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LOADED SUBJECTS
Psychoanalysis, money and the global financial crisis

David Bennett
(Editor)
Responding to the trauma of the current global financial crisis, this book brings together an eclectic group of psychoanalysts, philosophers, cultural theorists and historians to debate the links between psychology, money and economic crashes. Among other things, contributors discuss: the century-old divorce between psychological and economic explanations of human behaviour; the gender politics, ethics and psychology of economists’ attempts to explain today’s rolling crisis in money markets; psychoanalytic theories of financial investment, risk and the jouissance of devastating loss; the rise and fall of Bernie Madoff; the squandering of fortunes on art; the attraction of Deleuzian speculation versus Freudian investment; the nexus between political economy and libidinal economy; the mystifying effects of treating ‘the market’ as a subject capable of ‘speaking’, ‘reacting’ and ‘punishing’; and the fate of desire in postmodern, hyper-commoditised culture.

Contributors: David Bennett, Geoff Boucher, Claire Colebrook, Paul Crosthwaite, Karl Figlio, Bruce Fink, Stephen Frosh, Jean-Joseph Goux, Campbell Jones, Viktor Mazin, Manya Steinkoler, Matthew Sharpe, Bernard Stiegler and Tan Waelchli.

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GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS

David Bennett (Editor)

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FINANCIAL CRISIS, SOCIAL PATHELOGIES
AND ‘GENERALISED PERVERSION’:
QUESTIONING ŽIŽEK’S DIAGNOSIS
OF THE TIMES

Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe

The global financial crisis came at a good time for Slavoj Žižek. When the crash began to spread from the American sub-prime mortgage market, Žižek was just going to press with two major interventions into left-wing politics, designed to refute what he takes to be the basic assumption of today’s postmodern leftist, that ‘capitalism is the only game in town’. 1 His popular work Violence (2008) maintained that the real violence in the world system was not the political counter-violence of the oppressed, but the structural violence of unjust economic arrangements. 2 Its theoretical companion, In Defense of Lost Causes (2008), proposed a reinvention of the left-wing program he calls ‘egalitarian communism’ on the back of a survey of the social atomisation of contemporary capitalism, the limitations of contemporary left-wing oppositional politics and the crisis potentials of the system. 3 Žižek’s core discursive strategy is to critique the ideology of contemporary culture and politics as a means of contesting the naturalisation of capitalist economies. Because ‘the depoliticised economy is the disavowed “fundamental fantasy” of postmodern politics’, 4 Žižek calls for a return to the radical critique of political economy as the prolegomenon to a truly emancipatory project, described in terms of a radical Act capable of ‘traversing’ (negating) this ideological fantasy. But, as Georg Lukács argued before the first Great Depression, nothing denaturalises the capitalist economy quite like a really impressive crash 5 - something that arrived on cue in the form of a wave of bank failures, pretty much at the moment Žižek’s books hit the shelves.

Žižek, whose intuitions about capitalism were in this way spectacularly confirmed, has not been slow to respond. With the crash in full swing all around him, he dashed off First as Tragedy, Then as Farce (2009), a detailed
description of the escalation of the crisis replete with the usual post-cultural and philosophical riffs on the theme of ideological justification for capitalism through the depoliticisation of its machinery, exposed as illusions through the massive state bailouts of the corporate sector at the height of the crisis. Žižek argues from the manifest irrationality of capitalism to the meaninglessness of liberal and socialist projects designed to ameliorate its workings, and thence to a radical vision of communism as a rejection of both state and market. Scarcely pausing for breath, Žižek then produced a new juggernaut, *Living in the End Times* (2010), which focuses less on the financial crisis itself than on its delayed and distorted registration in the imaginations of contemporary radical opponents of capitalism. Capitalism has announced that its use-by date is up, basically, but the Left (like everybody else) is in denial, so trapped in stages of grieving for the lost support of our conformist subjectivity that it cannot grasp either the magnitude of the crisis potentials at work in the system or the radical nature of the opportunity for emancipatory politics that this represents.

In spite of numerous calls for a reactivation of the radical critique of political economy, though, Žižek has not himself produced such an analysis; he has not really located his position within any of the contending schools of radical economics, although he mentions both Kratanić's Kantian reconstruction of Marx's *Capital* and Boltanski's neo-Weberian analysis of contemporary post-Fordism. Thus, despite the richness of the cultural analysis and sociological descriptions in his most recent books, Žižek offers less an analysis of the crisis than a perceptive understanding of individuals' subjective attachments to capitalism and of the desperate uncertainty that has afflicted the Left, confronted with the virtually simultaneous reality of the discrediting of historical communism and the greatest crash since the 1930s. All talk of 'crisis potentials' based on the 'four antagonisms of the world system', then, is founded on descriptive plausibility in sociological terms rather than on an economic analysis that would represent a contemporary equivalent of the Marxian critique of political economy.

Indeed, one could go further and argue that Žižek's theoretical relationship to the category of capitalism exhibits a paradoxical logic, according to which the closer he comes to the idea of a return to the critique of political economy, the further he gets from its actual execution - something reflected in his offering no less than five different, and conflicting, accounts of what the capitalist economy is in his various books. Tempting though it may be to suggest that the category of capitalism acts as an object of desire in Žižek's work, we want to propose a more prosaic explanation: Žižek does not do economics (or base his theoretical reflections in any disciplined way on a recognised economic theory, including Marxism) because his analysis of the problems of capitalism and the radical solutions he proposes are located almost entirely within the categorial framework of psychoanalytic theory.

It is remarkable - and a striking irony - that the core ideas of the world's leading contemporary advocate of a neo-Marxist politics can be most economically stated in psychoanalytic terms, but this is indeed the defining characteristic of Žižek's theoretical apparatus. Alongside his somewhat self-serving claim that economics and politics exhibit a 'parallax effect', whereby the relation between the two social domains cannot be captured under a single theoretical description, Žižek's major contention about contemporary society is that the victory of capitalism represents the universalisation of commodity fetishism, which, for Žižek, means a society of 'generalised perversion'. Drawing on a tradition in social theory that proposes a homology between the categories of the exchange relation and the structure of the transcendental subject, Žižek argues that this subject, the modern subject who is also the subject of the monetary relation, is clinically perverse. 'Commodity fetishism', and above all money as fetish in the Marxist sense, bleeds conceptually into the fetishism of the pervert, so that a fully monetised consumer capitalism must be a form of 'generalised perversion' just as much as a form of 'generalised commodity production'. Contemporary capitalism, as a form of generalised perversion, is said to be a society of commanded enjoyment, a post-Oedipal order ruled over by a perverse imperative to consume incessantly, where prohibition is replaced by an apparent permissiveness that actually masks superego prescription. The importance of all this is not only that Žižek's position has practically become a new orthodoxy within Lacanian-influenced social theory. But it is also that his particular formulation of the position is combined with his efforts to link this to opportunities for a radical politics whose core demand would be a social order forged around a non-pervasive subjectivity. This exemplifies the purported connections between monetary exchange, social pathologies and psychoanalytic categories that are in question here.

In this article, we question the series of conceptual links that constitute this position. First, we show in the evolution of this position that it leads Žižek to equivocate in his diagnosis of contemporary society between two mutually exclusive categories ('psychosis' and 'perversion'), indicating an antinomy in his work that is resolved in favour of 'generalised perversion' on empirical, not logical, grounds. Secondly, we offer a critical resolution
of the antinomy through a critique of what we argue is Žižek’s mistaken over-extension of psychoanalytic reason beyond its legitimate scope of application. Finally, we point to some of the political implications of the way that Žižek speculatively resolves his logical difficulties, by analysing the consequences of his claim that generalised social perversion - the problem to be solved - involves a dethroning of the communal ego ideal. Implicit in the potential conflation of moral denunciation with psychoanalytic diagnosis that the rhetoric of ‘perversion’ invokes is a communitarian streak, which we argue runs through Žižek’s work on capitalism.

COMMODITY FETISHISM AND GENERALISED PERVERSION

The roots of Žižek’s equation between the forms of subjectivity and the structures of the economy go deep, all the way back to his opening intervention in The Sublime Object of Ideology (1989). There, Žižek follows the classical Frankfurt School line of thinking that ‘in the structure of the commodity form it is possible to find the transcendental subject’, where the commodity form is the genetic principle for all of the forms of subjectivity and objectivity under capitalism. Adorno’s protégé Alfred Sohn-Rethel gave this idea a novel twist, projecting the basic homology between subject and society backwards to ancient Greece via the notion that the real abstraction active in the process of exchange was the true genesis, something that emerged prior to the full development of the commodity economy.11 In agreement with Sohn-Rethel, Žižek proposes to regard ‘this real abstraction as the unconscious of the transcendental subject’,12 providing a social-theoretical interpretation of the thesis, elsewhere deployed with great interpretive plausibility, that the best way to grasp the Lacanian subject is through a psychoanalytic reading of the Kantian project.

Without in any way rejecting the notion of a Lacanian reading of the Kantian subject, it is possible to say that the other side of the equation, between the transcendental subject and the commodity form, risks prematurely flattening out the social totality in ways that promote political voluntarism (Lukács) or apolitical quietism (Adorno). It is probably for this reason that the theoretical lineage descending from Althusser - where Žižek locates his own project - rejected the homology thesis as evidence of ‘metaphysical causation’ and ‘expressive totality’.13 By contrast, Žižek seems less interested in theoretical caution around the topic of social complexity than in the possibility of having a position that immediately translates every proposition about German Idealism into a critique of capitalism. The implication of this position, however, is that the Marxian notion of money as a fetish within commodity exchange has to be taken literally in subjective terms, thus translating ‘commodity fetishism’ directly into a psychoanalytic diagnosis of the transcendental subject as clinically perverse, something that for a long time sat very uneasily with Žižek’s other basic position, which was that capitalism promoted a hysterical subjectivity.14

In his debate with Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler in 1999, Žižek announced his break with the project of radical democracy and towards egalitarian communism, in ways that indicated that capitalist subjectivity was no longer something to be traversed symbolically, but a major problem that required a radical act ‘in the real’ of a type that has most recently led Žižek to invoke names like Robespierre and Mao.15 Coextensive with this political shift came a theoretical shift from capitalism as hysteria to capitalism as perverse, together with a significantly more drastic assessment of capitalism’s lack of social cohesion, technocratic political implications and spiralling cultural problems. In ‘Whither Oedipus’, the programmatic chapter of The Ticklish Subject, the book that announced this major change of political direction, Žižek lays out most of the consequences of this position, which, if not exactly new, realised the implications of the homology thesis in ways that had previously been held in check by other commitments. The central implication of the homology thesis is, of course, that society can be psychoanalysed - that is, that historical developments can be considered directly in terms of structures of subjectivity, by means of an unmediated application to social institutions of diagnostic categories drawn from the clinical setting where, as a matter of fact, individuals rather than collectives are involved.

It is worth pausing to examine the theses of that chapter closely, both to see clearly the difficulties they involve and to establish our claims textually. The central argument of ‘Whither Oedipus’ is that the very conditions that made possible the emergence of the modern autonomous subject dialectically contained the seeds of its opposite, the contemporary mutation of subjectivity into forms of pathological narcissism and/or perverse self-instrumentalisation. In the premodern communal society, Žižek proposes, the roles of superego injunction and the point of imaginary identification that provided the ego ideal were respectively performed by the separate figures of the patriarchal father and the monarch. With the elimination of the monarch in the celebrated ‘Democratic Revolution of Modernity’, these
two figures were combined into one, the paternal head of the bourgeois nuclear family. According to Žižek:

the ambiguous rivalry with the father figure, which emerged with the unification of the two functions in the bourgeois nuclear family, created the psychic conditions for modern Western dynamic creative individualism; at the same time, however, it sowed the seeds of the subsequent ‘crisis of Oedipus’ ... the ‘crisis of investiture’ [where] symbolic authority was more and more smeared by the mark of obscenity and thus, as it were, undermined from within.\(^{16}\)

Of course, as Žižek states, this ‘crisis’ is also the ‘normal’ functioning of the Oedipus complex. Indeed, citing the authority of Horkheimer, he proposes that ‘far from being the elementary cell and generator of authoritarian personalities, the modern nuclear family was simultaneously the structure that generated the “autonomous” critical subject’.\(^{17}\) What tips the balance is modern reflexivity and scientific knowledge, because the Oedipus complex ‘can accomplish its job of the child’s integration into the socio-symbolic order only insofar as this identity’ - between the pacifying ego ideal and the obscene superego figure - ‘remains concealed’.\(^{18}\) Not surprisingly, Žižek invokes Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in this context: in attacking the figure of the master, supposedly the embodiment of traditional, arbitrary authority, rational autonomy actually corrodes the pacifying ego ideal, the social norm represented through a master signifier. Thus, what modernity gets is a nasty surprise. The attempt to dispense with the ego ideal, or master signifier, failed to consider the possibility that oppression was in fact the result not of the ego ideal, but of the superego, and that the master signifier actually pacifies the superego by regulating it through a symbolic contract. Indeed, the corrosion of the master signifier is also a potentially dangerous erosion of the ‘symbolic function’ of ‘paternal authority’ that is the bearer of the ego ideal:

today ... it is the very symbolic function of the father which is increasingly undermined - that is, which is losing its performative efficiency, for that reason, a father is no longer perceived as one’s Ego Ideal, the (more or less failed, inadequate) bearer of symbolic authority, but as one’s ideal ego, imaginary competitor.\(^{19}\)

It is in this context that Žižek turns to theories of reflexive modernity in order to stage an appropriate critique, where he will argue that two crucial oversights vitiate this descriptively interesting account of the way that society has crossed a qualitative threshold in self-reflexivity. These oversights are first the notion that a society in which the social bond is mediated by scientific knowledge can possibly preserve the autonomous subjectivity of the original modernity, and secondly the tendency of the risk society theorists to naturalise the capitalist economy. The first point follows directly from Žižek’s argument about the ‘end of Oedipus’ as a consequence of the corrosive effects of reflexivity within the fragile psychic constellation of the nuclear family. The contemporary subject, Žižek argues, at worst is pathologically narcissistic and at best has the external relation to social ideals characteristic of perversion. This is why the typical modern subject indulges in paranoiac conspiracy theories, and also why the reinvocation of master-slave relations is the typical contemporary fantasy.\(^{20}\) Žižek’s second point reflects his conviction that there is a connection between the capitalist economy and a society in which the social bond is fundamentally mediated by scientific knowledge. The implications of this position are brought out in *Parallax View* when he discusses Jacques-Alain Miller’s analysis of contemporary society in terms of the ‘analytic discourse in a state of fragmentation’, where enjoyment regulated by scientific knowledge forms the social bond. Žižek accepts Miller’s fundamental description of society, while criticising his analysis as ‘impressionistic’ and rejecting his liberal political solution. As Žižek writes, ‘when, exactly, does the objet petit a’ - in Lacanian theory, the unattainable object of desire - ‘function as the superego injunction to enjoy? When it occupies the place of the Master Signifier ... This is how Miller’s claim of the identity of the Analyst’s discourse and the discourse of today’s civilization should be read: as an indication that this latter discourse (social link) is that of perversion’.\(^{21}\)

In summary, the contemporary decline of the ego ideal brought on by the rise of scientific knowledge does not disperse with the superego but actually frees it to reign without restriction. As Žižek has recently claimed, ‘our postmodern world ... tries to dispense with the agency of the Master-Signifier’ in what he calls ‘postmodern permissiveness’. As a result, the superego stands in the position that the master signifier formerly occupied, so that ‘transgression is more and more directly enjoined by the Law itself’.\(^{22}\) However, he stresses, ‘far from liberating us from the pressure of guilt, such dispensing with the Master-Signifier comes at a price ... [where] the decline of the Master-Signifier exposes the subject to all of the traps and double-
talk of the superego’. The suspension of the master signifier means that transgression is elevated to a norm, because it ‘leaves as the only agency of ideological interpellation the “unnameable” abyss of jouissance - the ultimate injunction that regulates our lives in “postmodernity” is “Enjoy!”’

For Žižek, the crisis of the present reduces to the gradual eclipse of the ego ideal in processes of identification and its progressive replacement by the superego.

How can emancipation happen, he asks, when instead of the revolution against the reigning master signifier, ‘we dwell in an atonal world, a world of multiplicities lacking a determine totality’, previously lent the world by the master signifier? Žižek’s response is to propose the master signifier of egalitarian communism as a special form of discourse that dispenses with the superego injunction yet is capable of totalising the ‘atonic world’ of global capitalism. Invoking the ‘properly Leninist moment of Lacan’, he turns to the notion of revolutionary psychoanalytic collectives as a prefiguration of the desired social link. ‘What if,’ he asks:

the task of the analyst should no longer be to undermine the hold of the Master Signifier, but, on the contrary, to construct/propose/install new Master Signifiers? Is this not how we should read Lacan’s **des un signifiant nouveau**? As a call to counteract the disintegration of any consistent world in the crazy symbolic dynamics of late capitalism, to propose new ‘quitting points,’ new Master Signifiers, that would provide consistency to our experience of meaning? ... It is only here that we encounter the real problem: that of a sociopolitical transformation that would entail the restructuring of the entire field of relations between public law and its obscene supplement. In other words, what about the prospect of a radical social transformation which would not involve the boring scarecrow of utopian-totalitarian ‘complete fullness and transparency of the social’?

That these rhetorical questions motivate the formulation of Žižek’s political programme is surely evidenced by In Defense of Lost Causes, where the ‘eternal Idea of egalitarian communism’ is exactly such a master signifier. What is missing today, Žižek maintains, is the figure who embodies the social bond, the master - and what is wanted, he seems to suggest, is an alternative to the Enlightenment: instead of the master with the superego, or the superego without the master, society needs the master without the superego.

AMBIVALENT DIAGNOSIS

Now, Žižek’s diagnosis and his proposed solution both depend upon the resolution of a theoretical antinomy, which we argue evidences the way in which the homology thesis invites an over-extension of psychoanalytic categories into descriptions of social totalities. Žižek uses two terms interchangeably: the Symbolic Order (the symbolic, differential aspect of natural language, that is, the way in which a natural language as the medium of sociality consists of a system of differences lacking positive terms) and the ‘big Other’ (the Symbolic Order as it is particularised into a normative order for each individual, through symbolic identification with a master signifier that becomes the individual’s ego ideal). Under these rubrics, he wants to speak about what Hegel called ‘ethical life,’ that is, the normatively saturated institutional structures of a social totality. But he cannot decide whether contemporary society is characterised by the break-up of ethical life, that is, by the disintegration of the big Other, or by the relocation of the big Other from the institutions of civil society into the global economy, its radical mutation into a normless system.

Žižek can either focus on phenomena of alienation as evidence for an alleged fragmentation of the big Other, or on the conformist consensus around the ‘triumph of liberalism’ as evidence for its supposed relocation. On the one hand, the disintegration of the Symbolic Order as a supposed result of the lack of binding collective ideals might mean that the ‘narcissistic’ contemporary individual has radically foreclosed paternal authority, with the consequence that the individual is actually proto-psychoic. On the other hand, the fact that today’s hedonistic consumers are manifestly non-psychoic, combined with evidence that the social bond is more coercive now than ever before, might imply that there really is a Symbolic Order, only that it is hidden, so that contemporary consumer hedonists are really engaged in perverse disavowal of it. Žižek initially tries to have it both ways: the big Other has broken up and the uncontested hegemony of global capitalism means that capitalism itself is the contemporary Symbolic Order. But in fact, these represent mutually exclusive diagnoses of the ‘spirit of the times’.

When Žižek concentrates on the fragmentation of ethical life, the break-up of social cohesion and the atrophy of the paternal function through the disintegration of the Symbolic Order, he is aiming towards a social diagnosis of psychosis. The psychotic radically ‘forecloses’ (for our purposes here, rejects) the master signifier that represents paternal
authority, and as a consequence, never properly internalises the working of language as a differential order. Instead, for the psychotic, language is an array of material things, which means that for Lacan, psychosis is foremost a language disorder characterised by the failure of metaphor, in this context equivalent to the claim that such individuals cannot even potentially articulate new master signifiers. With no symbolic pact to restrain the individual's narcissism, relations to others have the potential to break down as the other confronts the subject as either a narcissistic confirmation of the subject's self-image, or as the threatening bearer of an unregulated enjoyment. For the psychotic, the foreclosed paternal signifier then 'returns in the real' as paranoid delusions of persecution by an 'Other of the Other,' a conspiratorial entity that guarantees meaning at the cost of a radical invasion of the subject.

A great deal of Žižek's description of contemporary life resonates with the terminology and categories of the Lacanian understanding of psychosis, such as the notion that contemporary political violence is a 'return in the real' of a failure of symbolisation of capitalism, or that the suspended paternal Law "returns in the Real," in the guise of the multitude of "undead" spectral apparitions which intervene in our ordinary lives. Žižek explores this alternative under the heading of the decline of symbolic authority, where he argues that today's 'direct superegoisation' of the imaginary Ideal' cashes out at two levels: that of the big Other (the Symbolic Order) and the little other (the other person). For Žižek, the Symbolic Order fragments into an archipelago of 'small big Others', islands of regulation in a sea of transgression, generating a multiplicity of inconsistent rules or heterogeneous language games. Ethics committees with the mandate to regulate a localised area of social life, for instance, represent a desperate replacement for the missing social consensus where these (re)invented rules supplant the lack of a fundamental Law/Prohibition... [so that] it is as if the lack of the "big Other" is supplanted by... so many substitute "small big Others".

Meanwhile, cynical detachment from official institutions and symbolic authority is counterbalanced by the delusional belief that there is an 'Other of the Other', or big Other in the Real, an invisible master who supplies an ultimate guarantee and manipulates the world, directing a sinister global conspiracy against the subject:

The paradoxical result of the mutation in the non-existence of the big Other - of the growing collapse of symbolic efficiency - is thus the proliferation of different versions of a big Other that actually exists, in the Real, not merely as a symbolic fiction... [Consequently,] the typical subject today is the one who, while displaying cynical distrust of any public ideology, indulges without restraint in paranoid fantasies about conspiracies, threats and excessive forms of enjoyment of the Other.31

As Žižek repeatedly emphasises, this 'mutation in the non-existence of the big Other' is not the same as the Lacanian proposition that 'the big Other does not exist (as a closed totality)', but something much more radical, namely, the fragmentation of the Symbolic Order as the ultimate reason for a 'decline of symbolic authority' or 'waning of symbolic efficiency'. Likewise, the little other undergoes a mutation best expressed through the figures of the totalitarian leader and the corporate executive, where contemporary representations of Bill Gates provide an exemplification of the paranoid logic at work in today's popular culture. Gates is not the corporate master, but 'little brother', an ordinary person who is elevated to an uncanny (monstrous) position. Where the authority of the traditional master is anchored in the symbolic, the postmodern 'lesser master' depends upon the Real, upon the superego.

In Lacanian terms: the suspension of the Ego Ideal, of the feature of symbolic identification - that is, the reduction of the Master to an imaginary ideal - necessarily gives rise to its monstrous obverse, to the superego figure of the omnipotent Evil Genius who controls our lives. In this figure, the imaginary (semblance) and the real (of paranoia) overlap, owing to the suspension of the proper symbolic efficiency.32

We have quoted Žižek in extenso in order to show that he does indeed heroically maintain the thesis of a psychotic society. This thesis remains at least descriptively central to Žižek's social diagnosis of late capitalism. For instance, recent, more circumspect expressions, such as the Badiou-influenced notion of contemporary social formations as involving 'atonal worlds', that is, a heterogeneous plurality of discursive universes that lack the consistency of a 'society' because they are not united by a master signifier, only make sense against this conceptual background. But the problem is that although current anxieties about social disintegration and popular fantasies about the 'postmodern Evil Genius' who runs Microsoft Corporation might have something psychotic about them, the term 'psychotic society' is an oxymoron.
At the same time, Žižek insists that contemporary society maintains a structure of disavowal, in its acceptance of global capitalism as ‘the only game in town’. This insistence leads Žižek to relate late modernity to a re-naturalisation of the commodity form.\(^{39}\) Here, the emphasis is on the disavowal of the ‘real big Other of the risk society’, the world economy as a form of global Symbolic Order supported by the fantasy narratives of the ‘victory of capitalism’, the ‘triumph of liberal democracy’, and the ‘end of history’. According to this diagnosis, the new epoch is characterised by ‘generalised perversion’, by the elevation of transgression into the norm, within which individuals seek to make themselves into instruments of the universal superego imperative to ‘Enjoy!’ consumerism.

The notion of a society of generalised perversion is an attempt to soften the description of social disintegration by supposing that there is an operative Symbolic Order after all, but that today’s pathological-narcissists-cum-commodity-fetishists are engaged in a perverse disavowal of it. Seeking to square the disintegration of the Symbolic Order and the decline of symbolic authority with its simultaneous reinforcement, Žižek claims that:

The spectral presence of Capital is the figure of the big Other which not only remains operative when all the traditional embodiments of the symbolic big Other disintegrate, but even directly causes this disintegration: far from being confronted with the abyss of their freedom - that is, laden with the burden of responsibility that cannot be alleviated by the helping hand of Tradition or Nature - today’s subject is perhaps more than ever caught in an inexorable compulsion that effectively runs his life.\(^{54}\)

The notion that there can be a superego without that symbolic identification which forms an ego ideal is an assertion of Žižek’s rather than something established within Lacanian theory (the paranoid’s ‘Other of the Other’ is definitely not the superego). Basically, Žižek hesitates between his two contradictory diagnoses. He is on the horns of a dilemma.

The diagnosis of society as psychotic is theoretically consistent. The foreclosure of the ego ideal in the individual would mean that the subject was not properly inserted into the Symbolic Order, that is, that the fundamental Symbolic Law was lacking in that person. This would lead to the ‘return in the Real’ of the foreclosed Symbolic Law as an external persecutory agency commanding enjoyment, a ‘big Other in the Real’ or ‘Other of the Other’, together with a collapse of the symbolic elements of interpersonal relations, so that others would confront the subject as narcissistic rivals, or as the bearers of an obscene and threatening drive to annihilate or dominate. Unfortunately, this diagnosis is descriptively implausible - although it is certainly colourful.

The alternative is a position that is theoretically inconsistent but descriptively plausible. It seems to capture beautifully a whole series of contemporary phenomena, from the dark underside of reflexive subjectivity through to the way in which ideological cynicism and political apathy today are in fundamental collusion with global injustice. But it rests on the theoretically nonsensical proposition that there can be a Symbolic Order operative in the lives of individuals without the ego ideal to ‘quit’ the subjects into it. A superego without the ego ideal does not make theoretical sense within a Lacanian framework. Žižek is therefore forced by the logic of his position to assert that the superego is the underside, not of the ego ideal, but of the Symbolic Order.

In the end, Žižek goes for the ‘society of generalised perversion’ option on descriptive rather than theoretical grounds, and without renouncing the sort of descriptive claims that really belong to the ‘psychotic society’ position. Thus he can maintain that ‘from all sides, Right and Left, complaints abound today about how, in our postmodern societies composed of hedonistic solipsists, social bonds are progressively disintegrating; we are increasingly reduced to social atoms’.\(^{56}\) At the same time he claims that ‘what is missing in today’s social bond … is not the big Other but a small other which would embody, stand in for, the big Other’.\(^{56}\) The ultimate political problem from this perspective is that the lack of bearers of symbolic authority, of ‘Master-figures, renders the invisible “big Other” … all the more pervasive’,\(^{58}\) which is the fundamental reason why ‘the discourse of today’s civilization … is that of perversion’ where ‘the objet petit a functions as the superego injunction to enjoy’.\(^{58}\)

What this sort of descriptive tension and theoretical inconsistency reveals is that the homology thesis directly encourages the unmediated application of diagnostic categories to the social formation. Psychoanalysis definitely has a place in social theory, but it is necessary to recognise some salient differences between the analysis of symbolic formations that happen in the context of what critical theory would call the ‘lifeworld’ and the impersonal dynamics of meaningless and anonymous ‘systems’ such as the global economy. Žižek’s uncertainties about whether the capitalistic economy is the Lacanian Real in modern society or the Symbolic Order regulating contemporary
civilisation are indicative of what happens when this is not recognised. 39 What meaning can the claim that the laws of tendency of global capitalism are equivalent to the effects of libido in the psyche possibly have? On the other hand, how can there possibly be any descriptive traction in the claim that an essentially meaningless systematic network that can only be grasped through mathematical modelling is equivalent to the differential network of linguistic signs responsible for the emergence of meaning between speaking subjects? How does the thesis that world capitalism is the disavowed big Other of contemporary subjects help to explain the global financial crisis in any way, beyond the subtle conflation of the vocabulary of moral evaluation and the categories of psychoanalytic diagnosis implicit in the notion of the ‘perverseity’ of capitalism?

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

It is certainly no part of our argument to reject the moral intuitions about global injustice that motivate Žižek’s criticisms of capitalism, or to oppose the prospect of a radical social transformation. But we are concerned that Žižek’s statement of the nature of the problem is descriptively implausible (because the present crisis has objective dimensions best captured by critical systems theories of economy and administration) and theoretically untenable (because it rests ultimately on a conflation between the fate of the ego ideal and the destiny of the Symbolic Order). We are also concerned that the political implications of Žižek’s formulations are, to say the least, not automatically progressive. What potentially makes this position so conservative is its combination of the cultural assumption that the crisis of social cohesion is located in questioning the traditional authority of the father, and the sociological assumption that society needs a single set of binding representations for its social cement.

Žižek nowhere states this sociological assumption directly (because it is an assumption), but it is everywhere implied in the neo-Hegelian notion of the breakup of a formerly unitary ethical life. This is restated by Žižek in terms of the ‘concrete universality’ of a way of life that is inaugurated by the declaration of a new master signifier (and imperilled by its eclipse). If the universal is the empty place ultimately correlative to the autonomy of the subject - the empty place of power, the empty imperative of the moral law and the empty differential Law of the Symbolic Order - then the ‘concrete’ universal is the shared social Ideal that ‘represents the subject for another signifier’ - in other words, that represents the subject of this society to another society. The Hegelian thesis that the abstract Idea of universality - the Symbolic Order - must appear in the form of a concrete universal Ideal - an ego ideal, or master signifier - becomes, on Žižek’s treatment, the notion that the binding representation supplied by a shared Ego Ideal is coextensive with the Symbolic Order. This is how to decode Žižek’s claim that ‘the Hegelian “concrete universality” is uncannily close to what Althusser called the articulation of an overdetermined totality’, which means that the concrete universal is the underlying principle behind the rules and regulations of the entire society, a post-Marxian theoretical equivalent to the Marxian category of the mode of production. 40 But he also makes it clear that the concrete universal is the ‘phallic’ master signifier, the universal that is an exception to its own universal rule (because as a master signifier, it is ultimately meaningless). 41 No wonder, then, that the link between the two roles that the concrete universal plays in its suture of Ego Ideal and Symbolic Order, is theorised as ‘the structurally necessary short circuit between levels’. 42 What Žižek means is that the concrete universal collapses ego ideal and Symbolic Order into a single category.

It is extremely difficult to grasp this claim as anything other than the idea that social cohesion depends on a unitary ideal. Put differently, this thesis means that the existence of multiple (non-shared) values in a society equals social breakdown. Now, although Žižek here pointedly mentions master signifiers, in the plural, his analyses of contemporary problems and proposed solutions really only make sense in the context of the assumption that social cohesion depends upon a relatively unified body of collective representations, sutured by means of a reigning master signifier that would act as the ego ideal for all of the subjects, and whose paradigms would be modern nationalism and medieval religion. That is presumably why the stakes in the most important contemporary debates must be framed as questions of the ‘One of identification’ that forms political subjectivity. In resistance to global capitalism should the ‘One’ be ethnic identity or communist egalitarianism? 43

Social cohesion does not - for Lacan at least - depend on a shared ego ideal (although group cohesion might well do so). It is the Symbolic Order of a shared language that is the basis for the social pact. Indeed, Žižek’s own example of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, drawn from his exposition of the ego ideal as placeholder for the Symbolic Order in the individual’s unconscious, shows why this entire conflation is theoretically unmotivated.
Within this order, it is the Name-of-the-Father that functions as Ego Ideal for the subject and holds the place of the big Other in the psychic economy. Is it necessary to state that the multiplicity of patronyms includes a diversity of identifications, even in Rousseau’s society? For Rousseau, for instance, far from identification with the sovereign, Louis XVI, the patronymic signifies the family as the locus of the highest intellectual achievements.

Žižek’s ‘cure’ for value pluralism - that is, for the existence of a diversity of ego ideals, which he tends to equate with the disintegration of the Symbolic Order - is a proletarian dictatorship that would go beyond Mao and Stalin in its radical egalitarianism. It is difficult to see how this is different from a reversion to a monocultural society with restored forms of paternal authority and something closely resembling an official ideology or even state religion. Žižek of course maintains that the radical collectivism he proposes is entirely different from nostalgic conservatism. But the upshot of our analysis of Žižek’s inconsistencies is to suggest that this is a rationalisation (in the Freudian sense) for a position that seeks to restore a form of paternal authority problematised by modernity. This is not surprising, given the highly conservative implications of the conflation of ego ideal and Symbolic Order. Lacan asserts that individuals must participate in a speech community, not that they must share a single ideal or a uniform religion.

The risk, then, is that positions on the ‘generalised perversion’ of the ‘society of enjoyment’ might turn out to be elegies for the paternal authority of the Father, conducted in terms that uncannily echo the cultural diagnoses of the neoconservative Right. During the last twenty years, claims have arisen within Lacanian-influenced social theory to the effect that we have entered a new post-Oedipal cultural epoch, a ‘society of enjoyment’ characterised by ‘generalised perversion’. The raft of assumptions and perceptions that make up this theoretical perspective is so widely dispersed - because so widely accepted - within the intellectual community of Lacanian researchers that it is sometimes difficult to know where to start in asking questions about its cogency. Indeed, there is enough of a consensus for us to describe it as a pervasive intellectual mood rather than a defined theoretical position. Nonetheless, Slavoj Žižek’s positions represent probably the most influential statement of this perspective, which is why we have selected his work for close inspection. It echoes and extends positions advanced by Paul Verhaeghe, Juliet Flower MacCannell, Joan Copjec, Teresa Brennan and others. Evidence for its influence is the way that Todd McGowan’s recent synthesis of Lacanian research mainly echoes Žižek’s positions. It would be very interesting to hear something more about the ways in which these theorists differ from Žižek’s stances.

In Žižek’s case, there is, disquietingly, some agreement with the neoconservative Right on political topics, such as the undesirability of multicultural politics and liberal tolerance, the uselessness of sexual harassment regulations and racial vilification laws, the misguided nature of feminist critiques of the traditional authority of the patriarchal father, and the idea that the old Left might have been authoritarian but that the new Left mainly consists of ‘politically correct multicultural liberals’. Many of Žižek’s stances are provocations, of course, so that his ‘plea for intolerance’ for instance, turns out not to be an embrace of ethnic particularity, but the idea that only a post-capitalist world could truly include the other. But the reader might wonder whether blocking liberal cultural reforms in the name of a utopia that is declared, from the outset, to be politically both ‘impossible’ and ‘terroristic’ might not just effectively line up Žižek with the neoconservative Right in practice, if not in theory. And some of the provocations generate real concern, as for instance when Žižek announces that we need to junk the term ‘totalitarian’ in order to ‘reinvent emancipatory terror’.

The analysis presented here indicates that the effort to diagnose the social pathologies of late capitalism in terms of clinical categories, enjoined by the homology thesis, must necessarily smuggle in the Durkheimian assumption that ‘society needs a unifying ego ideal’ for social cohesion. The corollary to this idea is the call to replace the ‘superego injunction’ behind ‘capitalism as the contemporary big Other’ through a new unifying identification that logically takes the form of religious discourse. Even when Žižek protests that taking St Paul as the contemporary model of a ‘Leninist’ universalism would involve dispensing with the religious substance of Christian ideology, the univocal form remains, as the leader leâover of the demand for the ‘gesture that would undermine capitalist globalisation from the standpoint of universal Truth, just as Pauline Christianity did to the Roman global Empire’. It looks very much as if the notion that commodity fetishism is clinical perversion leads to the idea that the solution to a supposed decline of symbolic authority is a reinstatement of paternal authority combined with a rejection of value pluralism. At the same time, because the master signifier is arbitrary in Lacanian
theory, Žižek thinks that there is no way to say before the revolution which ego ideal is the best.\textsuperscript{55} This means that his position has significant potential to be restrictively monocultural while being grounded in an arbitrary assertion of political willpower.

NOTES


17. Ibid., p344.

18. Ibid., p313.

19. Ibid., p344.

20. Ibid., pp545, 362, 367.


23. Ibid., p360.

24. Ibid., pp34, 30.


30. Ibid., p534.

31. Ibid., p562.