

Philosophy Insights

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The Subject of Politics

Slavoj Žižek's Political Philosophy

Henrik Jøker Bjerre & Carsten Bagge Laustsen

*“... ideology is
already at work in
everything we experi-
ence as ‘reality’...”*

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A Note on the Authors

Henrik Jøker Bjerre is Assistant Professor at the Department of Philosophy and History of Ideas, Aarhus University, Denmark. His main research interests are moral philosophy, sociology and psychoanalysis. His publications include *Kantian Deeds* (Continuum, 2010).

Carsten Bagge Laustsen is Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Denmark. His main research interests are terrorism, political theology, political thought and modern social theory. He has previously published *The Culture of Exception. Sociology Facing the Camp* (Routledge, 2005, with Bülent Diken) and *Sociology through the Projector* (Routledge, 2008, with Bülent Diken).

Chapter 1. Lacanian interventions: Psychoanalysis as a theory of society

In his work, Slavoj Žižek performs a psychoanalytic study of society. What could be meant by this is the theme of this chapter, for couldn't one already simply dismiss his project on this ground? How can it be possible to perform the psychoanalysis of a society, as if there were a common, psychological unconscious – a sort of flipside of the World Spirit – which could be brought forward through some kind of mystical, metaphysical discourse? The first step in the exposition of Žižek's use of psychoanalysis must be to answer this immediate intuition and to show how the unconscious is not, on neither the 'individual' nor social level, an inscrutable, hidden entity that steps forward in analysis. The unconscious is already out there, and it is therefore already socially and linguistically mediated 'in' the individual. The relation between society and subject is already central to psychoanalysis itself, and the application of it in sociology is not therefore supposed to be an invention of a new metaphysical entity, but rather a shift of perspective.

The unconscious

The image of the unconscious as a sort of ghostlike or hidden substance has given psychoanalysis a bad reputation as a form of mysticism in some quarters. Indeed, it may immediately seem that psychoanalysis fails to live up to any standards of science. How can one investigate an object which has no positively given substance? The very idea of an unconscious, some claim, is absurd or at best without any real sense. It makes sense to talk about the not-conscious: that which we have no knowledge of; you could talk of the pre-conscious, i.e. that which we know, but are not currently conscious of

(most people know that Madrid is the capital of Spain, even though they rarely think about it). You could also talk about the pre-reflective, such as automatic reactions to situations that are so familiar to us that we no longer have to reflect on them consciously. Indeed, you could even talk about a sort of bodily intelligence, about how phone numbers are 'in the fingers' after some time. But the unconscious is none of this. It is not something conscious that has sunk down into the depth of the soul. And it is not something which surfaces from an original wealth of biological or instinctual appetites – like a sexual need (Hyldgaard 1998: 38f).

The unconscious is unconscious and is not dug out like in an archaeological project. But this does not entail that it is an irrelevant concept or that it is unscientific. The unconscious shows itself – but as 'absent' – as that which punctuates the speech of the analysand as symptoms. The unconscious is the problematic or unfinished in our relation to the world. It shows itself in contexts that we are part of, as signification that we and our behaviour have, but which we are not conscious of. It is meaning that we are creating behind our own backs; that which we are doing without knowing that we are doing it. To illustrate this point, we might make use of a truly Žižekian example.

In one of his many articulations of psychoanalytic points through concrete, historical events, Žižek refers to the former American Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, who, through a small course of epistemology in 2003, emphasised all the possible dangers that Saddam Hussein represented. Rumsfeld reminded us that 'There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know that we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know' (Žižek 2004: 9). In other words, Rumsfeld pointed to a number of logically possible explanations of the ways in which Iraq posed a threat, including that which we 'don't know that we don't know'. Not only did we know that Saddam had WMDs before (known knowns), and that we did not know everything about their present whereabouts (known unknowns), but we might very well also imagine that there were even things that we

didn't suspect, i.e. that he was hiding secretly obtained weapons in facilities entirely unknown to us (unknown unknowns).

Žižek points out that Rumsfeld forgot the fourth possible combination of the known and the unknown: the unknown knowns, namely that which we don't know that we know, 'which is precisely the Freudian unconscious, the "knowledge which does not know itself", as Lacan used to say' (ibid.: 9–10). Rumsfeld and co. knew more than they knew: in their actions a type of knowledge was present, which did not know itself, about the motives for invading Iraq and the consequences it would have. The unacknowledged knowledge, e.g. the idea of the superiority of Western civilisation and its right to intervene where it finds it timely, in a way returned in its perverted form with the disclosure, around a year after the invasion, of the torture and humiliation that had taken place in American controlled prisons in Iraq.

The unconscious is thus a type of knowledge, but is rather unlike what we ordinarily understand by knowledge. It would not be advisable to rely on the unconscious in a game of Jeopardy. It is what we do not know that we know, i.e. a way that we act or place ourselves in the world without being aware of the implications. Therefore, the horizon of meaning that we move in is always broader than we think. The unconscious is structured like a language, as Lacan says, but it is not yet articulated *to* the analysand *as* an understandable message. It is the relations we stand in without being aware of it; it is the fact that we do not oversee our own world and its connections or how our own speech relates to the big picture. A symptom is therefore an immediately incomprehensible message that must be interpreted in order to make sense. It must be placed in a meaningful context that is not yet clear to the analysand, but which she nonetheless – with assistance from the analyst – has the resources to clear up.

The analytical sequence has, as its purpose, to uncover how the analysand 'lives her world' (Žižek 1997: 29). One could say that it is the unacknowledged relations to others that are the theme of analysis. The hypothesis of the unconscious is therefore precisely that which connects the poles of the individual and society. It is because the individual is never complete or master in its own house that it must iden-

tify with socially mediated roles and values. The unconscious refers to a constitutive lack of being, which on the one hand forces the individual to ever new acts of identification, while these, on the other hand, will always misfire. The psychoanalyst listens to the ways in which the analysand cultivates this constitutive lack.

The exchange between the psychic and the social can, however, also be analysed from the other side. Just as the subject is driven towards the social, so the social is driven towards its subjects. Society itself is constituted with a lack. 'There is', as Margaret Thatcher put it, 'no such thing as society'. Any regime needs to ensure legitimacy and backing, and this cannot be achieved exclusively through the display of physical power, which would be a self-defeating strategy in the long run, but must also be supported, arguably primarily, by ideology. The function of ideology is to make it possible for the individual to mirror itself in society – like one of the faithful sons of the nation, for example. But why does ideology work? The critique of ideology has turned to psychoanalysis, because here it has found a theory of the constitution of the 'psychic' and an answer to the question of why people identify with ideologies that seem to work against their own interests. Lacan's version of Mrs. Thatcher's refusal of the existence of society could be said to be his famous description of the 'big Other': it does not exist, but it functions nonetheless. There is not, or at least there certainly doesn't *have* to be, any unequivocal conspiracy (a mastermind) behind the way ideologies work on their subjects, but they nonetheless function and subjects largely orient themselves via an imagined coherence behind the actual events in society, or to put it another way: we behave as if there were a society. There *is* no society, but it functions nonetheless.

It is thus possible to focus on the pressure that society exerts on the individual or on the ways in which the individual deals with or handles this pressure. The latter is the task of the psychoanalytic clinic, while the former is the task that psychoanalytically founded social theory has taken on itself. Where clinical psychoanalysis is intrigued by the statements of the individual patient, psychoanalytically founded social theory deals with and is intrigued by social phenomena. In other words, you must always place brackets somewhere:

in clinical psychoanalysis, the brackets are placed around the ‘societal’, and in psychoanalytically founded social theory, brackets are placed around the ‘individual’.

We may thus already confront one of the criticisms that has been levelled against the attempts at employing psychoanalysis within the field of social science. It is said that psychoanalysis is irrelevant because it is interested in individual beings and the motivations that the individual has for his or her actions, and that this might be of interest to psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts, while social science is interested in society. Similarly, psychoanalysis has been charged with biologism, pan-sexualism, naturalism and determinism, based on the perception that psychoanalysis conceives the individual as shaped by pre-social forces (ibid. 8). Accordingly, Freud was supposedly blind to the intersubjective and linguistic context within which the individual unfolds itself. This criticism, however, is running in open doors. The forces that are permeating the individual are precisely socially mediated.

An isolated individual subject, for instance, cannot fantasise about a specific, desired object. The question is, as Žižek puts it in *The Plague of Fantasies*, how the subject knows at all that it desires this specific object. How has it learned what an object is, and that precisely this object is desirable? According to Žižek, one cannot say that an ‘independent’ subject recognises an object in the world as a possible satisfaction of a corresponding pre-linguistic desire, on the contrary: we *learn* to see certain things as desirable or interesting, because we are already part of a socially articulated game of desire. The example Žižek uses to illustrate this is a story Freud himself tells about his daughter Anna, who, at an age where she hardly had any language, was fantasising about strawberry cake one night in her sleep (Freud 1999: 135). Žižek explains this fantasising as an illustration of the fundamentally intersubjective character of desire: the daughter had discovered that her parents enjoyed watching her eating strawberry cake. This feeling of doing something that fulfilled the strong wish in the parents to see their child in a certain way, created a very strong emotional attachment to strawberry cake in the little Anna. She learned to desire strawberry cake because she thereby achieved

the status of being the object of the desire of the other(s) – her parents. She became the happy, enjoying little girl whom they loved (to watch) (Žižek 1997: 9). This story illustrates that desire, in Lacan's words, is always the desire of the other. What I desire is first and foremost to be desired by the other, i.e. to become or do something which the other finds love-able. Even the most 'immediate' private wish is therefore always already mediated by a kind of unconscious awareness of our relations to the other. In a most literal sense there is no psychic private language.

Back to Lacan

Jacques Lacan's reinterpretation of or 'return' to Freud has given psychoanalysis a new fruitfulness to a range of theoretical fields, and Slavoj Žižek has contributed with one of the most influential translations of this potential in the field of social theory. Lacan is primarily known as the one who brought the linguistic turn to psychoanalysis, and he is simultaneously one of the central figures in French post-structuralism. The dominant reading of Freud in Lacan's time was one of ego-psychology, and in order to salvage psychoanalysis from the individualistic misconceptions of this tradition, Lacan claimed that the road back to Freud had to go through the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Hence Lacan's description of the unconscious as 'structured like a language'. Only in this way could the radicality of Freud be preserved. Lacan wanted to add a more strict, structuralist awareness of language to Freud's groundbreaking clinical observations. With Lacan the intersubjective foundation of psychoanalysis is unfolded, thereby rendering it relevant for sociology; with Žižek, it becomes political.

Social science has always imported from neighbouring disciplines. In this sense, there is nothing controversial about Žižek's mixture of philosophy, psychoanalysis and sociology. Exactly by 'bracketing' the particular, unique individual and its handling of societal pressure, and focusing on the games of meaning, power and desire that are displayed in the public and political space, Lacanianism can contribute to new ways of articulating and questioning the political. Central

to this work is, for Žižek, the concept of the subject, and it is in the exploration of a concept of the subject relevant to social thinking that he combines (classical, mainly German) philosophy with psychoanalysis. By investigating the universalist implications of the classical concept of the subject and combining it with the perspectives of the social field in psychoanalysis, Žižek seeks to establish a more refined understanding of how subjectivity is at stake in our age, as well as seeking, in a very broad sense of the word, a kind of therapy to overcome some of the pathological elements in it.

In a first take, one could simply say that in psychoanalysis Žižek seeks new ways of framing the questions that may contribute to a more adequate understanding of society. By employing a strategy of questioning similar to the one which is unfolded in the analytical situation, attention can be directed towards parts of our societal reality that are not commonly addressed, or it can be directed towards that which makes us act or refrain from acting in certain ways, and what makes us accept ideological constructions and see ourselves the way we do. Psychoanalysis as a strategy for questioning can, as Danish scholar Lilian Munk Rösing has put it, help us to consider a fundamental question: ‘what if things are really working in exactly the opposite way of how we commonly take them to work?’

What if the client, who states that she loves men, thereby also says the opposite, namely that she hates them? What if the slogan of Coca Cola that ‘this is it’ also means the opposite – that it is precisely *not* it: Coca Cola is never the fully satisfying object. And what if this is precisely the reason why we have to keep on buying it? What if Tony Blair’s ‘third way’ simultaneously indicates the opposite: that there is really only one way – the one of liberalism? What if the Western pluralistic ideology of freedom is simultaneously the opposite: a homogenising culture of commodification? (Rösing 2005: 103, our translation)

It is noticeable that Žižek, in both his writing and talks, again and again makes use of exactly this form of questioning: ‘what if...?’ Often, one can simply read these what-ifs as straightforward claims. When

Žižek writes 'what if', he usually means 'in reality, the fact of the matter is this...'. As interventions in polite, coherent, academic discourse, Žižek's questions are almost always intrusive inversions. His method in this sense is a type of forced application of psychoanalysis to social scientific themes. With Gilles Deleuze, one could talk of a kind of activism of concepts in this approach to social theory. By not merely describing an available, understandable reality, but actively investigating it, challenging it and inverting it, the very attempt at mapping and understanding becomes a theoretical contribution itself. The writing becomes a labyrinth that forces the reader to find his or her own way. The Lacanian interventions become reinterpretations intended to make the reader reconsider and think, i.e. to see his or her own age in a new light and thereby also acquire a new approach to his or her own position in the societal order: what if...?

Lacan's concepts are mostly formal abstractions, which means that they have to be reformulated in every context. When psychoanalysis is employed in its social theoretical variant this entails that a particular type of diagnostic sensitivity must be developed. This partly means that Žižek's critics are in a certain sense *always* right: there is no one unequivocal, corresponding method for the application of Lacan's conceptual structures to contemporary philosophical and political themes. There *is* no big Other that acts in such-and-such a specific way, and there is no proto-subject that identifies unequivocally in terms of this acting. Nonetheless, psychoanalysis can be put to work to throw light on issues which are difficult to handle in statistical, rationalist and other analytical strategies. Psychoanalysis has developed a series of formal structures to identify forms of suffering and being such as hysteria, neurosis, perversion, fetishism, etc. This in turn leads to more specific analyses of conditions like anxiety, narcissism, and stress, as well as phenomena like objectification, alienation, nationalism, racism, commodity fetishism, etc. For Žižek, such analyses make possible a more nuanced understanding of the pressure that a specific political system, *in casu* capitalism, exerts on its subjects.

Discourse analysis or critique of ideology

Lacan's thinking, together with that of Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault and other French philosophers from the 1960s onwards (all of which has been central to Žižek's thinking from the beginning), has formed the basis of what is usually referred to as post-structuralism. In the social sciences, this broad theoretical field is often propagated under the banners of discourse analysis and social constructivism. One often refers to a 'linguistic turn', on the background of which the analytical focus is redirected towards investigations of textual and verbal expressions. In its most radical forms, discourse analysis has developed into a radical empiricism. The idea of something 'behind' concrete texts and statements is rejected. What *is* is what is articulated: the concrete expressions.

Lacan's thinking, as well as Žižek's, works against what one could call a discourse analytical reductionism. It is true that the subject is necessarily permeated, and to some extent alienated, by language, but the alienation in symbolic and imaginary identities does not exhaust it. The 'more' or the remainder, which insists after the socialisation of the subject, is the ground of psychoanalysis. It is described as the subject of the unconscious. Psychoanalysis is about all that which is *not* articulated in discourses, consciousness, cultures, self-perceptions, etc., but which is nonetheless there, if in no other sense than as the necessary, material background or the place for these articulations.

But how does one conceptualise the foundation of a critical practice (which seeks an additional 'more' to that which is to be found in explicit evidence of cultural etc. norms) in such a way that it does not become a particularism? Clinical practice has a fundamentally critical aim: it seeks to make people better. And this ambition, obviously, cannot be met without a thorough reflection on the conditions for a better life. One should not 'cede upon one's desire' – one is encouraged to 'traverse the fantasm', etc. These fundamental moral intuitions are transported into the social scientific version of psychoanalysis, although there are of course differences between focusing on the sufferings of an individual patient and on the societal conditions that provoke them. One cannot infer directly from the societal to the 'individual'.

As a program statement for a Lacanian critique of ideology, one could say that it investigates how different identifications are possible and encouraged within the social field, while simultaneously examining the background of the instability and possibly radical change that might occur exactly because of tension within the process of identification itself. Fundamentally, it is of course worth noticing that we are talking about ideologies rather than discourses. The perspective of the critique of ideology is different from the one of discourse analysis in that it does not see social reality as a complex game of competing discourses, but rather as founded upon one overarching frame of reference. Of course, alternative and competing perspectives are present in many important senses, but the emphasis is on one, overall, structuring perspective. The dominant ideology manifests the ability of the ruling class to make their values count in order to support and cement their social position. The other important difference is that the critique of ideology differentiates between the dimension of contents and the dimension of enunciation. Although ideology produces subject positions, this does not mean that there is no one who benefits from its yields. This approach to the analysis of ideology is not to be found within the frame of discourse analysis. Here, the subject is not something that is 'behind' a statement, but exclusively something that is produced in the statement. In fact it is both, as we shall see later.

In spite of the relativisation that inevitably comes with the linguistic turn, Žižek insists that it is still possible to be critical in a more fundamental sense than discourse analysis: there is such a thing as oppression, we can operate with a truth which puts the content of ideologies into perspective, and so on. One could perhaps explain this more precisely by differentiating between two different concepts of truth. The truth that is generated in knowledge as we commonly understand it is a truth that can be collected in heaps of data, as in propositions with a well defined semantic content where the content of knowledge corresponds to a reality that is independent of the knower. Truth in the sense that Žižek is after, on the other hand, is that which allows another reality or another dimension of reality to step forward.

Discourse analysis often establishes a sort of prohibition against asking ontological questions – it tends to reduce ontology to epistemology, or more generally, it relativises the fundamental philosophical and political questions to the historical and cultural contexts within which they emerged. Typically, we find variants of the convictions that there is no such thing as society, but only multiple discourses, there is no such thing as Woman, but only white, middle class women, black single mothers, lesbians, etc., and there are no classes, but only groups ordered by consumption or lifestyles (Žižek 1999: 133). This approach precisely obscures the type of truth that Žižek wants to bring forward in his analyses:

[W]hen a typical Cultural Theorist deals with a philosophical or psychoanalytic edifice, the analysis focuses exclusively on unearthing its hidden patriarchal, Eurocentrist, identitarian, etc., ‘bias’, without even asking the naive but none the less necessary question: OK, but what *is* the structure of the universe? How does the human psyche ‘really’ work? Such questions are not even taken seriously in Cultural Studies, since they simply tend to reduce them to historicist reflection upon conditions in which certain notions emerged as a result of historically specific power relations. (Žižek 2001a: 218)

Psychoanalysis offers a critical perspective that does not appear in discourse analysis. It can make explicit a conditioning level that goes deeper than historical, cultural and linguistic conditions. Compared to the descriptions of intersubjective systems found in discourse analysis, psychoanalysis therefore appears as a transcendental philosophical investigation of the subject.

You remind me of Emmanuel Ravelli!

The concept of the subject is one of the most disputed and ambiguous concepts in the tradition of the humanities. It finds its classical stipulation in the juxtaposition of a subject and an object, with the subject as the active part, and the object as something which is acted upon. You can be reduced to being the object of someone’s manipu-

lation – a plastic material shaped in the hands of others. You can be an object of strategies, planning, and political action in the broadest sense. The object, of course, is not necessarily another person; it might as well be, and indeed more precisely is, nature in the widest sense. Nature is objectified, it is subjected to scientific scrutiny, and thereby becomes possible to mould. A subject thus capable of moulding its surroundings – whether it be other people, culture or nature in a broader sense – is often referred to as ‘an individual’, ‘a self’, ‘an I’, or more abstractly, ‘a human being’. By an individual we understand, negatively, something unique, not moulded or produced, something in-dividual, i.e. indivisible, and if understood positively, something with a consciousness of its own, an ability for reflection, and thereby an ability to act freely and autonomously. In contrast to animals, we have the ability to transcend our most immediate instincts.

What the concept of the individual refers to is something that is identical to itself or less cryptically and more precisely: ‘The concept of the individual points to the idea that there are layers and qualities that can be peeled off, while something remains which is indivisible, and this indivisible core must be something that remains the same, i.e. something identical to itself’ (Mortensen 2003, our translation). This entirely individual quality refers to that which ties a life history together, i.e. that which remains the same in all contexts and at all times. The ‘I’ is a kind of hook, on to which all masks, roles, and experiences can be attached. The ‘I’ is that which remains, once every positive identity has been deducted. The intuition that one is always more than the concrete roles, one performs, and the norms, one is following, is the fundamental intuition to which the concepts of the ‘I’, the ‘individual’ and the ‘self’ refer. This entity is the subject that we know from the liberal tradition and from humanism: an accountable subject that can be held responsible, feel guilt, reflect, and not the least act.

But there is also another subject, or rather another meaning of being a subject, and this time one that relates to the exact opposite, namely to being subjected to the power of others (*sub-jectum*), and, more generally, subjected to social moulding (hence, for instance, the regular discussions of subject positions in structural Marxism). ‘Sub-

' here refers to an epi-phenomenon: one is a subjectivised, receiving being. We have here, in other words, the subject which is referred to in sociology: the socialised individual that only exists because of the 'societal'. Structures shape the individual; indeed, the very idea of an individual is something that is socially produced. Sociology, and more narrowly structuralism, thus rejects the understanding of the self as given in an absolute self-presence. This thought is often formulated as an attack on Descartes' *cogito*, which is claimed to have been one of the most radical formulations of a metaphysics of the self, i.e. the idea of a self-transparent I equal to itself ('*cogito ergo sum*') as the stable basis of a controlling scientific practice that keeps being under control by means of thinking. (Lacan's reading of Descartes' *cogito* is radically different, and we will encounter this reading in chapter 4).

Structuralism rejects the Cartesian conception of an unproblematic separation of two independently identifiable substances (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*), i.e. the thinking and the extended substance, which can be directly referred to through their immediately representative signs (indexicals). Meaning, according to structuralism, is given from the relations between signs, and not from reference that these signs are supposedly making to the world or to the self. Since language is given as a structural nexus between signs, this also means that the sign never rests in itself, but only carries meaning via its relations to other signs. Thinking does not presuppose a *cogito*, but a system of relations between signs that precedes the thinking agent.

It is obvious that the Cartesian as well as the purely structuralist understanding of what it means to be a subject is of a reductive nature: the subject is either self-present and independent from the world or given entirely in virtue of its linguistic and intersubjective situation. The question here, however, is how different the two conceptions really are. In both cases, being a subject is thought as a coherent and fully given being. The difference between them is that this being has its source in the I or the self according to the liberal and humanist tradition, while in the structuralist tradition it is thought of as derived. The consequence of the criticism that structuralism levels at the Cartesian paradigm is, in other words, not carried

through radically enough. Classical structuralism does not identify an absence where liberalism and humanism saw absolute self-presence. It merely replaces a self-presence with a culturally and historically produced presence.

Post-structuralism and especially psychoanalysis here become interesting as a tradition that has taken up the consequence of the critique from structuralism (this is precisely what the 'post' in post-structuralism indicates). Psychoanalysis, for Žižek, exactly represents a way to overcome the dichotomy between the ontologies of presence in the liberalist and the structuralist humanist traditions. Thinking the subject as the subject of the unconscious enables psychoanalysis to maintain the valuable aspects of the Cartesian *cogito* and the conception of the subject in German Idealism, while at the same acknowledging the radical structuralist critique of them. Where the two humanist traditions understand the subject in terms of a personal or social identity, Lacanian psychoanalysis is characterised by understanding the individual or the self as permeated by forces and registers which it does not master itself, and, no less importantly, by forces that are often in a contradictory relation to each other: the self-preservation instinct vs. the death drive, the reality principle vs. the pleasure principle, the superego vs. the id, and so on. One could say that the subject in psychoanalysis is precisely the conflict between the two aspects of subjectivity that the liberal and the structuralist tradition are accentuating. The subject is the unfinished conflict between self-presence and the symbolic identity ensured or given by others.

Žižek enjoys employing jokes from the old Marx Brothers movies and radio plays to illustrate even very abstract theoretical points such as this. One of these jokes nicely illustrates the 'third subject', i.e. subjectivity, as that which is not a pre-symbolic identity, nor the symbolically interpellated subject that is entirely exhausted in its name. Two people meet, and one exclaims: 'Hey! You remind me of Emmanuel Ravelli!' 'But I *am* Emmanuel Ravelli', the other replies, a little bit confused. 'Then no wonder that you look like him!' The conviction of Emmanuel Ravelli that he really is Emmanuel Ravelli illustrates the presumed self-presence of the subject. 'You remind of Emmanuel Ravelli', on the other hand, illustrates the intersubjective

identity of the subject, as given by others or by ‘the big Other’ – *it* will decide whether or not Ravelli is really Ravelli. It is not surprising, of course, that the two look like each other, but the apparently meaningless punch line in the Marx Brothers’ joke nonetheless illustrates a minimal distance between them. This distance is the third subject of psychoanalysis.

Although psychoanalysis thus presents itself as the science of this third subject – the subject of the unconscious – this does not entail a negligence of the two other forms of subjectivity. Lacan formulates the three subjects in a topographic field: as three dimensions that are all important in understanding the subject’s being in the world. Instead of the ‘I’, he speaks of the imaginary, which shortly said refers to the ability of saying ‘I’ – the image of a centre, without which the subject would not be able to create a narrative about its being in the world, and which is thereby also the precondition for connecting experiences together and reflecting on them. Instead of the conception of the subject in social science, and more specifically in structuralism, Lacan speaks of the symbolic: the moulds that are necessary for an identity to be shaped at all. And finally, he speaks of the real, as, on the one hand, the remainder that stays once the subject has identified itself, and, on the other hand as the very impetus behind our engagement in acts of identification. Without a constitutive lack, there is no urge for identification. ‘The Real’, thus, does not refer to the really existing, but much more to the opposite: to that which always escapes.

Insofar as the subject of the unconscious is the starting point for psychoanalysis and Žižek’s thinking, it is a subject that is articulated in the minimal distance of the individual towards itself, or in the lack of completeness that shines through the symbolic and imaginary identities. The very cause of wonder, critique and questioning of societal processes of identification is the driving force in Žižek’s psychoanalytically mediated philosophical investigations. When his works do not clearly mark the transition from the individual to the societal level, this is because the transition isn’t as clear cut as one might think. The subject is oriented towards society and vice versa. It is this intersection between the individual and the societal that intrigues

Žižek. The closing remarks of this chapter must therefore, by way of a conclusion, emphasise that in order to understand his particular form of social scientific thinking, one must not only try to relocate the methodological procedures of the psychoanalytic clinic in the analysis of societal issues, but also seek to grasp an understanding of subjectivity in general, which encompasses the individual as well as the universal or societal, i.e. which can be applied to individual pathologies as well as to societal conflicts and power structures. It is no coincidence that the critique of ideology plays such a decisive role in the work of Slavoj Žižek.

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