

## THERE IS NO POST-IDEOLOGICAL WORLD: IDEOLOGY IN A ZIZEKIAN KEY\*

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**Abstract.** *The study interprets The Sublime Object of Ideology by Slavoj Žižek emphasizing that the human being is deeply ideological as (s)he is deeply fantasizing the totality of reason, universality, freedom, absolute knowledge and other such necessary landmarks which order human life, human society and human world. These landmarks are ideological universals and fantasies that create and re-create the human world, not as superficial accidents, but as deeply structuring, lively elements. Why there is no post-ideological world? To be (human) is to entertain fantasies and ideology feeds on fantasy. When and how is ideology sublime? The study reads the sublime of ideology as a paradoxical structural manifestation of a human being that dreams and lives the totality and the absolute of reason, which has engulfed its own negation, that is, its symptom, without canceling it.*

**Keywords:** *ideology, post-ideology, antagonism, democracy, Slavoj Žižek.*

### Introduction

*The Sublime Object of Ideology* offers an original interpretation of ideology and shows from this perspective not only why we do not live in a post-ideological world (yet), but also that we shall never populate one. The fact that his argument finds illustrations in the most diverse and unexpected places, reading ideology mainly in a psychoanalytical and Hegelian key emphasizes not only the originality of the endeavour, but also the playfulness and the postmodernism of this fragmented approach (which rejects postmodernism), without shadowing the scholarship of the approach or the depth of the theoretical analyses. This journey only brings the reader closer to the idea of the split subject<sup>1</sup> on which agency is based in the

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<sup>1</sup> The subject is at Žižek, in a Lacanian perspective, designated by the symbol \$. The subject is split, characterized by a pre-symbolic, mythical void present in the subject’s symbolic network (“with Althusser, too, the ‘individual’ which is interpellated into subject is not conceptually defined, it is simply a hypothetical X which must be presupposed”). Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London, Verso, 2008, p. 112. Pol. Sc. Int. Rel., XIII, 2, pp. 109–122, Bucharest, 2016.

postmodern world and which generates the inner antagonism of human society. The interpretation of ideology involves various contemporary and historical ideological phenomena and the idea of ideological fantasies that alleviate the irreducible antagonism or sum of antagonisms, translated by Žižek into denied *jouissance* – explained as “the necessary but hidden institutional authority complement” by Ian Parker<sup>2</sup> – or into the facing of the Other, characterizing human society and its destiny. In this study we intend to address and set in perspective this interpretation of ideology in a manner that sustains the thesis announced in the title: “There is no post-ideological world”.

Published in first edition in 1989, in a world mesmerized with the hope of witnessing not only a more liberal, post totalitarian, post-Cold War world, but also a post-ideological one as the work proposes a psychoanalytical view of ideology founded on the psychoanalytical approach of Hegelian philosophy. This interpretation of ideology has its main resources in Lacan, Hegel, Marx, in the theory of antagonism developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. This work was re-edited many times and translated in several languages: Verso published five English editions until 2009, in 2008 Navayana published a first English edition, in 2011, in 1995 it was translated in Turkish language (*İdeolojinin Yüce Nesnesi*), in 2010 in Spanish (*El Sublime Objeto de la Ideología*), in 2014 in Italian (*L'oggetto sublime dell'ideologia*), in 2003, 2005 and 2011 in Estonian (*Ideoloogia ülev objectand Ideoloogian ylevä objekti*), in 2006 in Greek (*Το υψηλό αντικείμενο της ιδεολογίας*), in 1992 in Portuguese (*Eles Não Sabem oque Fazem: o sublime objeto da ideologia*), in 2000 in Japanese (*Ideorogii No Suukou Na Taishou*), and in 2002 in Chinese (*Yi Shi Xing Tai De Chong Gao Ke Ti*).

How and when is ideology sublime? The book capitalizes Lacan as a rationalist and his theory as a “contemporary version of the Enlightenment”. At the same time, this interpretation is based on a different understanding of Hegelian dialectics as centered on difference and contingency, on negativity and loss.

The theory of ideology resulted from a philosophical psychoanalytical interpretation of Hegel, Lacan and Marx starts from the identification of the foundation of ideology: the reality which is perceived as ideological. “This is probably the fundamental dimension of ‘ideology’: ideology is not simply a ‘false consciousness’, an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as ‘ideological’ – ‘ideological’ is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence – that is, the social effectivity, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals ‘do not know what they are doing’”<sup>3</sup>. And immediately after, emphasized, the author shows “‘Ideological’ is not the ‘false consciousness’ of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by ‘false consciousness’”<sup>4</sup>.

This is a symptom, manifest individually and socially, as a certain particular element that negates the universal foundation of its status and meaning caught in

<sup>2</sup> Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction*, London, Pluto Press, 2004, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London, Verso, 2008, pp. 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

a logic of exception: the negation is a symptom of a certain affirmation which is deeply enrooted in its meaning, identity includes with necessity otherness, the idea and the concrete expression of value includes the threat of the lack of value. Marx himself opens the way to psychoanalysis via terminological innovations such as “symptom” and “commodity fetishism”. Slavoj Žižek notices that Lacan considers Marx the inventor of the symptom when he denounced the imperfect realization of the bourgeois universality of rights and duties in the case of the working class and he follows the passages in the capital where these terms are present.

Slavoj Žižek illustrates this with the comment of the ideological universal represented by freedom which is present in a variety of forms – freedom of press, freedom of expression, political freedom, freedom of consciousness or freedom of trade – but in its manifestation as the freedom of the worker to sell unconstrained his labour on the market is a negation of freedom as universal because this way the worker loses his (or her) freedom. In his perspective, because workers sell their labour instead of the products of their labour the principle of fair trade is negated as well. The labour force is remunerated, but the surplus value generated by the labour force is appropriated by the capitalist and this is a negation of the principle of free trade and it functions as exploitation. In Marxian perspective it is possible to have a world in which universality functions without the symptom, that is, where the workers remain the owners of the means of production and this way they are not exploited anymore. On the other hand, this is also why theoreticians tend to call this society of universalism without its symptom utopian socialism. Marx himself found in proletariat, which is functioning as “the unreason of reason itself”, a disturbing element for the totality of reason, when he interpreted Hegel.

*“The real aim of ideology is the attitude demanded by it”<sup>5</sup>*

Slavoj Žižek sustains that the identity of an ideology is socio-symbolic in nature and tends towards an ideal stage consisting of a closed and homogeneous totality, giving unity and specificity to our experience of social and historical reality<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, capitalizing on the theory of social antagonisms and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Slavoj Žižek shows that the identity of an ideological space is formed out of a sum of “floating signifiers” (the ideological universals) that become to be structured via the “nodal points”, in Lacanian terms “points de caption”, which have the role of quilting the floating signifiers (to stop them and to “freeze” them in a fixed structure). Otherwise, the ideological universals are not tied up, are open in meaning and identity characterized by “metaphorical surplus-signification”<sup>7</sup>. Žižek states: “Ecologism, for example: its connection with other ideological elements is not determined in advance; one can be a state-orientated ecologist (if one believes that only the intervention of a strong state

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 90.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 142.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 94.

can save us from catastrophe), a socialist ecologist (if one locates the source of merciless exploitation of nature in the capitalist system), a conservative ecologist [if one preaches that man must again become deeply rooted in his native soil], and so on; feminism can be socialist, apolitical; even racism could be elitist or populist...<sup>8</sup> Then, he shows that when the ideological signifiers are quilted through Communism ever signifier attains a certain closed meaning: “democracy” becomes “real democracy” and not “bourgeois democracy”, people are made of “a special mold” and they cannot be simply people, but they are Communists, etc.

For Hegel, Reason is embodied in society as social order, for Marx the proletariat is the symptom of that reason and order and for Žižek there is always an irrational element perturbing the totality of rational universality which nevertheless finds ways to preserve itself via symptoms, ideological phenomena and enjoyment. The ideological universals (instances of ideological fantasies) have the task of masking their negative instances, as ideology itself is based on a sort of cynical reason (Sloterdijk): “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it”<sup>9</sup>. Although people know that their ideological truth is not exactly the truth, they nevertheless base their activities on ideological fantasies. Freedom, as ideological universal, conceals and also *cancels* the forms of exploitation in spite of the cynical/ironic distance (Sloterdijk’s “kynicism”)<sup>10</sup> since fantasy is structuring social reality itself: “The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself”<sup>11</sup>.

In a Lacanian key, Žižek discusses the human unconscious as the realm of the imaginary, a realm of fixations which are unassimilated by the symbolic development<sup>12</sup>, *symptoms* not yet filled with meaning, but potentially meaningful, because man is a symbolical being craving with necessity for meaning, as Cassirer explained. In our view, through meaning the human being satisfies a basic necessity of decreasing the realm of nothingness and we can correlate this view with the fact that Žižek states clearly that symptoms are the first signs, the “traces” of the symbolic development of meaning in certain respect. We can say that this is the craving for the Big Other – defined as “the symbolic order as a consistent, closed totality” – which Lacan deems inexistent. The fact that it does not exist leaves a void in the signifier’s structure, generating the symptoms, the interplay of signifying differential relations that have the function of conferring the substantiality of enjoyment<sup>13</sup> to the existing phenomena. The symptom is a chance for the subject “to organize his enjoyment” and exemplified by Žižek through the slip of the tongue this is different from the fantasy, because it produces displeasure when it emerges, and pleasure when interpreted. The symptom is not ideological, but rather a modality

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> Our note.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78.

in which the subject manages to cope with the symbolic realm and the symbolic development.

In an interpretative incursion that approaches the formalism of imperatives during Enlightenment, as well as at Kant, correlated with Sade and Lacan, Žizek indicates that ideology mimics successfully the logic of the moral imperative and investigates this aspect in the case of Fascism as following: “Let us take the case of Fascism – the Fascist ideology is based upon a purely formal imperative: Obey, because you must! In other words, renounce enjoyment, sacrifice yourself and do not ask about the meaning of it – the value of the sacrifice lies in its very meaninglessness; true sacrifice is for its own end; you must find positive fulfillment in the sacrifice itself, not in its instrumental value: it is this renunciation, this giving up of enjoyment itself, which produces a certain surplus-enjoyment”<sup>14</sup>. Also, in this perspective, the power of Fascism stays in the *lack*: of programme, justifications, or reasons for sacrifice and obedience.

When the author discusses the role of the Jew as “social blockage” and “social negativity” against Fascism<sup>15</sup> it becomes clear that for Žizek Fascism is a metonymy for totalitarianism. Totalitarian society projects its own antagonisms and blockage in the figure of Jew as any society projects its blockages and antagonisms in some specific problematic figures: the enemy, the gypsy, or the roma, the marginal, the terrorist, the leftist, etc. In Nazism the main fantasy is the harmonious whole of the world dominant Aryan race and its war against a figure seen out of place, trespassing limits, antagonistic and destroying the structuring of the social fabric – the Jew (“a hidden Master aiming at world domination: they are a counter image of the Aryans themselves, a kind of negative, perverted double”)<sup>16</sup>.

Expanding a metaphor that we find at Descartes<sup>17</sup>, Žizek identifies the paradox of ideology as the attention to its form, the fact that it continues to go straight in the initial direction no matter what, this going straight and this unique purpose of serving itself (nothing, anything) being the “absolute” of ideology and the Lacanian *jouissance*, which gives consistence to their ideological attitude and justifies the means<sup>18</sup>. Descartes’ maxims of provisional morality meet the Kantian formalism and the formalism of Fascism emphasizing the supremacy of form, the imperative of the devoted attitude that conceals the excess of enjoyment. Žizek quotes Laclau and Mouffe with their thesis that ‘Society doesn’t exist’, since it is merely an inconsistent field structured around a constitutive impossibility,

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

<sup>15</sup> Or Nazism, or Stalinism or Communism, etc.

<sup>16</sup> Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory*, London, Free Association Books, 1988. *Ibidem*, p. 143.

<sup>17</sup> “. . . that of being as firm and resolute in my actions as I could be, and not to follow less faithfully opinions the most dubious, when my mind was once made up regarding them, than if these had been beyond doubt. In this I should be following the example of travellers, who, finding themselves lost in a forest, know that they ought not to wander first to one side and then to the other, nor, still less, to stop in one place, but understand that they should continue to walk as straight as they can in one direction, not diverging for any slight reason, even though it was possibly chance alone that first determined them in their choice. By this means if they do not go exactly where they wish, they will at least arrive somewhere at the end, where probably they will be better off than in the middle of a forest”. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, p. 64 apud S. Žizek, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 92.

traversed by a central ‘antagonism’. Thus, any fixed socio-symbolic identity vanishes when confronted with the right antagonism. The ideological strengths provided by the devotion to the form are completed by those yielded by taking failures into account in advance, compensating through the fantasies of noble ideological universals for the fails in identification<sup>19</sup>.

If the strength of ideology is form, appearance, the danger of ideology resides precisely this same aspect. Žižek notices: “The real danger, for Plato, is this appearance which purports to be an appearance and for this reason is nothing but the Idea itself, as Hegel knows very well (‘the supersensible [Idea] is the appearance qua appearance’). (...) This is why the fundamental Hegelian motif that ‘appearance as such is essential’ could not be grasped without the hypothesis of the big Other – of the autonomous symbolic order rendering possible the deception in its properly human dimension”<sup>20</sup>. This insight is illustrated for the case of Stalinism and “its obsessive insistence that whatever the cost we must maintain the appearance: we all know that behind the scenes there are wild factional struggles going on; nevertheless we must keep at any price the appearance of party unity; nobody really believes in the ruling ideology, every individual preserves a cynical distance from it and everybody knows that nobody believes in it; but still, the appearance is to be maintained at any price that people are enthusiastically building socialism, supporting the Party, and so on”<sup>21</sup>. This argument suggests that the ideological universals (among those, besides the above mentioned “freedom”, “the party”, “party unity”, etc.) compose the “essential appearance” and the wholeness of the entire system. In the protective shadows of the ideological appearances dwells the big Other. Ideology entertains some level of deception, while not the people should be fooled by the ideological fantasy, but the big Other. The value of Stalinism, states Žižek, consists “in the ontological proof of the existence of the big Other”. And, from the Žižekian perspective, this idea of the value of an ideology founded on appearance as ontological proof for the big Other, should be extended for all ideologies, totalitarian or not.

Ideology claims to rule in the name of a noble ideal, in the name of the people, in the name of whatever quilting element is to follow, but it just feigns to rule in that name and in fact rules only to reproduce power. And for this reason ideology is being perpetuated whenever and wherever there is a human realm, as a long shadow of man and society.

### *Democracy, Revolution and Reform*

Slavoj Žižek does not see much difference among various ideologies and the different types of totalitarianisms intelligible from the unique philosophical investigation focused on quilting floating signifiers in fantasies that elate the reproduction of power. Less sustainable are the so-called fundamentalisms identified with too much ease. S. Žižek outlines: “We have; for example, feminist

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 142.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 225.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.



fundamentalism (no global liberation without the emancipation of women, without the abolition of sexism); democratic fundamentalism (democracy as the fundamental value of Western civilization; all other struggles – economic, feminist, of minorities, and so on – are simply further applications of the basic democratic, egalitarian principle); ecological fundamentalism (ecological deadlock as the fundamental problem of mankind); and – why not? – also psychoanalytic fundamentalism as articulated in Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (the key to liberation lies in changing the repressive libidinal structure)"<sup>22</sup>.

Nevertheless, the author proposes a reasonable analysis of democracy from the perspective of the inner antagonism that brings about both its meaning and its value. "We have the same logic with democracy: it is – to use the worn-out phrase attributed to Churchill – the worst of all possible systems; the only problem is that there is no other which would be better. That is to say, democracy always entails the possibility of corruption, of the rule of dull mediocrity, the only problem is that every attempt to elude this inherent risk and to restore 'real' democracy necessarily brings about its opposite – it ends in the abolition of democracy itself. Here it would be possible to defend a thesis that the first post-Marxist was none other than Hegel himself: according to Hegel, the antagonism of civil society cannot be suppressed without a fall into totalitarian terrorism – only afterwards can the state limit its disastrous effects"<sup>23</sup>.

From the perspective of the theory of the social founded on the notion of antagonism (Laclau and Mouffe), the author shows that radical democracy is not quite radical, as by taking into account its inner antagonism, this democracy is in a certain sense "realistic". Zizek shows: "Here we can see how we have reached the opposite extreme of the traditional Marxist standpoint: in traditional Marxism, the global solution-revolution is the condition of the effective solution of all particular problems, while here every provisional, temporarily successful solution of a particular problem entails an acknowledgement of the global radical deadlock, impossibility, the acknowledgement of a fundamental antagonism. My thesis (developed in *Le plus sublime des hystériques: Hegel passe*) is that the most consistent model of such an acknowledgement of antagonism is offered by Hegelian dialectics: far from being a story of its progressive overcoming, dialectics is for Hegel a systematic 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"<sup>24</sup>.

In other words, democracy is not attained in time with the maturity of the democratic forces, with a sort of progress or due to democratic development of the legislation, institutions, customs etc., but only due to actions and efforts that include the contradictions at the core of the democratic identity. For instance, although the revolutionary branch of social-democracy is not necessarily indicated as the example for improved democracy nowadays, Zizek notices that the historical reproach for the social-democratic revolutionaries of being too hastily, too

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xxvii.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xxviii.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xxix.

impatient, was contradicted by Rosa Luxemburg who showed that it is never the right time for the seizure of power and that revolutionary acts are always premature.

Zizek notices thus that the opposition to the premature seizure of power betrays the revisionists who oppose to the seizure of power itself and want a 'revolution without revolution' as Robespierre said. The reformist (Bernstein) is obsessional and delays everything careful to act in the right moment, while the revolutionary (Luxemburg) is hysterical rushes to act and change everything, criticizing the obsessional position. Because of revolutionary haste a revolution succeeds rather as a repetition, which brings Zizek to Hegel's repetition of history due to the sanctions of the revolution once the political system is renewed. Another aspect is that truth of the historical necessity arises also from misrecognition, which plays the role of a "productive" instance. The revolution is interpreted here as a symbolic representation of "a contingent trauma, as an intrusion of a certain non-symbolized Real; only through repetition is this event recognized in its symbolic necessity – it finds its place in the symbolic network; it is realized in the symbolic order<sup>25</sup>. "The misrecognition is a case of *non-percipi*, which is a condition for *esse-percipi*. And for this misrecognition reasons Minerva's owl flies only at night, when the epoch ended and things are settled and ready for interpretation.

Attempting nevertheless to interpret democracy in our times, Zizek identifies a struggle between the neo-conservative interpretation of democracy and the social-democratic interpretation of democracy, centered on the understanding of a main ideological universal – freedom. "Today, for example, the stake of the struggle between neo-conservatism and social democracy is 'freedom': neo-conservatives try to demonstrate how egalitarian democracy, embodied in the welfare state, necessarily leads to new forms of serfdom, to the dependency of the individual on the totalitarian state, while social democrats stress how individual freedom, to have any meaning at all, must be based upon democratic social life, equality of economic opportunity, and so forth"<sup>26</sup>. First, this tendency to interpret in such a lax manner the concept of the totalitarian state is rather a characteristic of the perspective sustained by Slavoj Zizek (generated by the idea of ideology as the result of the totalizing action of the *rigid designator* which is the *point of capiton*) and not so much a tendency of the neo-conservative interpretation of democracy. Second, we should notice that in Zizek's interpretation freedom becomes a *point de capiton* for the contemporary concept of democracy, that is, an ideological universal which structures in a fix assembly all the other ideological elements. However, this aspect should be interpreted as a generator of an essentialist illusion that democracy can be captured through a *permanent* arrangement of the set of characteristic elements. There is no permanent essence of democracy to be captured.

The anti-essentialist approach (sustained by Laclau and Mouffe) "compels us to conclude that it is impossible to define any such essence, any cluster of

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 64-5.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 96.



positive properties which would remain the same in ‘all possible worlds’ – in all counterfactual situations”<sup>27</sup>. Should we understand that it is impossible to define democracy? Žižek’s appeal to Laclau and Mouffe indicates that there is still possible to advance a definition: “In the last resort, the only way to define ‘democracy’ is to say that it contains all political movements and organizations which legitimize, designate themselves as ‘democratic’; the only way to define ‘Marxism’ is to say that this term designates all movements and theories which legitimize themselves through reference to Marx, and so on”<sup>28</sup>. The variety of the attempts to capture democracy brings the theoreticians before the trap notion of “true” democracy, all mutually exclusive and mutually critical. All these attempts include a positional-relational approach to democratic identity, an oppositional relation to whatever is considered “un-democratic”, a stigmatizing signifier underneath the “splendor” of the rigid designator that coagulates the ideological vision (the freedom, the party, the country, God etc.), and that label all the other attempts as inaccurate or wrong. For instance, “ ‘Communism’ means (in the perspective of the Communist, of course) progress in democracy and freedom, even if – on the factual, descriptive level – the political regime legitimized as ‘Communist’ produces extremely repressive and tyrannical phenomena”<sup>29</sup>.

In a Lacanian perspective, democracy is the political regime ruled by the “real-impossible sovereign”, since it is the rule of the people, sovereignty is situated in and generated by the people, but the people cannot rule themselves: “a sociopolitical order in which the People do not exist – do not exist as a unity, embodied in their unique representative. That is why the basic feature of the democratic order is that the place of power is, by the necessity of its structure, an empty place”<sup>30</sup>. The other part of the definition of democracy, Žižek shows, is the dissolution of the socio-symbolic relations as well as the “irruption of the Real” represented by the elections included in its socio-symbolic fiber. This is an irrational element constitutive for democracy, and it is democratic imperfection that brings about democracy. “It is true that democracy makes possible all sorts of manipulation, corruption, the rule of demagoguery, and so on, but as soon as we eliminate the possibility of such deformations, we lose democracy itself – a neat example of the Hegelian Universal which can realize itself only in impure, deformed, corrupted forms; if we want to remove these deformations and to grasp the Universal in its intact purity, we obtain its very opposite”<sup>31</sup>.

### *The Sublime of Ideology?*

Human meanings are “permeated with enjoyment”. As a consequence, the “greatest” meanings are those generated by the terrifying impossible *jouissance*, as is the case with Titanic. “The wreck of the Titanic therefore functions as a

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 121.

<sup>30</sup> The author quotes Claude Lefort, *L ‘Invention démocratique*, Paris, Fayard, 1981, *Ibidem*, p. 165.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 166.

sublime object: a positive, material object elevated to the status of the impossible Thing. And perhaps all the effort to articulate the metaphorical meaning of the Titanic is nothing but an attempt to escape this terrifying impact of the Thing, an attempt to domesticate the Thing by reducing it to its symbolic status, by providing it with a meaning. We usually say that the fascinating presence of a Thing obscures its meaning; here, the opposite is true: the meaning obscures the terrifying impact of its presence”<sup>32</sup>. Our meanings offer glimpses of the sublime bodies, of the “outside” of the vital cycle of degeneration and corruption. The sublime dwells between the two deaths: the biological and the symbolic, “final” one.

One can talk about the sublime of ideology because it is a “sublimate” and because the way we understand Žižek’s interpretation, we the people, our society, our world and our ideologies are made from the substance of dreams. We are the expression of the heroic effort to symbolize and historicize, to drape with meaning the empty place at the core of existence. This is a sublimate for the impossibility of the real, of our *perspective* on reality.

Titanic remained in history the metaphorical experience of the wreck and the image of the wreck got superimposed on the image of the European (human) civilization as well as of the civilization as succession of ages of wreck. Either the former age is the age of gallantry and represents present loss or the former age is seen as an age marked by some kind of failure (a reified class society), nevertheless, the negative is engraved in our culture and going more on the perspective of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe we can say that it plays a resilient role in the dynamism of human societies.

The study interprets *The Sublime Object of Ideology* emphasizing that the human being is deeply ideological as (s)he is deeply fantasizing the totality of reason, universality, freedom, absolute knowledge and other such necessary landmarks which order human life, human society and human world. These landmarks are ideological universals, in fact fantasies, that create and re-create the human world, not as superficial accidents, but as deeply structuring, lively and creative elements. The sublime object of ideology is placed as well between two deaths<sup>33</sup>. The sublime object of ideology is a type of fantasy producing enjoyment. This enjoyment supports a fantasy that although is situated between two deaths is in fact beyond death. Žižek illustrates it: “In the Stalinist vision, the Communists are ‘men of iron will’, somehow excluded from the everyday cycle of ordinary human passions and weakness. It is as if they are in a way ‘the living dead’, still alive but already excluded from the ordinary cycle of natural forces – as if, that is, they possess another body, the sublime body beyond their ordinary physical body. (Is the fact that in Lubitsch’s *Ninotchka*, the role of the high Party apparatchik is played by Bela Lugosi, identified with the figure of Dracula, another ‘living dead’, expressing a presentiment of the described state of things, or is it just a happy coincidence?) The fantasy which serves as a support for the figure of the Stalinist Communist is therefore exactly the same

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 77.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162.

as the fantasy which is at work in the Tom and Jerry cartoons: behind the figure of the indestructibility and invincibility of the Communist who can endure even the most terrible ordeal and survive it intact, reinforced with new strength, there is the same fantasy-logic as that of a cat whose head is blown up by dynamite and who, in the next scene, proceeds intact his pursuit of his class enemy, the mouse”<sup>34</sup>.

The sublime of ideology stays in the fact that ideology is a paradoxical structural manifestation of a human being that dreams and lives the totality and the absolute of reason that has engulfed its own negation, that is, its symptom, without annihilating it. This substance of dreams is the very substance of ideology – an animation of universals, expressing the human attraction for absolutes such as reason, freedom, knowledge etc. and of symptoms that express the cancelation of the universal, its negation, the negative and the void. There is a terrifying vibe in the sublime of ideology.

In this perspective, the sublime of ideology includes the bare minimum required for human enjoyment of the self and of the world as well as the fantasy of wholeness, of symmetry, of homogeneity, of continuity... Thus, the sublime of ideology consists in its object: the human dream of reason and human noblesse, marked by meaningful limitations and negations that cannot cancel it. We do not need virtual technology to build and have our virtual world of enjoyment which is structuring our social reality: the sublime object of ideology and our other fantasies take care of this aspect.

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Slavoj Žižek’s work enjoyed a growing reception from the beginning and his influence grew over time, to the point that we can speak now of a political theory area called “Žižek studies”. There is a journal dedicated to the interpretation of his work – *International Journal of Žižek Studies* – and several Žižek readers, among which quite well known are Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (2003); Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek* (2003); Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (2004); Glyn Daly and Slavoj Žižek, *Conversations with Žižek* (2004); Matthew Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of The Real* (2004); Rex Butler, *Slavoj Žižek – Live Theory* (2005) etc. The great majority of these readers are introductory aiming to address and explain the complexity of Žižek’s multi-reference work. We can discern that after a period of awe and celebration came a more critical time for Žižek’s work.

Judith Butler who is an interlocutor for Žižek as well as Laclau, and other theoreticians have capitalized Žižek’s work, in general, in their scholarship and in their own works and, explicitly, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, too, in what concern the consequences of the agency of the split subject. But this is a critical capitalization. For instance, in her work *Bodies That Matter: On the discursive limits of sex*<sup>35</sup>, which continues the perspective from *Gender Trouble: Feminism*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 163.

<sup>35</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the discursive limits of sex*, New York and London, Routledge, 2011.

*and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler shows what is the contribution made by *The Sublime Object of Ideology* to gender theory: “The innovative theory of political discourse offered by Slavoj Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* takes up the question of sexual difference in Lacan in relation to the performative character of political signifiers. The reading of his work and the subsequent essay on the re-signification of “queer” are inquiries into the uses and limits of a psychoanalytic perspective for a theory of political performatives and democratic contestation. Žižek develops a theory of political signifiers as performatives which, through becoming sites of phantasmatic investment, affect the power to mobilize constituencies politically. Central to Žižek’s formulation of the political performative is a critique of discourse analysis for its failure to mark that which resists symbolization, what he variously calls a ‘trauma’ and ‘the real’”<sup>36</sup>. Although she appreciates the breakthrough realized by this theory, she criticizes the lack of problematization of specific antagonisms: “An instructive and innovative theory, it nevertheless tends to rely on an un-problematized sexual antagonism that unwittingly installs a heterosexual matrix as a permanent and incontestable structure of culture in which women operate as a “stain” in discourse. Those who try to call this structure into question are thus arguing with the real, with what is outside all argumentation, the trauma and the necessity of oedipalization that conditions and limits all discourse”<sup>37</sup>. This author capitalizes also on Žižek’s efforts to link the performative character of discourse to the power of political mobilization. “His explicit linking of the theory of performativity to that of hegemony as it is articulated in the radical democratic theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe offers insights into political mobilization through recourse to a psychoanalytically informed theory of ideological fantasy. Through a critical engagement with his theory, (...) psychoanalysis might retain its explanatory force in a theory of hegemony which reifies neither the heterosexual norm nor its misogynist consequence”<sup>38</sup>. The fact that the valuable theoretical points are barely problematized in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* is the most pertinent of the criticism brought to this work.

Speaking of Žižek’s perspective on the role of the name in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* we present another example of problematization at Judith Butler: “It is this function of the name to secure the identity of the subject over time that Slavoj Žižek underscores in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* as the ideological dimension of the name. Žižek argues that what the philosopher Saul Kripke understands the proper name’s status as a rigid designator is parallel to this identity-conferring function of the name in Lacan”<sup>39</sup>. But factuality shows that the name might change, in the case of women, and only the identity of the patronymic lineage remains in place illustrating the power relations in terms of gender”. For women, then, propriety is achieved through having a changeable name, through the exchange of names, which means that the name is never

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xxviii.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 109.

permanent, and that the identity secured through the name is always dependent on the social exigencies of paternity and marriage. Expropriation is thus the condition of identity for women. Identity is secured precisely in and through the transfer of the name, the name as a site of transfer or substitution, the name, then, as precisely what is always impermanent, different from itself, more than itself, the non-self-identical. Clearly, neither Žižek nor Kripke have this problematic in mind when the name is said to secure the permanence of that which it names. The changeableness of the feminine name is essential to the permanent appearance of the patronym, indeed, to the securing of an illusory permanence through a continuing patrilineality. Moreover, the proper name can be conceived as referential and *not* descriptive only to the extent that the social pact which confers legitimacy on the name remains un-interrogated for its masculinism and heterosexual privilege. Once the proper name is elaborated as a patronym, then it can be read as an abbreviation for a social pact or symbolic order that structures the subjects named through their position in a patrilineal social structure”<sup>40</sup>.

*The Truth of Žižek* (by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp) is a reader that acknowledges the dramatic contribution made by Žižek in theoretical and political debates not only in political theory, but also in film studies, media studies, cultural studies anthropology, in the study of Hegel and Lacan, as well as in Marxism and post-Marxism. At the same time this reader attempts a more critical approach of the theoretical foundations embraced by a thinker who deserves this sort of approfondating approach, and who has crossed with his ideas and influence the borders of academia to a greater extent than any thinker before him. An interesting critical stance concerns his argument on hegemony and “the sad predicament of today Left” or the minimalisation of the influence of cultural wars (feminist, gay, anti-racist etc.) as emancipatory politics and leftist achievements, but as achievements of the “welfare state”.

Ian Parker addresses in his reader the critical aspects of Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, namely the sum of rejections (of the substantial individual subject, of Martin Heidegger, of postmodernism as present in the perspective which is characteristic for Lyotard and of deconstruction as present in the writings of Derrida) that are present there and which are disputable, without dismissing any of his theoretical contributions, but noticing the elusiveness and the contradictory aspects of his perspective. For instance Ian Parker discusses the contradictory relation between insubstantial individual and substantial community, or Marxism and post-Marxism. He interprets also the connections between Butler’s, Laclau’s and Žižek’s works based on their common work *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (2000).

A relevant indicator for the strong echoes of the perspective opened by Slavoj Žižek is its presence in other theoretical arguments, farther from philosophy, psychoanalysis and social theory. In this respect we could mention the study of Campbell Jones and Andre Spicer, titled “The Sublime Object of Entrepreneurship”, which is approaching the debates on enterprise culture and the figure of the

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 110.

entrepreneur through the problem of the failure of entrepreneurship discourse in the Lacanian and Žizekian key. ‘The entrepreneur’, as well as entrepreneurship become in this approach Lacanian-Žizekian terms that offers glimpses of the Real: sublime objects. This marks a presence of psychoanalytic cultural criticism in organization studies, which is a novel methodological approach in this less philosophical field.

*The Sublime Object of Ideology* remains a particularly influential argument that ideology is a specific experience of the universe and our place in it, which sustains and triggers the production of power relations and identity in a changing world, a chatchy argument meaningful in many theoretical aspects and factual situations – many of them presented in the book and others much more interesting when interpreted from this perspective.

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