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According to Žižek’s neo-Marxist conception, ideology consists of a relatively fluid set of representations that constitute social subjectivity, together with a core of communal practices that condition the unconscious libidinal investments of subjects in their political community. These libidinal investments are structured by unconscious social fantasy and ballast the subject’s political allegiances with a kernel of enjoyment, which determines a relatively fixed loyalty to the institutional rituals of the political community.

Because political communities that rely on ideology for social cohesion, and therefore political inclusion, depend upon exclusions that are constructed in fantasy and supported by enjoyment – for instance, the figure of the Jew as marginalized alien – the institutional rituals of the nation state reinforce domination. Thus, while individuals may espouse a range of liberal beliefs and identify with progressive ideals, they “know not what they do” when they participate, despite their ideals and beliefs, in the material practices of the nation state, the church congregation or the social group, where they unconsciously enjoy a form of belonging that may be antithetical to their expressed politics.

Žižek’s theorization of “enjoyment as a political factor” has important implications for both ideology critique and political strategy, as his thesis of a persistent kernel of enjoyment at the heart of ideology affects questions of universality, belief and history. Additionally, Žižek theorizes that modern ideology has undergone a decisive mutation in the post-1960s era, as global capitalism erodes liberal ideals, human rights and democratic citizenship. Increasingly, modern subjects are exposed to a superego injunction to “enjoy!” consumerism, nationalism and other potentially exploitative and oppressive collective practices, shorn of the symbolic fictions of equality, liberty and solidarity. Ultimately, the existence of ideology is linked to the commodity form as the structuring principle of modern subjectivity, so that a politics of truth, in opposition to ideology, must include not only traversal of the fantasy through identification with the sinthome, but also a revolutionary set of anti-capitalist social practices.

Žižek’s conception of ideology is a radicalization of post-Marxist theories that arose from Althusserian Marxism. Drawing on the categories of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser had defined ideology as an “imaginary relationship ... to the real conditions of existence” (Althusser 1971: 153). For Althusser, the mutual recognition of liberal subjects as autonomous
individuals who are the bearers of (political, legal, civil and social) rights exemplified the imaginary misrecognition characteristic of ideology, in so far as these subjects regarded themselves as the free authors of society when in fact they were its products. From Althusser’s Marxist perspective, ideology is a necessary illusion that acts as a social cement because it provides a form of subjectivity that corresponds to the prevailing economic and political relations. It supplies subjects whose lived experience of themselves is as compliant workers, family persons and democratic citizens … but not socialist militants, members of revolutionary collectives or participants in a radically egalitarian political community. Ideology therefore constitutes subjectivity through the material practices, or institutional rituals, of the “ideological state apparatuses”, such as the family and church, school and media, the ballot box and the trade union, which “interpellate” (“hail” or subjectivize) biological individuals into social subjects. For Althusser, the ideas and beliefs of the subject are effects of “material practices, governed by material rituals, which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus” (ibid.: 169).

To make his point clear, Althusser quoted Pascal’s provocative remark on the relation between church ritual and Christian belief: “kneel down [often enough] and you will believe!” (ibid.: 114). Unfortunately, however, Althusser could not fully theorize either the process of interpellation as symbolic identification, or the unconscious enjoyment produced by the institutional ritual. Despite the influence of psychoanalysis on his categories, “Althusser’s theory of ideology trails Lacanian resonances without meaningful correspondence” (Barrett 1993: 175).

Žižek’s position is strongly influenced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s post-Marxist theory of ideology, which considerably developed the concept of ideological interpellation. Ideologies are conceptualized as composed of signifiers that constitute the political identities of social groups, but that “float” because they can be articulated into various constellations, so that the struggle to articulate a hegemonic ideology is always open. Žižek’s concise summary of their position cannot be bettered:

the multitude of “floating signifiers”, of proto-ideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a [master-signifier] which “quilts” them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning. Ideological space is made of non-bound, non-tied elements, “floating signifiers”, whose very identity is “open”, overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements … The “quilting” performs the totalization by means of which this free floating of ideological elements
According to Laclau and Mouffe, hegemonic articulation in democratic politics consists in the rival efforts of social alliances to install their master-signifiers as universals in the “empty place of power”. Not only does this assign to all social forces a particular position and political identity, it also defines universality because every such quasi-universal signifier has particular contents. Finally, the “hegemonization of the universal” through ideological struggle not only defines the particular contents of the empty place of universality, but also acts as a social cement by constituting social subjectivity through identification with the dominant universal, or master-signifier. The process of ideological interpellation can be recast in terms of symbolic identification, where subjects constitute their political identity through identification with the master-signifier. But, Laclau and Mouffe add, the process is never final and identity is never fixed, because the formation of a reigning universal happens adversarially, through the negation of a social antagonist whose master-signifier is entirely excluded from the hegemonic ideology. This formation of a “constitutive outside” to society through a process of absolute exclusion means that every social identity, formed through symbolic identification with the master-signifier, is negated by something that is by definition a meaningless element. Describing this as social antagonism, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the excluded element embodies negativity as such, and is therefore demonized as hostile to the principle of society itself – the Jew, communism, the terrorist and so forth. As a result, the ideological struggle to hegemonize the content of the universal is marked by a symptomatic performative contradiction, between a neutral-universal political statement and its partisan position of enunciation by members of political communities sustained by exclusions.

According to Žižek, theories descended from the Althusserian concept of ideological interpellation lack a properly psychoanalytic dimension because they develop the dimension of the signifier – of symbolic identification and imaginary identity – at the expense of the unconscious investment in the institutional ritual – the dimension of the Real of enjoyment structured by the social fantasy. Žižek therefore proposes to grasp ideology through Lacan’s “graph of desire”, which outlines the structure of the subject as consisting of two levels:

- the Symbolic/Imaginary level of interpellation, where the “interplay of imaginary and symbolic identification under the dominance of symbolic identification constitutes the mechanism by means of which the subject is integrated into a socio-symbolic field” (SO: 110);
• the Symbolic/Real level of what escapes symbolization and is beyond interpellation, “the square of desire, fantasy, [the signifier of] lack in the Other and drive, pulsating around some unbearable surplus-enjoyment” (SO: 124).

The distinction between these levels is crucial for Žižek’s critique of ideology. The connection between them can be explained by asking a simple question: why is there anything at all “beyond interpellation”? Why does the identity of the subject not close and become fixed around symbolic identification with the master-signifier and the resulting imaginary identity of the ego? For Žižek, the answer is: the radical contingency of naming, itself a consequence of the arbitrary character of the signifier. Nothing in the field of the Other can guarantee the fit between the social identity of the subject and the “ineffable singularity” of the drives arising at the boundary between soma and psyche. Consequently, symbolic identification with a master-signifier represents a sort of “pre-emptive strike”, an effort by the subject to anticipate what object they are in the desire of the Other. In other words, the subject kneels down in an attempt to guess what the Other wants from them, and the surplus enjoyment that results from this act of renunciation, or submission to the Other, then provides the unconscious ballast that supports the subject’s convictions about religious (or political) dogma through all of their crises of doubt, changes of faith and confessions of fidelity.

Žižek’s theory of ideology may be described as a properly Lacanian interpretation of Althusser’s concept of ideological interpellation through institutional rituals. But this also incorporates the post-Marxist conception of ideological hegemony constituted through social antagonism. Žižek argues that ideology critique therefore consists of two distinct operations: One is discursive, the “symptomatical reading” of the ideological text, bringing about “deconstruction” of the spontaneous experience of its meaning – that is, demonstrating how a given ideological field is a result of a montage of heterogeneous “floating signifiers”, of their totalization through the intervention of certain “nodal points”; the other aims at extracting the kernel of enjoyment, at articulating the way in which – beyond the field of meaning but at the same time internal to it – an ideology implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy (SO: 125).

The dimension of ideology beyond interpellation has four aspects, which determine the four major innovations in the theory of ideology that Žižek has achieved:

• The subject’s ego-ideal forms through symbolic identification with the ideological master-signifier, but the inverse of the master-signifier “beyond

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“interpellation” is an unconscious superego imperative to “enjoy” transgressions of the norms represented by the reigning universal.

- The subject’s unconscious desire is determined by the Other (desire is the desire of the Other: Lacan), which depends on exclusions to maintain the illusion of the consistency of the socio-symbolic field, so that the subject entertains the fantasy of the theft of enjoyment (by the Other or some marginalized other), with the consequence that the dark logic of sacrifice is at the heart of ideology.

- The subject’s knowledge of ideology is articulated symbolically and can even include the critique of ideology, leading to a cynical distance from the reigning universal, but the subject’s unconscious beliefs depend on their relation to the enjoyment of the Other, so that contemporary subjects typically disavow ideology while participating in the ritual (they “know very well ... but still, they are doing it”).

- The role of the unconscious social fantasy is to conceal the fact that the Other cannot guarantee the identity of the subject, a situation that Žižek describes as the inconsistency of the Other, the non-existence of the big Other and lack in the Other. The social fantasy achieves this effect through its retroactive narration of political contingency as historical necessity in a fantasy of social origins that masks the lack of any guarantee that the social order can provide what its ideals specify (e.g. equality, liberty, solidarity).

Accordingly, the distinction between symbolic identification and the Real of enjoyment structured by fantasy implies four major theses on ideology:

(a) Every ideological universal, or statement of the norm, entails reference, at the level of the enunciation, to a set of inherent transgressions of the norm, which are the focus for prohibited enjoyment. This thesis is represented in Žižek’s work directly and through a series of equivalent claims: every universal implies a non-universalizable kernel of singular enjoyment; democratic politics is supported by nationalist enjoyment; universal human rights are supported by an obscene enjoyment of torture and assassination; the public legal framework is supported by an unwritten code of illicit enjoyment; the Symbolic Law is sustained by the Real of a superego imperative to “enjoy!” transgression.

(b) The kernel of enjoyment that sustains ideology is subjectivized as a relation between the subject and the big Other, as representation of the socio-cultural field, with enjoyment as the stake of this relation. The subject unconsciously believes that the Other demands a sacrifice of enjoyment from the
subject, and/or the subject believes that the marginalized figure generated by social antagonism threatens to steal the enjoyment of the Other. The logic of the sacrifice of enjoyment is at the heart of the ideology of fascism, where the subject assumes the perverse role of an instrument of the enjoyment of an Other who must extract the sacrificial enjoyment from some marginalized group. It is also at the centre of orthodox interpretations of Christianity, where identification with Christ is made on the basis of the assumption that the crucifixion of Jesus happened because he offered himself as both the instrument of God’s demand for sacrifice and the sacrifice itself. The fantasy of the “theft of enjoyment” is the basis for both the ethnic nationalism that emerged in the 1990s and the democratic imperialism of the “War on Terror”, both of which depend upon a threatening figure of absolute Otherness who embodies the phantasmatic danger that the existence of negativity (of the ethnic other, or of the terrorist other) might prevent the harmonious fullness of the political community. Likewise, Žižek argues that multicultural tolerance, which apparently manages to include a range of ethnic others within the political community, only succeeds because it ultimately rests upon the exclusion of supposedly absolute Others, such as the Islamic fundamentalist or the illegal migrant, who are the focus for social fantasies about the introduction of intolerance into otherwise tolerant societies, the undermining of job opportunities that make cohesion possible, and so forth – all of which are forms of the fantasy of the theft of enjoyment.

The distinction between symbolic universality and real singularity implies the difference between symbolically articulated knowledge and unconscious belief, centred on the subject’s fantasies about the enjoyment of the Other. By virtue of the knowledge produced by ideology critique, the subject can be highly critical about the official ideology of the political community and manage to maintain a cynical distance from explicit ideological proposition. But this does not affect the subject’s unconscious beliefs structured by the fantasy of the enjoyment of the Other, with the consequence that the subject projects their beliefs onto others (the rest of the political community, ethnic group or religious collective; the marginalized figures of social antagonism). On the one hand, this means that subjects can believe through these others, that is, they can project their unconscious beliefs onto dupes supposed explicitly to believe in the nation, the bond of blood and soil, or the colourful narratives of religious doctrines, which allows the subject to continue to perform the ideological rituals of politics, ethnicity or religion, “so as not to disturb the ignorant”. On the other hand, the subject projects their fantasies about transgressive enjoyment onto the marginalized figures of social
antagonism, who are supposed to believe that abhorrent practices bring an illicit thrill. The discursive marker for unconscious projection about transgressive enjoyment is the subject’s absolute certainty about what others believe. Žižek can therefore decode, for instance, the declarations of the West on what Islamic fundamentalists or neo-Nazi terrorists believe (e.g. that the Other demands that unbelievers must be put through agony before being beheaded), as admissions about the fantasy of illicit enjoyment at the heart of democratic ideology (which acts as if those who do not believe in democracy may freely be tortured and assassinated).

(d) The fantasies about the enjoyment of the Other that sustain ideology have as their purpose concealment of the inconsistency (the contingency, or the partisanship) of the Other. The social fantasy represents the Other as providing a guarantee for the identity of the subject by ensuring a harmonious society and full meaning. This is equivalent to the claim that the social fantasy sustains symbolic identification by displacing the disturbing stain of enjoyment from the Other onto the marginalized other or the subject itself. The most important ideological instance of this function of the social fantasy is the transformation, through retroactive narration about social origins, of political contingency into historical necessity. For instance, communist ideology represents the Russian Revolution as the inevitable result of social evolution, so that instead of a chancy event involving political partisanship and a social change made without any guarantee of success, the revolution appears as the necessary result of the historical process. Žižek also speaks in this connection about fantasy disguising the “non-existence of the Other”, that is, the lack of a final signifier that, as a guarantee of meaning, would assign a fixed position to all of the other signifiers, or the lack of a teleological goal to history that would guarantee an “end of history” after the revolution.

In his work in the last decade, Žižek detects a mutation in the field of ideology in liberal-democratic capitalism, where cynical distance towards ideology is increasingly replaced by the complete absence of political ideals. The contemporary social field consists of “atonal worlds, lacking the master-signifier”, in which subjects are exposed to a superego imperative to “enjoy!” not only consumerism, but also the inherent transgressions constitutive of national solidarity. Neo-conservatism, for instance, arises as a response to the situation of a social field that resembles a heterogeneous patchwork of floating signifiers lacking the quilting point of a master-signifier, with neo-liberal economics plus a politics of social conservatism designed to reinforce a “minimally authoritarian spirit of community”. Liberalism has dissolved the master-signifier as an authoritarian
imposition, but what this leaves is the dimension beyond interpellation of the superego and fantasy, lacking a set of ideals that might at least regulate enjoyment.

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SEE ALSO Althusser; Fantasy; Subject