (1994) put it—a thesis restated by Žižek (1994) and Mark Fisher (2009)—today it is easier to imagine the end of the world than even a modest transformation in the capitalist mode of production, or even its destruction. The problem, in other words, is that a *cynical* realism (what Fisher (2009) calls “capitalist realism”) pervades in liberal societies.

Žižek develops this form of cynical resignation, tying it precisely to the Lacanian form of perversion as fetishistic disavowal, most easily approached through the formula of “*je sais bien, mais quand même...*” “I know very well, but nevertheless...”. Here, the fetishistic disavowal of the form of perversion overlaps with the predominant cynical approach to reality. Cynicism, as Todd McGowan explains, is the form that helps us to understand why we may continue in our pursuit of the lost object of desire, even though we know full well that no positive object will satisfy our enjoyment. It is, as he puts it, “a mode of keeping alive the dream of successfully attaining the lost object while fetishistically denying one’s investment in this idea” (2011: 29). In the form of the consumer society, for instance, cynicism “allows subjects to acknowledge the hopelessness of consumption while simultaneously consuming with as much hope as the most naïve consumer” (Ibid).

Furthermore, we see here too in what sense we might be able to understand, as Žižek (1999) has put it, in the face of the apparent demise of the big Other, the reason why “perversion is not subversion.” In *The Parallax View* (2006), Žižek notes that the Lacanian formula of perversion is the exact same as that of the analyst’s discourse; the only difference is that in the latter, the subject has achieved the traversal of the fantasy (p. 303). In the case of the pervert, the function is operatively one of constantly willing back into existence figures of the Master, of authority: the figure of the big Other. The reason for this, if we see it in the form of cynicism, is precisely the fact that the pervert’s relationship to its enjoyment operates through transgression—that is, through the constant transgression of a law or a norm. If enjoyment is, or can only be, procured through the form of the transgression—that is through constant and continued negation of every master-signifier; every metanarrative—then it constantly requires the propping up of some figure of Authority or Mastery (or meta-language) against which it may transgress. This is why, as Žižek has put it, with the death of god, it’s not that everything is permitted; rather, with the death

of god everything remains prohibited. In order to feel free to pursue the lost object of desire, we require the enactment of some limit preventing its access. In the form of disavowal, we miss the point that we are always, still, actualizing the form of the Other whom we transgress.

Judith Butler, here, is a primary example of a theorist who, through her own allegiance to the Foucauldian dimensions of micropower (as opposed to the macropowers of the market and the state—this is where discipline/discourse theory departs from the Althusserian ISAs) demonstrates the tie between subjectivity and ideological enjoyment. As she puts it at the beginning of her book *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), power (in the Foucauldian sense) “is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are” (p. 2). If we depend on power as the very mechanism for the production of subjectivity, then we have to question the ethical dimensions of a theory of resistance based on this model—a model, that is, based solely on the bad infinite of endless negation. How might we reconcile this fact of critical realism, grasping the locations and the sites of power, while at the same time noting our reliance upon it and therefore undermining every attempt at its overthrowing? Here, again, the form of the fetishist disavowal helps us out, since the disavowal is only operative insofar as it relies upon an objectal correlate. For Žižek, this allows us to rethink the mechanism of the Marxian category of commodity fetishism, and in this way links the perverse form of the Foucauldian model with the very liberal model of the rational enlightened realist who nevertheless clings to the market form of the global capitalist economy.

6. Commodity fetishism, or the material correlate of ideology

The example of money in its very material form lends a hand here. When we look at money—paper money, but even credit and other digital forms of currency in operation today—we understand it in a very realistic way. We tell ourselves that the value of money is purely arbitrary; that this is only a piece of paper, or bits of digital information on an electronic ledger; it has no intrinsic value; its value is but a mere reflection of a larger social relationship, and so on. We say all of this; we avow it directly; but nevertheless we still act as if money contained some intrinsic value. Why? Here we have to understand the effective ambiguity of the form of the big Other in post-ideological (postmodern) capitalism.

Again, we are not driven by some sort of “false consciousness.” No mere illusion is masking reality. The fictitious, arbitrary or social value of money is on full display to each particular subject. The problem, however, is the utter ambiguity regarding the Other’s knowledge or desire. Does *the big Other*, in other words, know that money has no material, intrinsic value? Does the big Other know that it, itself, does not exist, even? We are back at the problem of anticipating the desire of the Other. In a precipitous move, we find ourselves invested not in our own belief but in the ambiguity of the Other’s belief; and

we see this all the time in the everyday operation of the market economy. It functions as a material manifestation of the Symbolic order, of the big Other, in the way that capitalist abstraction is materialized in practices and relations of exchange. No amount of trying to tell every individual subject in capitalism about the falsehood of the value of money can have an impact on its transformation, since, in our everyday practical activity, we treat money as if its value were truly real. But then, still, in the market form (especially when we consider it in the basic neoliberal sense of the market as a space not merely of exchange but as one of competition; that is, the way that, today, various competing personal, particular, individual truths (in the plural) are in competition with each other—that is, in the context of the so-called “post-Truth” era) we all, nevertheless, share the same basic common belief in its *practical* truth and its logic. That is to say, as Hegel demonstrated (2008: 180-186), the form of civil society in which each individual aims at enacting their own individual, particular interests nevertheless can only function against the background of some truly universal, if however disavowed, truth (that is, the space of the market). What we share in common, despite appearances, is the same investment of our (unconscious) belief in the value of the money commodity, as well as the market space of competition/exchange. All truths—even contradictory and competing truths—are permitted (there appears to be no metalanguage) only on condition that we all do invest in the shared (universal) commonality of the market space and commodity form.

The difficulty, then, for the critique of ideology, is how to bring to the surface this dimension of the shared common truth between individuals with competing, different truths and alternative facts, given that no particular truth (or means of defending Truth) is allowed to be raised to the level of metalanguage. What, in fact, makes the Marxist truth superior to the liberal or the post-Structuralist approach? All of these approaches are permitted to exist in agonistic parallel currency with each other, none more valid than the other, as long as we accept the basic rules of this game. The post-ideological condition has taught us that no one truth is superior to another and has therefore brought us fully into the dilemma of a post-Truth society. But things do not (cannot) simply end here; and this is where, for Žižek, the Lacanian and Hegelian critiques of ideology overlap.

7. Truth has the structure of a fiction

Beginning with *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek demonstrates the difference between the post-Structuralist claim that “there is no metalanguage” and the Lacanian version. As he puts it, “Post-structuralism claims that a text is always ‘framed’ by its own commentary” (1989: 153). The interpretation of every text is *already* internal to the text itself; there is, in other words, no external position from which the text may be interpreted or analyzed. No interpretation, in other words, can be legitimized from outside. Truth, as Foucault (1984) often put it, is only present in its effects in discourse. Truth is never

anything outside of the truth-claims made in discourse. The problem, as Žižek argues, is that post-structuralism often ends up producing merely a series of bad infinities: “an endless quasi-poetical variation on the same theoretical assumption, a variation which does not produce anything new” (1989: 155). Its problem, in other words, is that it remains too confined to the truth claims of its own discourse, but never is it prepared to *risk* truth; to risk a gesture of positing some truth that could operate as the building blocks against which we may reason the very real presence of contradiction and antagonism.

As Žižek put it in his introduction to *Mapping Ideology* (1994: 7), the task of the critique of ideology is “to designate the elements within an existing order which—in the guise of some ‘fiction’[...]—point towards the system’s antagonistic character”. Earlier, in the introduction to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, he writes, in contrast to the common reading of Hegel and his conception of the Absolute, that:

Far from being a story of its progressive overcoming, dialectics is for Hegel a system of notation of the failure of all such attempts—“absolute knowledge” denotes a subjective position which finally accepts “contradiction” as an internal condition of every identity. (1989: 6)

We have here the needed co-ordinates for realizing the way that the Lacanian thesis, that truth has the structure of a fiction, overlaps and corresponds with the Hegelian dialectical strategy for reaching the Absolute Idea; not merely in the positing of some Truth, but rather, in the *reasoning* required to reconcile with the fact that every attempt at overcoming falls back into contradiction. What we must do to reach this conclusion is begin with some foundational *positing* that, through the process of reasoning, allows us to approach the situation at the other end from the perspective of *presupposing* the positing.

This process of reasoning is developed in the dialectical movement from positing to external, to determinate reflection (or, even, in the movement from the positive to the negative to the infinite judgement). This is a movement, not merely of the negation of truth or concept or transcendental signified—which is the operation of the post-structuralist gesture of deconstructing every movement towards truth—but in *the negation of the negation* that returns the subject to its starting point, now from an entirely new perspective that rounds the circle of the true infinite. It is only in this way that the subject is made capable of taking ownership over the foundational forced choice of being that it made freely, in the moment of subjectivization, which was the foundation of its relationship to its desire and to its enjoyment.

We find, in a way, what Žižek (2006) later on refers to as the “parallax gap” between the subject and the object—between the moment of foundational positing and the moment of the presupposition on the part of the subject. To be much more blunt, we discover that it is only through the initial intervention of some *fiction* that we are made capable—if we reason clearly through

the framework of this fiction—of arriving at Truth. The only path towards Truth, in other words, is *through the very form of the fiction itself* that returns us to the initial moment of positing. When we do this, we come to learn that we are the ones who form our own framework, our own approach to our desire and to the reality that it frames. The traversal of the fantasy does not consist in achieving or finding the lost object that lies beyond it; it consists, instead in recognizing that enjoyment (*jouissance*) is *only* in the fantasy. The product of this recognition is the realization that we do have the freedom to impose our own structures, our own frameworks for producing the conditions of our freedom. That is, to realize that the imposition, the positing of the structure or framework of our Truth and our freedom is perhaps (historically) contingent—there is nothing inherent or natural about the frameworks we produce—yet still necessary. Not by deconstructing false truths but by imposing a contingent yet necessary fiction do we find ourselves capable of the kind of reasoning through the movements of negation, and then through the negation of the negation, to arrive at Truth. This, after all, is the structure we find in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where in every scenario we find ourselves falling into contradiction, only to realize at the point of Absolute Knowing that contradiction is, again, the “internal condition of every identity” (Žižek, 1989: 6).

There is a kind of debilitating ethical limitation, then, present in both conceptions of being post-ideological and post-truth. On the one hand, post-ideology denies us our awareness of the frameworks—even the unconscious frameworks—giving structure to our common material conditions and relationships to each other. The relativism of post-ideology reflects the very fact that the market logic of competition exists against the background of allowing everyone their own personal truth(s). Denying the presence of this background undermines our efforts to realize the shared common source of our cultural and political discontent. Naming the system indeed matters!

On the other hand, denying Truth also undermines our efforts insofar as it puts us back into conditions of cynical resignation. A politics based on constant and absolute negation all the time prevents us from *risking* the positing required to arrive at the Truth—it stops short at every instance of building the necessary, if however contingent, frameworks for our salvation. It likewise denies our efforts in, still, constantly externalizing and positing the Other as the source of our failure to find full satisfaction in our enjoyment. The continued belief that the Other has stolen our enjoyment leaves us in the unsatisfactory repetition of enjoying the failure of our ability to attain the lost object. *This* is the most ideological condition we face today: the expectation that our enjoyment has been stolen from us by the big Other. It is not an avowed belief in the big Other that plagues us, but the unconscious belief in the Other's belief in itself (belief in the market, for instance), rather than recognizing the Truth that we are the ones who are free to produce the conditions (that is the frameworks or structures) required for our (free) enjoyment of the limits we impose upon ourselves. Being free has nothing to do with transcending limits to our enjoy-

ment—of the constant negation of limits or imposed truths. It, rather, turns on the production of the Concept: the framework or narrative that marks the impact of the Symbolic into the terrain of the Real. This, if I may put it this way, is the lesson of the Žižekian system as a politics of Truth.

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